

INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PUTTING ASSESSMENT AT THE HEART OF LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to share lessons learnt from a unique change process in one Welsh university which involved changing institutional- wide assessment practices. The project is part of a Higher Education ‘Change Academy’ initiative which is a year-long programme of support for teams from higher education institutions to enable them to achieve complex institutional change. This project differs from many change initiatives in HE, as this project uses interdisciplinary constructs and theories and a bottom up approach involving both staff and students throughout the process. The project has been cited as good practice both within and outside the university. The lessons learned from this project are valuable to all involved in changing assessment in higher education.

Keywords: Change, assessment, innovation, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to share lessons learnt from a unique and innovative change process project which focused on institutional wide assessment practices. The project is part of a UK Higher Education initiative called the ‘Change Academy’ [14]. The Change Academy is a year-long programme of support for teams from higher education institutions to enable them to achieve complex institutional change. This is organized through partnership of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) [9] and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Change Academy teams are exposed to interdisciplinary constructs and theories, complex research designs, and multiple methods of data analysis to help develop the best approach to tackle their research project aims. The University created a team consisting of members from different levels of the university including a student member plus an external consultant from the HEA. This change management practice is different because it creates a safe and open environment for team of people from different disciplines and background working towards the same objective to provide the support to facilitate changes, but the real initiator of change is to be taken forward by the faculty staff as change agents.

SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose for the staff participating in the Change Academy was to initiate changes in assessment and feedback practice. Analysis from the biggest survey of student opinion undertaken in the UK, with 220,000 respondents revealed 36% of the respondents were unhappy with the assessment and feedback for their course, the largest percentage of dissatisfaction across six different aspects of University experience. (HEFEC, [7]) This concern is therefore not unique to one institution and the significance of this paper is that the project has identified a range of proposals that are of relevance to the wider

academic community. Based on previous research and the recommendations of the project team, three objectives were identified:

- 1) To improve the quality of the student experience through improved assessment practices
- 2) To develop and implement a revised approach of curriculum design so that assessment is at the heart of learning;
- 3) To reduce assessment workload for staff and students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary aim was to understand the situation by capturing the reflections of all the stakeholders involved in the project and manage change in an inclusive way. In this study the research is trying to capture ‘the human experience of participants’. The HEA encouraged teams to think creatively about how they would tackle institutional change and advocated a mixed method approach drawing on a range of disciplines. The framework for the project was one of the collaborative enquiry (Heron [8]). In order to make this project work it was important that it was collaborative in its design, interpretation, evaluation and dissemination. The significance of this research is the synthesis of knowledge and experiences from quite different situations and paradigms in order to identify barriers and so develop solutions that can improve interaction. The affected groups (managers, tutors and students) participated in decision-making and were encouraged to use both formal and informal routes to engage with the project. Bryson and Einsweiler [1] discuss the importance of “shared power” if change is going to be managed successfully in organizations. Seeking to control the direction of major change interventions in complex situations presents major challenges. The literature on normative models of change management is considerable; despite this, a number of commentators argue that success in change management is limited and that much of the literature consists of unproven assumptions (Doyle [5]). Despite this lack of evidence senior managers seek to bring about change in their organization. . The main alternative approach to understanding and managing change may be described as emergent models (Pettigrew [12], [13], Dawson [3] [4]). These recognise that managers cannot control change, that (even) planned change is subject to unanticipated consequences and that these arise both from external developments as well as the reactions and interactions of people involved. Further, and unlike planned change models, emergent models argue that history, politics and sociology matter, that change takes place set in a real time context and these impact factors impact on the proposed change.

THE PROJECT

Methods

The Change Academy team began the project at a four day residential workshop managed by the HEA. This was key to its success. In a focused environment the team concentrated on developing a project plan and methodology with the help of external consultants. This generated lively debate, exposed the team to approaches outside their comfort zone. It led to the design of a mixed methods approach to explore the challenges posed. It was agreed that if an institution is going to benefit from changes it must support approaches which foster effective communication across disciplines. The sampling approach to the data collection reflects the desire for inclusivity. All staff (200) and students (5,000) in the two faculties were invited to take part in the project. For the first stage of the project, staff were encouraged to submit examples of good practice in assessment and a selection were chosen for a good practice guide. Student data was collected via surveys, focus groups and social networking sites.

