

# Using a collaborative approach to share and develop the first year student experience

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The higher education sector in Wales (UK) has worked collaboratively over the past two years to produce two 'practice guides' designed to share and develop good practice. The First Year Experience Action Set is supported by the Higher Education Academy and consists of a representative from all of the universities in Wales.

Using a case study approach, the group have collected and published approximately 80 examples of innovative practice across four connected themes. In 2008-09 the themes were 'developing communities of practice' and 'improving student academic engagement'. In 2009-10 the themes were 'enabling employability through the first year curriculum' and 'innovation in first year assessment'. These themes represent current topics of interest to higher education, linked as they are to transition and assimilation - two key elements of Tinto's (1993) retention model.

This paper will discuss the methodological approach used to collect the case studies (action research) and provide examples of practice from each of the institutions concerned. This will demonstrate how the collaborative approach has enabled the transfer of learning between individual academic staff and institutions throughout Wales. Each of the case studies are scalable and consist of a full range of application from module or course level, departmental level, School or Faculty level and institutional level, meaning that the initiatives were either relatively small scale (module or course) or large scale initiatives that ran throughout the institution.

The paper will show that collaboration represents an appropriate method of enquiry from which to approach the discussion and development of good practice in the transition phases of the first year experience. The paper will also offer some conclusions about the value of collaboration in the drive towards the enhancement of the first year student experience in higher education.

**Keywords:** collaboration, case studies, first year experience

The higher education sector in Wales (UK) has worked collaboratively over the past two years to produce two *Practice Guides* designed to share and develop good practice and to investigate initiatives which support the first year experience. The First Year Experience (FYE) Action Set is supported by the Higher Education Academy in Wales and consists of a representative from each of the universities in Wales.

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The FYE Action Set was created by the Higher Education Academy Welsh Institutional Group (WIG), a committee consisting of senior representatives from each of the Welsh higher education institutions (HEI) who voiced an interest in understanding the approaches and initiatives being undertaken in Wales which support the first year experience. The University of Glamorgan volunteered to lead the group, and the author was asked to take on the role of project leader.

This paper will discuss the methodological approach used to collect the case studies (action research) and provide examples of practice from each of the institutions concerned. The paper will demonstrate how the collaborative approach has enabled the transfer of learning between individual academic staff and institutions throughout Wales.

The author concludes that collaboration represents an appropriate method of enquiry from which to approach the discussion and development of good practice in the transition phases of the first year experience. The paper will also offer some conclusions about the value of collaboration in the drive towards the enhancement of the first year student experience in higher education.

### **Forming the Action Set**

Each participating institution was asked to nominate a colleague to be part of the Action Set. There were no stipulations regarding the role of participants within their institutions and the Action Set comprised an even balance between academic staff, registrarial staff, and retention officers with a specific remit to encourage practice which improved student retention. Walsh and Khan (2010) suggest that such a multi-functional group will each bring strengths and that the learning that takes place within such groups is as important as the output from the group. However, the author cannot claim to have influenced this fortunate composition, it was simply an accidental gathering of a group of experts with different roles and experiences.

### **Methodology**

Action research has multiple approaches and is defined in many ways (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Dick, 1999; Kemmis, 1982). Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) present an overview of seven forms of action research: participatory, critical, classroom, action learning, action science, soft system approaches and industrial action research. This demonstrates the breadth of approaches which exist under the common term of action research, and although there is variance in the plurality of definitions, there are common characteristics in each of them.

