



UNIVERSITY OF
LEICESTER

Putting Students at the Heart of our Processes

What Works



Inspiring
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Exchange**



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Are Students at the Heart of our Processes?



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Foreword

We are delighted to present, on behalf of the University of Leicester, the conclusions of our project. This report is the product of nine months' work by students, staff and senior managers which was made possible thanks to the funding received from the Leadership Foundation in Higher Education.

The project has engaged twelve senior managers, twelve students (including four distance learners) and twenty members of staff in gathering information on the student experience, reflecting and using appreciative inquiry techniques to help design a vision for the University of Leicester in 18 months time. The project was funded as an exploration into whether connecting senior leaders more closely to the student experience created impetus for organisational improvement. Our explorations have led us to reconsider some of the ways in which we have understood our relationships with our students, including our reciprocal expectations of each other.

We believe this guide to our approach and "what works" in engaging senior leaders with the student experience will provide valuable insight for institutions looking to develop similar approaches.

As participants, we found that the project provided a refreshing view on how we might better understand the experience students have when they interact with the array of services and processes our university provides. Through the approach taken, we have opened up a space in which people have been able to speak about some fundamental issues that we might not otherwise have prioritised. It has underlined, for both of us, the importance of senior leaders spending more time connecting with students and front-line staff rather than committees and computers.

As senior leaders, we have been able to take on board reflections of colleagues during the action learning style workshops and build these into our new teaching and learning strategy and associated projects that focus on our academic offer, the student voice, student partnerships, a revised Staff and Student Charter and a bi-annual Forum for students and senior leaders, demonstrating the direct and valuable impact such an approach can provide.

We hope that you find this guide provides a structured approach to understanding in more depth the issues which are faced by students and staff members within your own institutions. This is not intended to be a prescriptive methodology; instead, our checklist will provide you with a flexible framework with elements that you can amend or adapt to suit the circumstances, challenges and opportunities of your own organisation.



Introduction

In the three years prior to embarking on this project, the University of Leicester had established and grown a portfolio of improvement initiatives across the institution using Systems Thinking. As well, there had been a concerted effort to increase the engagement of our staff with the change programme and Systems Thinking methodology through a range of local and strategic interventions.

However, in line with many other organisations and much academic research, one of the key challenges facing our ambitious programme of change was building upon initial successful engagement with senior management and staff across the organisation in order to sustain the activity. Contending with packed diaries has led to staff at all levels of the organisation not being able to commit as much time as they would like to continuous improvement efforts.

Furthermore, we recognised that we could do more to engage students more directly with our improvement efforts. We hypothesised that through bringing senior managers together with students there would not only be an increased appetite for improvement but possibly a change in the way in which senior leaders viewed the student experience and their own priorities for improvement.

“The new student funding model in England places greater emphasis on student choice as a mechanism for encouraging competition between universities. This competition is one of the factors driving universities to become more responsive to the evolving needs of students”

(Efficiency effectiveness and value for money – Diamond 2015)

“One of the problems faced by many modern managers is that the pace and demands of the workplace allow little space for reflection” (Raelin, 2002)

Through undertaking the project, we aimed to:

1. Understand whether bringing senior leaders closer to the student and frontline staff impacts on the way in which they prioritise and influence change
2. Develop an approach which could be used across the sector, for connecting staff and student voices to improve the student experience

