Rethinking the values of higher education - students as change agents?

By Professor Janice Kay (Senior DVC, Education),
Elisabeth Dunne (Head of Project Development, Education Enhancement)
and James Hutchinson (CEO, Students' Guild), University of Exeter

Foreword

Many terms and phrases are used to describe the relationship between universities and students, such as 'consumers', 'active participants', 'co-producers', 'partners', 'community of learning' and 'apprentices'; all are useful, but each has limitations and particular connotations.

When the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) made the decision to include students as members of Institutional audit and review teams, consequently imbuing them with the authority and responsibility that come with the role, we were asked questions about what this implied for the relationship between students and the higher education sector. Given the level of interest in this and the amount of times we have been asked for an opinion, we felt it was appropriate to commission some 'think pieces' from a range of leaders in the sector with different perspectives.

Professor Janice Kay, Elisabeth Dunne and James Hutchinson from the University of Exeter have produced the following thought provoking piece entitled *Rethinking the values of higher education - students as change agents?* The paper sets out a positive vision of the relationship between student and institution and offers some real examples of initiatives pursued at the University that are making a positive difference to the student experience, changing the culture and nature of the relationship between students and the academic community within which they learn.

This paper adds a significant, new and complementary perspective to those articulated in the paper we published in autumn 2009 from the National Union of Students and the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at the University of Warwick.[1]

The student experience and changing relationships between students, their institutions and their learning are at the heart of current debates about the future direction of higher education. These pieces are important contributions to that discussion.

Anthony McClaran
Chief Executive, QAA
September 2010

---

[1] Available at www.qaa.ac.uk/students/studentengagement/undergraduate.pdf.

Introduction

Do those of us working in higher education genuinely take student engagement seriously?
In 2008, the current President of the National Union of Students (NUS), Aaron Porter made this 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.

But how many of us have started to explore new ways, in real situations, and more importantly why should we do so?

All of us recognise the importance of the 'student voice' and of listening to students. In the form of student evaluation, as in the National Student Survey (NSS), it can be a key institutional driver. But the concept of the student voice can be passive and disempowered, governed and operated by the institution rather than by students themselves.[1] For many years now, students have been members of university committees, though not necessarily full members, and often expected to disappear at 'reserved business'. Student involvement in structures and systems, like student-staff liaison committees, once highlighted as good practice in Subject review and Institutional audit, is now routine.

But there is a new kind of message and a changing agenda: students can take a more active role in improving their educational experiences. The passive power of the 'student voice', while creating significant institutional benefits in understanding student perceptions and needs, has arguably also reinforced the notion of students as customers, with all its attendant dangers: '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.)

Building on arguments that identified the pitfalls of a 'students as consumers' model in earlier think pieces in this Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) series, our paper sets out the approach taken by the University of Exeter, where we seek to engage students as partners in shaping and leading their own educational experiences through our successful and growing 'students as change agents' initiative. The key concept is that students themselves take responsibility for bringing about change, based on their own research on aspects of learning and teaching.

Professor Janice Kay (Senior DVC, Education), Elisabeth Dunne (Head of Project Development, Education Enhancement) and James Hutchinson (CEO, Students' Guild), University of Exeter

---

[1] '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).

The Exeter approach: a new framework for engaging students in change

Firstly, we suggest a framework for four different but equally valid approaches in which students can engage and be engaged with their learning. They are not discrete approaches, and may overlap, but they help to show how there are differences in the ways that students are encouraged to engage with the University in improving their experiences, and the extent to which they can be proactive in bringing about change.

Students as evaluators represents those means by which the institution, or external bodies, drive change through listening to students; for example, using monitoring devices such as questionnaire surveys or focus groups (external: NSS; internal: cross-institutional, subject or service-based feedback), including formal procedures for complaints; making use of informal evaluative feedback on a smaller scale; voting through Guild representation systems (via Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) and other forms of representation: cross-institutional, School or Guild practice), and so on.

Students as participants represents a more student-led approach, but does not relate to active engagement with change; it includes showing commitment to change through student/staff dialogue and offering solutions via SSLCs and other forms of representation. It also includes involvement by students in committee structures through the whole institutional system, from representation on Council to cross-institutional working groups to School Learning and Teaching committees; or activities such as supporting the writing of codes of practice (such as a behaviour code).

