



# STUDENTS AS CHANGE AGENTS

New ways of engaging with learning and teaching  
in Higher Education

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The production of this publication was co-funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and ESCalate, HEA Subject Centre for Education.

Published by  
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ESCalate would like to thank the University of Exeter and its students for supplying some of the images used in this publication.



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# Overview

**The University of Exeter has developed an innovative and exciting student-led action research initiative that brings students and staff together to improve experiences of higher education.**

Students from across the university have contributed to this initiative, carrying out a series of research projects on their learning and teaching environment, selecting concerns raised through *student-staff liaison committees* (SSLCs), and providing recommendations and solutions to improve their experience. A small amount of funding was made available from the University's learning and teaching budget to support this initiative.

Students worked as apprentice researchers; their research methods included focus groups, informal interviews and questionnaire surveys. Outcomes were presented at a student-staff conference, which resulted in institutional engagement with key research findings. Each small project has also been captured through a case study.

Student research has driven organisational change, contributed to student engagement in shifts of policy and practice within the University, and supported students' graduate skills in the areas of research, project management and presentation of outcomes, leadership and understanding organisational development.

The impact of the initial pilot, with students acting as change agents in ten small-scale projects, has led to continued activity. Many further projects have now been completed that contribute to the change agenda for students and the University, and the initiative will be given high priority over the coming years, continuing to develop and expand into new arenas within the student experience.

# Definitions

## Student engagement

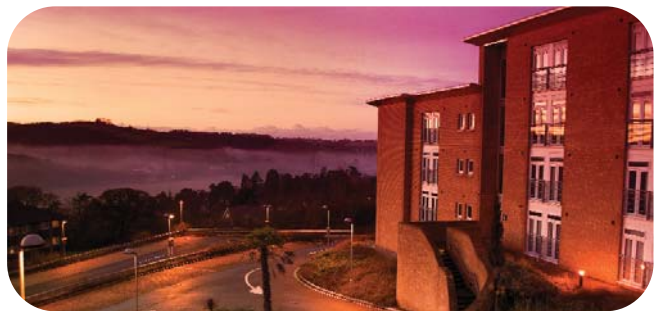
Student engagement is a term used to cover many different areas of student activity. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2010) offers a particular vantage point: ‘students as active partners in shaping their learning experiences’. This fits well with the conceptualisation of students as change agents as outlined in this publication, which describes how student led research can drive developments in teaching, learning and organisational change.

## Change agents

Since this is a booklet about ‘change agents’, it may also be useful to consider what this can mean. Dictionary definitions are straightforward: ‘Somebody or something that brings about, or helps to bring about, change’ (Encarta, 2009); or ‘A person whose presence or thought processes cause a change from the traditional way of handling or thinking about a problem’ (Freidman’s Business Dictionary, 2010).

According to Stevenson (2008) a change agent is as much about identity and character as it is about any definitions; such a person must understand people, have a strong ability to self-motivate, be fuelled by passion and have the ability to be patient. To a certain extent, change agents are dissatisfied with what they see around them, but above all, ‘A change agent lives in the future, not the present... has a vision of what could or should be and uses that as the governing sense of action’.

The idea of students being clear about what needs to be improved, having a vision of what could be, and wanting to bring about change, is central to this publication.



# Foreword



Many years of working with students has given me faith that, in the main, the more responsibility students are given, the more they will take, and the more they will gain from it:

- the higher the expectations from students, the more they will achieve;
- the more that students are encouraged to be independent and creative, the more surprising and exciting will be the outcomes;
- the more collaborative the relationship between student and teacher, or the student and the broader institution, the greater the knowledge and expertise that will be developed by both parties.

Working with academics and professional staff across the university has shown me that, despite the numerous pressures of a research-intensive institution and the growing numbers of both undergraduates and postgraduates, there is a great commitment to giving students the best possible experience. The ‘student voice’ (or many voices) is taken seriously at Exeter; for example, through participation in committees and meetings, through surveys and other forms of feedback, both institutional and subject-based, and through activities led by the Students’ Guild. The improvement of teaching, learning experiences and assessment is always high on the agenda.

However, despite the genuine attention to student feedback and the efforts of the university to engage with students, there has been a missing element – and that is the direct involvement of students in actually bringing about change. There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that ‘listens’ to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of ‘listening to the student voice’ – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as ‘consumer’, whereas ‘students as change agents’ explicitly supports a view of the student as ‘active collaborator’ and ‘co-producer’, with the potential for transformation.

In developing my ideas for this project, I also assumed that many students at Exeter:

- have spare time and would like to do something useful with this time;
- have energy and creative ideas and would rise to a challenge;
- would like to play a more active role in their Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC);
- have a genuine interest in learning and teaching and its improvement;
- have a deep commitment to their department or subject area and would, and could, take on responsibility for a small-scale learning and teaching project;
- could take on aspects of the role of a social science ‘researcher’ and would be prepared to disseminate their project to a university audience;
- have a good rapport with their peers, thereby enabling access to student groups;
- would appreciate gaining additional employability skills and would like to enhance their CV;
- would not expect payment but would appreciate the possibility of using their projects for the Exeter Award or the higher-level Leaders Award<sup>1</sup>.

It was only retrospectively that I realised how important some of these assumptions were, especially in terms of believing in what students are prepared to do, and can and will do, and what they can achieve.

As the project took shape, I recognised that I had also assumed that academic staff would support students as change agents, would allow them to take a lead, would respond favourably to requests for access to their student cohorts (e.g. to lecture groups) for data-collection purposes and would, if asked, allow students to interview them on their opinions and practices.

I was also fortunate that institutional managers at Exeter, including the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Education (Professor Janice Kay), were interested in the concept of moving beyond ‘listening to students’, and I was able to assume from the beginning that they would be supportive of a ‘change agents’ initiative.

Although these assumptions do not need to be fully shared by others for the ‘change agents’ project to be effective, I would suggest that many of them underpin its success. Without the belief in students, the project might never have come into being; and without support from academics and managers, it may also have faltered or been far more difficult to manage.

**Elisabeth Dunne**  
**University of Exeter**  
**March 2011**

<sup>1</sup> *Designed to enhance employability and leadership*  
[www.exeter.ac.uk/exeteraward](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/exeteraward)  
[www.exeter.ac.uk/exeterleadersaward](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/exeterleadersaward)



# The authors

## Elisabeth Dunne – Head of Project Development



My career has been devoted to the promotion of innovation, change and strategic development in education – as a teacher, a researcher and a manager. I have coordinated and directed many major research, development and evaluation projects on aspects of learning and teaching of national interest as well as promoting a range of central initiatives across the University of Exeter, several of which have been ground-breaking, and always with student learning at their core. I have always taken the opportunity to develop new ideas and ways of working, with a focus on the student experience, on understanding the processes of learning and of change, including the development of evidence-based practice. Having recently moved from Head of Academic Development to the newly created post of Head of Project Development within Education Enhancement, I have directed a number of externally-funded projects on student learning, especially through technology, and always striving to be at the forefront of the field. The ‘Students as Change Agents’ initiative draws on all my skills and imagination and I am proud and excited to be engaging with students in new ways.

## Roos Zandstra – Graduate Project Co-ordinator



My involvement in this initiative was as project co-ordinator in the first year of ‘Students as Change Agents’. I have a background in teaching and moved into higher education management having joined the university as part of their graduate management training scheme. Being involved in the project has both challenged and inspired me to think about the ways in which we work with students and manage the student experience effectively. How the students react when given the opportunity to engage with their peers and staff at the University has been incredible. Having been involved in facilitating these methods of engaging students I can only hope that the initiative continues to inspire more to become involved in this way.



# Preface



## Why change agents?

The 'Students as Change Agents' project came about through a variety of activities. Staff from Exeter had attended a Higher Education Academy (HEA) workshop entitled 'Students as Agents for Change'<sup>2</sup> in which both staff and students were invited to share perspectives on aspects of assessment and feedback. It immediately became obvious that we could take the idea of change agents further. It seemed to represent a culmination of so many ways of working over a long period.

With the support of the HEA, Exeter ran a similar session specifically tailored to our context. Students involved were all Chairs of Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs), run through the Students' Guild. Each represented a different subject area, along with an equal number of academics and education enhancement staff. Staff reported coming to deeper understandings of student perceptions of learning. The session demonstrated how much students wanted to engage with issues. They expressed amazement at the amount of time and detailed thinking that academics put in to designing assignments, marking and feedback and their determination to make fair judgements. Students were taken aback by academics' accounts of how difficult they sometimes found the assessment of individual students. Overall, staff and students reported considerably improved understandings and some changes in opinion. As one example, a student who had stated early on that 'Exams are the only fair way to assess us', and who argued that there should be 'no other form of assessment', left with a determination that more variety in assessments should be provided across the subject area.

The following year, a similar workshop was offered to a wider group, with good results. Staff and students again came to deeper understandings. Students not only demonstrated a willingness to engage with pedagogy, they were prepared to develop and change their opinions. They had concrete ideas about how they could improve assessment in their subject areas. This continued to be exciting, but the process seemed to miss an opportunity. Although student and staff voices had been listened to, there was no obvious pathway for action to promote change when the session and the discussion ended.

<sup>2</sup> Organised by Brenda Smith, previously Assistant Director, HEA

This publication is the story of how we remedied this missed opportunity to influence University practice and policy. It describes the first year of the Exeter 'Students as Change Agents' initiative, from idea to actuality: how the project moved towards students being engaged in change; how the concept developed and was supported, what the outcomes were, and how they were achieved. It seems to be timely. The ideas have already gained national acclaim through a case study in the previous government's publication *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009). The QAA have published a 'think-piece' on the topic (Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson, 2010). The NUS has shown considerable interest and has published resources from Exeter (see the NUS Toolkit, 2010), and ESCalate, the HEA Subject Centre for Education and the Higher Education Academy have supported the writing of this booklet. In addition, wherever we talk about this project, both inside and outside the university, nationally and even internationally, people's imaginations seem to be fired; staff and students alike can see the potential of working together in new ways.

Importantly, the initiative would never have achieved the momentum and drive that it has unless it fitted positively into the political context of the moment. Equally important is fitting into Exeter's strategy for becoming a world-class university, with excellence in learning and teaching matching excellence in research.

## Stakeholder support

The following comments show how the project has meaning for a wide range of stakeholders; without the interest of such people, the project would never have taken off in the way that it has. Importantly, all these comments reinforce the view that the 'time is right' for involving students in change in new ways, that there are strong drivers for change, nationally as well as at Exeter.

