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# The Story of Students as Change Agents at the University of Exeter: From Slow Beginnings to Institutional Initiative

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## **THE STORY OF STUDENTS AS CHANGE AGENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EXETER: FROM SLOW BEGINNINGS TO INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVE**

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‘Students as Change Agents’ at the University of Exeter is an initiative that has become extremely successful, impacts strongly on the way that students are listened to and work in partnership at the University, and is beginning to influence ideas and practices nationally and internationally. Perhaps as with many such initiatives, the story of this success has been dependent on the commitment of individuals who have believed in its philosophy and values and who have contributed to making it work.

This piece outlines the development and growth of Students as Change Agents from the perspectives of six key players. It highlights some of the ‘back story,’ the times before the initiative was successful, the long journey and the voices of some of the people who have supported this development, from the first seeds of an idea to a major institutional initiative. These voices weave a complex story of personal enthusiasms and interests, of parallel stories, of chance encounters and the meeting of like minds, along with the development of formal approaches and institutional strategies.

***Hannah**, a final year student and student academic representative for her subject, starts this story by describing two projects she was involved in during the last academic year and by explaining why students are motivated to participate in Change Agents projects.*

In Theology and Religion, there have been two key Change Agents projects this year: a buddy scheme and a diversity and tolerance forum. Launching the buddy scheme was relatively simple; the project is an obvious way to create community, so there was automatic support from the University and from the Students’ Guild (Union) for such a project, because it feeds into some of their wider institutional aims. Getting students involved in the project was also easy to achieve because its benefits are obvious: for the mentors, there is a chance to develop leadership skills, listening skills and the diligence to know the University’s support systems so that they can point their buddies to the right place—qualities transferable to any work place. When pitching change agents projects to students, the main emphasis to gain people’s involvement is on the ways in which the project could enhance their employability.

Getting students involved in the diversity and tolerance forum was more complex because its benefits for students are more than employability; it enables students to reflect on how their degree has changed their approach to how they think and respond to situations. The support from the University for the project has been great because it acknowledges the importance of humanities students being able to be self-aware of their academic development. In a culture where degrees are scrutinized for their financial viability, to be able to run a change agents project which celebrates the personal development and not just the employability of a student is really valuable.

Change Agents projects at Exeter work because the academic representatives (reps) behind them have the support of the University, whether it be practical in providing training and resources or in its confidence to support projects where the benefits are more nuanced. That is why all the academic reps I have worked with are proactive in creating and maintaining them.

*So how did we get here? Liz describes the initial conceptualisation of Change Agents, from an ill-formed idea to a working concept that is embraced by the University and well understood by students.*

Of importance in Hannah's description above is her confidence in the assumption that the selected projects will be supported by both the University and the Students' Guild, and that she can personally take significant responsibility for their development. So how is it that she can make such assumptions, and with such confidence? She is also clear about institutional drivers and about what motivates students to get involved, from personal development to employability. How is it that we have now had hundreds of such projects at Exeter (with 63 in the last academic year), each one driven by students and responding to the needs of particular disciplines?

For me, the story starts in 2005 when, by chance at a conference dinner, I sit next to a senior figure (Brenda Smith) from the UK's Higher Education Academy. At this time, I am Head of Educational Development, a role that straddles both staff and student development. She mentions setting up a workshop on students as agents of change. I don't really know what this means, but I am sure that it fits with both my role and my excitement in working innovatively. Only two other institutions were represented at the workshop, alongside Exeter; ideas were interesting but relatively unformed; no one beyond myself wished to take it any further.

A year later, I invite Brenda to Exeter to run a session with academic subject representatives (students) for our Students' Guild. The topic is assessment; sixteen subject representatives and thirteen staff are involved in heated debate and activity; feedback is outstanding. The following year, I run the same event myself. Great involvement; great feedback; but it all seems slightly lacking in purpose from my viewpoint. Staff and students are learning from each other, coming to understand each other's perspectives, but this learning is not then being used to drive change. Over a year has gone past, and 'change agents' remains just words.

At this time, in order for the University to work more closely with our Students' Guild, I sit in on some student-staff representation meetings. These meetings give outstanding opportunities for the student voice to be heard and heeded, and for collaboration between staff and students to develop. But again I am frustrated. I realize that the same issues are being aired again and again.

I wonder how important many of the issues really are, or whether a highly committed and eloquent single student is voicing their own individual perceptions. The researcher in me wants more information, data, and evidence that there are significant challenges that do need to be resolved.

