



Case study 2: Engaging students as agents of change

University of Exeter

What this case study covers

- **Subject and level:** Higher education undergraduate business studies students
- **Topic:** Student-led research project to increase use of technology, increase engagement and help students in large cohorts in the School of Business get to know each other
- **Technologies used:** Echo 360[®] video lecture recording, Turning Point[®], optical mark recognition (OMR) scanners, Flip[™] video cameras, Turnitin[®], YouTube[™], Facebook[™], wikis, Moodle[™], student-owned mobile devices

Background

The University of Exeter has a student population of over 17,000 engaged in learning and research at campuses in Exeter (Devon) and near Falmouth (Cornwall). The university also has project offices in Shanghai, Beijing and Bangalore. The Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry is run in partnership with the University of Plymouth and the NHS trust.

The university's academic subjects, research groups and centres are arranged into six colleges covering the broad disciplines of: business; engineering, mathematics and physical sciences; humanities; life and environmental science; social science; and medicine and dentistry.

Vision

At the University of Exeter, first year undergraduate students in the Business School are acting as 'agents of change' and working with academic staff to enhance learning and support engagement. Students are transforming traditional approaches to lectures by researching and co-developing innovative solutions in response to feedback from staff and student liaison committees.

Although the Business School has outstanding National Student Survey results, its use of technology was limited. The university has seen a sharp rise in its undergraduate intake, with undergraduate numbers more than doubling in the last three years to 2,204 students, with 33% of these being international students. Working together, students and staff have embedded technology to reflect

commercial practice, sustain active participation in learning, and manage assessment and feedback processes, despite the large and culturally diverse student population.

Transforming practice

Students as agents of change

The [JISC-funded INTEGRATE project](#) is one of ten projects undertaken by the university to engage students as agents of change. The project grew from a workshop run by the [Higher Education Academy \(HEA\)](#) for university staff involved in education development. Initially, the focus was on assessment and feedback, but staff wanted to explore the benefits of moving beyond listening to students to actively engaging students in other aspects of learning and teaching.

Students were invited to put forward proposals for improving learning and teaching to the university's Education Enhancement team. Proposals were based on concerns raised through staff and student liaison committees, and each proposal was endorsed by a named member of staff within the school to ensure staff input and support. The application process was open and encouraging, outlining the support that would be offered and the skills that students would develop. Students were supported throughout the application process, and a graduate project co-ordinator was recruited to support the data collection, the analysis and reporting aspects, and to develop collaboration between students, staff, the Students' Guild and the Education Enhancement team.

Enhancing learning

Finding out students' views on how technology could support their learning was part of the research process. The students explored how technology might support student engagement in lectures, how students felt about the use of technology in lectures, and whether technology enhanced their learning experience.

Activities included: recording and streaming lectures; responding to questions in lectures using mobile phones and SMS messaging; using an electronic voting system to facilitate greater interaction during lectures and group sessions; creating video evidence that students uploaded to the Virtual Learning Environment; podcasting lectures; using optical mark recognition scanners and multiple choice questionnaire software for formative and summative assessment; and using wikis for collaborative group work and blogs to record and communicate project progress. In addition, lecturers used Turnitin, an internet-based plagiarism-detection service, to minimise potential plagiarism in student-submitted assignments and improve turnaround time.

It was interesting to observe changes in pedagogical approach in response to the introduction of new technologies. For example, the electronic voting system clickers helped to minimise the impact of the large group size and their use enabled teaching staff to find out more about their students' educational backgrounds, and to be more diagnostic in approach by responding to feedback and conducting revision activities to check understanding at the end of sessions. The capacity of the software to collate students' responses instantly enabled staff to analyse the results and identify what went well and where students might benefit from further support.

Supporting staff and students

The Education Enhancement unit and the Learning Technology team have made a considerable investment in terms of the support offered to staff and students to help them engage in the project and to work through the change processes. A 'hub and spoke' approach to embedding the use of technology, whereby the project team worked centrally to learn about and develop expertise in the agreed technologies before taking this out to the school, proved successful and built up confidence.

A range of strategies to support staff were utilised in addition to training sessions and drop-in sessions. Strategies were tailored according to the needs of individuals and the context. Some examples include:

- Colleagues observing teaching practice and subsequently discussing and sharing reflections as 'critical friends'
- Technology being demonstrated and staff being offered in-session support to use it for the first time
- Colleagues co-facilitating a session or teaching in teams
- Guidance and support being offered by telephone and email

Students received assistance in designing their research methods – for example in designing questionnaires and interview questions – and in learning how to run focus groups, and they received support in analysing their research results.

The project generated a considerable bank of resources to support staff and students, including quick-start guides to help users become familiar with the technology, and 'talking head' video clips in which staff and students share their experiences of using specific technologies and engaging in the project. Teaching fellows set up a series of seminars entitled 'Eight technologies in under an hour' to share effective practice with colleagues from other schools. The resources are freely available from the project website at <http://projects.exeter.ac.uk/integrate>

Benefits

Students are benefitting from engaging in practical research and developing valuable business skills and confidence that will better equip them to cope with and respond

to change in an evolving world. Students can see the value and impact of evidence from well-conducted research and, in taking charge of their own learning environment, they are benefitting the academic community, ensuring their learning needs and preferences are met, and sharing with staff the responsibility of keeping pace with new technologies.