'...The role of students as co-producers and as active participants in their higher education is vital. The Students as Change Agents project has been an exceptional way of making this live amongst the student body, actively encouraging students to take a positive role engaging in their programme.' (Aaron Porter – President, National Union of Students, 2010)



'I was excited by the concept of students as change agents as soon as I heard about what Exeter has been doing. What is important is that students are gaining the opportunity to work in the kinds of way that are essential for success in multi-national companies, as well as improving their learning experiences in higher education.' (Betty Collis – International Education Consultant and previously consultant to Shell)

'Providing students with opportunities to engage in the shaping of their learning experience is known to impact positively on their HE experience. The HEA is delighted to support this booklet on the Students as Change Agents Project at Exeter as an exciting and innovative approach to achieving enhanced student engagement.' (Helen Thomas - Assistant Director, Higher Education Academy)

‘As the relationships between students and the higher education providers are tested and challenged by changing priorities and structures, it is important that institutions maintain a clear and persuasive vision of the role students can and should be playing in the academic community. Exeter’s ‘Students as Change Agents’ project injects new energy and commitment to the ideals of partnership and co-production, empowering students to take charge of their own learning environment and enhance the experience of the entire academic community.’ (Derfel Owen – Development Officer, Students and Enhancement, Quality Assurance Agency 2010)

‘The HE Academy remains committed to supporting work that ‘enhances the student learning experience’. ESCalate staff see the Students as Change Agents project as an opportunity to work directly on this commitment, by helping to bring the project’s aspirations, processes and outcomes to a wider audience, including staff developers in Education departments, students, policy makers, and other interested colleagues across the HE sector.’ (Tony Brown – Former ESCalate Director)



In the University of Exeter context, support for the initiative has been wide-ranging, and at every level of the university, from senior managers to teaching staff. Having ‘champions’ in so many roles allows the project to gain credibility; it is an essential starting point in enabling the ideas and practices to grow.

‘The idea of ‘Students as Change Agents’ is really exciting. It genuinely is a great way for students and staff to work in true partnership to make learning better for all students. This is top of the university’s agenda for learning.’ (Janice Kay - Senior DVC, University of Exeter)

‘I believe the successful universities of the future will be the ones which give students a true voice, empowering them to embrace and lead positive changes, starting with the university itself. This is why the ‘Students as Change Agents’ project is not just good for the university, but critical.’

(James Hutchinson – Chief Executive, University of Exeter Students’ Guild)



‘At Exeter you have the chance to do so much more than simply going to lectures and writing essays – you can shape and improve the experience for yourself and your fellow students. Being an agent for change empowers you to find improvements in everything the university does and to see your changes implemented, and the voice of every student is heard and acted upon. If you are looking for a university that offers a high class education and student experience, a university that thrives on your engagement and involvement, a university that treats you as an individual, then Exeter is beyond a doubt the university of choice for you.’ (Bertie Archer – Vice President Academic Affairs, University of Exeter Students’ Guild)

‘Our ‘Students as Change Agents’ initiative is a great example of Exeter’s commitment to working with students to enhance their experience and to improve it for future generations of students.’ (Michele Shoebridge – Director of Academic Services, University of Exeter)

‘One of the somewhat unanticipated but exciting outcomes of the ‘Students as Change Agents’ project is that it provides students with some highly desirable learning experiences. Through the project methodology they are empowered to research a range of educational practices which underpin learning. This means that they are engaged in producing and analysing research informed evidence – a valuable learning process in itself. It also means that they increasingly understand their own learning processes much more clearly and as a result they are achieving better academic results. As we start to understand these processes better the project has the potential to inform and improve educational practice across the university.’ (Sue Burkill – Head of Education Enhancement, University of Exeter)

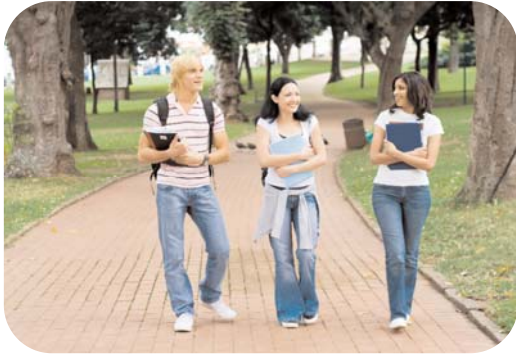


‘As part of our sustainability and globalisation strategy here at Exeter, we believe that we are educating our students for an uncertain world. Therefore we need to develop in them the capacity to create change and to deliver that change through collaboration and partnership. Alongside formal study there are plenty of opportunities in which students can connect to others to bring about positive difference. ‘Students as Change Agents’ is more than a project or an initiative, it is a mindset focused on working together to empower those with the creative energy to improve our university, and to encourage students and staff to step up and play their part.’ (Jackie Bagnall – Leadership Teaching Fellow, the University of Exeter Business School)

‘The ‘Students as Change Agents’ initiative offers invaluable benefits on many levels to both the university and to students. Collaborative working is implicit in the 21st century economy: fostering this culture offers long-term benefits to develop the potential of everyone involved. Engaged students – the leaders of tomorrow – are encouraged to see how their own ideas can lead to collaborative change, whilst also gaining important experience and understanding of how change happens in real-world situations. If institutions can embrace passionate student advocates, they will be in a good position to drive forward innovation and to make a real and genuine difference to the services they provide.’ (Dale Potter – Graduate Co-ordinator of Change Agents projects, University of Exeter 2009/10)



# The purpose of the publication



The purpose of telling the ‘Students as Change Agents’ story is so that others can share in our journey, and take from it ideas for similar projects in their own institutions. It is told chronologically, to give a perspective on how the initiative unfolded, from the vaguest of ideas to the detailed research outcomes that are at its heart. It is a story of great successes and rich learning, but also one that has had risks and unanticipated challenges. It will hopefully be of interest to anyone wishing to promote change in teaching and learning, whether at the level of student, staff, or institution. The outcomes are of value to all students, at whatever level and whatever their discipline. Above all, this is a story about students, about the wonderful things that they can achieve when given the opportunity and about the recognition that they can collaborate actively in improving their educational experiences.

The publication is also designed as a resource for those interested in promoting the idea of change agents, whether as an individual member of staff or a student, or on a broader scale such as a subject area, a faculty or even a whole institution.

## How to use this resource

**Section 1** of the publication provides the following material.

- A brief review of current rhetoric and literature on student engagement as a driver for change. This provides arguments, or a ‘case’, for working with students in new ways, thereby enabling those who wish to promote change agents in a new context to underpin this with a positive rationale.
- A description of the processes we went through to establish the project. This is designed to be supportive at a more practical level, especially for those wishing to set up any similar kind of activity.

**Section 2** of the publication provides a series of short case studies.

These highlight the variety of projects that were undertaken by students, and outline the methodology for each small-scale study. They also illustrate the outcomes and benefits to the subject area and beyond, and what the student researchers gained from their involvement.

The case studies provide evidence that can be used by the reader to show:


- how powerful a tool the concept of students as change agents can be, for both the institution and the individual students;
- what kinds of projects students wanted to and can realistically undertake;
- what kinds of activities took place;
- what kinds of recommendations and solutions students suggest;
- what the anticipated outcomes might be.

Above all, they illustrate the real attention to detail and the interest that students take in what they are doing.

Longer versions of these and additional case studies can be seen in Section 3.

**Section 3** is an accompanying online resource providing access to three types of support.

<http://escalate.ac.uk/8064>

1. The full text of case studies, as written up for the 'Students as Change Agents' project.
2. Resources that are associated with specific aspects of the text in the booklet, and that provide additional practical information. These are marked by a symbol within the text  They may be copied or adapted in any way that the user considers appropriate.

These resources comprise:

- the advert for the graduate project co-ordinator;
  - the publicity leaflet and application form;
  - examples of full-text case-studies;
  - the individual evaluation form, for each student to complete at the end of their project;
  - the project feedback form, to review and report back on implementation of recommendations and solutions.
3. A small number of development activities are provided to allow groups of staff and students to think through in detail the conceptualisation and practicalities of students engaging as change agents.

# Section 1

## Student engagement as a driver for change



What has become apparent over recent years is that many institutions are beginning to engage closely with students in new ways. From 2005, several of the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) have promoted student engagement and involvement through a variety of initiatives<sup>3</sup>. Student ‘representation’ and listening to the ‘student voice’ have become increasingly central to institutional ways of working. The ‘student experience’ is firmly embedded within the rhetoric of higher education, even though it is an ambiguous idea that may lack definition. In 2011 student ‘engagement’ is a popular buzzword, along with conceptualisations of students working in ‘partnership’ with institutions, and as ‘collaborators’ and ‘co-producers’.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, initiatives at Sheffield Hallam, De Montfort, and Napier Universities, with students developing curricula, or supporting staff with technology, etc.



Recognition of the 'student voice' has been widespread in schooling over a long period (see, for example, Walker and Logan, 2008; Halsey et al., 2006). More recently, opportunities have been widely provided – both nationally and institutionally – for listening to students in higher education. Institutions have made considerable efforts to enhance provision as a response to the feedback gained. However, much of this has been institutionally rather than student driven:

While institutions' rationales for student engagement processes stem from a central concern to enhance the student experience, for many... institutions a "listening and being responsive" rationale seemed to take precedence over a rationale that emphasised student engagement as being central to creating a cohesive learning community (and hence staff and students being viewed as partners in enhancing learning experiences) (Little et al 2009 p.43).

In a similar vein, Ramsden (2009) suggested that:

Student involvement in quality processes should start from the idea of building learning communities. Practically speaking, this involves shaping student expectations of their role as responsible partners who are able to take ownership of quality enhancement with staff and engage with them in dialogue about improving assessment, curriculum and teaching (p.16).

Likewise, Porter (2008) made an impassioned plea:

I ask you to begin to explore, within your own context, new ways to engage students in their learning, to involve students in your internal quality assurance systems, and in the design and planning of courses. We will only be able to take this work forward if we have a wide resource of innovative ideas and solutions to draw upon, and the only place that those can be developed is by practitioners, in real situations.



## From customer to collaborator and co-producer

The reason for this move towards a more collaborative and participative agenda has arisen largely from concerns about prevailing customer or consumer attitudes in education, and the problems that this can create.

If students are envisioned only or primarily as consumers, then educators assume the role of panderers, devoted more to immediate satisfaction than to offering the challenge of intellectual independence (Schwartzman, 1995, p.220).

Similarly, Cheney et al. (1997) have long argued that the customer metaphor encourages students to be passive and detached rather than engaged in the co-creation of education. Furedi (2009) is adamant:

There is little doubt that encouraging students to think of themselves as customers has fostered a mood in which education is regarded as a commodity that must represent value for money. The celebration of the assertion of customer interests is part of a misguided attempt to hold higher education to account according to the doctrine of value for money. It is misguided because the customer model's implicit assumption of a conflict of interest between client and service provider inexorably erodes the relationship of trust between teacher and student.

However, university programmes can help to develop students as citizens, and this approach is increasingly cited as one purpose of higher education. Co-production helps to promote highly desirable social and public engagement. It brings together students, lecturers and others in a cooperative enterprise which is focused on knowledge for the enhancement of learning and teaching. A current good example of this can be seen in the Student Academic Partners scheme (Birmingham City University, 2010) that integrates students 'into the teaching and pedagogic research communities of faculties as a way to develop collaboration between students and staff, generating a sense of ownership and pride in the institution and its programmes'.