Greenwood and Levin determine these common characteristics as “action, research and participation” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 5) and go further in suggesting that whilst research may contain some of these characteristics, “Unless all three elements are present, the process may be useful but it is not AR” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 5). There is common ground amongst many in sharing a view that action research must contain these elements, particularly if ‘action’ is also taken to mean the focus on research as practice (Dick, 1999; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kemmis, 1982; Park, 2006; E. T. Stringer, 1999; Waterman, 1995). Similarly, common ground is found in the ways in which action research is seen to bring together theory and practice (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2006b; E. Stringer, 2007; E. T. Stringer, 1999) and indeed Kemmis (1988) attributes this as one of the reasons for the resurgence in popularity of action research methodology in education research, coming at a time when debate about the appropriateness and usefulness of much education research was being debated, see for example Hammersley (1997) and Hargreaves (1997). The

role of research as a characteristic in action research also includes the role of the practitioner as a researcher and the value of reflective practice is apparent here (Kemmis, 1988; Reason & Bradbury, 2006a; Waterman, 1995).

The third common element that of participation, concerns the way action research treats the people involved in the project – that is as equal participants in, rather than ‘subjects’ of, research.

Action research methodology follows a cyclical process to assess, reflect, evaluate and respond to issues. Stringer (1999, p. 18) uses a simplified cycle of “look, think and act” to reinforce the simplicity of the action research cycle (illustrated in Table 1) and to encourage action researchers to use it as a routine, or a way of being and it was this cycle that was adopted by the group.

Table 1: Action Research Cycle

| <b>Stages in the action research cycle</b> | <b>Typical activities in the stage</b>   |
|--|--|
| <b>Look</b>                                | Gather relevant information (data)<br>Build a picture, define and describe the situation |
| <b>Think</b>                               | Explore, analyse<br>How or why are things as they are                                    |
| <b>Act</b>                                 | Plan, implement and evaluate (reflect)   |

Adapted from Stringer (2007, p. 9)

It is important to note that the Action Set was not intended to have any fixed outcomes, rather WIG envisioned that the group would share and discuss initiatives that were being used to support the first year experience and those discussions would, in essence, be the product of the group. However, it quickly became apparent to the FYE Action Set members that such a vast number of initiatives and practices were being shared that we wanted to be able to disseminate the cases as widely as possible within Wales and beyond and therefore we sought to develop the initiatives as case studies using a simple template which is discussed later in this paper.

The group met physically on only five occasions during the two years. At the start of each year we came together to discuss topics of current interest and from these developed our themes for each year. We then had a further face to face meeting each year when we narrowed down the initiatives into those to be developed into case studies, and we had one other meeting in the first year to discuss the shape of the publication.

The author suggested that an effective way for the group to collaborate was through the use of a wiki and the wikis (there were separate wikis for each year of the project) were very valuable in providing a secure space for the group to share their long list initiatives with a brief overview which members then used as the basis for deciding on the short list. This multidimensional method of collaborative working is acknowledged in Walsh and Khan (2010) and the use of technology to enhance collaboration, particularly where groups are geographically spread such as FYE Action Set in Wales, can only be a positive development.

### **Choosing the Themes**

The literature around the first year experience is plentiful and varied and moves from an understanding of cultural values in first year students (Beder, 1997; Hillman, 2005; Latham & Green, 1997; Lawrence, 2002) through to practical strategies or ‘things to try’ to address

potential issues (Latham & Green, 1997; Wallace, 2003; Yorke & Longden, 2007) and various methods and approaches to supporting first year students as they find their way through their initial experiences (Fitzgibbon & Carter, 2006; Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2008; Gallagher & Allen, 2000; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). It quickly became apparent to the FYE Group that trying to share practice across the breadth of issues concerning the student first year experience would result in a lot of dialogue and a thin coverage of the issues, so the focus was narrowed to two themes each year. The themes were chosen as a result of discussion by the group about the particular challenges facing HE in each of the two years of the project, and areas that the group considered to be 'hot' topics.

In 2008-09 these were:

- Initiatives to support the building of communities of practice
- Initiatives to support the academic engagement of students

In 2009-10 the themes were:

- Initiatives to support innovation in first year assessment
- Initiatives to enable employability through the first year curriculum

Each institutional representative then collected examples of good practice within their own institutions and shared them with the group via the wiki. Each year within a period of a few months the group had over eighty examples of initiatives that had been tried and tested in the two themes for that year. Perhaps just as importantly as sharing the good practice, the group were very candid with one another about what had and had not worked, with the over-riding desire to share practice and all its foibles, not only the positive stories.