Students as partners, co-creators and experts emphasises active student engagement and collaboration, and includes, for example, students training staff in new skills, as with new technologies wherein students have the greater expertise; designing curricula and resources - negotiating examination questions or writing question banks; setting assignments; redesigning module provision and delivery; producing induction material. In our experience at Exeter, such initiatives have been invaluable, but tend to be led through institutional or School initiatives.

Students as change agents, in the form we have promoted and as outlined below, enables students to be actively engaged with the processes of change, often taking on a leadership role. They are engaged deeply with the institution and their subject areas, and the focus and direction is, to a far greater extent, decided by students. The most important aspect is the focus on research, and building change on evidence-based foundations.

The Students as Change Agents project

How did the initiative start?

In 2007, the University of Exeter participated in a workshop run with the Higher Education Academy in collaboration with the Students' Guild, and entitled 'Students as Agents for Change'. Staff and student chairs of SSLCs were invited to participate in vigorous and open debate about their experiences and to listen to different opinions. It was exciting stuff for all concerned, but when discussion ended there was no obvious pathway to take things forward.

The Students' Guild at Exeter plays a central role in ensuring that student concerns are responded to in effective ways. Yet it has been apparent at times that there have been residual concerns or ideas for improvement that were consistently returned to, but never quite resolved. Moreover, it was essential that SSLCs should understand what the issues of their constituencies were. Interestingly, it was not always clear either to the University or to the Guild how widespread some of these concerns were among students, or whether the more eloquent or strident views of small numbers of SSLC members were truly representative of the wider cohort.

The Change Agents initiative was a practical response to the ongoing challenge of enabling student representatives to be more clear about where change was most needed, to be more fairly 'representative', to provide evidence for their concerns and also to enable students to be proactive in bringing about change. In particular, there was a will to view issues as positive challenges to be resolved, and to de-emphasise a consumerist approach.

Building on these ideas, Student Chairs of SSLCs were given the opportunity to take a lead in small-scale action research projects. In the first year of the initiative, there were 10 volunteers. Students involved acted as apprentice researchers, deciding on the topic for investigation, developing a research question, and planning their own methods of data collection. They designed questionnaire surveys (online, paper or using voting systems), ran focus groups, and collected, collated and analysed data from their peers. They made evidence-based recommendations or provided solutions for change and, where appropriate, put their projects into action. SSLC Chairs took the lead, but usually worked with a larger student group to support discussion of ideas and collection of data. The initiative was co-ordinated by a graduate student on a paid placement,[2] with support and guidance provided through Education Enhancement services. In this way, students took on the role of partner, collaborating with their peers and with staff to gain data to promote evidence-based change, and a way ahead or course of action based on knowledge and understanding rather than on individual opinion.

What were the outcomes and impact?

Over a period of 18 months, 20 small-scale projects run through SSLCs have now involved undergraduate and postgraduate students in almost all subject areas, investigating topics such as assessment and feedback, engagement in lectures, seminar provision, technology development (such as podcasting, video-streaming and the use of voting systems), learning spaces, sustainability, employability, cross-campus provision, personal tutoring, academic writing, and peer-tutoring. Each of the projects is written up by the graduate co-ordinator in collaboration with the students and the Education Enhancement team, to provide a series of formal case studies detailing processes and outcomes. Two student-led conferences have been used to share findings with staff and students across the University, emphasising the value of evidence-led change. Projects have had an impact in each of the subject areas involved (in the words of one student: 'Overall, the Students as Agents of Change Project has had a noticeable and lasting impact on feedback and assessment in Arabic and Islamic Studies'), with some projects also influencing decision-making and practice on a broader scale. For example, in the University of Exeter Business School, student-led research highlighted the power of voting systems with first

---

[2] Students received no payments but had ongoing help, and minor costs for photocopying, travel, and so on were covered.

year students, and now 4000 handsets - to cover all undergraduate and taught postgraduate teaching - have been used or are currently on order; and a student written booklet on writing skills in Biosciences is likely to be customised for a number of other subject areas.

The very brief examples below give a flavour of the kinds of project that students have addressed.

Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies

Improving assessment and feedback

Research findings (2008/09): Students were happy with timing, amount and level of assessment, and turnaround times, but many were concerned about consistency of marking and wanted more formative assessment and support in understanding how to improve; a greater role for personal tutors in offering feedback was requested.

Project outcomes (2009/10): Formative feedback was given within the first six weeks; improved mark sheets/handbooks were provided for all modules; personal tutor meetings were introduced in 'welcome week' plus an introduction to assessment by the Head of Department.