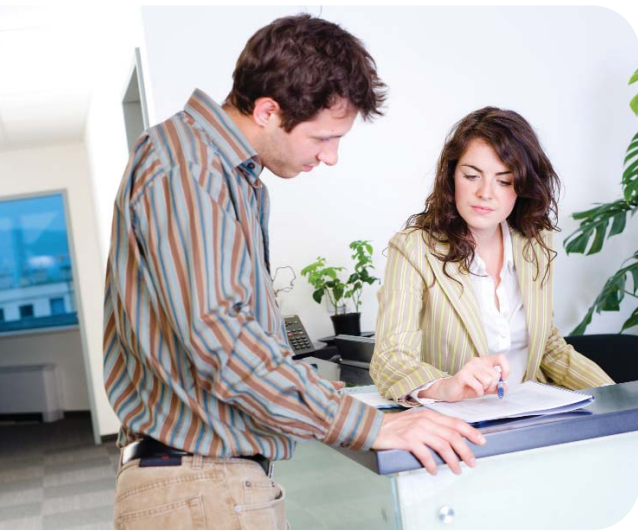
## Students as researchers

The 'Students as Change Agents' project has research at its core. Research is clearly an important distinguishing feature of learning in higher education, and it is the student as researcher who can most ably demonstrate the value of higher in higher education, who can show the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical know-how. Recently, the concept of students as researchers in their discipline has become an important topic for discussion (see Healey and Jenkins, 2009; Taylor and Wilding, 2009).

What is different about the change agent's concept is that it takes the idea of students as researchers into a different dimension from the discipline-based research usually discussed in higher education, with a new focus on researching pedagogy and curriculum delivery. Students apply and develop their research expertise in the context of their subject, taking responsibility for engaging with research-led, evidence-informed change, and promoting reflection and review at a departmental and institutional level.

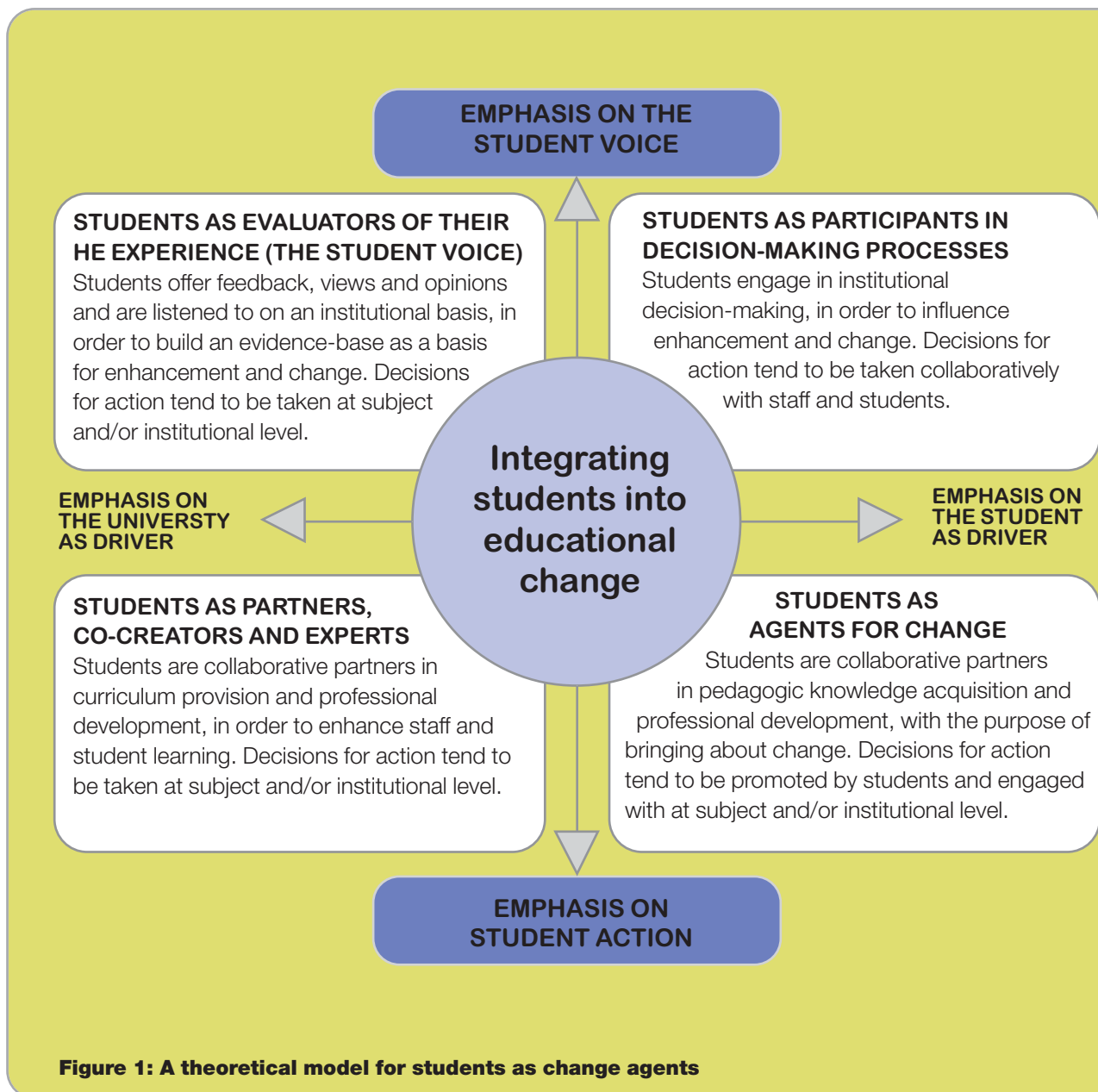
Student-led research can have a direct impact on learning and the development of communities of practice in which students take responsibility for bringing about pedagogic change. Those students who have the opportunity to research the learning and teaching environment in which they are studying not only acquire valuable skills that enhance their employability, they also make an important contribution to social and community engagement within their institution. This is an approach that is embryonic within higher education. Nevertheless, it has enormous potential for influencing engagement and institutional responsiveness to the needs of students. In a climate where many students will be paying more towards their education, it seems of particular importance that they should be actively engaged in creating the educational future that will serve them best.

# A theoretical framework for engaging students as change agents



In order to have an explicit framework for testing our thinking and our decision-making in the context of current modes of student representation and engagement, we developed a theoretical model. The purpose of this was to highlight how we perceive the 'Students as Change Agents' initiative to be moving into a new dimension of student activity. The model needed to be appropriate for a research-intensive university and sufficiently detailed to illustrate the dimensions of student engagement that we were working with, together with the processes of change brought about by the students' research activities. It also needed to be simple enough to convey our approach to others, as well as to illustrate the distinctiveness of the initiative. Our approach (Figure1) is designed around two key dimensions:

- the extent to which any activity is led by students, or led by the institution;
- the extent to which any activity is premised on active engagement by students in change, or is based on more passive forms of representation.



We saw this model as a starting point that represented our thinking and encapsulated our intentions for action. We give equal importance to the quadrants whilst recognising their different nature. The value of this model is that it has enabled us to be considerably more focused in our thinking and actions about formal engagement with students, the different forms that this can take, and where responsibilities lie.

## The model elements

**Students as evaluators** includes those processes through which the institution and external bodies listen to the student voice in order to drive change. This includes internal, cross-institutional, subject and service-based feedback, using monitoring devices such as questionnaire surveys, focus groups, or the National Student Survey (NSS) organised through the HEA. It includes formal procedures for complaints, informal evaluative feedback at department level, voting through the Students' Guild representation systems, and so on.

**Students as participants** emphasises institutional commitment to greater student involvement in changes to teaching, learning and institutional development. It is often evident through student/staff dialogue and the active involvement of students in a search for solutions to recognised difficulties. It is evidenced through actions taken by Staff/Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) and other forms of representation with departments and schools and as part of cross-institutional practice. In its most participatory form, student involvement is evident through well-established participation in University committee structures throughout the whole institutional system, from representation on Council to cross-institutional working groups, to School Learning and Teaching committees, and through participatory activities including the writing of codes of practice (such as a behaviour code).

**Students as partners** emphasises active student engagement as co-creators and experts. It includes student engagement in institutional development, for example through students training staff in the use of new technologies, designing curricula and resources, negotiating assessment processes and practices, through writing of examination questions and question banks, setting assignments, redesigning module provision and delivery and producing induction material for new student cohorts. In our experience at Exeter, such initiatives have been invaluable, but tend to be led by the institution or School. When students act as change agents in this model, the focus and direction is to a far greater extent decided by students themselves.

**Students as agents for change** requires a move from institution-driven to student-driven agendas and activity. In our experience, at Exeter as elsewhere, invaluable partnership initiatives have evolved from departmental-led agendas to become institutional initiatives where the focus and direction is to a far greater extent determined by the students themselves, both as individuals and groups. Students become actively engaged with the processes of change in the institution and their subject areas, often taking on a leadership role.

In terms of students acting as change agents, the importance of the model is that we are shifting the agenda towards students taking on greater leadership through actively participating in enhancing their learning experiences. They are moving beyond being commentators to being participants in change. Having a 'voice' is important, but may remain a passive experience in comparison to being given the opportunities to drive and lead change initiatives. Hence our emphasis is in particular on the more active forms of participation of the lower segments of the model, without devaluing the importance of the other areas.



# Students as Change Agents – the story of the Exeter project



Here we give more details about the story of how the ‘Students as Change Agents’ initiative began and how it developed over the first pilot year. The previous discussions outlined the philosophy and rationale of the initiative, The story that follows offers a more practical view of implementation: one of the main purposes is to help those in other institutions to think through the processes they would want to adopt in taking a similar project forward.

The following descriptions outline the sequence of steps, (see Figure 2) – or the processes – that we went through in order to bring the project to fruition. These steps relate to the particular model that we planned, that is, with volunteer students undertaking a number of small-scale research projects on learning and teaching, supported by an employed graduate to act as a co-ordinator and guide; and with analysis of this research then leading to dissemination activity and a series of recommendations and solutions from the students involved. However, it is anticipated that the steps described will be useful in other contexts and for different ways of working.

- Step 1 – Gaining institutional support**
- Step 2 – Appointing a graduate project co-ordinator**
- Step 3 – Publicising the project to students**
- Step 4 – Selecting projects**
- Step 5 – Undertaking the research**
- Step 6 – Dissemination**
- Step 7 – Acting on research outcomes**

**Figure 2: Project processes**

To reinforce the practical element, some of the steps are accompanied by web-based resources that can be copied or adapted for use elsewhere.

Throughout the projects, students took a leadership role, always in close contact with the Education Enhancement team. It is important that staff champions in each subject area also continuously supported and encouraged their students. For example, they suggested questions for surveys, they were open to being interviewed by students, they enabled access to lectures for data-gathering purposes, they reported on research feedback within staff meetings, they enabled changes to be built into the curriculum documentation and practices, they negotiated funding from their College to publish outcomes. Overall, although not tasked with specific activities, they collaborated in flexible ways to respond to the change agents needs and to ensure that recommendations were followed up and that changes were made.

## Step 1 – Gaining institutional support

As with many new initiatives, the project started as little more than an emerging idea – a hunch that students could take more responsibility for change, and that change based on evidence gained through research would be a useful step forward. These ideas seemed to spark an interest amongst staff and to fit well within the context of a research-intensive University. Serious conceptualisation of the initiative began in September 2008 with a grant of £12,000 from the Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor. This was important in demonstrating Exeter's high-level commitment to the project. Although funding was not essential to developing the initial ideas, it would have been extremely difficult to make progress without this commitment and without any form of support for students. It was decided, in collaboration with the Education Officer<sup>4</sup> from the Students' Guild, to use most of the funding to employ a recent graduate for a six month placement within the University's central Education Enhancement team.