... There has been mild panic as the key speaker for a leadership session at the University has cancelled. A young Welsh speaker is found at the last minute. I have not heard of him; I almost decide not to attend. But I find myself listening to someone who complements my own ideas about student engagement, who works closely with students to bring about change. He even has a model of student engagement! At the end of the meeting I go to talk with him briefly—to explain why his model doesn't go far enough. He doggedly disagrees and I leave disappointed.

About this time, a new line manager asks me if there is one thing I would really like to do. My ideas suddenly start coming together. Volunteer students will negotiate a research topic with a focus on the learning and teaching environment; they will then engage in a research project to illuminate the topic, take responsibility for providing recommendations and solutions, and put these into practice. Change Agents is born! Funding is found for a graduate student (Roos Zandstra) for five months and the first ten projects are completed and evaluated. The initiative seems to be unexpectedly timely. Suddenly, Change Agents is taking off. The ideas gain national acclaim through a case study in a government publication, *Higher Ambitions* (2009); the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) publish a 'think-piece' (Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson, 2010); the National Union of Students (NUS) publish a case study; ESCalate (the HEA Education Subject Centre) commission a publication.

In September 2010, senior managers, members of the Students' Guild, and academic and professional services staff agree to be involved in a four-day change program in order to work on ways in which the University might move the 'Students as Change Agents' initiative from 'Margins to Mainstream.' And, as the Student Engagement agenda grows nationally, a decision is taken to advertise for a Student Engagement Manager... I suddenly find myself working alongside the newly appointed Derfel Owen.

*Derfel describes how his interests and experiences lead him to engage with change agents and student engagement strategy at the University of Exeter.*

I began my career by being elected President of my Students' Union at the University of Hull. That was in 2004, when the nature of students' relationships with Universities was under the spotlight as variable tuition fees were introduced for the first time. I remember, at the time, challenging the University Council to think very hard about what this meant and how the need for a high profile and visible commitment to partnership working was required in order to meet the expectations of students and build a sense of academic community.

A few years later, I started work at the QAA. The core of my job was to build effective relationships with university students nationally, to engage them more closely in the Agency's work and to promote student engagement in Universities. At the time, this was highly controversial; but a number of dynamic and visionary Universities formed a small core that was keen and willing to do things differently, including Exeter. It was a matter of chance when a

keynote speaker at one of Exeter's Education Excellence Seminars pulled out, and I was drawn in as a last minute replacement. Here I met Liz Dunne and her colleagues (students and staff). I heard more about the Change Agents initiative largely because Liz came to talk to me at the end of the seminar, in particular because she disagreed with the model of student engagement that I had discussed. I was keen to know more but never expected that these discussions would continue any further.

However, a while later I contacted the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) of Exeter (Janice Kay) to see if she would write a think piece as part of a series I commissioned through the QAA. She responded positively, writing a piece with Liz and the Chief Executive of the Exeter Students Guild, thereby cementing the concept at Exeter and beginning to gain a national reputation for the initiative. I also interviewed Liz and others at Exeter for one of a series of podcasts I was creating for the QAA on topics of national interest.

To my surprise, I was contacted again, some months later, by a senior manager from the University. I was asked if I would like to participate in a four-day planning session. And a year later, I applied for the newly created role of Student Engagement Manager at Exeter. Not only do I find myself working in the same office as Liz, but I am tasked with devising a student engagement strategy for Exeter. Along with senior managers, including the DVC, it is decided that an important factor in ensuring widespread commitment to student engagement will be to ask each of the six University Colleges to provide funding for half a full-time post for a junior member of staff. Colleges duly appoint such staff, and the beginning of a 'hub-and-spoke' approach is set in motion. The 'hub' maintains the central support, motivation and drive, with each of the 'spokes' fulfilling the new role in a variety of different ways.

At the core of the Change Agents initiative is a commitment to partnership working and recognizing the mutual and complimentary expertise of students and academic staff. It takes the shared enthusiasm and energy of both and turns it into a positive opportunity to make change happen. What is most important is that the ideas are driven by students, whether this is by identifying areas for improvement and then researching solutions or just having a good idea and being given the space and support to run with it.

This principle can work in every part of the University. My career has moved on and I'm now responsible for quality assurance, enhancement and academic governance at University College, London (UCL), but the principles of change agents still apply in this context. Students are the only people who know what it's like to be a student; they have unique insight and experience to share, and expertise that can make our decision making better at every level of the University.

