

## **Perspectives on changing the environment for change**

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### **Introduction**

Change initiatives, generated by funding councils and agencies or internally in institutions, have not been a rare occurrence in Higher Education over the last ten years. The authors have been involved in change projects at all of these levels and, most recently, in the Changing the Learning Landscape programme. This differed from many of those that came before, as it was about enabling HE providers to bring about change in their strategic approaches to technology in learning and teaching. It was led by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, in partnership with Jisc, ALT, HEA, and NUS\*\*.

### **Fit for purpose**

The successes achieved in this programme did not occur because of expensive technology, increased numbers of staff or large capital investments. Emphasis was placed on institutional commitment and individual engagement. The management of change was rapid and agile, lacking onerous and rigid management processes. It was designed to help institutions understand that agendas for TEL/digital literacies must move past the 'usual suspects'/innovators, scale-up/embed good practices and respond to student demands for greater 'consistency' in TEL practices. Because there has generally been much less clarity about how best to achieve this, the agile approaches, regular coaching and action learning sets and support based on feedback and need helped the CLL partners deploy resources to best effect.

It was also recognised that professional change management is required in some instances - for scaling-up/embedding good practices by means of such approaches as change academies. Other institutions are focusing on permutations and combinations of approaches – for example, staff capabilities and development, students as change agents, enhanced support, improved communications and culture change.

### **More persuasive arguments for TEL required**

Common to many projects was a need for more effective persuasion of both staff and students to deploy or adopt TEL. Whilst such strategies as 'Let's celebrate successes!' can work, communication should be more sophisticated, with better understanding of different stakeholder motivations, needs and 'blocks', and should also, in particular, address the question 'Why should I engage?'.

Centrally-based professional services could be more effective in bringing faculties, departments and programme teams to an appreciation of the potential benefits of TEL in addressing such important issues and opportunities as improving NSS scores, changing drivers and needs, bringing in efficient ways of working/learning, improving assessment and feedback, improving student engagement, enhancing contact with students and developing new opportunities for research-led teaching.

## **Students as change leaders and innovators**

Students can be powerful advocates of change and leading institutions are incentivising staff and students to create partnerships focused on enhancing the student experience – for example, with students as e-pioneers, students mentoring staff and students as co-curriculum designers/researchers. Students who come up with ideas for exploiting technology can also enter a Jisc competition to win significant funding and support to develop those ideas, such as, for example, mobile apps. Furthermore, students might well, in unleashing their creativity in the use of technology, gain authentic learning experiences by working with employers to address real employer (and sector) challenges and thus enhance their own employability skills.

## **Cutting through the rhetoric**

Staff often have difficulty in understanding and making sense of top-level strategies: what do phrases like ‘outstanding learning’ or ‘ready and able graduates’ actually mean to a senior faculty lecturer with both a teaching and research load? Feedback indicates that some level of translation would be helpful, giving, for example, ‘principles’; these are solid and can be acted upon – and later evaluated for impact – and should be incorporated into all strategies, policies and plans, at central and local levels. Jargon in education is creating an artificial barrier to the engagement of staff who want to do a good job, but feel disenfranchised by management speak.

## **Do TEL professional support staff have the right change skills?**

Just as the ‘usual suspect’ academic innovators like to maintain their innovations’ momentum, most TEL support staff, in our experience, focus their work and skills on supporting these ‘usual suspects’ and pay less attention to the wider group of academics and managers who, it could be argued, need a different type of support to adopt the innovations that the ‘usual suspects’ have created. The skills required for such TEL support staff are perhaps those more associated with coaching, communications and persuasion, as well as change leadership.

## **Going Forward**

As we move forward with the TEL agenda, against a backdrop of shifting educational priorities and funding issues for both students and institutions, it is essential that we find efficiencies of cost and effort to support change. The Changing Learning Landscape model started us on a more agile and responsive approach. What has emerged is the need for us to find complementary activities and resources to enhance that even more. One aspect for development that has emerged as a result of this programme, and the currently-running Transforming the Digital Student Experience Project, is the need for a ‘live primer’ to the canon of literature generated in the TEL area from Jisc, LFHE, ALT and many other sources. This resource, available to all institutions, would enable them to start the change journey with greater focus on the available learning and aligned with their own strategic priorities.

**\*\*Note:** Individual institutions have not been named in this article, for confidentiality reasons.

## Reference list

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