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Facilitating conversations about race: staff views on the importance of accountability and trust in a student-led project

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ABSTRACT

Significant conversations provide a private and safe space for teachers to develop their thinking about teaching and learning. These conversations are important to academic development but may be limited by their privacy, although Roxå & Mårtensson noted that it was possible to create a culture which led to extended networks. This study explores how the concept of such conversations can be developed further to contribute to institutional change and the development of inclusive learning communities. Led by students of colour, a project, 'The Big Change', was designed to provide an empowering space for open and non-judgemental conversations between students and staff about the experiences of student of colour in a modern university. The paper explores the experiences of the staff ($N = 15$) who participated in online focus groups in which they explored their experiences of the project and the complexities of vulnerability and public discourses. Within these focus groups we provided a space for conversations in which trust and accountability were identified as key factors for meaningful change, particularly in a sensitive area of work such as anti-racism. This approach, based on student-led interventions plus safe conversations, provides a model for facilitating cultural change within higher education.

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Introduction

Significant conversations between academic staff are both a process for and a product of accountable change in academic development (Pleschová et al., 2021). However, acknowledging errors or showing signs of vulnerability can be problematic and academic teams can therefore hesitate to engage in situations of doubt or uncertainty in relation to curriculum development (Pleschová et al., 2021). Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) reported that most university teachers rely on a small network of significant colleagues to discuss teaching and related topics without overt public accountability. These conversations both build on and facilitate trustful relationships between individuals, but as Roxå and

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Mårtensson noted, the quality and impact of the conversation in relation to academic standards may be variable and may not relate directly to institutional aims, such as the widely supported one of reducing inequities in education. To establish accountable commitments to institutional change, it is helpful to create conducive spaces that move these informal conversations into a supportive public arena that recreates the concept of a small, trusted network of colleagues. This group is then able to discuss difficult issues in teaching and service provision in open and non-judgmental discussions.

In 'The Big Change' project, we created public, safe, and accountable spaces as one element of a four-year strategic project at a large UK university to develop inclusive learning communities for a diverse student population. Fundamental to the project was a partnership with students of colour who were employed as Student Ambassadors to develop campaigns and events for students, and to represent students' views on ways to influence positive change on campus (Gamote et al., 2022). These Student Ambassadors worked with student groups and academic teams to co-construct commitments to institutional change to improve students' experiences and raise awareness of the existence of differential outcomes between students of colour and white students, which is observed across UK higher education (UUK/NUS, 2018).

This paper therefore aims to contribute to the research on conversations on teaching and learning by exploring how we created trustful accountable public spaces for collective and institutional development in partnership with students. These professional conversations offered opportunities for the staff to gain a new perspective on practices and processes that they had previously taken for granted, through the lived experiences of the students. We report on staff perceptions of these conversations about race and how they facilitated cross-institutional change, a process which could be adapted to other institutional change initiatives.

Background

Historically minoritised students in higher education report having different experiences from a stereotypical 'traditional' student. There are many examples: Campbell (2022) showed how assessments 'are often constructed around who and what educational gatekeepers imagine constitutes the typical or "standard" university student' (p. 13). Jehangir (2010) presents vividly the challenging feelings and experiences of students who are first in their family to attend university. In addition, Leyerzapf and Abma (2017) bring to startling life the microaggressions experienced by medical students from minority ethnic backgrounds and Reay et al. (2010) report the dilemmas faced by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Studies have shown that historically minoritised students are also less likely to achieve high grades and more likely to leave university earlier than planned, for instance, in South Africa (Council on Higher Education, 2016) and in the UK (UUK/NUS, 2018). Within the UK, these differences are described as awarding gaps, and they point towards barriers to the success of historically minoritised students, particularly students of colour. It is entirely plausible that such gaps are also found in other countries, too, but the systematic collection of data nationally about racial origin in the UK has made it possible to see these differences very clearly. There is a growing evidence base on anti-racism with higher education in the UK, and universities are introducing socially-just pedagogic

practices and teaching practices (Healey & Healey, 2023). In other countries, it may not be legal to ask students for these data systematically, although they can give it voluntarily for small-scale studies. In Sweden, Fjelkner Pihl (2022) found that socioeconomic background had a strong impact on student success, as measured by the continuation of students and the number of academic credits completed in the expected time.

