

## Changing Teaching and Learning styles

### Key Words

Teaching practices; Organisational change

### Context

To cope with increased student numbers and a declining level of resource, a University radically reviewed the way in which it delivered and supported the curriculum.

### The lessons of change

The following were the key learning points about managing this change.

- If we were to do it again, we would be more focused on what we wanted to achieve and put a more effective measurement system in place.
- Bottom-up and top-down approaches both contributed to the successful change.
- Communication and support from top management cannot be underestimated.
- The way we went about the change provided a lot of space for creativity and expression, but might have had a bigger impact if we staged it as pilot, exploring different ways of doing things, measuring impact, and providing guidelines to approaching the problem to facilitate the main change effort.
- People took a whole variety of different approaches and the risks of slipping backwards could have been high. If there'd been an expectation that everybody would change in the same direction, change could have taken a very different shape: we could have perhaps achieved economies of scale, e.g. if everybody changed to computer aided assessment, then we could have released a lot of rooms that might be used for conventional examinations.
- Communications could have been more structured.

### Influences

In order to accommodate a significant increase in student numbers, and another trend, that many will associate with - doing more with less (we weren't able to increase staff numbers proportionately to the increase of student numbers), we embarked on a radical change in the styles of teaching and learning within the university.

Another driver for the change was to better understand students' needs, learning styles, and accommodate these within teaching and assessment processes and practices.

The above pressures, as well as observing how other institutions had responded to similar pressures by adjusting their teaching and learning, provided the business case for radical change in the styles of teaching and learning within the university.

### Decision-making

Looking how others change we engaged on a series of what we called 'learning raids'. We went to other institutions that we thought might be more advanced than we were in these changes. What we found was that they were just better at doing the publicity. In that sense, we

didn't find good practice to benchmark, maybe because all institutions were changing in a similar direction and weren't more advanced than we were.

To change the culture of the institution, and adopt a student-centred approach, meant that we looked at student learning styles, mode of delivery and assessment. The business case was presented, and it was a decision of the Academic Board that we couldn't continue with the present style of teaching. A note of caution: agreeing the case at Academic Board level doesn't mean to say anything will happen - if the change isn't designed and enabled appropriately.

## Enabling

Through a series of focus groups, three key things surfaced as areas that needed to be included in the design of the change:

- we needed to know more about how students learn;
- we needed to consider how to make better use of the web and electronic materials, as opposed to the traditional distribution of handout approach; and
- we needed to review the whole area of assessment and reduce the assessment burden on students and staff.

On the later point, we'd hoped that we'd be able to really focus assessments on the key learning outcomes. I don't think we succeeded very much in that, but what we did succeed in doing was to get people to vary their range of assessment techniques and in particular we were able to develop more computer assisted assessment which could be measured by optical mark reader.

A number of younger staff were actually quite keen to change, so we directly dealt with these individuals by appointing a number of people, whom we called change agents, in every department, across the university. The incentive to become a change agent was a relatively small amount of money, which could be spent on things to assist with the job. The type of person that became a change agent was willing to experiment, ready to change, and had a good understanding of educational developments.

We brought in external experts in order to provide an understanding for change agents of how students learn and be trained up in new forms of learning facilitation, assessment. As with any training event, the proof of its effectiveness is in the application of the accumulated knowledge. In our case, the change agents took those messages back, interpreted the information into their own teaching, and actively promoted these into their subject area and departments. The fact that they were named change agents provided expectations that they would begin the change with their own subjects.

## Achieving change

### Change agents

Throughout the change design, transition and maintenance stages of the change process, the change agents had the unequivocal support of top management. Regular meetings maintained the high profile of the change. The operational role of top management in the change situation was to communicate with deans and heads of departments the importance that these people are given the time and the space to experiment and adjust with the new techniques.

We tried to engage management in the change process, but we were meeting a block by Deans and Heads of Departments. It soon became obvious that the amount of resistance could not justify the design of a unified, one stage, top-down change. Instead, we went around and recruited enthusiasts from the Learning and Teaching HE induction course. They'd had a year working one day a week with the Educational Development Unit (EDU). The people in EDU had a very strong relationship with the change agents to be, and pointed us to the people that were capable and ready for change.

The EDU's primary function for that year was to take the change agents and bring that change about. They were exposed to new ways of teaching and assessment, and translated these in their own departments. What they also did was to promote the innovative methods to colleagues. We ended up with a set of people who were using new styles, which resounded with the students. The students were the biggest driver for change – once exposed to innovative practices, they expected that they would get similar 'treatment' from every lecturer. This spurred colleagues into action more than anything else. People who were thought of as barriers for the change in the beginning were eager to be trained and embrace 'the new', as the change wasn't anymore perceived as the whim of a VC or a DVC, but was what students really needed and wanted. It all made sense. We saw the opinion changing influence that students as stakeholders of the teaching process have.

The big thing was that change agents needed to know that top management was fully supportive of their role. The biggest threat to the change would come from their managers, who were the Deans and HOD. Deans and Heads see the aim of their game to get more resources for their area, and they were deeply suspicious of the change agent programme because they felt that if they got more students they should get more staff. We recognise that a more structured approach to communications planning could have speeded up the changes.

### **Communication**

Our communications strategy was reliant on qualities that were built prior to this particular change: trust, integrity and a high level of credibility. Clearly articulated vision was the basis of all communications. We met at regular intervals to exchange information, disseminate learning and approaches to change with the change agents. These meetings were popularised and provided a vehicle for maintaining the high profile of the change as well as a forum for information exchange.

### **Risk management**

We didn't assess the risks to the change in a formal way by using a matrix, just common sense. There was the risk that the change agents would leave the institution before they had the chance to bring about the change. Another risk was that the Heads and Deans would give these people an extra lot of work to do, so that the change would assume lower priority. We made it clear that the change agents had to be given the time and space to do the changes.

### **Resource Allocation**

We needed a relatively small amount of resources to conduct this change, and we used a formula, based on HEFCE weightings to do so. Resources were needed for training change agents, and later other staff. Linking rewards to change proved to be successful.

### **Leading**

Top management was the face of the change, and it was their responsibility to find a way of going around the barriers to change, to ensure the change effort was resourced, to recognise the need to empower people at the shop floor level and to communicate clearly the vision for the change. Nothing more than to walk the talk.

Our change agents were the active leaders of the change. Leaders of change efforts should not be restricted to top management – not all change is effective if it is top-down. Leaders of change can come from any part of the institution.

### **Learning**

A characteristic of staff, who supported the change was found to be age. A number of younger staff, who were actually quite keen to change, were appointed as change agents in every

department across the university. Going around barriers taught us a lesson or two about building alliances, capturing enthusiasm, empowering the right people and the effectiveness of rewarding change.

Successful implementation of this change was achieved by making sure that time and space for experimentation was provided for the change agents, and continuous support from top management was displayed and provided.

Cotals