Geography

Writing skills

Research findings (2008/09): Many students in the School of Geography really felt that they struggle with academic writing, in particular in the second year. The majority were clear that they would take up extra support if it were available, especially if it could be tailored to individual needs.

Project outcomes (2009/10): Change Agents research helped in winning £5000 funding from the University's Alumni fund to provide academic writing support from postgraduate research students. This was well received by undergraduates ('will improve the standard of writing dramatically').

Engineering

Encouraging employability

Research findings (2009/10): Survey data outline that much of what students want in terms of employability events and careers advice is already available, but is not necessarily well used. Further, expectations for jobs do not match the reality of end destinations.

Project outcomes (2009/10): Recommendations included better communication of employability events and the reality of the job market, more tailored support, linking with small group tutorials, investing in a placements co-ordinator, etc. Data and recommendations were presented to the School's new Education Forum and will be acted upon in 2010/11.

English

Peer mentoring of postgraduates

Research findings (2009/10): A survey highlighted specific requirements for the provision of subject-specific workshops, social integration events and skills-based training for postgraduate students, with a number of areas consistently required across the different subjects and specialisations.

Project outcomes (2009/10): A student-led Postgraduate Mentoring Scheme has been piloted with new MA, MRES and first year PhD students. A variety of workshops, events and general support has been offered throughout the year to develop postgraduate skills and to connect students with the wider academic community.

Psychology

Podcasting

A project that created instant interest at the first Change Agents conference was a study of podcasting. Several academics in the School regularly made podcasts of their lectures available. Despite frequent discussions in the SSLC requesting podcasts to be more widely available, there had been no action taken. Student-devised surveys gained useful feedback.

Detailed information from their peers about the value of podcasts: 'Podcasts are brilliant. I would have seriously struggled with my understanding had they not been made available online, despite attending all of the lectures throughout the term. It's so easy to make full notes and gain a better understanding of the content and theories when you can stop, pause and rewind'; 'The difference between my performance in term 1 to term 2 is unbelievable, and I'd put that down to the podcasts.'

Assurances that lecture attendance would not be affected: 'I supplement the lecturer's notes with notes made from a podcast and those taken in the lecture. I don't find the podcasts an alternative to lectures, but a useful back-up to information I might have missed.'

More understanding about learners: 'If podcasts are available I will make less notes in the lecture because I can concentrate on understanding the lecture instead.'

The study has so far impacted on the implementation of podcasting in Biosciences as well as on the setting up of a further student-led project in the Business School, where it is anticipated that student 'champions' will organise the recording and availability of podcasts for a large number of lectures.

Student feedback

Comments from student leaders illustrate their enthusiasm about the project: 'a fantastic and innovative opportunity' and, in particular, indicate recognition of the power of evidence in bringing about change. Feedback illustrates that this is what they most like: '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'; 'Making recommendations to the School with research support and the hope that this can make the uni a better place for students'; 'Interpreting the results that we got back from the questionnaire was probably the most interesting part [and] contrasting to what I had previously thought'. For some students their experiences are transforming: 'Completely changed how I think'; 'I have learnt that I really enjoy the process of carrying out projects/research and this is influencing my choice in career path.'

Already, in just the second year of the initiative, with comparatively little resource, the project has quickly grown. Students from SSLCs across the University respond quickly to good ideas. They like what other students are doing. So, for example, Biosciences students looked at the student-produced booklet on seminars in History, and immediately set out to write a (very different) booklet on writing skills in Biosciences, having also borrowed the effective History research methodology in terms of surveying students and interviewing staff. Individual Change Agents projects have been drawn into School planning, they have inspired projects in other Schools, and they have led to gaining additional funding. Further, a few students have been involved in similar small-scale projects that have been assessed for credit, as in a third year student project reviewing the first year experience in Mathematics. Also, all fourth year medical students in the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry (PCMD) have the opportunity to act as educational change agents by exploring the concept of Medical Student as Teacher within a year long Special Study Unit (Foxall et al, 2010). Postgraduate students on PCMD taught programmes are also encouraged to act as change agents in clinical practice through the development of their leadership and team-working skills and engagement in specific projects that focus on implementation of a change initiative in their workplace.

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. Sustainability also requires commitment from academic staff and students, groups such as Education Enhancement and the Guild and, at the highest level, through support from senior managers and institutional action planning and quality assurance. It also may mean a preparedness for the project to develop in new forms. Further, and at a highly practical level, the way in which the scheme is organised does not require huge time commitments for academic and professional staff: hence they are more likely to engage and to maintain that engagement.