In addition, the 'Students as Change Agents' initiative linked well with the drive from the Students' Guild (students' union) to improve the quality of student representation. It offered a practical method for enabling Staff/Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) to be more explicitly representative of a broader range of student views, to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of student interests and concerns, and also to be more proactive in bringing about change. SSLCs therefore became central to the running of the project.

SSLC meetings importantly allowed access for the authors to pre-formed groups of students who wished to engage with University affairs, and they enabled effective dissemination about the possibilities for engagement with the project. All decisions for research topics came from the SSLCs rather than from individual students, meaning that the agenda was an agreed and shared one, often picking up on issues that had not been satisfactorily resolved in the past. Working through the SSLCs also meant that there was a formal route for feeding back research findings that emerged from the project, and for agreeing on changes in practice.

<sup>4</sup> This is a paid position of one year's duration for a graduate who is elected by students



## Step 2 – Appointing a graduate project co-ordinator

A co-ordinator was advertised for through an institutional placement scheme for recent graduates. Writing an advertisement ★ required the first real focus on what such a person would actually be required to do and to achieve. Above all, the thinking that went into the description of the post cemented the research element of the initiative – the collection and analysis of data from staff and students and a written report including recommendations for change. The essential element of collaboration between students, staff, the Students' Guild and the Education Enhancement team was also clearly stated as central.

Applicants to interview were anticipated to bring a range of communication skills, but the most important factor was that:

...they will need to be enthusiastic and imaginative in order to make the most of this innovative and exciting project. There will be support and guidance from the supervisor throughout, but the project will largely be dependent on taking initiative, bouncing ideas around and looking for new ways of working (advertisement for the post).




The implication was that whoever took on this role would help to shape the future of the project and would need the sophistication to cope with unknowns, which is where Roos<sup>5</sup> came in.

There were several things that attracted me to applying for this post. Although I did not completely understand what the project was about, to me the concept was a logical one and being involved in something that was new to the sector sounded exciting. What attracted me foremost was that it would give me the opportunity to interact with students and academic staff, engage in research, and that I would be able to bring some of my own ideas to the project. The opportunity to be so heavily involved in change heightened my enthusiasm for the project, and as I am always up for a challenge I jumped in with both feet... and arms...legs...Let's just say it was a case of getting completely stuck in from the word go (Roos Zandstra, 2009).



<sup>5</sup> One of the authors of this booklet

## Step 3 – Publicising the project to students

A publicity leaflet  advertising the project to students was created. This again helped us to be more explicit about what we wanted from the project. However, we highlighted:

This is a highly experimental project at this stage, and it will be up to you to help to shape it and to get what you need from it.

We asked, for example:

- would you like to support your department in improving learning and teaching?
- what really matters to you within your degree programme?
- are there things you keep moaning about, but they never seem to get any better?
- do you know what students feel most strongly about in relation to their personal learning experiences?


We also highlighted what we thought students would gain from being involved:

You will be working in a unique way to support change – something which will be highly valued by your subject area, that may impact on future students for years to come, and will prompt employers to sit up and take note of you. You may even have an impact that is far wider than your School. You will gain a variety of research and organisational skills that will be valuable in your degree and on your CV and that could also contribute to experience for The Exeter Award.



The leaflet highlighted that students would gain help from a graduate student; to work on a research question, to help write a questionnaire, to organise focus groups, to collect and analyse data, to make phone calls, to organise meetings, to help design and produce an end product and to disseminate findings. It was also made clear that funding would be available for photocopying or printing of materials and that resources, such as voice recorders and state of the art digital video cameras, could be borrowed.

## Step 4 – Selecting projects

To support students in being clear about the practicalities of any project, we spent half a day in the Students' Guild café/ lounge area, making it clear that we would be available for students to come and talk about ideas, and to give guidance on completing the application form . The venue was

deliberate in giving the message that we would go out to meet students, rather than necessarily expecting them to come to the less familiar territory of the Education Enhancement team. An important aspect of these early meetings was to set the tone and style of conversations and of the research. The philosophy of the initiative was firmly based on looking for the positive and learning from good practice, not on focusing on negatives. This was specifically so as to avoid individuals or subjects feeling criticised or threatened but, rather, exploring what was most valued by students and staff.

The application form was designed to ensure that interested students thought through a number of aspects of their proposed projects: what they wanted to research and why, when they would do the research, how they would collect appropriate data, what help they might need from us, and what they would like to achieve both on a personal level and in terms of project outcomes. The form ensured that students had thought their projects through fully, and this provided a platform for getting the projects off the ground. We also ensured that we had a preferred means of ongoing communication with each student – which turned out to be crucial!

We asked for application forms to be signed off by a member of staff who had some oversight of learning and teaching within the subject area of the project. This not only gave us the reassurance that staff in the SSLC had some input and had agreed to the project topic, but it also gave us a contact person from within the academic community. This factor became important to the ongoing success of projects; in order for recommended changes to be realistic and for these then to be implemented, academic staff needed to be involved and to take some responsibility for progress.

The application form also included reference to personal objectives and skills, highlighting that there would be personal as well as institutional benefits for those involved, and providing a link with personal and professional development and hence employability.

We had initially planned to accept eight projects; however, with well-formed proposals for ten highly varied projects from different subject areas, we decided to run with all of them. Topics covered assessment and feedback, seminar provision, personal tutoring, technology for learning and teaching (for example, the use of podcasting and of personal voting systems), inter-campus teaching, employability, peer-tutoring, learning spaces, and support for academic writing.

## Step 5 – Designing and undertaking the research project

To begin with, the project had a huge amount of forward momentum. Students completed their forms and were keen to share their ideas with us. Shortly after this, things went a little quiet. Students did not always reply to communications and there was a worry that they may have changed their minds about being involved – especially since their engagement with us was entirely voluntary.

We had to learn not to panic! We came to recognise that the students gave different levels of commitment to the project at different times. We learnt that we would need to be flexible and to work around their schedules – they were giving up their time and it was important to be supportive and to

gently keep them motivated. We never imposed a strict timetable of meetings for this very reason, but made it clear that we expected feedback and contact on a regular basis. Only when this was not maintained did we chase after them.

When we did see them, the students usually came to us full of ideas, although not all knew how to express these or how to design a research project based on their initial assumptions. We had to tease out their ideas and give appropriate support to help them design their research tools. Students decided to use a range of research methods, including focus groups, informal interviews and questionnaire surveys (paper and on-line). This then required support for design of questionnaires, questions for focus groups, and interviews with staff. It also involved training them, for example, in how to run a focus group, or in using audio equipment. One of the main challenges was helping them to recognise that their research should not hold a bias towards their personal views. In addition, students on occasion needed support in finding strategies to bring about change in non-intrusive or non-threatening ways. Throughout, we were always positive and encouraging, making it clear that we valued really highly all their time, their ideas and the effort that they were making.

Gradually, completed surveys started to come in, and we moved from a point of concern at having nothing to being inundated with huge amounts of data, interviews to transcribe, and students wanting to know what the findings looked like. For reasons of time, students were given considerable help with analysis of data, especially with some of the more detailed surveys. At this point they were excited and totally engaged in understanding what the data told them and in how this could be fed back to appropriate audiences.

## Step 6 – Dissemination

### 1. The project blog

We kept an ongoing blog, in particular to highlight key phases and successes. The Education Officer from the Students' Guild (Sam Miles) wrote a particularly encouraging entry, which gave a boost to the project as a whole – to the students and to us. This kind of feedback allows everyone involved to feel that they are achieving something that is recognisable and worthwhile.

In today's blog, I'd like to add my favourable impressions of the Research Projects undertaken, and to clarify how impressed I have been as Guild Education Officer with the genuine drive that our SSLC Subject Chairs have displayed in striving for more effective learning and teaching methods across the year. I think this is an absolutely great idea, combining as it does the representation structures of our Students' Guild – our Subject Chairs of SSLCs, who are elected from cross-campus ballot – with University resources, delivered by the Education Enhancement team and utilising their sophisticated data-gathering resources and staff.

This project is *ground-breaking* and it is already yielding some very interesting results, empowering students who are acting as 'change agents' within their degree courses and enabling new ideas and changes for the good of the students. Impressively, some of the projects are already implementing their research findings into departments, with Schools writing Students as Agents for Change into their annual School Plans! I'm really excited to soon see the results from the 10

projects. I'm proud and heartened to see our students pioneering such *professional, evidence-based lobbying work* so effectively within the University. Finally, it's worth noting the importance of schemes like these. Earlier this month, I went to a really interesting student projects conference up in Leeds, along with the Guild Education Officer elect, Llewellyn Morris, Roos Zandstra, and Liz Dunne (Head of Projects at Education Enhancement). The focus of our day's discussions was precisely this: enabling us, as students, to *influence our learning and assessments* by really getting involved and changing how we're taught for the better.

## 2. A conference

Since the work undertaken by students was of such high quality, in June 2009 we established the first campus-based student conference to showcase the projects. Aaron Porter<sup>6</sup> provided a real focus through agreeing to give a keynote presentation. Students also presented their projects and findings, together with any outcomes that had been achieved. The students gave excellent presentations in terms of both content and communication skills, and were confident with their delivery as we had given them an opportunity to practise in front of each other a few days prior to the event.

The conference proved unexpectedly effective at drawing in a wide range of people from across the university and provided a forum where staff and students could debate ideas together.

The feedback reassured us that we really had achieved something worthwhile, as illustrated by the many enthusiastic and positive comments.

'...all the students involved had great ideas, were really competent presenters and made the event really interesting. I also enjoyed a lot of the concepts coming forward and would really like to see these in action.'

'Fantastic work from Education Enhancement, the Guild, and most of all the student Subject Chairs who were involved.'

'It was inspiring to see this partnership between students, academic staff and Education Enhancement staff.'

'Excellent to see the students themselves taking the initiative and making such good presentations on their projects.'

'The Guild/University collaboration is a logical one and something that both sides can be proud of – and most of all, the students who were involved. Fantastic volunteering from them.'

'The conference was exceptional – most importantly it brought out exactly the process of student engagement that not only makes sense, but ensures the highest quality.'



<sup>6</sup> At that time NUS Vice-President – Higher Education, and currently President of the NUS



The conference was perhaps the most important moment of the project. It had confirmed in so many ways that the project was working – that it had achieved something very special, and that senior managers, academics, staff from professional services and the Students' Guild, and students could all recognise this together.


It contributed to the beginnings of an institutional culture shift wherein student participation – already at a high level at Exeter – is moving further towards a collaborative partnership model where change is more broadly led by student activity and engagement. Of most importance, the conference has demonstrated the power of evidence-based change that draws on knowledge and understanding rather than on individual opinion.

