

Applying Change Academy Principles at Department Level: Supporting discipline-based curriculum changes (0042)

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"I want you to imagine that you have been asked to form a new department Given the rare opportunity to write without constraint, would your curricula bear much resemblance to most of the formal courses of study to be found today? With any luck your answer will be something like, good grief no! If your answer is something else ... there is not much hope for the future!"
(Gould, 1973, 253)

Bringing about change to teaching and learning in a department is a key issue for department leaders. The department is arguably the key organisational unit at which the core teaching and learning experiences of most students are designed and implemented (Trowler *et al.*, 2003). The Department Change Initiative discussed here, implemented by the UK Geography Earth and Environmental Sciences Subject Centre (GEES) with the support of the Centre for Active Learning at the University of Gloucestershire, grew out of a desire to be more strategic about supporting changes in teaching and learning. It adapted ideas developed in *Change Academy*, a year-long facilitative programme led by the HE Academy and the Leadership Foundation, and applied them at a departmental level.

While others have evaluated the impact of *Change Academy* (Bradford, 2010; Dandy, 2009), and have explored the application of the principles within their own institutions (Flint and Oxley, 2009; Gentle, 2007), GEES is the first Subject Centre to implement the principles at department level. This paper investigates curricula changes which are in the process of being implemented. It covers the critical 'framing' stage, and the early stages of implementation of changes to curricula.

GEES departments in four different universities established teams of four to five participants with different roles and levels of seniority, including students. Whilst two teams were single-discipline department groups, one team was interdisciplinary and another was seeking synergies in course delivery from the merger of three previous departments. The year long initiative was in three phases: a) bidding and support of team development; b) 48-hour three day residential event; and c) development of the projects over the subsequent six months. The programme was designed and delivered by three senior staff from the GEES disciplines experienced in running learning and teaching change workshops, with the active support of the GEES Associate Director.

Although various models of curriculum change (e.g. Barnett and Coates, 2005; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Jenkins, 1998) and theories about the management of change in higher education (e.g. Bryman, 2007; Kotter, 1996; Trowler *et al.*, 2003) underpinned the initiative and were introduced to participants, most emphasis was placed on helping the teams conceptualise their projects and think creatively about what they wanted to do and how. Techniques, such as rich-pictures and liquid café, as well as informal social occasions, were used to encourage discussion between

individuals and teams. Each team had their own supporter who acted as a critical friend when the team thought it would be helpful.

The experience of the participants was researched through interviews, self-completed questionnaires and the authors' observations as participants. The main conclusion is that overall the GEES Departmental Change Initiative appears to have been effective at supporting departmental teams to clarify, design and plan significant curriculum related initiatives. For example, the four team leaders' were particularly complementary about the Department Change Initiative residential workshop saying: *"It was excellent"*; *"It's been really amazing"*; *"Brilliant"*; and *"It was wonderful"*.

Among the key features of the initiative which made it successful are:

- The inclusion of the planned initiative's key stakeholders, including students and where appropriate learning support staff
- The supported change residential event, which took the teams off campus for at least two days and immersed them in a mixture of activities, particularly emphasising creative thinking, and time to plan
- The discipline-based nature of the event, which enhanced the benefits of networking with members of the other teams
- Pre- and post-event telephone discussions, which provided critical support to the team leaders
- Respected, experienced supporters who acted as independent critical friends of the teams and encouraged them to think of a range of ways of meeting their objectives.

Against these benefits has to be balanced the intensive nature of the programme from the point of view of the Subject Centre. It is difficult to calculate a cost-benefit ratio, especially for changes which have yet to be implemented fully in their departments. However, the indications from the participants are that the initiative has added considerable value to the quality of the teaching and learning which the four departments have designed and planned. Arguably the projects supported in this initiative will impact on the quality of student learning more extensively than many of the smaller projects traditionally supported by Subject Centres, which are usually targeted at individual modules or courses. In the context of restricted resources for Higher Education nationally, serious consideration should be given to moving from this pilot initiative to a full programme of supporting strategic changes at departmental level. This applies not only to GEES, but to work in the other Higher Education Academy-supported Subject Centres, and to whatever other discipline-based initiatives designed to support teaching and learning may emerge in the future. With appropriate adjustments the model may also be used effectively within higher education institutions based in and beyond the UK for planning curriculum-related and other changes.

This paper began with the quote from Peter Gould where he asked the question: Given the opportunity to establish a new department would your curricula bear much resemblance to most of the formal courses of study to be found today? His answer, that reflects his hope that we would be creative and think anew, presents a challenge to all of us as we design, plan and support strategic changes to curricula. He would probably agree with Barnett and Coate (1995, 6) that "there can hardly be a more significant concept than 'curriculum' with which to understand higher education."

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