Stage 1: Evaluating Current Practices in Assessment

All participants agreed that an important starting point was to establish where the institution was in terms of its approaches to assessment. There had been a review of assessment across the institution in 2006-2007, where over 4000 modules were reviewed, it revealed that the majority of assessment methods used were traditional using summative assessment and focusing on assessment of learning rather than assessment for learning, in particular only 9% of the modules explicitly state the use of formative assessment [11]. This mirrored Elton and Johnston's [6] literature review where they stated that there is still a "persistence of a largely unreflective traditionalism (in assessment) in spite of the existence of proven innovations and much relevant research over the past 35 years." In addition, "much established practices (in assessments) are far from good practice" [6: p7).

Stage 2: Exploring changes in Assessment

The University recognising the importance of good assessment created a new assessment policy. However there can be a wide gap between policy creation and policy implementation. Whilst pockets of good practice existed, wider take up for innovative assessment was slow. The University therefore decided to initiate 'bottom-up' changes from across the faculties to compliment the 'top-down' and centralised support team. The first significant action from the team was the dissemination of an initiative from one of the faculties involved in the project. The National Student Survey (NSS) had highlighted poor student feedback in one subject area, the course team developed 'Assessment Diaries', which contain a list of hand-in and hand-back dates displayed online in order to make it easier for students to work out when their coursework is due in and due back with feedback. The 'Assessment Diaries' improved communication about assessment and managed student expectation and as a result the students' satisfaction doubled in one year. The next stage was to produce a good practice guide in assessment and feedback with both staff and students contributing. This was distributed to all staff and is a 'living document' which will be updated regularly.

Stage 3: Providing an appropriate environment for change

Tutors in the two faculties involved were asked to submit an 'Expression of Interest' (EOI) describing the modules they would like to change and the changes that they wished to explore in the assessment. This was an open call to all staff. It was important that colleagues would willingly engage and not see the project that was being used to identify modules with weak assessments. The EOIs were considered by the Change Academy team and 30 were selected based on their innovative nature. The types of change were wide ranging but the common factor was a desire to improve the student experience. All the successful applicants were invited to a workshop to share ideas and discuss how they would take their proposal forward. This was one of most rewarding and exciting parts of the project as colleagues across a range of academic disciplines debated approaches and shared practice.

RESULTS

This collaborative change project has resulted in learning from one another; sharing ideas and practices; understanding other viewpoints; understanding the constraints and limitations that different groups have to contend with. The project team in particular gained from the Change Academy the notion that enduring institutional change would more likely be initiated if the process grew from the bottom up. In addition the

assessments of 30 modules have changed), including the introduction of alternative assessment methods, such as digital story board to replace traditional essays, the use of peer assessment and marking, the use of reflective log via blogging, the use of audio files and audio feedback and the development of holistic assessment across a number of modules in order to reduce assessment workload and provide opportunities for student to collaborate.

Some of the module leaders are already looking to cascade the changes they initiated to other modules across the institution. Other examples include the implementation of assessment diaries, where they are introduced not just in the two target faculties, but across the University. The Change Academy team were able to act as change agents to promote and embed this initiative. Collecting evidence-based practice which will challenge embedded practice has been a key feature of the project. We have identified from both student and staff perspectives highlights of successful and innovative practice, which will challenge, improve and enhance embedded “traditional” practice. The main lesson from this has been gathered through the active participation and involvement of the wider student bodies

Using different data collection methods with students, provided staff with the evidence to challenge established assessment practice within the institution. For example, academics have the perception that students are often concerned with whether feedback is given back to them within the 3 weeks time frame. From our data, students are actually content with simply knowing when the feedback will be given back, rather than a universal timeframe. Other student feedback included the request for more diversity in the use of assessment methods, peer feedback and cross-module assessment. The feedback was discipline specific and this helped the lecturers focus on changes in their modules. The project as a whole has enabled us to successfully raise the University’s profile on its commitment to assessment for learning and the change process learnt from this project is now in place for larger gains and changes in the future [10]

CONCLUSION

This project has been cited as good practice both within and outside the institution and has been highlighted as an exemplar for Higher Education by the HEA. The issues discussed in this research are certainly not unique to the United Kingdom, Day and Hurtado [4] in the USA cite similar issues. The Change Academy provided an effective vehicle for achieving institutional change and the opportunity for team-based learning and professional development that focus on the strategic interests and needs of the institution. As managers, tutors and students we must learn to change in a complex and changing world and this research address some of the complexities of change and it provides practical approaches to embedding change.

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