### 3. Case studies

When we started the project, we knew that a certain amount of report writing would be important to dissemination and decision-making within the institution. However, we had not predicted the quality of the research that would be undertaken, nor the detail of the data collected. As we began to review what the students had achieved, a decision was taken to write up each study as an individual piece. We also decided on a standard format. This made it easier to write, but also easier for a reader who wanted to scan across several projects to make sense of them quickly.

The extent to which students were involved in data analysis and writing was varied, but they were all excited as they saw their research formalised within case studies, they all prepared their own slides for the end of year conference and they felt a real sense of pride in their achievements.

The case studies outline some of the key findings, recommendations and solutions to each of the areas that students worked in, and highlight the impact as well as what those involved gained from the experience. Case studies are particularly appropriate in a research-intensive university; they provide an in-depth record of the work done, they have proved important for dissemination, for demonstrating the level of work undertaken by students both within the institution and beyond, and in some cases for providing evidence that can be used in new contexts.

A series of case study summaries is presented in Section 2, with full texts being available in Section 3 online .




## Step 7 – Acting on research outcomes and evaluating processes

The intention of the project was that research outcomes should lead to recommendations for change, and solutions if appropriate. For some of the research outcomes it was possible to act immediately on project findings and recommendations in ways that engaged teaching staff and institutional processes. In addition to research reports, student outcomes have included a broad variety of activities (many of which are outlined in the context of the case studies in Section 2), running sessions on writing skills and on careers, both organised and delivered by students; the organisation of a buddy system; and peer-tutoring. Students have also produced a study guide, appropriate for both students and staff, on effective engagement in seminars. Overall, many hundreds of students have participated in the various studies and have benefited from the outcomes.

At the end of the year, students were asked to complete an individual evaluation form . The purpose of this was twofold:

1. To ensure that the students involved had reflected on the processes they had been through, and as an outcome recognised the skills and experiences they had gained. These also provided a source of words they could use in future job applications;
2. To give us written feedback on their experiences, so as to ascertain formally that the project had been worthwhile, but also in order to have quotes that could be used for future marketing, and to persuade others that the 'Students as Change Agents project was giving a positive and fulfilling experience to individual students as well as to the causes that they were supporting.

Finally, and in some cases long after the project leaders had left the University, SSLCs were asked to complete a project feedback form  to report back on how the project recommendations or solutions had been implemented. Questions included:

- what was achieved by the project?
- what changed/is being done differently because of the project?
- who made the changes?
- what are the benefits of this? For whom?

There was also a requirement to report if there had been no change or action, and to explain why not. Responses are illustrated in the case studies in Section 2.



## Top tips for running projects

The descriptions on the previous pages have already outlined a number of factors that we considered important. The following points provide a brief summary of a few practical aspects that we believe to be useful in the context of student-led projects.

1. Start with a small number of projects that are manageable; put time into making sure they are successful and that the results are worthwhile.
2. Maintain a constantly positive stance, looking for good practice rather than focusing on the less good, since this allows forward progress and the valuing and acknowledgement of staff who are doing things well.
3. Ensure that students involved in any project have agreed who is going to be responsible for what, and be clear with students about expectations for working arrangements and their role.
4. Have high expectations of the students but always be available in the background, and make it clear they can contact you as they need.
5. Keep in contact with students throughout a project and gain ongoing feedback on progress. This keeps the momentum going but also ensures that help and support is given as required.
6. On occasion, students may need support in finding strategies to work in ways that are not seen as intrusive or threatening, and therefore alienating to staff; talk through ideas for doing this.
7. Be sensitive to different perspectives (from senior management, academics, professional services and support staff as well as students) and get buy-in to ensure change is taken on board.
8. Make sure that positive outcomes are shared with appropriate parties and seek strategies for doing this – ongoing success may depend in part on visibility. Having a conference at the end of the year gives an absolute deadline that provides an incentive for completing projects.

# What were the key factors of success?

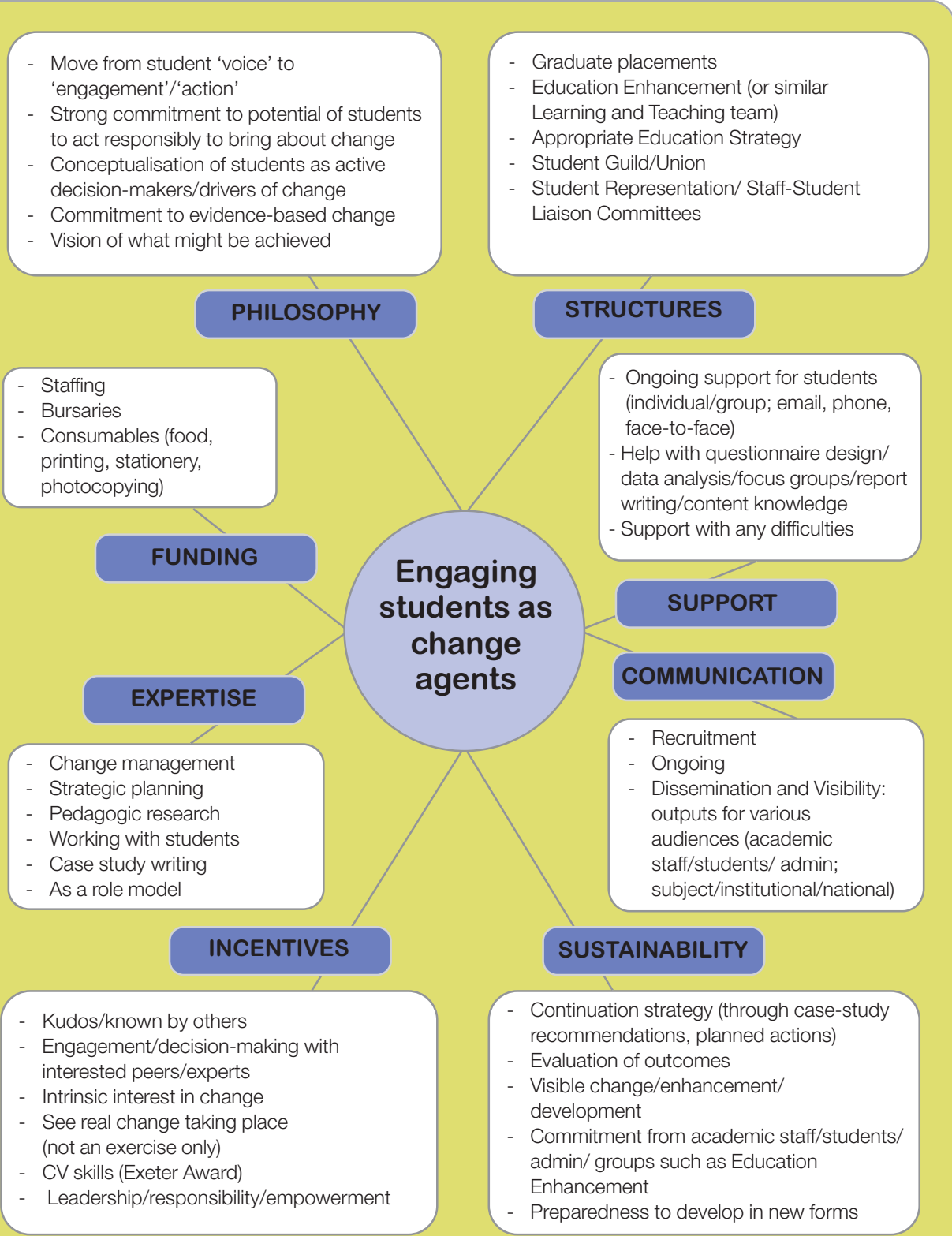


Given that we were really feeling our way with this project, and that there were no similar precedents from which we could learn, it was really important to us that we analysed what we had been doing and had achieved. Roos highlights how the pilot had some guiding principles that were all important:

I did not feel that the project needed to be fully structured from the beginning. That was part of its beauty. We understood what we were trying to achieve but did not become fixated with exactly how to achieve it. We had several key concepts which we wanted to maintain: that the ideas and change would come from the student, that these needed to be properly researched and that the students would need to be fully supported by me but also by the academic staff who were involved. It was about enabling the students to step back from the situation and giving them a means of engaging effectively with their departments. It was about opening up conversations that would not normally happen and about changing the views of students and staff alike. (Roos Zandstra, 2009).

However, in order to replicate the early success, we needed to establish some key factors in both this success and in its continuing interest (see figure 3). We do not claim that these are the only factors, or that they are necessary pre-requisites in all contexts. They relate in specific ways to an institution-wide initiative (that is, run from the centre and gaining support from subject areas across the University). They may not need to be formalised in different ways for subject-based individuals wishing to work more collaboratively to promote change with students known to them, or for wanting to work on a project in their own individual context.

This model highlights those areas we consider to be most important.



**Figure 3: Factors that contribute to the success of the 'Students as Change Agents' initiative**

**Philosophy** As already outlined, the project was built upon some central premises: that there was a need to move from a mostly passive voice for students to their being involved in more active engagement, with the underlying conceptualisation of students as active decision-makers, and even drivers of change. Underpinning this was a strong belief in the potential of students to act responsibly, a commitment to evidence-based change, a vision of what might be achieved – at least on a small scale at this point – and a belief that small incremental steps in bringing about change, especially at the level of the discipline, can have a powerful impact. Hence, what might appear to be disparate and ad hoc changes are held together both by their intentions to improve learning and teaching by those who experience it, but also by the fact that students can take on this responsibility for change and, through being involved, create collaborative communities that are working in new ways.

**Structures** Alongside the philosophy, there were existing structures that supported the development of the project: for example, having a central Learning and Teaching team (Education Enhancement) that already worked closely with the Students' Guild; having strong student representation through SSLCs which enabled contact with students who had already shown a commitment to the University through their role in this context; having a graduate placement scheme to recruit from; and also having a University Education Strategy that has students at its core and is conducive to new approaches.

**Funding** Internal funding for the pilot allowed support for students, and demonstrated a University commitment. The allocated sum of £12,000 for the first year (2008/09) was used as salary for the first graduate co-ordinator of the project, consumables (food, printing, stationery, photocopying) and a small amount of travel to conferences (for fact-finding and as speakers). The same sum was made available for 2009/10 and was used in similar ways. No payments were made to students (differently, for example, to the project at Birmingham City University). This has been a constant feature of discussion, but we currently maintain that payments would slightly change the ethos of the project – at least if it were payments to individual students – and that if we want to expand on a broad scale so that it underpins the way we act and think as a University, then this becomes increasingly difficult. Already, it is clearly complex in terms of student responsibilities since, in some cases, large numbers of students have collaborated at different levels, for different amounts of time and with different roles.

**Expertise** Running the initiative through the Education Enhancement team meant that there was considerable expertise in areas such as co-ordinating change, strategic planning, pedagogic research, and working with students, as well as case study writing; in addition, there were also staff who could provide a role model for the graduate placement co-ordinator and for students, allowing them into the discourse and professional ways of working of that community. This has been recognised and valued by students.

**Support** Ongoing support for students (individual or as a group, email, phone, texts, face-to-face) was essential to ensure that projects were able to flourish, that momentum and motivation were maintained and that, for example, questionnaires were appropriately designed for their purpose, or focus groups did have a focus. In addition, the support available for data analysis, for report-writing, and any difficulties as they arose was highly valued, as well as the linking in with appropriate staff from Education Enhancement. Students were never left to feel alone or unsupported, not knowing where to go next or feeling overwhelmed by piles of data.