Communication

Alongside recruitment of students and ongoing support, and ensuring the inclusion of students, Guild members and staff in conversations, the most important aspect of communication is dissemination, and visibility of the project. There have been outputs for various audiences (academic staff, students, administrative support; subject, institutional and national). The case studies have proved useful in that they formalise research findings and recommendations for change and they provide shareable resources. Students as well as staff appreciate having evidence to work with.

Beyond the curriculum

We are now working with our students on projects beyond their academic learning. For example, a group of students is working with the University on mitigation of the effects of large-scale building works on the Streatham Campus. Further groups are working on University 'Green Impacts' projects, extending its major sustainability agenda. All the students working as Change Agents can have their work recognised as part of the Exeter Award scheme for extra-curricula achievement.

Questions and issues

The Change Agents initiative is about far more than listening to the student voice, with the associated risks of promoting a customer-oriented approach to education. It is a powerful example of the connection between research and education and the way in which this influences changes in practice and provision in students' own learning environments. However, in terms of widespread cultural change, we are left with new sets of issues, questions and unknowns that will influence future progress.

Students as customers?

If students are not to feel and act solely as customers, then we have to think more broadly than an initiative, however successful, on students as Change Agents. We need to consider structures, policies, and strategies, and how the University conceptualises itself from the way the institution is marketed to the ways that student feedback is collected, analysed and used; from the University's Education Strategy, to the way that individual academics interact with students, as groups or as individuals; from broad curriculum content in many subject areas to how students might engage actively with their individual learning through enquiry and challenge. Learning cannot be bought; it needs considerable investment of time, energy and commitment. It is not always easy, or fun.

The Student Learning and Teaching Network has a new Facebook campaign: 'I'm a student, not a customer'. This suggests that the very meaning of being a student needs to be reconsidered, and how it can fit with the new rhetoric of community, collaboration and co-creation rather than that of customer. The focus of student life needs to be centred around learning, enquiring, and becoming more knowledgeable in any way that we can as an institution, being more relaxed about the ownership of expertise, and recognising that students want to, can, and will engage in new ways when the opportunities are available. If they know they are encouraged to take this kind of stance, they no longer need to be the 'customer who complains' when things are not what they want or expect, but can seek out solutions, share or take a lead in improving the learning environment. Our view is that the model of students as Change Agents can readily be imported to other institutions and is a powerful tool in promoting involved and interactive learning. Indeed, many institutions are already working with students in similar ways, but usually on a smaller scale or without sufficient support, and the focus on research is less apparent.

Changing the conversations?

As Trowler, Saunders and Knight (2003) point out, cultural change takes time, subtle persistence and a mindset that thinks 'small scale and incremental'. Fullan (1993) in addressing effective change suggests that is it not easy to mandate 'what matters'. In the case of Change Agents, small scale steps have been taken, testing the water, and in part have been successful because students know what matters to them; they have been active in collecting evidence about what matters to them, and they admit to sometimes being surprised at what matters to their peers. They care and they have ideas about what needs to be changed and about how this may be done.

The Change Agents experience suggests that the kinds of approach in which they are engaged relates most strongly to models of emergent change (Seel, 2000), moving in small and uneven steps, with outcomes that may not always be predictable. Importantly, as Jackson (2004) argues: 'It is necessary for individuals and teams to invent their own wheels in order to understand and take ownership of change to gain improvement'. Ownership, and the centrality of the subject context is central to the way in which the Change Agents have worked to date. Is this enough, however, to bring about deep-rooted change in institutional culture? A current view is that this means 'changing the conversations' (Seel, 2000, Haigh, 2005), since it is these conversations that confirm and reaffirm the meanings and values of an institution. Interestingly, 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 picked up by staff who have never been involved in the student projects. 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.

Whose voices?

So far, the project is working with the enthusiasts, the volunteers, but is the concept of students bringing about change threatening? It has certainly been the case that some staff were initially resistant, perceiving these student-led explorations as a direct challenge. But, this was countered by the students themselves, and the majority of staff and students alike have been welcoming, instantly seeing its potential. As we start to develop ideas more widely, we may find resistance and uncertainty, both with staff and students. Importantly, Change Agents needs to remain fresh as an idea, so that people, whatever their role, do not switch off as soon as they hear the words, but can adapt them to their own contexts. It needs flexible ownership in multiple contexts, rippling and spreading, and meeting. In terms of the projects themselves, there are still questions about the voices that we hear: are the 'faint voices' or the culturally diverse viewpoints being represented? Also, as Streeting asks, what should we do about 'students who just want to follow their course and have a good time. Convincing such students that they should want to be 'co-producers' might be seen as the greatest challenge'.