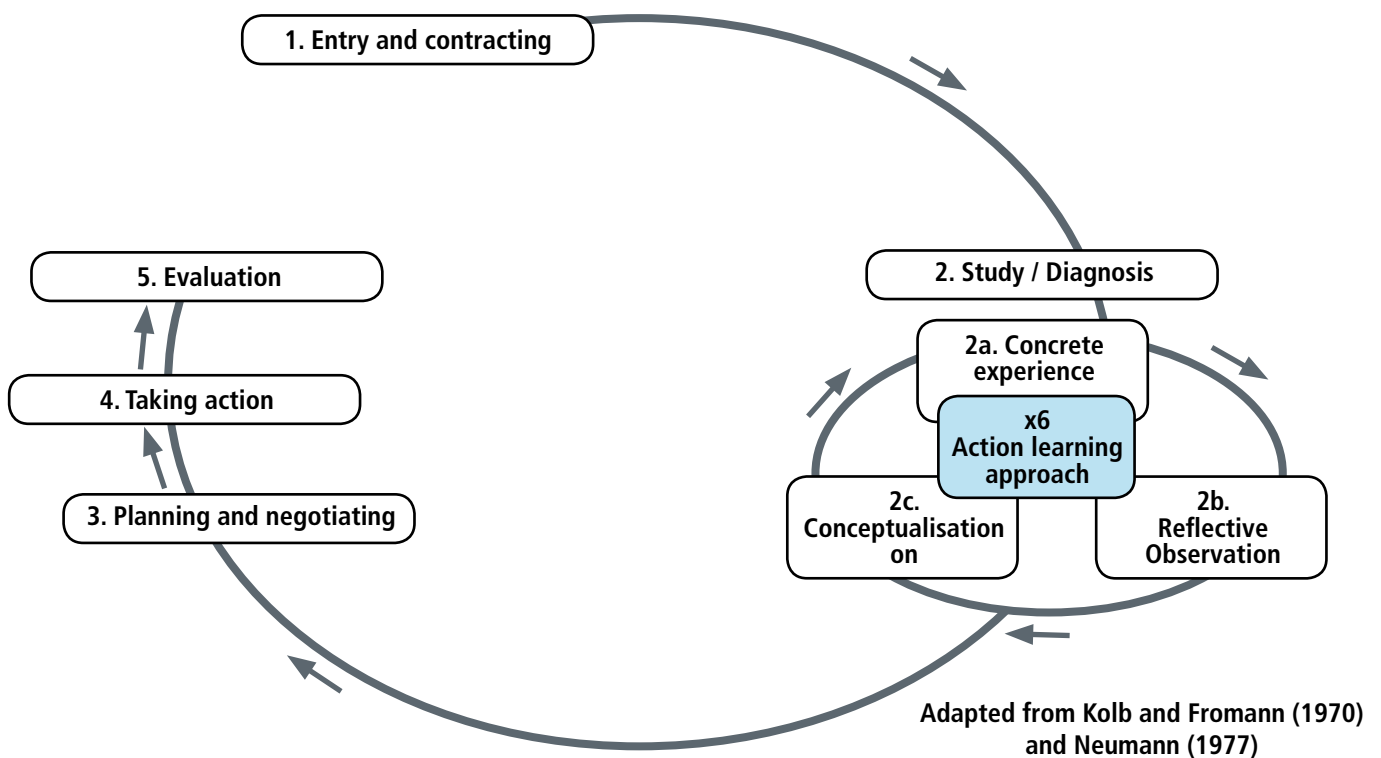
A key element of our approach was building in structured time for conversations and reflection and providing a “safe space” for this became one of the underpinning principles of the project.

This report will focus on our findings in light of the aims set out above and will provide a useful guide for any institution which seeks to solve the same problems. The report begins with an overview of the methodology used and some lessons learnt, which may be of interest should an organisation wish to replicate any part of it. The “What Works” checklist shows this cumulative learning and forms the conclusion to the paper. Links to further guidance around using the approach within your own organisation, templates and useful information are provided throughout.

Methodology

In designing the project, we took a number of recognised approaches to the project management, learning, reflective practice and improvement.

In this section, our methodology is set out in the stages of the project lifecycle defined by Neuman (1997). We also drew heavily on the Kolb and Frohman learning cycle (1970) and appreciative inquiry techniques. Further information on these approaches and links to useful resources can be found in the glossary section. For the purpose of this report, we focus on the first four stages with stage five being the production of this report and associated materials.



Stage

What we learnt

1

Entry and Contracting Stage

- a. Recruit participants to the project in the following categories:
 - Senior managers
 - Staff
 - Students
- b. Group participants so that there is a minimum of one of each category participant per “small group” which will meet monthly. This provides the direct link between student and senior manager.
- c. Conduct one to one interviews with staff and senior manager participants to collate a baseline of views (templates available at [Appendix A](#) for this process).
- d. Hold introductory workshop, setting out project objectives, providing an opportunity for questions and for the participants to meet and agree how they will work together throughout the project.

We were able to recruit 12 students, 20 members of frontline staff and 12 senior managers to the project which provided a good range of voices whilst remaining manageable. Reflection following the project led us to conclude more student voices may have been helpful to create a more robust data set as well as to keep conversations fresh and challenging.