**Incentives** As outlined previously, there were no financial incentives built into the initiative, and few students thought there should be. What they reported gaining was a sense of kudos, having a profile and being known by others; they appreciated the engagement with staff and with the Students' Guild, and being involved in decision-making with both interested peers as well as experts. Some had an intrinsic interest in change and seeing real change take place as an outcome of their collaboration; others were motivated by the feeling of taking ownership and responsibility and feeling empowered, or by how involvement and the leadership skills they would gain would differentiate them on a CV, through the Exeter Award. The research dimension was extremely important to students involved, and even allowed some to consider staying on in higher education after their first degree.

**Communication** Alongside recruitment of students, ongoing support, and ensuring the inclusion of students, Students' Guild members and staff in conversations, the most important aspect of communication has been dissemination, and visibility of the project. There have been outputs for various audiences (academic staff, students, administrative support, at subject, institutional and national levels). The case studies have proved useful in that they formalise the research findings and recommendations for change and they provide shareable resources. Students as well as staff appreciate having evidence to work with. The success of the end of year student-led conference also cemented the value of what had been achieved, both to students and to senior managers and academics.

**Sustainability** An element of sustainability is built into projects in that they have a built-in continuation strategy, through the provision of recommendations and planned actions. Many project outcomes are now deeply embedded into practice, with evaluation of outcomes to give evidence of visible changes, enhancement and development (as can be seen in the case studies in Section 2). Sustainability also requires commitment from academic staff and students, groups such as the Education Enhancement team and the Students' Guild and, at the highest level, through institutional action planning and quality assurance. It also may mean a preparedness for the project to develop in new forms. At a highly practical level, the way in which the scheme is organised does not require huge time commitments for staff: hence they are more likely to engage and to maintain that engagement in future.

# Where next?



As outlined, the 'Students as Change Agents' initiative is about far more than listening to the student voice. It is about the connection between student engagement in research on learning and teaching and the way in which this can have a powerful influence on changes in practice and provision in their own learning environments.

McCulloch (2009) states:

By encouraging the student to assume the role of consumer of what is provided by the university, and by encouraging universities to adopt their market role of providing what students demand, the student's role in the production of learning is de-emphasised and thus learning itself may be diminished (p.173).

Higher education has to have learning at its heart, and learning needs considerable investment of time, energy and commitment. The focus of student life needs to be centred on learning, enquiring, and becoming more knowledgeable and skilled. What this project has shown is that students want to, can, and will engage in new ways when the opportunities are available, and can seek out solutions, share or take a lead in improving the learning environment and the production of learning. They can take a lead in changing the conversations (cf. Haigh, 2005) surrounding the development of pedagogy. The use of the term 'Change Agents' is already surprisingly widespread in the University; it is an idea that seems to fit. It has been picked up and used by the Students' Guild in their training of student representatives; it has been used by staff who have never been involved in the student projects. It is even being used more broadly at a national level. The term itself (just by having the words) enables new concepts, new perspectives, new discussions, and no doubt it will be re-invented to mean things far different from the original intentions.



However, in terms of widespread cultural change, we are left with new questions and unknowns that will influence future progress. There is little doubt that the project has been effective, but as yet only on a small scale. If considered purely in terms of value for money, the investment will have been repaid many times over. We have yet to see if it has any impact on general satisfaction ratings, whether external or internal, despite the observed positive impact on many hundreds of students. But could it be scaled up? What would this mean for the University? How could it be achieved? What would be the issues? Embedding the concept of change agents into the mainstream thinking of the institution, and enabling the project to take on meanings that develop and grow beyond a small-scale flagship initiative, may be a more difficult journey.

Questions about the purposes for student engagement also need to be asked: should all students be involved in change agents projects, and in what depth, and how? Or is it more important that students understand the language and the message, and feel empowered even if they do not want to engage with change? Is the leadership element something that needs to be preserved, with small groups or individuals taking the greatest responsibility? Can both of these go hand-in-hand?

As we begin to implement plans for a third round of research activity in 2010-11, we can report that existing projects have involved almost all subject areas from across the three Exeter campuses located in Devon and Cornwall, engaging mostly with undergraduate students but also with postgraduates. The second year of the initiative promoted in particular a focus on STEM<sup>7</sup> subjects, with student researchers investigating topics such as academic writing, employability, technology use, and sustainability. The project was as successful as previously.

Through 2010-11 the Students' Guild and the University will be working to embed the 'Students as Change Agents' project more securely into life at Exeter. This involves exploring how we can move the project from the 'margins to the mainstream'<sup>8</sup>. We are working towards a broader series of research initiatives, to be known under the umbrella of 'ExChange', which will reinforce collaborative partnerships between students and staff across the University. For example SSLCs will become known as 'ExChanges' designed to highlight an expectation for creative exchange of ideas and collaborative decision-making processes between staff and students. Projects will include institution-wide research initiatives as well as supporting suggestions from Professional Services and the new University Colleges. 'ExChange' will embed a culture of students as engaged collaborators, empowered to lead positive changes across the whole institution. However, moving from a small number of effective projects, to changing the thinking and practices of a whole University, will not necessarily be an easy journey. Nonetheless, the evidence to date suggests it will be a journey that is well worth embarking upon.

<sup>7</sup> *Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics*

<sup>8</sup> *'Students as Change Agents - From Margins to Mainstream': title by Sue Burkill (Head of Education Enhancement) for an HEA/Leadership Foundation Change Academy programme*



## Section 2

# Student research outcomes



Whereas Section 1 provided a rationale for ‘Students as Change Agents’ and outlined the processes involved in setting up and implementing the initiative, Section 2 provides information on the research topics that were selected and the outcomes that were achieved by students. In terms of institutional change, each area of research is relatively small and each is different in content and purpose, but the power of the whole could be conceived in terms of a patchwork of different activities, joined together by the involvement and impact upon, altogether, hundreds of students across the University.

## All 'Students as Change Agents' projects 2008-09

This table provides a summary outlining the research topics undertaken by students. It is followed by case studies which outline in detail the findings and impact of the research projects and the feedback from staff and students.

### **Arabic and Islamic Studies** – Improving assessment and feedback

What kind of feedback most benefits the student? What kind of assessment works best? How can the assessment process be improved? With a view towards both technological and traditional improvements, the kinds of assessment and feedback that students find most beneficial were reviewed, as well as differences between what is needed for learning a language and for learning of subject content.

### **The Business School** – Student engagement in lectures

Research was undertaken into the impact of technology on engagement in lectures. The Business School has outstanding NSS results and was entering a phase of considerable expansion and international diversification. How will teaching need to be adapted to continue to engage well with students? This project linked with an externally-funded Integrative Technologies Project<sup>9</sup> looking at technology that allowed academics to engage in better ways with students in lectures. Feedback from students and staff on the use of the new technology in lectures and the impact it has on learning and engagement was used to promote change.

### **Classics** – Peer language tutors

Language skills on entry to Classics courses vary enormously and those students entering at level 1 can sometimes struggle to keep up with the pace of language classes. A study was devised to explore whether third year students could help support first year students entering study at level 1, through a peer tutoring scheme. The cost and benefits of a scheme were investigated, along with how such a scheme might be implemented and whether there is a need for training of peer tutors.

### **Film Studies** – Shared learning spaces

Research was undertaken into the impact of the loss of a shared film viewing space where Film Studies students were able to borrow and watch films communally. This space served as an informal learning environment where students from different years would mix and discuss their learning. Students' preferences for learning in the context of film viewing and the importance of communal spaces to aid learning were investigated.

<sup>9</sup> A JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) funded project in the Curriculum Design and Delivery Programme, 2008-10

**Geography** - Academic writing support

In the first year of the degree, students have tutorials wherein they have the chance to go through essays and discuss writing techniques. In the second year, there is less academic support and students struggle to improve their academic writing techniques. Would students benefit from extra support and what form could this take? The project investigated in detail exactly what students were struggling with and what support might look like.

**History** – Seminar experiences

This research project was devised to review what kind of seminar structure or format enables history students to learn best. History students have comparatively few contact hours; apart from weekly lectures, seminars are a vital part of their learning experience. Understanding what style of seminar students find the most useful is therefore central to ensuring that history students get the most out of their contact hours.

**Law** – Comparative study Cornwall/Exeter campuses – Law library and tutorial systems

A comparison of the personal tutoring and feedback systems at two campuses was undertaken. This was highlighted as a particular concern for Exeter-based Law students, but not for Cornwall students. A further comparison, of the Law libraries at both campuses, was undertaken since this was of most concern for Cornwall students. It was hoped that, through the use of comparative study, lessons could be learnt from good practice at both campuses.

**Psychology** – Podcasts as a learning tool

How do students use podcasts? What are the benefits of lecture podcasting? How do they impact upon lecture attendance and exam performance? Despite students asking for more podcasts, many staff were reluctant to provide them. This study explored student views in order to provide School staff with a better understanding of the benefits of podcasts to students.

**Sport and Health Sciences/Education and Lifelong Learning** –

Studying on two campuses

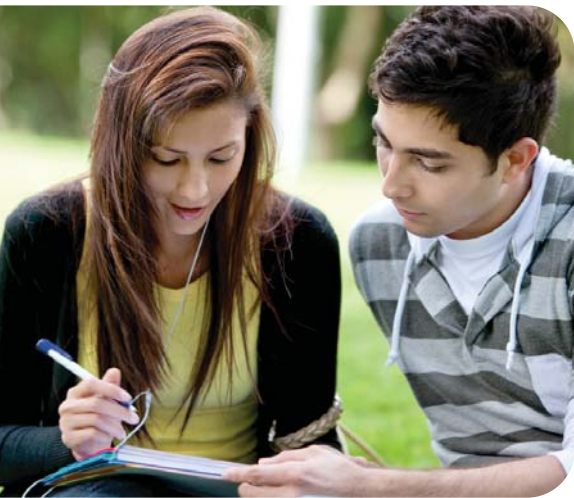
This project was an investigation into the challenges students face when they study a dual honours course taught on the two campuses in the Exeter city locality (2km apart). The project explored the issues and how they can be addressed. Factors included timetabling (adjoining lectures on two different campuses), commuting between campuses, sharing of resources, and library lending.

**Theology** – Employability

Employability is a key issue for Theology graduates. How can we ensure that Theology students are aware of the employability skills they have? This project looked at the destinations of Theology graduates, gathered profiles of previous Theology graduates and explored routes to different career paths in order to expand students' ideas about what they might do upon graduating.

**Table 1: All 'Students as Change Agents' projects 2008-09**

# Case studies



Details of seven of these projects have been selected to be included in this publication, from Business, Film Studies, Law, Psychology, Arabic and Islamic Studies, History and Geography. They have been chosen because they cover a broad range of topics, or they highlight different research designs, or because they have had a widespread or significant impact on change in the University. The case studies each cover three aspects:

- the project - a description of the area that students chose to investigate, and why it was of importance;
- impact - outcomes of the research, which are key to evidence-based change, and what was achieved as a consequence of the project;
- what people say - feedback from students and staff to highlight what was gained by the University and by individuals.