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?

Students as experts?

Taylor and Wilding suggest that positioning undergraduates as researchers challenges the 'hierarchical binaries between teaching and research, and teachers and students' (Lambert, Parker and Neary, 2007), with the issue of recognising undergraduate students as being both capable of research and able to contribute to the production of knowledge being one that has often arisen within the Reinvention Centre at Warwick. In the Exeter context, it has not yet been tested whether the papers written would be 'counted' as 'real' pedagogic research by academics. However, they do provide valid data from which staff in the associated subject areas, and beyond, are prepared to learn, and the thoroughness of the student research, the richness of some of the data, and the honesty of some of the feedback gained is certainly valued. There have, so far, been no challenges to the accuracy or appropriateness of the data or of the research processes used.

It has to be recognised that students involved are not, by definition, expert in their subject of study, nor are they likely to be trained in the theory and practice of pedagogy (as raised by Streeting and Wise, 2009). Yet, they have shown themselves to be expert in terms of reaching out to student groups, committed to intelligent and realistic change within University agendas and, with guidance, fully able to gain detailed and meaningful data and responsibly analyse outcomes. Fundamentally, they have become experts in being students, with a commitment to gaining the most from their educational experiences.

Relationships within higher education?

An initiative such as Change Agents does offer a vantage point for re-considering the purpose of higher education, or at least the relationships within it. As at Warwick:

> Student researchers as producers of original knowledge and designers of curriculum raise important questions about the status of participants in HE and the resources allocated to their interests. Such questions lead in turn to broader debates about the role of the contemporary university. (Taylor and Wilding, 2009.)

Similarly to Warwick's student researchers, the Change Agents initiative does ultimately reflect a shift in power relationships between students and staff, but one that so far has been welcomed and respected at Exeter. Perhaps differently from the Warwick project, there is no threat to academic research identities or to the status of academics as specialists and leaders in their discipline? In addition, although discussions of 'student as customer' are important to conceptualising University relationships, the customer mentality may not be as all-pervasive as some suggest. It seems likely from Change Agent project feedback that many individual academics create a strong sense of community within their discipline, along with a sense of collaborative enquiry, and that the Change Agents approach is a logical next step. However, it is important as an institution that we are clear about the shift of emphasis to a more collaborative partnership with students.
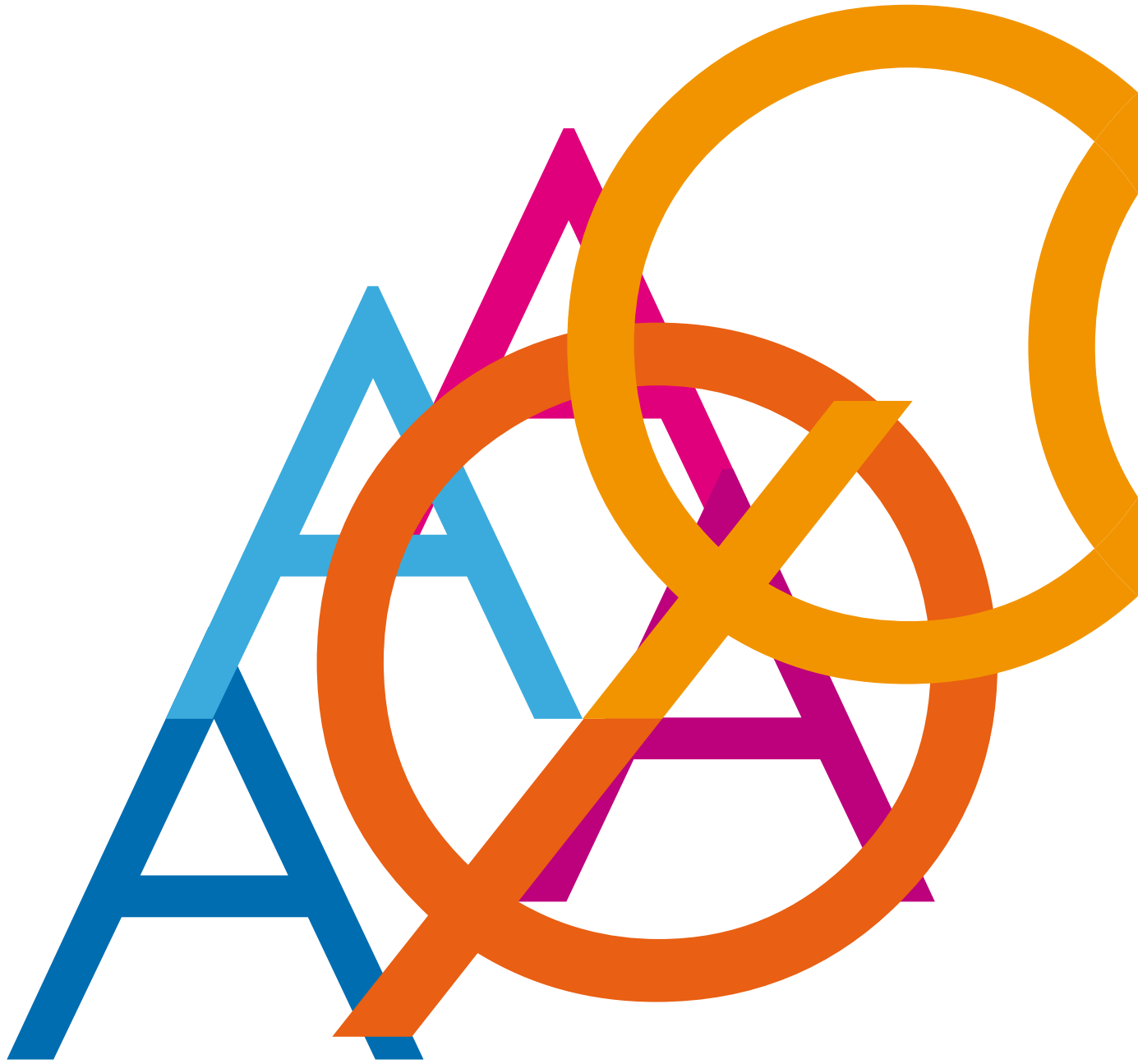
Where next?