*Sabina describes her role as one of the first College 'spokes' and how this supports and encourages students to engage.*

I joined the University of Exeter in 2012 as a Student Engagement, Widening Participation and Internationalisation Coordinator in the College of Life and Environmental Sciences. My role was to deliver ambitious plans to engage and involve current students more actively in the academic community. This included providing support and guidance to students for the Students as Change

Agents scheme. I was the first person appointed to coordinate student engagement activities; hence the challenge was great.

When I started this role, I revitalized the College Student Engagement Action and Advisory Group, which had not met for a long time. The remit of the group was to support the delivery of the student engagement strategy, with particular focus on raising the profile and importance of student engagement. At the start, I found it very difficult to encourage academics to get involved in such activities. In order to demonstrate how important student engagement is, I carried out some research that highlighted its importance to the academic members of staff. As a result, they began to plan new activities, with my support, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of existing activity.

Students are experts in being students and know better than anyone else what could and should be improved. The Change Agents scheme encourages them to spot improvements that need to be made and implement recommendations. Before I started this role, the number, remit and quality of Change Agents projects within the College was significantly lower than in other Colleges, so I attended all the Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings in order to promote the scheme and to encourage students to take part in the program, resulting in more than double the number of projects across the first six months of this work. Students have undertaken a range of activities such as module fairs, creating a research database, forming active student-led employability groups, and resources being produced for the Wellbeing Centre. In addition, most of the projects were rolled out into the next academic year and students had the opportunity to showcase their achievement during the Exeter Student Conference in June 2013.

I am now working as a Regular Giving Assistant in the Development and Alumni Relations department, but my role as a supporter of the Change Agents scheme does not end here. Having started this role only three months ago, I have already started working closely with the Students Guild on our three campuses as well as with appropriate members of staff in the Colleges and services to ensure transparency of information about the Annual Fund availability. This is important as the Annual Fund grant can be used to support Change Agents projects specifically and will be increasingly used to support student engagement and student voice projects more broadly.

*James now describes his role in the Students' Guild and how this, too, is central to having a university that listens to students, that cares deeply about partnership and is committed to supporting Change Agents.*

When I joined the University of Exeter Students' Guild in 2012, Academic Representation was at an interesting point in its evolution. As a result of the dynamism of my predecessors, there was an effective student representation system in most departments. However, significant challenges remained. Although each department had enthusiastic academic reps, there was no proper means for getting them into their posts, with elections held sporadically and inconsistently. Coupled to this, less than half attended a training session, and it was therefore not surprising that there was a real disparity of experience across the University. Beyond this, only a relatively small number of the student population outside Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs) knew what academic representation was, or how to go about making a change at Exeter if they wanted to do so.

The Students' Guild three-year plan was therefore to work alongside the University so that *every* student became empowered to have their voice heard and make change happen. We sought to ensure that our academic representatives were democratically elected, increase the awareness of representation mechanisms across the University, and worked with Colleges to ensure that every student received equivalent opportunities. None of these goals could have been achieved in isolation, a clearly defined partnership between the Students' Guild and the University remains crucial. Each College now has a member of staff devoted to working with the Students' Guild on student engagement activity, a factor that has helped to ensure that students in each department receive support that is tailored to their particular needs.

Change Agents has been integral to the process of empowering students to lead change and therefore fits perfectly with the Students' Guild's own ambitions. In the current higher education environment, an ethos of partnership and collaboration between students and staff is crucial, and Change Agents has created a valuable framework in which this relationship can flourish.

In a sense, Change Agents is a self-perpetuating success story. A small number of projects in the early years of Change Agents demonstrated that it could have a real impact on student experience. The Students' Guild, the University of Exeter, and the students themselves all have access to different experiences and resources. Change Agents creates an environment in which all three parties can benefit from sharing their experiences, thereby creating projects that benefit everyone. Students can run projects with staff support, whilst staff benefit from the fresh perspective of accessing current student ideas. The success of this approach has seen the number of projects snowball, reaching an all-time high in 2013/14, and giving the University a vibrant, student-led environment.

*Will brings a further perspective. He moved some months ago from the Students' Guild to the Student Engagement and Skills team, making the powerful connection between the University and the Students' Guild even closer.*

The scale of the challenge presented in changing an institution as large as a University can seem overpowering. I first joined the University of Exeter in 2007, as Research & Representation Manager in the Students' Guild. My task was to improve the quality and the scale of the student voice across the entire institution. At the time Exeter had about 15,000 students; trying to deliver the change on my own seemed foolish, so the first thing I did was pick one area to focus on—the academic representation system and our Student Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs). I focused on sharing the workload by building alliances, drew up an initial set of proposals and held 121 meetings with administrative staff in every academic College and key departments. I amended my proposals based on the feedback I received, wrote these up as a report, and the recommendations I made were approved, despite some opposition from academics. As a result, staff were given the responsibility for administering SSLCs and sharing information with the Students' Guild. I learnt that when you try to make positive change, always identify your allies before opening the debate: they will speak for you in the face of opposition.