## Case study 1

# The Business School - Student engagement in lectures

## The project

The University of Exeter Business School has outstanding NSS results. However, it has been moving into a phase of considerable expansion and international diversification. A major challenge relates to how teaching will need to be adapted so as to continue engaging well with students. At this time, a JISC-funded project (Integrative Technologies), a collaborative venture between the Business School and the Education Enhancement team, had as its remit to review technology that allows academics to engage in more effective ways.

To support this project, the Business School SSLC decided to explore some key questions. How could technology support student engagement in lectures? What did their fellow students feel about the use of technology in lectures? Did this enhance their learning experience?

By means of a paper-based survey, they gained student views on the use of three forms of technology.

**Echo 360** – a system that automatically records and streams lectures, which are then made available through the university's virtual learning environment. Lecture content can be paused and reviewed as the viewer needs.

**Mobile phones** – used as a response tool to provide answers to questions in lectures. Responses are then reviewed by the lecturer and used for diagnostic purposes as well as for feeding back to students in the next lecture.

**TurningPoint** – a voting system which enables lecturers to interact with students during lectures and other group sessions.

Analysis of data on the use of new technologies in lectures, and the impact it has on learning and engagement highlighted the following features.

- Staff were concerned that video recording would affect lecture attendance; however, no link was found between lecture attendance and the availability of streamed video of those lectures. Personal response (voting) systems were also seen as highly positive by the majority of students. They were considered to promote student engagement, were a useful revision tool, easy to use, supported more student-lecturer interaction, helped to increase student concentration, and results allowed peer comparison, which was greatly appreciated by students.
- Mobile phones were also perceived as useful to learning, with the majority of students happy to use texting as a means of responding to questions.



## Impact

The findings from this project have had a huge impact on the use of technology for engaging students in lectures. In addition, the highly positive feedback enabled managers to be confident in pushing and investing in its further use.

- There were already patchy uses of technology, but this has now been much extended and it continues to improve curriculum delivery.
- The use of video recording of lectures has significantly increased; in some cases, live lectures have been replaced by streamed lectures that form a compulsory precursor to more interactive seminars.
- All four thousand Business School taught students have each been given a personal response voting handset and these are used regularly in lectures, to good effect.

## What people say

Sam, the third year Business School student who ran this project, says:

‘The best bit of the project is being exposed to new learning devices but also going further than seeing whether students like them, but why they liked them... interpreting the results that we got back from the questionnaire was probably the most interesting part of the project. This is what the project built up for and it was interesting to see if the results were the same as expectations. For example, the various uses of the video recordings were contrasting to what I had previously thought.’



He also added:

‘The fact you are doing a presentation in front of many university staff and lecturers looks very good to employers and others.’

The project carried on into the second year of the ‘Students as Change Agents’ initiatives, with more students continuing to reaffirm the benefits of technology use. A first year Business School student from Sweden, Johan, stated:

‘I think the most exciting part of this project has been that it is possible to make a change even at such a large institution. Before this project I did not expect it to be possible to make a change, but this has shown me that with a little work and dedication you can make things happen. Another exciting aspect of this project was to meet and work with different people, not only other students but also staff that I might otherwise not have met.’



Tim also became involved in the first year of his studies, working on a project capturing the student experience of employability events on video. He continued this into the second year.

‘The Students as Change Agents project initially attracted my attention as being a good medium for getting the student voice heard across the university, therefore shaping future student experiences for the better. I hope that through the involvement of students like myself, we have already helped to develop more student-centric teaching and learning environments.’

He is also highly aware of the benefits to himself.

‘Additionally, I have taken many personal benefits from involvement with ‘Students as Change Agents’, comprising an exposure to more senior staff within the university and therefore having the opportunity to experience the more intricate workings of the business and how it operates. Further benefits included developing enhanced presentation skills, developing an ability to prioritise my time more effectively as well as having a wealth of experiences to include in my CV and talk about at interviews. Moreover, since my project revolved around the employability services on offer at Exeter, my own awareness of the world of work and the need to be proactive in looking for a career as a graduate was enhanced. On the whole experience of engagement with ‘Students as Change Agents’, it has been a positive and enjoyable journey and I would unreservedly recommend getting involved to any proactive individual who has a passion for making a difference and enhancing their student experience and that of others.’



Staff have also really embraced the notion of involving students in learning and teaching developments. Juliette Stephenson, Senior Teaching Fellow and Head of Student Learning at the Business School, has strongly supported data-collection, and has used the data gained to pursue arguments for change. Sam’s original survey is also going to be used again in 2010-11, so as to gain longitudinal data on learning through technology. Juliette believes that students bring with them new ideas and perspectives to the research they undertake.

‘They come up with questions that staff would not necessarily have thought to ask. The students know what it is like to be part of the learning environment and know the issues students face.’

Jackie Bagnall, also a Senior Teaching Fellow, adds that although it may mean educators stepping outside their comfort zones, there is no better way to engage with students.

## Case study 2

# Film Studies - Shared learning spaces

## The project

This student-led project enabled an investigation of how film-viewing facilities are currently used by students, and whether the facilities available are appropriate for supporting an effective learning experience.

Film studies students had until recently been provided with access to their own space, known as the AV room. This was a space with private, group viewing facilities. It housed videos and DVDs, and had a common area for group discussion. Due to necessary reorganisation of space, this facility was moved and was made available to all students across the University. There was concern that these new facilities were less well equipped, and also available for a variety of AV purposes that are not necessarily conducive to viewing film. A survey was used to ascertain how wide the student concerns about use of space were, or whether the new facilities were considered appropriate.

Findings highlighted that:

- students do not find the film viewing facilities as good as they would like in order to support their learning needs;
- staff and students would appreciate an informal and collaborative learning space where it is possible to both view film in groups and to hold collaborative discussion;
- students should be more involved in the new-build Forum Project (see below) to ensure that appropriate space is provided for film viewing and collaborative learning, no matter the subject.

The Forum Project is a multi-million pound project creating a new development for the heart of Exeter's busiest campus at Streatham. It will create an inspirational mix of outside and inside space and will deliver a new Student Services Centre, retail and catering outlets, a refurbished Library, new technology-rich learning spaces, a 400-seat lecture theatre and a new university reception.

## Impact

Although there was little immediate impact on the circumstances outlined above, there are very clear plans for how the Forum will lend itself to better collaborative viewing and discussion. In addition, this project had an extensive impact on recognition that students can engage creatively and seriously in discussion of the design and use of learning spaces. Staff managing the Forum project have been keen to involve students further since listening to their presentations at the conference.



- A further Change Agents survey was undertaken to gain feedback on preferences for aspects such as furniture and interior design, links with arts and culture, sustainability and internationalisation. Over a thousand students responded to the survey and the information gained was given to the architects.
- Students have since been invited to test out samples of new furniture and to offer feedback on what they liked, and to discuss layouts and use of space in the new building. All feedback has been passed on to the planners.
- Students on the Cornwall campus also had the opportunity to engage in a Change Agents project looking at plans for a new build. A multi-disciplinary group from both Exeter University and Falmouth College (both institutions share a campus) collected data and wrote a report for the architects that covered many ideas for creating individual and social spaces that would promote enthusiasm for learning.

## What people say

The original student project had a profound impact on the researcher, Alessandra, a Film studies student in her third year.

'When I heard about 'Students as Change Agents', in which students could decide on a project they believed was important and that would make a difference, I immediately took up the opportunity to work with Education Enhancement, and more specifically Liz Dunne and Roos Zandstra.'

‘The project and conference helped in many ways. It first of all showed that students are not apathetic, that they do care about their programme and university. In fact, improving the students’ experience either directly or indirectly reflects on the university as a whole. A student’s environment is one of the most important components in her or his student experience. The loyalty of the student toward the institution they are studying in should not be underestimated, as it is beneficial for the institution and the student. Thus a project such as ‘Students as Change Agents’ is more than helping students develop certain skills, it creates a bond between the university and its students.’



‘Being a part of this project helped me a lot personally. Seeing that it was possible to give a presentation in front of a diverse audience who were not my peers pulled a trigger. In fact, receiving feedback from faculty, and realising their interest in the project not only boosted my confidence, but it showed that there is a desire for greater student-staff exchange and participation.’

‘I am currently a Masters student in film studies at Columbia University in New York City. Choosing to be in the academic field means to expose yourself, your ideas, and your writings. I believe that participating in such a project encouraged me to go further. Being at Columbia and having to face professors with my ideas and perhaps future publications has been made easier through my participation in the conference, as improving a certain field or enhancing education is a joint venture between scholars and, essentially, future scholars.’



‘The project and the conference has been a great experience for me and for my fellow peers. I am happy to have been a part of it, and although I am no longer at Exeter, and cannot directly benefit from any changes; the outcomes have reached far beyond the grounds of Exeter University.’

## Case study 3

# Law, comparative study Cornwall/Exeter campuses - Law library and tutorial systems

## The project

The areas the students decided that they wished to research were twofold: the personal tutoring systems and the Law Libraries, at two campuses. Luke, a second year Law student was the SSLC representative based at the Cornwall campus, and Emily was a third year based at Exeter.

Personal tutoring and feedback systems had been highlighted in SSLCs as a particular concern for Exeter-based Law students, but not for Cornwall students. In Cornwall, the key issue at the time was the provision for the Law library. It was hoped that, through the use of comparative study, lessons could be learnt from good practice at both campuses.

Their research findings highlighted many differences between the two campuses, as had been anticipated:

- Exeter students were happier about Law library facilities, though Cornwall students saw an improvement in their facilities over the period of the project;
- there was a lack of hard copy resources at Cornwall, largely due to its being a comparatively new library. However students reported using electronic library resources to a greater extent at Cornwall;
- Cornwall-based students met much more regularly with their tutors and were much happier to approach their tutor if struggling;
- only 25% of students at the university's Streatham Campus felt their tutor would be able to support them if they were falling behind.

Recommendations picked up on what was highlighted by the research to reflect best practices on each campus. So, for example, it was recommended that the role of the tutor in Exeter should be made far clearer to students, as was the case in Cornwall, and that academics should post a tutorial schedule on their doors with slots for students to sign up for. With respect to library provision, it was hoped that the Cornwall library would be able to match more nearly that of Exeter, with more resources, and with better organised learning spaces for individual work and group work.

## Impact

Students were satisfied that their recommendations were implemented, especially in Cornwall where enhancements to the Law library were clearly apparent. The staff champion invited the two lead students to a staff development seminar to discuss the comparative points on personal tutoring and to learn lessons on good practice from Cornwall colleagues. Clear documentation was produced to guide staff in personal tutor meetings and to provide consistency across the department.

One of the main interests of this study lay in the idea of taking good practice from one context and embedding it in another, and this same research model has been used for an additional project on assessment and feedback within the School.

## What people say

Luke said:

'I really enjoyed the cross campus nature of the project, which involved getting results from both campuses and analysing them. Having the chance to make recommendations to the School with research support was very powerful. I like the fact that the project has hopefully made a difference – I hope that this has made the university a better place for its students.'



