Change-Making in Universities: influencing leadership decision-making. (0182)

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Part 1: Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to disseminate successful approaches to effecting significant change at institutional and Faculty level in universities. A qualitative approach is adopted, drawing on a current project at a UK University to embed Learning Development Teams across the institution. The case study offers insights into, and an explanation of, endeavours to influence key leaders and senior managers' decision-making.   It is argued that the paper offers valuable insights into the ways in which institutional decision-making can be influenced and major changes implemented. The approach adopted has led to institutional wide discourse about the value of embedding Learning Development Teams in Faculties, based on evidencing the efficacy and successes (both for retention and student success) through data and the narrative case study. The paper provides practical and pragmatic approaches that could be applied to a range of desired changes.

Part 2: Outline

Growing concern amongst the University Board and Executive Team (UET) of a UK university about the financial implications of a perceived increase in attrition of undergraduate student numbers (an increase from 1% to 2% in 2013-2014) led to the establishment of a 'Success and Retention' working group convened by the Head of the Centre of Excellence in Learning.

This was a fortuitous opportunity to influence pedagogic practices at strategic level; the university was undergoing significant organisational change, including the restructuring of six Schools into four Faculties. To address student retention and enhance academic success, a working group was recruited from across the institution. The group was tasked to produce a report and action plan to inform institutional endeavours to improve retention. A sub-group of thought leaders and experts in retention and student experience was established. As a recognised knowledgeable research-informed academic and practitioner in LD support the team leader of the Media Faculty was invited to participate in the working group and sub-group.

This was perceived as an opportune initiative through which to advance a project to embed academically-led bespoke, subject specific, congruent LD support across the university: at that time LD support was ad hoc and undefined in other Faculties. The Deputy Dean for Education and LD team leader considered ways in which their efforts to expand LD teams across the institution could be advanced.

Bruns and Bruns (2007) note that, amongst the factors which influence institutional decision-making, financial and political considerations can be catalytic determinants of policy and practice changes. Bruns and Bruns (2007) do however acknowledge that Faculties can be resistant to change, especially if the status quo is challenged. For this reason it was decided that a multi managerial-level approach should be adopted in order to achieve the implementation and embedding of LDTs.

An approach was devised, adopting Alschuler's (1987 cited by Jones and Lewis 1991, p. 52) strategy which requires:

> "...a leader who is supportive of the change proposed and who is prepared to be actively involved in bringing it about."

The Deputy Vice Chancellor was identified as a key decision-maker who could facilitate institution-wide change. Alschuler (1987 cited by Jones and Lewis 1991, p.52) also posits the importance of:

> "a group within the organisation aware of the need for the proposed change and who are prepared to assist in bringing about the change."

The Success and Retention Group (SRG) was identified as the most likely forum though which to promote the embedding of LDTs. For a period of approximately twelve months, at every opportunity, including strategy group meetings and internal events, the case for embedding LDTs was promoted. This included the University's Dignity, Diversity and Equality Steering Group discussion regarding concerns about disparities in attainment between traditional and non-traditional and WP students, especially those with disabilities. Academic colleagues in the group expressed interest in the Media Faculty's LDT model and have instigated discussions in their Faculties about LD support. This is important as supportive key decision makers and collegiate relationships are essential in effecting change in HE (Bruns and Bruns 2007; Alschuler 1987 cited by Jones and Lewis 1991).

As a member of the SRG the LD team leader led a debate at a meeting of the University's Education and Student Experience Committee - which mandates institutional policy. A presentation proposing various strategies including changes to induction and LD support was made and its value, both financial and pedagogic was accepted. This committee is chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) who was persuaded of the positive impacts of School/Faculty based LDTs. In a subsequent meeting the DVC accepted the pedagogic importance of Learning Development support and the ways in which it has been shown to enhance the engendering of positive staff/student relationships and a sense of belonging in students to the benefit of the institution (Foster et al. 2012; Parkes 2014). The case was made that faculty based LDTs would meet the University's Strategic Plan and Key Performance Indicators.

The DVC was particularly interested in the significant financial impacts. A Media Faculty LDT report (based on data collated by the team's professional practice researcher) was used to evidence retention of students who had expressed an intention to withdraw yet remained in study as a direct result of support. The savings amounted to approximately £800, 000 for undergraduate student retention for the

academic year 2013-14. Tentative evidenced savings for postgraduate retention (relating to progression and mitigating failure) are approximately £450,000.

The case for Faculty-based LDTs was also made at the Centre of Excellence in Learning CELebrate (2015) event. The presentation highlighted both cost savings and student successes, including fostering a sense of belonging (O'Keefe 2013; Soria and Stebleton 2013 ;) and shift in habitus (Reay et al, 2001) as identifiable outcomes of the Media Faculty's provision of LD support.

To promote the positive financial impacts of LDTs the Director of Operations for the Media Faculty was approached, as a leader responsible for the financial management of the Faculty: he has promoted the benefits of embedded LDTs amongst colleagues in the institution's other three Faculties, citing the savings as a result of retention as a business case for the implementation of LDTs.

The Success and Retention group produced an Action Plan that has been endorsed by the university's UET, which includes a recommendation to:

> "Consider having a Learning Development team in each School/Faculty modelled on the Media Faculty."

During the CELebrate event one of the leading proponents of learning development in HE evinced that the institution's Media Faculty LDT's practice is "sector leading". This has been communicated to the University's UET and senior managers. The profile of the LDT has been further raised across the University and as a result, the team is now being placed 'front and centre' as outstanding pedagogic practice demonstrating the excellent student experience offered by the Faculty. This case study demonstrates that by adopting Alschuler's (1987 cited by Jones and Lewis 1991) strategy it is possible to influence institutional decision making and effect significant pedagogical and policy changes.

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