Fears that students being able to watch recorded lectures without being present would have an adverse effect on attendance proved unfounded, with 98% attendance and particular benefits for students for whom English is not the first language, offering them a chance to listen to the recordings as many times as they wanted. The electronic voting system and use of SMS messaging promoted greater student engagement, offered diagnostic benefits and enabled lecturers to respond to students. Camcorders supported the development of presentation skills and together with wikis helped to develop peer relationships and a collaborative online community.

Initiatives such as a photography competition and the Grand Google Map (students create and upload video, audio, photographic and text content to describe their home localities) helped students in large cohorts get to know each other and better understand the diverse cultural backgrounds that make up the student population at the University of Exeter.

Useful to know

- Engaging students as agents of change is fundamentally about people. Developing trust, confidence and a cultural mind-set that is positive, open, enquiring and supportive can take time. Head of Project Development, Elisabeth Dunne, comments that “Change happens one conversation at a time, and each conversation counts towards enabling success.”
- It was important to help students realise that they can make a difference and to build their confidence in the value of the contribution they are able to make. The role of the graduate project co-ordinator was critical in supporting the students and motivating them to meet the challenge.
- Adopting a model of distributed leadership involving staff, students and teams such as the Education Enhancement and Information Technology teams fosters a sense of ownership and commitment that encourages everyone to contribute fully. All parties have a vested interest in ensuring the project succeeds and that the development is sustained beyond the involvement of any one individual.
- The support of a team focusing on learning improvement, such as the Education Enhancement team, can facilitate conversations with key people and broker support between academic and technical staff. It can also provide both support and challenge at appropriate times.

- Working with internal stakeholder groups that have complementary agendas and established structures, such as the Students' Guild and staff and student liaison committees, helped to move the project forward.
- Exploring a wide range of technologies gave more opportunities to a greater number of students, as some students appreciate some technologies more than others or find them valuable for different purposes.
- Students were not paid to take part, but small incentives such as providing refreshments for focus groups met with a positive response.
- Not everything will go to plan; be flexible and be prepared for unexpected outcomes, some of which may be beneficial.

Moving forward

Engaging students as agents of change has enabled the Business School to move further and faster in integrating technology appropriately within the curriculum. The momentum and enthusiasm generated has empowered students and generated a commitment to action in the quest to build educational futures that best serve students' needs.

The findings from all ten university projects to engage students as agents of change were presented at a student-led research conference at the end of the academic year. The conference was attended by students, senior academics and school managers, and proved so popular that it has become an annual event. Funding ensured the conference was delivered to a professional standard and that the work received the recognition it deserved.

Learner perspective

Students recognise and value the research skills and experience acquired:

"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 like 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."

Sam, Year 3 Business School student who ran the first technology survey

Dale Potter, Students' Project Co-ordinator, sees that the project has much greater potential:

“Engaged students – the leaders of tomorrow – are encouraged to see how their own ideas can lead to collaborative change ... 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.”

Tutor perspective

The positive impact of the project is reflected in feedback from teaching fellows such as Jenny Wren, who was awarded the accolade of 'most innovative teacher' by students from the Business School at the inaugural Students' Guild Teaching Awards in 2010:

“This project has taught me that technology can be a very useful aid in the personalisation of learning. I wasn't too sure about it at first but, trusting in the process, trusting in the equipment and trusting in the students very specifically and their knowledge and keenness to use the technology for their own learning purposes has been a complete revelation. The fact that they have then taken the use of the cameras from my module into other modules and they are now keen to drive through technology in learning across different modules, helping other students and volunteering to help other staff – that is stunning.”

For Elisabeth Dunne, Head of Project Development in the Education Enhancement team at Exeter University, the INTEGRATE project has confirmed the value of setting challenging real-life research targets for students:

“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.”

Reflect and discuss

[The INTEGRATE project](#) promotes a collaborative and active learning ethos that engages students and values cultural diversity, despite large cohort sizes.

- Are there opportunities in your institution for learners to collaborate with staff to explore how technology is used to enhance the learning experience?
- Is it possible to identify opportunities to build on your current practice in working with students to further extend this practice?

Key words

Agents of change, co-collaboration, cultural diversity, learner engagement, learner voice, personalisation, research skills

Links and further reading

Dunne, E and Zandstra, R (2011) *Students as Change Agents: New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in Higher Education*. ESCalate, University of Bristol <http://escalate.ac.uk/8242>

INTEGRATE project <http://projects.exeter.ac.uk/integrate>

JISC, The Design Studio, Integrative Technologies project <http://bit.ly/jiscintegrate>

JISC, The Design Studio, Students as Change Agents <http://bit.ly/pHTuzf>

Kay, J, Dunne, E and Hutchinson, J (2010) *Rethinking the values of higher education – students as change agents?* Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Rethinking-the-values-of-higher-education---students-as-change-agents.aspx

QAA podcast_on Students as Agents for Change at the University of Exeter

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/Podcasts/Pages/Students-Agents-Change-University-Exeter.aspx