There is little doubt that the project has been effective, if as yet only on a relatively limited basis. The next step is to create scale by integrating it through all our colleges, and across all our students. We believe it will be a good mechanism to integrate students from different backgrounds and different cultures. It is applicable from first-year undergraduate, to final-year doctoral student, to continuing professional development and training in the workplace.

So, this methodology places learning at the heart of University practice - learning about, with and from students - through research on teaching and learning. Students may act as customers or consumers in the sense that they want a quality product, but they are also prepared to contribute to that product in collaborative, imaginative, responsible and positive ways. Through the Change Agents initiative, we and our students seek to create world-class learning together.

References

Foxall P, McHarg J, McCulley M and McGarrick J (2007) Medical student as teacher: inspiring the transition from learner to teacher using the Disney creativity strategy, *The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine Newsletter 01*, no 13, pp 24-25

Fullan M (1993) *Change Forces: probing the depths of educational reform*, London, The Falmer Press

Haigh N (2005) Everyday conversation as a context for professional learning and development, *International Journal for Academic Development*, vol 10, issue 1, pp 3-16

Jackson N (2004) Paper 1, *Setting the scene: A Change Academy Perspective on Change and Changing*, York: LTSN, available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/changeacademy/2010/Amended_resources/Jackson-SettingTheScene.pdf (accessed 1 July 2010)

Little B, Locke W, Scesa A and Williams R (2009) *Report to HEFCE on student engagement,* available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2009/rd03_09 (accessed 1 July 2010)

Porter A (2008) The Importance of the Learner Voice, *The Brookes eJournal of Learning and Teaching*, vol 2, issue 3

Schwartzman R (1995) Are students consumers? The metaphoric mismatch between management and education, *Education*, 116, pp 215-222

Seel R (2000) *Culture and Complexity: New Insights on Organisational Change, Organisations & People*, vol 7, no 2, pp 2-9

Taylor P and Wilding D (2009) *Rethinking the values of higher education - the student as collaborator and producer? Undergraduate research as a case study*, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), available at: www.qaa.org.uk/students/studentEngagement/Undergraduate.pdf (accessed 1 July 2010)

Trowler P, Saunders M and Knight P (2003) *Change thinking, change practices*, York: LTSN, available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id262_Change_Thinking_Change_Practices.pdf (accessed 1 July 2010)