UCL ChangeMakers projects: supporting staff/student partnership on educational enhancement projects

Jenny Marie, Mahmoud Arif, & Tejas Joshi.
Centre for Advancing Learning and Teaching, University College London.
For correspondence, please contact: j.marie@ucl.ac.uk

Jenny Marie works in UCL's Centre for Advancing Learning and Teaching. Jenny is the director of UCL ChangeMakers and the probationary lecturers' professional development programme.
Mahmoud Arif is a UCL ChangeMakers student in 2014/15, and a member of the steering group and project assessment panel.
Tejas Joshi is a UCL ChangeMakers student, 2015/16.

Summary

UCL ChangeMakers was established in 2014 to support students in undertaking educational enhancement work, with the aid of at least one staff partner. It has since grown with an aim of encouraging this approach to enhancing the learning experience across the whole institution. Any member of the learning community (students or staff) can apply for funding to undertake a project, though we encourage joint applications. All projects must be undertaken through staff/student partnership.

Description of project

Our aim is to create a culture whereby educational enhancements are undertaken in partnership between staff and students across UCL. We are trying to achieve this by supporting such work financially, pedagogically and administratively; and by communicating the successes of projects. In 2014-15 we supported 10 student-initiated projects across the institution. These included projects such as an investigation into student belonging, identifying the information students need for transition, producing a best practice guide on Moodle, advising on a module choice database and establishing an online language and culture exchange via Skype.

In 2015-16 we allowed both staff and students to apply for funding for partnership enhancement projects, resulting in 52 projects. As a result, we have had a project in every faculty across the university. We allowed staff proposals because we ultimately aim for all educational enhancement work to be done in partnership and, at least at the moment, the majority of this is staff initiated. It also fitted with our ethos: as we aimed to create equal partnerships we felt that staff and students should have equal opportunities to initiate projects.

In 2016-17 we have eliminated the distinction between staff and student projects to encourage co-creation and development of the proposals.

Enabling partnership

We intended to have a development group of students to advise on the scheme. This did not work out in practice, due to quite different timetable availabilities. We have therefore revised our approach. We have students on the steering group and we have a number of projects related to the scheme, which are run in partnership with students (for example looking at the relationship between UCL ChangeMakers and Student Academic Representatives and looking at who the 'hard-to-reach' students

are at the institution and how we can encourage them to participate in UCL ChangeMakers as part of the REACT project: www.studentengagement.ac.uk).

The scheme itself exists to encourage and support partnership: though the majority of the support (e.g. training and advice) is designed for students, support has been offered to staff through peer support sessions and named contacts, as we recognise that partnership work may be a new way of working for them. There has been little uptake of this, which we hope to investigate further through our evaluation of 2015-16.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts
We undertook a survey of the students who took part in UCL ChangeMakers in 2014-15. This showed that students were glad that they had taken part in the initiative (100%) and it had improved their experience at UCL (86%). Respondents were reasonably confident that change would take place following their project (average 3.9/5). We also conducted video interviews of some of the students (available at: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers/projects/projects-info). These showed that the students had gained both the skills and confidence for making change and had reconceived of themselves into a producing role. The students were very positive about the scheme, saying that it had allowed them to contribute to the university in ways not previously possible and that they thought every university should have a similar scheme.

An evaluation investigating the impact of the projects is currently being carried out. We know that some of the projects have made an impact: staff in one department reported that as a result of the Moodle best practice guide, students have reported an improvement in the usability of Moodle in the department. However, we won't have a complete picture of the impact the projects have had until that part of the evaluation is finished.

The evaluation for 2015-16 is ongoing, but the materials and feedback received so far suggest that a number of projects have been highly successful. For example, a trial of communication software saw 116,000 messages being sent via it in 6 months, with students feeding back that it had transformed their experience for the better and created a community feel. A conference organised in another department was so successful the department has pledged to fund it in future.

Reflections on the project
Staff perspective
Overall the initiative has been highly successful. Our aim is to embed partnership into the culture of how educational enhancements are made at UCL and we have made good progress in getting it embedded into UCL culture. Student Engagement has its own objective in the Education Strategy (2016-21), and UCL ChangeMakers is named in it as UCL's flagship student engagement initiative. UCL's Teaching and Learning conference in 2016 was also themed around ChangeMaking to highlight the work of UCL ChangeMakers.

We know that students have initiated projects that have enhanced their learning experience in ways that were important to them. We have less information about the

staff-initiated projects; but from the information we have, they seem to be progressing well. We also know that working on projects has benefitted the students enormously through the development of skills, confidence and a change of attitude towards their role in higher education.

