

Jisc change agents' network

Case study

How students are making a difference to teaching and learning at The University of Nottingham

Students at the heart of education

The University of Nottingham has campuses in Nottingham, China and Malaysia and serves over 43,700 students worldwide, the majority of which (33,369) are based in Nottingham (source: The University of Nottingham, 2013-4). The University is research-led and is committed to internationalising all core activities to prepare students for their intellectual, professional and personal futures. The University also has a strong reputation for the contribution of their Graduate and Student Service Centres to support and enhance the student experience and the University's systems for listening and responding to the student voice (QAA Institutional Audit, 2009).

The **Students as Change Agents** scheme was introduced during the 2014-5 academic year to increase levels of student engagement and empower students to make a difference to teaching and learning by working with schools on development projects, which are sponsored by an academic staff member in the appropriate school. Indicative projects could involve research, implementing changes recommended by research, and co-designing assessment methods, modules and learning materials. Pilot projects completed in the first year include:

- » Pairs of students devising content and creating learning resources for a Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) scheme in Maths
- » A group evaluation of the Biochemistry curriculum with a particular focus on year-to-year transitions
- » An evaluation of assessment objectives and proposals for a remodelled Biosciences curriculum
- » Developing accredited work placements modules in the University's Language Centre on the China campus
- » An investigation of learning activities and behaviours of Business School students to identify different persona and typologies to recommend ways of improving engagement.

Developing the Nottingham model

The idea of establishing a Students as Change Agents scheme to stimulate teaching enhancement arose from independent research carried out by staff and the Students' Union (SU) into how student engagement initiatives were being implemented at other Higher Education (HE) institutions in the UK. This led to academics, Learning Technology staff and Students' Union officers developing a model for student engagement through a series of workshops which reflected the University's specific needs and culture.

A co-ordinated approach

The scheme is supported by the University's four year **Teaching Transformation Programme** (TTP) which was launched in 2013. This is a collaboration between the Teaching and Learning Directorate and the Learning Technology team and is designed to support schools in addressing key issues in teaching and learning. Themes include: assessment; academic development; programme review; MOOCs and NOOCs (Nottingham Open Online Courses); Moodle development and video and rich media. Schools are working with the TTP team to identify priorities for teaching enhancement. Throughout the process, schools are encouraged to actively engage students in the planning and implementation of their development projects. This overt support for Students as Change Agents projects is helping to get the key messages across and secure buy-in at all levels.

The Students as Change Agents scheme provides students with the opportunity to gain credit for their work through the University's **Nottingham Advantage Award**. The Award, which offers over 250 modules focusing on career skills, mentoring, cultural awareness, entrepreneurship and volunteering, is a cross-campus initiative, available to students in the UK, China and Malaysia, and is supported by employers. Students get recognition for the employability skills they gain from engagement in projects which is recorded on their degree transcript.

Getting the projects up and running

Two different approaches to setting up Students as Change Agents projects have evolved – both co-ordinated by the University's Student Engagement Coordinator, Carina Neil:

- » Students can propose projects where they would like to see a change in teaching and learning activity
- » Staff can commission a project area where they would like students to take a lead.

In the first case, students are encouraged to discuss their idea with school staff and then submit an online application form to the Students as Change Agents team. Staff who want to commission a project discuss its scope with the team and complete a separate form, outlining the general aims of the project which then enables students to develop more specific plans. School Directors of Teaching are required to approve all proposals. Following this, a panel, which includes Teaching and Learning and Learning Technology colleagues and student course representatives nominated by the SU, reviews applications to ensure projects align with teaching strategy. In this way, projects are directly owned and managed by the schools and students. The Students as Change Agents team provides guidance to both students and staff throughout the project lifecycle, facilitating training, according to the needs of the students and the particular project, and co-ordinating accreditation.

The scheme is very much a collaboration with the SU who have been involved in discussions from the start. Dialogue is facilitated by regular up-dates, sharing of training and recruitment plans, jointly-delivered workshops and presentations.

Training and support

After project proposals have been approved, students and staff partners are enrolled on a Moodle module. Blended learning is a key feature at the University and the Students as Change Agents scheme demonstrates this with a combination of face-to-face and online training. Whilst recognising that networking and personal contact

are essential for relationship-building, online materials have been developed to make support more accessible to a wider audience across the University, including overseas campuses. Online technology also provides a greater level of flexibility and facilitates support for change agents when projects start at times in the year when face-to-face training isn't scheduled.

The two main training components are project management and team building. These sessions have been delivered face-to-face and recordings are available on Moodle. The project management course is designed to equip students to develop an action plan with a schedule of activities, which they agree with their staff partner and then submit their plans to the Students as Change Agents team in a project brief via Moodle. The team-building session enables students to identify their role in a team and recognise different strengths which other members contribute to make a team work well together.

As the pilot scheme has progressed, it has become clear that projects have different training needs and other staff are willing to offer specific training to support this.

"We anticipated that most change agents would need training in project management and team working but some, such as the Business School, include these areas in their curriculum so their needs have been slightly different. In this case, we've adopted a more flexible approach: the school accessed online materials and has run a session on analysing research data instead."