### **Developing the case study template**

The group agreed that the case study template should encourage completion by being easy to complete and yet provide enough context and information to be a rich resource for practitioners to use. The final template contained sections for authors to identify keywords, a description of the approach taken, the outcomes which were anticipated at the start of the initiative or project and evidence of the actual outcomes on completion, with a final section for the author to reflect on the impact that the initiative had on their practice, the students and where appropriate, the institution.

Authors of the case studies fed back that they found the template very easy to use and that they were able to complete it quickly. Asking contributors to keep to a limited word count ensured the crystallisation of practice rather than overly long descriptive accounts, and these were acknowledged by readers as being a particularly attractive aspect of the two publications.

### **Developing the wiki**

The decision to use a private members wiki to share initiatives was made to facilitate collaboration amongst the group members (Wagner, 2004) and was found to be an invaluable method of encouraging group communication and sharing of information and resources. The wiki also accommodated attachments and the group were able to upload all the case studies for comment and scrutiny without flooding inboxes with large documents. Each year the wiki was kept as a private members space until the publication was released when it was made public. The HEA is currently constructing a single wiki and amalgamating the materials contained on the two FYE wikis to enable this to be maintained as an ongoing resource. It is

hoped that colleagues from across the HE sector will find this a useful resource and one to which they are able to contribute their own examples of practice.

### **Examples of practice in the four themes**

The HEA agreed to the production of a publication which highlighted some of the case studies but clearly we couldn't publish all seventy so we narrowed the case studies down by streamlining whilst still trying to offer as much innovation in practice as possible. Authors submitted case studies using the template described above and the cases were then collated into the two themes. In each of the publications (Fitzgibbon, 2009, 2010) over thirty of the case studies are grouped into the themes and the reader is given information about whether the initiative was implemented at module, programme, year, faculty or institutional level. All the initiatives are scalable and many are resource light and replicable.

Examples of the case studies included in the four themes across the two publications are:

#### Initiatives to support communities of practice

- Authentic learning clinic
- Mathematical modelling through group work
- Pre-enrolment social networking using NING
- Money Doctors Project

#### Initiatives to support student academic engagement

- Computerised peer-assessment
- Online learner support tools
- Pre-fresher workshops
- Life through a lens – Induction photo project

#### Initiatives to support innovation in first year assessment

- Student Panel: Student Assessment Experiences
- Individual goal setting
- Variation in in-class assessment
- Making feedback work for you

#### Initiatives to enable employability through the first year curriculum

- Engineering induction: Elastic Olympics
- Working and learning: developing effective performance at work
- Pathology field trip: threshold concepts and the transfer of learning
- Mindfulness meditation

### **Conclusion**

By using a collaborative approach to sharing practice about the first year experience, the higher education institutions in Wales have been successful in drawing together a considerable number of case studies in the context of four significant themes. The action research methodology has proven to be a highly effective methodology for encouraging contributions not just from immediate group members, but by their ongoing collaboration within their own institutions. This echoes Hollingsworth's (1997, p. 248) summary of Simons (1992) work in calling for

‘collaborative partnerships in the teacher research movement which take into account the practice-oriented views of the curriculum researcher.’

There is evidence that this approach is leading to the sharing of practice across and between institutions with some initiatives originating in one university being taken up by different universities. It is also apparent that the scaling measure applied to the case studies has proven to be a helpful indicator when institutions are considering adopting a practice that has been tried elsewhere. Ultimately, the objective of the group has been achieved in that there is evidence of sharing first year experience practice across the HE sector in Wales.

As higher education in the UK faces challenging economic times, perhaps the approach taken in the First Year Experience Action Set might offer an alternative method of giving voice to the practitioners at its core.

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