Self-selection of participants through expressions of interest worked well (templates available at [Appendix B](#) for this process).

A mixture of academic and professional services staff and senior managers worked well in truly gaining a 360° view of the organisation.

Consider how you engage distance learners who are unable to attend the introductory workshop. At Leicester, the project manager contacted each using Skype individually.

Stage

What we learnt

2

Diagnosis Stage

- a. Staff and students produce one diary per month reflecting on their experiences working / studying at the institution, to deadlines provided at the start of the project. No restrictions were placed on what could be captured.
- b. Project manager conducts analysis on each set of dairies to identify common themes.
- c. Small groups meet each month to reflect on experiences and diary content. This provides the **“concrete experience”** element of the Kolb learning cycle. Senior managers also have the option to shadow staff and students to better understand their experiences. Template to help frame discussion is available at [Appendix C](#).
- d. Every 6-8 weeks, an action learning style workshop takes place with just the senior leaders group, providing a safe environment to critically reflect on a theme (identified in point b above) and agree next steps. This provides the **“reflective observation and conceptualisation”** elements of the Kolb cycle.

Be flexible in expectations around the diaries. Our original intent was that these would be video entries but it quickly became clear that this was not a comfortable medium for many participants and quality was poor. We found typed diaries with photos worked well. If you decide to use video diaries, ensure there is a suitable, shared repository for these as files can often exceed typical mailbox limits.

Ensure meeting and workshop dates are in participants diaries from the outset.

We used surveys to validate some of what we were finding mid-way through the project with a wider pool of students. The results fed into the next action learning style workshop.

Before each action learning set, the project manager met with each senior manager to explore what was working well and whether changes to the approach were required as well as providing a further chance for reflection on learning.

Stage

What we learnt

3

Planning and Negotiating Stage

- a. Following 6 months of diary entries, small group meetings and 3 action learning style workshops, 6 key themes had emerged which would frame this stage:
 - Student expectations
 - Communications
 - Processes
 - Facilities
 - Student experience
 - Teaching and Learning
- b. At this stage, each small group was given one of the themes and using appreciative inquiry techniques began to design a perfect University based on what they had learnt throughout the project.
- c. A series of drop in sessions were organised over a two day period in which groups of participants came to describe the results of their appreciative conversations and to give us a basis to plan for perfect.
- d. A final workshop produced a picture of the University in 18 months-time and a group of participants including students, senior managers and staff built an action plan for achieving the improvements identified.
- e. Final one to one interviews with senior leaders to re-visit baseline interview questions asked at the start in order to assess any shift in views.
- f. Final action learning style workshop using repertory grids with the senior leader group (Appendix D provides a template) to assess which aspects of the project had the greatest impact on their desire to make student-focussed improvements and which had generated learning for them.

Reflections as part of the review of the project suggested that a longer study would have produced a more rounded view of the student experience, perhaps over at least one academic year and possibly over a full student lifecycle.

A further, common reflection was that having the themes was useful to guide the groups in their discussions and it was suggested that themes be chosen from the outset should a future iteration of the project take place.

Preparing the groups correctly in order to conduct the appreciative conversations was critical. We used one of the full group workshops scheduled to introduce and practice this technique with participants. This made harvesting rich information from participants on their theme really easy.

Our picture is available at Appendix E as an example of the way in which we themed and designed our perfect institution.

Stage

What we learnt

4

Taking Action Stage

- a. Using the action plans developed in stage 3, small groups of participants will now begin to take forward actions identified and engage key stakeholders with this.
- b. Dissemination of the project outputs including this report will take place and a web page with associated information has been [published](#) for this purpose.
- c. Furthermore, the organisation plans to develop a sustainable approach to student engagement with improvement initiatives using what we have learnt works during this project.

It quickly became apparent that staff and students involved in the project would not have been satisfied with the project concluding with a report. They were keen to see real action come as a result of what had been learnt. This is the key measure of success for the project, not only do staff and students want to see change, they want to be an active part of making it happen.

What works?