In 2007, the Students' Guild did not have the contact details of the University's academic reps and we did not know how many SSLCs we had. By 2009 we had gained this information and the University had fully embraced the benefits of working in partnership with students. The



improvements led to the expansion of the Students' Guild representation team, from one to a team of four. It led to University support for the first Teaching Awards scheme in England, now the largest in the world, with students voting for the best lecturers, best supporter of employability, etc. It led to the creation of the 'Research Uncovered' scheme to publicize staff research to students, the University and the community. All of this was delivered by hundreds of students and staff working together, and demonstrates how partnership between the University and the Students' Guild offers fantastic opportunities to students and staff who want to change things for the better.

It also created an ethos into which the concept of Students as Change Agents could easily fit. The changes being embraced by the Guild and the University together meant that the initiative was supported from the very beginning and this has become more collaborative and focused year on year. Rep training through the Guild is explicit about change agents and it is even mentioned in Open Days—to parents as well as students—as a part of the Exeter student experience.

As for myself, I now have a role as Student Engagement Officer in Education Quality and Enhancement, a post funded jointly by this unit and the Students' Guild. Liz is my line manager and Change Agents has become a significant part of my remit. The agenda for my work has moved on substantially from when I first started. In 2007 it was about developing an institution-wide approach to student engagement. In 2014 we have achieved this; my job now is about demonstrating the outputs and outcomes of our student engagement work so we can continuously improve. As the processes within Higher Education institutions become more business orientated, evaluation is now key so that we can continue to demonstrate, and justify, the University's commitment.

### **Final comment**

As the new academic year commences, emails with ideas for new projects are flowing in, and each will be supported in different ways through the hub and spoke staff, and academics, working together with students. There will be no payments to students for undertaking projects, but the initiative works because it picks up on the individual concerns, interests and enthusiasms of those involved.

*—My name is Olivia and I am second year studying Clinical Psychology. The issue I would like to take a look at is the information given to first-year students about the subject and academic work in Welcome Week.*

*—I've started one [project] at the moment, named "Maths Uncovered" which I'm working towards, and I'd be happy to meet you and discuss that and other projects I have planned over the year!*

*— I would like to submit an application form for the Students as Change Agents scheme for a project on creating a series of interviews where academics who used quantitative research methods explain the obstacles, choices and limitations they faced when doing their research. I am convinced that this would make teaching quantitative research methods to politics students*

*much more interactive and effective. I have already talked about this project to my [Department] Head of Education and she wants me to get started as soon as possible.*

*– I have had an idea for a possible change agents project and wanted to run it past you and discuss its feasibility. I thought it might be good for students taking their dissertations in the College to get support from academics in conducting first-hand social research. This would be particularly useful for students considering academic careers or postgraduate study. This support could range from a one-off meeting to deliver advice on research, to a partnership in which student and lecturer conduct shared research and both use the findings to support their own writings.*

*– You mentioned that you might be interested in running a Change Agents project around Rhino Horn. We talked briefly about organizing a debate or talk about the economic issues surrounding this issue. I was wondering if I could buy you a cup of coffee one day next week and have a quick chat about what you might like to do?*

What is of most importance is that the philosophy of Change Agents will endure; it is now far more than an idea. It is interpreted in many different ways; staff change roles or move on; it is continuing to evolve; but the uniquely close relationship between the University and the Students' Guild increasingly supports the initiative. An institutional strategy weaves student engagement, including change agents, into the fabric of the University and the hub-and-spoke approach now gives considerable support for carrying out projects and ensuring success. It is also enshrined in the University's Education Strategy for 2014 to 2020, but it will always be the enthusiasts—such as those highlighted above—who will engage with it and who will make it work.

Alongside this, the focus on student engagement nationally and internationally continues to grow and to be interpreted in numerous ways worldwide. However, behind every initiative—whatever form it takes—there is a commitment to students, to their learning, to their views and opinions, to their personal growth and empowerment. Change Agents is just one of many approaches that ensure this commitment.

**For more information, see:**

Dunne, E. and Owen, D. (Eds.) (2013). *Handbook of Student Engagement*. Emerald Publishing Group, Bingley.

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Kay, J. Dunne, E. and Hutchinson, J. (2010). *Rethinking the values of higher education – students as change agents? QAA, Gloucester.*