Carina Neil, Student Engagement Co-ordinator, The University of Nottingham

Reflecting back on experiences so far

As the first year of the University's Students as Change Agents scheme draws to a close, a group of students are evaluating the success of the initiative, gathering and analysing participant feedback and data to prepare a report with recommendations for future development. Some interesting points are emerging:

- » Recruiting and engaging students can be difficult. Various routes for recruitment were tried including email, use of flyers targeting specific groups, newsletters, shout-outs and personal invitations. Experience has shown that personal contact and networking approaches work best, although lecture shout-outs can be effective when the staff partner is known in advance.
- » Whilst applications directly from students are very welcome, the level of interest has been low. After initial engagement with training and the Students as Change Agents team, students from this route of application did not convert to completed projects. As the programme moves out of its pilot stage, the scheme will continue to support both student and school routes and will promote more widely to reach more potential applicants. Interestingly, when surveyed, students showed a preference to schools commissioning projects for them to develop.
- » Staff may be cautious about sharing or relinquishing decision-making to students but this is generally a short-term phenomenon. This is overcome as student-staff partner relationships develop, through mentoring, setting clear parameters and showcasing successful projects.

One of the biggest challenges the project teams have faced is the restrictions posed by the academic year. The time taken up scoping out projects with students and schools, recruiting and training students means that there is little project activity in the autumn. Students also need time to grow into the role and these constraints mean that there is not always enough opportunity for projects to develop before the exam period begins. Ways of

addressing this are being explored, which include bringing recruitment forward to the summer term to 'sow the seeds' and get the projects off to a swifter start when students return to university in October.

"The Students as Change Agents role in changing the culture is as important as the projects themselves. Students as Change Agents is setting expectations for staff and students to engage more richly with each other"

Matt Dickinson, Director of Teaching, The University of Nottingham

Recognition and reward

In addition to the credit available through the **Nottingham Advantage Award**, the work of students involved in the Students as Change Agents projects is being recognised and promoted through internal staff-student conferences. An internal celebration to showcase the work is planned, presenting an ideal opportunity for other academics not yet involved in the Students as Change Agents scheme to come along and be inspired by what is possible.

Emerging impact

Students as Change Agents is viewed as contributing to wide scale change enabling the school programme to be updated. There are clear benefits for students, staff members and schools. By making recommendations, implementing improvements and producing student-focussed resources, the student perspective is being firmly embedded into school structures and challenging current ways of thinking. Most schools involved in the pilot year have indicated they will develop more Change Agents projects next year and some change agents are already engaged in the planning stages.

Students involved with the **Students as Change Agents** scheme have an authentic opportunity to play an active role in improving their own learning experience and that of others who follow, as well as develop their employability, project management, communication and research skills.

"We got to know the staff, it gave us an opportunity to go behind the scenes. It gave us a chance to have more of a say and a chance to fix the stuff that needed fixing. We developed communication, presentation [skills], there was a lot of teamwork involved in the project, and organisation... We would definitely recommend it to other people."

Student as Change Agent 2015, The University of Nottingham

Staff have reported that taking part in the projects has been valuable in building new relationships and exchanging of ideas with students, in addition to benefits for their own personal development.

"It's been one of the most fun things I've done in my 20 years at the University because you don't usually get to work with students like this."

Staff partner, Change Agents project

There are also wider benefits in terms of the different level of interaction students have with staff outside their day-to-day activities which may involve addressing a complaint or resolving a problem.

"This puts a different spin on how students can interact with those who team up with them and provides an opportunity to work in partnership where all views are valued on an equal level. Creating

more opportunities for students to interact on a non-student basis is also really important for employability."

Ruth Edgar, Education Network Manager, The University of Nottingham Students' Union

Looking to the future

After a successful pilot year, plans are underway to scale up the programme through wider promotion.

Initially, the Students as Change Agents team has concentrated on creating a flexible framework and building relationships to support future growth in student engagement. Delivery and support mechanisms for communication and training make the most of digital technology. However, whilst opportunities for running **Students as Change Agents** pilots developed in the wider teaching and learning arena, openings for technology projects have not yet come to fruition. Effective use of technology to support learning is a key aspect of university strategy, and now that robust processes are in place, the team seeks to actively develop Students as Change Agents projects with a digital focus.

"Students as the heart' is a key focus of the University strategy and this is reflected within all digital learning strategies. With a sound foundation established across the programme, the role of students to inform and support the enhancement of our technology-based learning provision will be a critical element in the future.

Andy Beggan, Associate Director of Learning Technology, The University of Nottingham

The University is also committed to a tri-campus, one university approach and from the outset, teaching leadership in Malaysia and China have been involved in development discussions. Plans are underway to roll out Student as Change Agents scheme on both campuses in the 2015-16 academic year.

Find out more

For further information please visit [The University of Nottingham Students as Agents of Change web site](#)

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You can also find out more about Jisc's work through the [change agent network](#).