Analysis of the results of the project have led to some clear conclusions as to which aspects of the approach taken produced the most effective results in meeting our aims:

- a. Understand whether bringing senior leaders closer to the student and frontline staff impacts on the way in which they prioritise and influence change
- b. Develop an approach which could be used across the sector, for connecting staff and student voices to improve the student experience

The list below sets out which elements were most effective in meeting those aims and supporting data. It also provides links to more information and the final “what works” checklist. The data in the table is based on responses on the repertory grids and one to one interviews with the 12 senior leaders who had participated.

What works?	Data
<p>1. Meeting directly with students</p>	<p>100% of senior leader participants confirmed that this either reinforced existing beliefs around the student experience or that they learnt something new.</p> <p>More critically, 100% of the senior leader participants expressed a desire as a direct result of meeting with students to make improvements with 25% having already changed something as a result.</p>
<p>2. Working cross functionally</p>	<p>100% of senior leader participants confirmed that this either reinforced existing beliefs (12%) or that they learnt something new (88%) as a result.</p> <p>This aspect of the project also inspired leaders to make change, with 83% stating that they want to change something as a result of working cross functionally. A further 17% already had plans in train to make improvements as a result.</p>
<p>3. Basing action learning style workshops around a theme based on survey data or diaries</p>	<p>Both approaches were taken during the project, starting with broad themes from diary entries and progressing into more detailed exploration of recurrent themes through gathering feedback from the wider student population using surveys.</p> <p>When asked about how useful the survey data was as a basis for reflection, 71% of senior leaders said that they had learnt something new as a result. Furthermore, 66% wanted to make improvements and 34% planned to or had already changed something.</p> <p>In terms of using the diaries as a basis for reflection, all of the leaders felt that this had reinforced or created new learning for them. Only one of the senior leaders expressed that this did not influence them to want to change something.</p>
<p>4. Taking a structured approach with allotted time for reflection through action learning style workshops</p>	<p>During one to one interviews with senior managers, there was clear consensus that each of the three points above were invaluable and led to learning. However, it was the structured approach which gave permission for such conversations and the reflective action learning workshops which provided the chance to make sense of what was being uncovered. Without these elements, the conversations would possibly not have led anywhere.</p> <p>63% of participants stated that they learnt something new as a result of the action learning style workshops, with the remaining 37% reinforcing what they already knew about the student experience.</p> <p>83% of participants expressed a desire to make improvements as a result of these sessions but had not yet developed concrete plans to do so.</p>

What Works Checklist

What	Led to learning something new	Led to a desire to change something	Led to actual change
Meeting directly with student(s)	•		•
Meeting directly with member(s) of staff	•	•	
Meeting both student(s) and staff together	•	•	
Senior leader action learning style workshops	•	•	
Working cross functionally / meeting new colleagues	•	•	
Using survey data as basis for action learning sets	•		•
Using themes taken from diaries to frame action learning sets and reflection	•		•
Taking a structured approach with allotted time for conversations and reflection	•	•	
Shadowing student	•	•	

What did not work so well:

- Use of online forum was rated as not useful by all of the senior leaders.
- There was a mixed response in terms of the full group workshops to which all participants were invited. These were invaluable as a project organisation construct but did not generate anything additional for participants in terms of learning or change.

Conclusion

This project has led us to two key conclusions:

- 1. When considering making changes, the student perspective is critical. Having a two-way dialogue as opposed to simply surveying students provides a chance to get to the heart of an issue and use follow up questions as appropriate.**
- 2. In building impetus for change, the direct interaction with our students has yielded the most learning and the greatest desire for making improvements. This will become a key pillar of our continued improvement efforts and providing opportunities for staff and students to interact outside of normal transactions will be central to this.**

As a result of the project, the University of Leicester is committing to build the most powerful elements of the project into a systematic and sustainable approach to shadowing between students, frontline staff and senior leaders. We will also be implementing specific improvements identified by the students and staff in this first iteration, which will provide ongoing efficiency gains and service improvements for the organisation, our staff and critically our students.

We would again like to thank the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education for their support in making the project possible and to all of the staff and student participants who gave their time and enthusiastic support to the work.

Appendices

- A. [One to one interview templates](#)
- B. Expression of interest forms – [Students Staff Managers](#)
- C. [Small group discussion template](#)
- D. [Repertory grids](#)
- E. [Our picture](#)

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