The major difficulty has been the timescale of the projects: recruiting to the projects and running them in the same academic year has led to very short projects. This year we are trialling recruiting in the academic year prior to the projects running: we received 68 proposals for the June deadline, 49% of them from students, so this appears to have worked well. We will still have a deadline early during the academic year, as not all students (e.g. incoming students) could apply for the June deadline.

Student perspectives:
Mahmoud reflections
As a student, I benefitted greatly from having my ideas recognised within an initiative that aims to bring change to the lives of students and staff at UCL. My project was centred on identifying the indicators of the racial attainment gap in UCL, and assessing whether a racial 'belonging' gap exists as well. The team behind UCL ChangeMakers helped me with overcoming barriers that I would have faced if I did not run my project within the initiative. These barriers include technical difficulties with using necessary software that eased my data collection process. Moreover, UCL ChangeMakers helped massively in increasing the level of student participation in my project, this is due to the fact that they could email different departments and have the information sheet of my project sent to students under an official UCL email, rather it coming individually from me and potentially being ignored. In addition to that, I benefitted greatly from positioning my project in the perspective of being able to bring change to the learning experience in UCL. The philosophy behind UCL ChangeMakers inspires students to see themselves as agents of change within their own learning experience. It also helps highlight the importance of research in shaping and driving change, in order to achieve truly evidence-based, or evidence-informed change.

Although my project successfully identified the existence of a belonging gap between students, and the significance of belonging in predicting performance, the findings were more limited than I would have liked and in hindsight I think this could have been avoided. I entered the project without being certain that sense of belonging varied by ethnic background in UCL; this meant that I did not have a strategy in mind on what could be done to solve the problem, if it existed. Thus, my project is limited in the "change" that it achieved on the ground; rather it contributed to changing people's perspectives on the factors associated with the attainment gap. Nonetheless, this is an important change and hopefully it will inspire other students to come up with innovative ideas on how to close the belonging gap that we have at UCL.

Moreover, apart from my experiences as a student running a project, I benefitted significantly from being a member of the panel and steering group of UCL ChangeMakers. This opportunity helped me learn more about the ideas that exist on campus, and the potential that students have to make a change. Each meeting with the panel and steering group consisted of different people from different departments

in UCL; this gave me a wider view of how student engagement works within the university. I learnt a lot from the discussions we had during the meetings. Lastly, the fact that during the panel meetings we were grouped to look at the same projects for funding, this helped me overcome some uncertainties I had with some projects, and gave me a better understanding of how to judge projects. What I would change would be more detailed criteria of how to rate projects and how to judge how much funding will be needed.

Tejah's reflections
The need for student-staff partnered educational enhancement initiatives is undeniable in a diverse institution like UCL. Even within the short span of time since its establishment in 2014, the variety of undertaken projects clearly demonstrates the significance of UCL ChangeMakers – not only in facilitating student-staff collaboration, but also in presenting an active role and platform for students eager to contribute to their own educational experiences.

Being a part of UCL ChangeMakers this year is exciting enough for me, but what makes it all the more special is working within the REACT project on student engagement. This combination presents a two-fold canvas for exploration, in terms of:
(1) reflecting on existing student engagement initiatives and student data at UCL, as well as
(2) an opportunity to study unique undertakings at other UK institutions, since REACT is a multi-university project.

It is noteworthy that our project focuses on enhancement at the university level, as compared to many UCL ChangeMakers projects, which delve into enhancement on a smaller scale (say, an issue which may be specific to a subject, department, or a particular group). At the same time, the methodology we are using is sequential – beginning with interviews with staff members to identify 'hard-to-reach' students, and then proceeding to student interviews before comparing this with existing data. This makes the project interesting, but challenging at the same.

Reflecting on the project, as Jenny mentions, the timelines of the projects from application to execution pose a challenge, particularly to maximise postgraduate involvement (given the need and their limited course duration), appreciating that the present structure works well for undergraduate participants. Similarly, acknowledging the fact that UCL is also constituted by a range of smaller independent institutions and centres in addition to its main campus, expanding involvement in UCL ChangeMakers across these institutions (outreach) is also another concern which is being worked upon.

Finally, the 2016 UCL Teaching & Learning Conference is certainly a great avenue to showcase the range of UCL ChangeMakers projects, and thereby inspiring and extending invitations to more students.

Follow up and future plans
The initiative is on-going. We aim to support approximately 35 projects during 2016-17.

Related publications and resources
About the UCL ChangeMakers initiative: www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers

A listing of undertaken projects:
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers/projects/projects-info (Click on the '2014-15 projects' section for videos where students share their experiences)