



Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation

Institutional Case Study

Which University?

The University of Exeter with the Exeter Students' Guild

Name of scheme/initiative:

Students as Change Agents

What is its purpose?

The key concept is that students can actively engage with processes of change in the university learning environment. The purposes are twofold:

- To put students at the centre of their educational experience, and enable Exeter to be better attuned to their needs
- To enable students to engage deeply with the institution, giving opportunities for leadership, ownership of change processes, and understanding of complex problem solving - all of which support academic progress and employability, as exemplified in [Exeter's graduate attributes](#)

How does it operate?

The focus is on evidence-based change. Students select concerns and interests, often raised through student-staff liaison committees, research them and provide recommendations and solutions. A central Student Engagement Officer (SEO), funded through a partnership between the Students' Guild and the University's Education Quality and Enhancement (EQE) division, is responsible for working with students and staff. The focus and direction of individual projects is decided by students and signed off by an appropriate academic staff member; an informal interview takes place with the SEO to ensure appropriate planning. Staff act as mentors, but students largely maintain a leadership role.

What is the background?

At a theoretical level, the idea originated from a growing UK concern about students being customers, with education regarded as a commodity. Concurrently, new metaphors offered a more positive set of concepts such as co-production, collaboration, and partnership, emphasizing ways to harness the energy of students to make a positive difference to their education. At a practical level, students voicing dissatisfaction with aspects of provision at Exeter turned only to the institution to make changes. Yet discussion highlighted students who were full of ideas. Change Agents provided a vehicle for drawing students into decision-making and action in relation to the changes they required.

Are there financial incentives?

There are no payments directly to students. Funding was originally available from the Vice Chancellor's budget, enabling a graduate to support the initiative centrally. Additional funding from [Santander](#) and Jisc enabled sustainability projects and student [Technology Champions](#). The initiative is now embedded and funded within Exeter's six Colleges, with particular staff members having responsibility for student engagement. Student reward and recognition takes the form of celebrations organised by Colleges and/or certificates. Change Agents activity can also contribute to the [Exeter Award and Leader's Award](#).

How many students are involved per academic year?

Ten projects in the 2008 pilot have increased to 125 completed [projects in 2014/15](#). Many students are involved overall: several may lead a single project, and many projects will touch on dozens, hundreds or even thousands of students.

How is the scheme managed?

The SEO takes responsibility for monitoring progress and gaining [reports on outcomes](#) as well as running the Student Engagement Network to ensure Change Agents is constantly on the agenda. The dual funding ensures close partnership between those responding to student concerns and those with experience of staff development. This partnership also ensures wide institutional knowledge and brokering expertise, so that students have opportunities to meet with staff members beyond the usual disciplinary boundaries or talk at committees to which there would generally be no access.

How are students recruited?

[Students are recruited](#) through face-to-face interactions, social media and written publications. Student-Staff Liaison meetings and introductions for Subject Chairs and other representatives will highlight Change Agents. No student is discouraged from becoming a Change Agent; the recruitment and mentoring process enables any student to take part. Nor is there a set number of projects annually, although around 100 seems to be feasible within the current infrastructure.

How are staff recruited?

Staff recruitment is undertaken by each individual student, who selects an academic they know with relevant knowledge or experience, or a staff member who is known for their student engagement role in the College.

What projects have taken place?

Students as Change Agents covers [a wide range of areas](#) including:

- Assessment and feedback
- Use of technology
- Employability
- Sustainability
- Mental health
- Personal/peer tutoring
- External speakers
- Module choices
- Internationalisation
- Engagement in lectures/seminars

How is sustainability achieved?

Over 350 projects have been undertaken since 2008 and, overall, tens of thousands of students have been involved in the research processes and outcomes. Outcomes have been presented at Exeter student-led change Agents and Learning and Teaching conferences, promoting institutional engagement with key research findings. This has helped to cement Change Agents in institutional thinking and planning, supported

throughout by senior managers. As the first initiative of its kind, it has influenced many institutions worldwide, has been disseminated through dozens of external conferences and workshops and was influential in winning the [HEA & NUS Students' Union and Institution Partnership Award 2014](#).

More information

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Website: <http://as.exeter.ac.uk/eqe/projects/change/>

Further Reading

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- Sandoover, S., Partridge, L., Dunne, E. and Burkill, S. (2012) [Undergraduate Researchers Change Learning and Teaching](#): A Case Study in Australia and the United Kingdom, CUR Quarterly, USA
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- Dunne, E. and Zandstra, R. (2011) '[Students as Change Agents](#)', HEA/ESCalate, Bristol
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