Staff in the Law School were pleased with the opportunity to receive such detailed feedback on the provision of services across both campuses and keen to integrate change and good practice where necessary.

The Director of Education for Law, Dr Sue Prince, who had strongly supported the projects, commented positively on the integral use of students as agents of change within the School:

'The creativity and energy of our students is extremely impressive when they are involved in such projects. Both this project and the debt literacy project which is run from within the Law School have encouraged significant and positive changes in how we operate. The Debt Literacy Project, for example, began as a student project with local schools but has given an additional focus on widening participation by the students involved as they have brought pupils into the Law School to see a university in action.'





## Case study 4

# Psychology - Podcasts as a learning tool

## The project

Several lecturers had been offering lecture podcasts to students, and this had been well received. However, students were frustrated that other staff were not podcasting their lectures, in part due to a fear of having a negative impact on attendance. Laura decided to research how students used podcasts, what the perceived benefits of lecture podcasting were and how this impacted upon both lecture attendance and exam performance. The purpose was to provide School staff with a better understanding of why students had been asking for more podcasts through the SSLC.

Research findings included the following points:

- podcasts were used to make notes, recap on things missed in a lecture and to review information that had not been understood;
- students felt better prepared for exams when a podcast was available;
- very few students used them as a substitute for lectures and most would be prepared to have their attendance monitored for more podcasts;
- students wanted more podcasts to be made available;
- podcast use in Psychology should be supported by academic staff.

It has been recommended that trialling of podcasts should be done for all first year lectures, and this has been supported by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Janice Kay) who, as professor of Cognitive Neuropsychology, has a close relationship with the School of Psychology. It was advised that lecturers should monitor attendance formally or subjectively if they were concerned about falling attendance, and that podcast provision would be limited if problems arose.

## Impact

The impact of this study has in fact been greater outside the School of Psychology than within. Laura so much impressed staff from Biosciences during the 'Students as Change Agents' conference that she was asked to repeat her presentation on podcasting to other Biosciences staff at a teaching development session. There are now several modules that use podcasting in Biosciences. The case study was also used to provide a rationale for podcasting in the Business School, with evidence from students as to why this is so worthwhile being used to persuade teaching staff and managers that they should be supportive of podcasting. The Business School has now provided web space for the uploading of multiple podcasts, and student technology 'champions' are organising the recording and availability of podcasts for a large number of lectures.

## What people say

Laura comments:

'It has been interesting to gather student opinion from outside the SSLC on the use of podcasts in Psychology, in particular looking at the detailed comments students wrote on the questionnaire. It is also exciting to think that I am able to provide the School with research-based recommendations about podcast provision which I believe will have a more positive effect than simply writing in SSLC minutes again that 'students think podcasts are an example of good practice that other lecturers should look into.'



'I am pleased with the questionnaire I sent out as I think it not only covers why podcasts are popular amongst students and how they are used, but also the areas that are currently putting certain members of staff off podcasting themselves, i.e. worries about attendance.'

'I have learnt that I really enjoy the process of carrying out projects/research and this is influencing my choice in career path, i.e. possible PhD. Presenting in front of such a large and mixed audience at the conference was a great personal achievement – I normally don't enjoy talking to an audience but I feel more confident now. I have learnt about the importance of student opinion and how to represent this to others.'

## Case study 5

# Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies - Improving assessment and feedback

## The project

The NSS scores for feedback and assessment in the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (IAIS) were not as good as expected, and issues relating to feedback and assessment have frequently been raised in SSLC meetings. Tom – an active second year SSLC member in Arabic and Islamic studies - wanted to investigate how the scores could be improved. With a view towards both technological and traditional improvement, and supported by a second year student, David, he looked at the kinds of feedback and assessment that students find most beneficial, as well as differences between what is needed for language learning and for learning of subject content.

The study found, for example, that:

- students were pleased with timing, turn-around times, level and amount of assessment;
- students did not always understand the marking criteria or why they received the marks they had;
- marking was considered to be inconsistent.

From his research study, Tom was able to make the following recommendations:

- more formative assessment as well as more constructive feedback, and further oral feedback;
- peer and self-assessment to support better understanding of what to aspire towards;
- for the first year – review of assessment procedures to include more formative, peer and self-assessment;
- Virtual Learning Environment pages and Module Handbooks to be available for all modules;
- personal tutorials to be more academically focused;
- feedback sheets to include tick box criteria so students have a better understanding of where marks have come from;
- introduction of January exams to third and fourth year students who have heavy exam loads in the summer term.
- introduction of feedback surgeries.

## Impact

The following year, the IAIS introduced a number of changes in the Department. Firstly, all students were asked to attend a general introduction meeting with the Head of Department in Welcome Week, so that all the important information about assessment and feedback in the Departmental Handbook could be explained clearly. This included the marking of work, plagiarism, and the role of the personal tutor.

Also, within Welcome Week, all students were given times to visit their personal tutors. It was hoped that with this first, informal meeting, students would feel more inclined to contact their personal tutor throughout the year.

In addition, there has been a clear increase in the number of module handbooks, especially in the languages. All the handbooks clearly lay out the assessment structure and provide essential information about the module.

This year also saw the introduction of a new feedback sheet, which followed the advice from the 'Students as Change Agents' project. After consultation in focus groups, the most popular model from a number of examples was selected. The new sheet means that students can see the distribution of their marks a lot more clearly, as they had requested.

## What people say

Tom is clear that the project had a marked impact:

'All modules should now receive formative feedback within the first six weeks. Overall, the 'Students as Change Agents' project has had a noticeable and lasting impact on feedback and assessment in the IAIS. I hope that the new SSLC will take up the project this year.'

'I really enjoyed conducting real research into what students actually think and being able to present this information to senior staff in full knowledge that what you're saying is backed up by proof. This gave me the chance to make research based recommendations that could potentially bring about change.'

'I've learnt good transferable research and problem-solving skills as well as developing my confidence in presentations. I've also learnt how to conduct interviews and focus groups. These will be good examples to draw upon in an interview and I feel will help me in my future career.'

## Case study 6

# History - Seminar experiences

## The project

History students have comparatively few contact hours; apart from weekly lectures, seminars are a vital part of their learning experience. Penny, a third year History student, worked with a small group of peers to research what kind of seminar structure and format would enable History students to learn best. Understanding what style of seminar students find the most useful to aid their learning was seen as central to ensuring that history students get the most out of their contact hours.

Research findings included the following points:

- there were differences between the years: first years are less aware of the role and benefits of the seminar;
- there are similarities between what students want and what many academics are trying to achieve;
- the relationship between the lecture and the seminar is important for developing understanding;
- students felt that student-led seminars are a really valuable way to learn, with the tutor acting as facilitator;
- participation in seminars is dependent on feeling comfortable and having trust between students and the tutor.

## Impact

The research project led to the creation of a booklet of good practice that includes examples of what students like, and exemplifies the ways that highly-rated staff conceptualise, prepare for, and teach their seminars. This resource has been made available to both staff and students in paper form and online, and has offered students a far better understanding of what a seminar is, and its purpose, than they had previously. The staff champion not only organised this dissemination, but also ensured that responding to change agent projects was built into the School's Education Plans, thereby validating and formalising the project outcomes.

## What people say

Penny, the project leader, who is now working in Management Consultancy, comments:

'I was motivated to take part in the Students as Agents for Change programme as it was a way to actively engage in the way that student seminars were run within the History department at Exeter. It provided my peers and myself with the opportunity to undertake student led research to feedback to the department, an opportunity that was too good not to take up as often student input is reactive and not proactive.'



'My highlight from taking part in the 'Students as Change Agents' programme was being given the opportunity to present the project findings back to the History department and wider university. The positive reception to the research results that we presented, and the subsequent student involvement in future 'Students as Change Agents' projects, highlights the success and value of the initiative.'

'Planning and running an independent research project developed my organisation, research, analysis and communication skills – all skills that I use on a day-to-day basis in my post-graduation career in Management Consultancy.'



## Case study 7

# Geography - Academic Writing Support

## The project

Tutorials to support undergraduate academic study and writing had previously been available across all years, but were recently discontinued in years two and three, following requests from students. Currently, only the first year students have academic tutorials.

Students have now argued that support for academic writing is lacking from their programme. Kirsty, a second year Geography student, decided to research this further and to ascertain how important an issue this had become for students. The findings of her questionnaire suggested that Geography students make high usage of the one-to-one appointments available through the university's study skills team, but that these were often difficult to secure. In addition, students suggested that they would benefit from more tailored support, especially those from Physical Geography. These students consider they have slightly different academic writing support needs to Human Geography students, since they are expected to submit reports that are different in form to any writing they will have done at A-level.

The School therefore decided that finding a means to develop writing skills effectively would be highly beneficial. In collaboration with Education Enhancement, the School successfully won a joint bid for £5000 from the Alumni Annual Fund. The funding they secured was used to develop a one-to-one support system, together with a number of workshops to support study skills and writing. These were negotiated through the Education Enhancement Study Skills team, who also offered training for three Postgraduate research students to support student writing.

## Impact

The three research students successfully took the project forward, with some excellent feedback from undergraduates. Overall 36 students participated in the scheme over a three month period. Importantly in terms of continuation, students who benefited have also been keen to promote its usefulness. Hence it is anticipated that a similar programme will be offered in following years, and the School is expecting to set aside resource for this purpose. It is also intended that similar opportunities will be made available to Geography students based at the Cornwall Campus.

In addition, since receiving feedback from the initial 'Students as Change Agents' survey, the School has also prepared a 'Referencing and Style Guide' that has been circulated electronically to all students and is available on the VLE, along with sample dissertations accessible to all students in Levels 2 and 3.

## What people say

Undergraduate feedback on the postgraduate support was extremely positive, for example:

‘This will improve the standard of writing dramatically; It proved to be very valuable as the tutor had seen a piece of my work and therefore advice was directed to personally helping me rather than just general tips; The advice was very adaptable and therefore I have been able to apply it to several pieces of work.’



Students reported gaining a variety of important skills, including improved ‘research technique and critiquing’, to being offered a ‘way to critically examine literature’.

Nicola Thomas, Director of Education for the School, had enthusiastically supported this project throughout.

‘It has been a great project and exceptionally well resourced and supported by Education Enhancement – which has been really important for us.’

She is particularly appreciative of the way in which the project has worked:

‘Getting some impartial support in identifying a problem and working really constructively with the department to solve that... They [the students] found it very empowering I think to identify the issues and to realise in fact they could make a change. The critical thing is keeping the resource for those sorts of projects because they are very useful in helping students to identify issues and then making a tangible difference. So I really support ‘Students as Change Agents’ and hope it will continue for a long time to come.’

**Overall, these case studies highlight the many ways in which students have brought about positive changes within the university. In terms of the institution, a number of significant improvements were undertaken, with an expectation for leading to greater student satisfaction. The students not only gained great pleasure through engaging with their projects, but they also developed a number of skills to support their employability, including negotiation and leadership. What is also clear is that there have been huge benefits for both the institution and for the individual students involved.**

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A joint University of Exeter/ESCalate/Higher Education Academy Publication.  
Students as Change Agents - New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in Higher Education.  
ISBN 978-1-907207-29-7 March 2011