The UUK/NUS report took into account a range of other socio-economic differences and still found that students of colour did not achieve to the same level as white students. The identification and removal of barriers to inclusion is now a priority for many UK universities: most university strategies and policies include statements on equality and access, and staff have strong aspirations to increase diversity and equalise student success (Forsyth et al., 2022; Hamshire et al., 2021). However, internal monitoring in the university in which this project took place showed that good intentions and clear policies had not been sufficient to achieve effective action to give all students equal access to the structures, teaching, and support needed to be successful. There was a need for a different approach. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009, p. 557) suggest that the existence of significant colleague networks may explain why 'policies, organisational strategies or bureaucratic requirements have such a limited impact on university teaching'.

Rationale for the approach

Pleschová et al. (2021) explore the role of conversation, suggesting, 'Significant conversations are both a process for and a product of meaningful change in academic development' (p. 203). The project described here centres on race, which adds another layer of nuance to consideration of conversation activities. It is a huge step to admit that there may be aspects of the organisation of teaching in departments that discriminate against students of colour. The project team needed senior staff to make this step to make progress towards real equity of opportunity.

Following up on their work on significant conversations, Roxå and Mårtensson (2015) identify different microcultures of informal learning. Using an academic development intervention, we wanted to try to support the development of a 'Commons' microculture, one in which colleagues have a high level of trust and experience of shared responsibility, with freedom to decide what is important and how to achieve the overall goals. The aim was to provide the training and support for educational leaders to then continue this work in their own departments, in this example, addressing the challenges of awarding gaps. In this way we hoped to achieve an institution-wide acceptance and understanding of the experiences of students of colour and use these to develop department-level partnerships with students, which would lead to appropriate initiatives to improve awarding gaps at the local level. Of course, this is moving away from the informal nature of learning, as described by Roxå and Mårtensson. The reason for doing this was that the evidence showed that although there was strong commitment to change, the pace was too slow: students still did not have equitable access to education. We wanted to link the conversational approach to taking responsibility for action to improve the situation, by facilitating the development of a microculture in individual departments. Roxå and Mårtensson suggest that such a microculture would be characterised by high levels of trust, high significance of the subject, strong ties between members, and a sense of belonging

(p. 199). The principal innovation here was to introduce accountability to the work by leading the conversations in a public forum in which commitments were shared and reviewed together.

According to Harris and Lyon (2013, p. 5), 'Trust is an expectation of others in a relationship. It occurs when there is an element of vulnerability and provides confidence in others even when there is a risk they will act opportunistically'. This idea is echoed by Simon and Pleschová (2021), who suggest that trust requires a willingness to become vulnerable, and that lack of trust can hinder conversations between colleagues. The complexities of vulnerability for white members of staff within public discourses about race and ethnicity are well documented (DiAngelo, 2019) and the willingness to be vulnerable, motivated partly by investment in another's success – as described by Spitzner and Meixner (2021) – was fundamental to the conversations within this project. Moving towards an open and honest discussion about the experiences of students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds was essential to the project and took some time to achieve. In a study of mentoring students of colour, Chan (2018, p. 22) found that 'trust was earned through the specific relational mentor practices of talking about race, listening, having a holistic approach, maintaining excellent communication, self-disclosing, using humor, admitting mistakes, and behaving with integrity'. These challenges would need to be addressed across the institution if permanent change was to be achieved across the university. Cook-Sather and Bala (2022, p. 137), asking participants in intercollegiate partnership programs about inequity in higher education, note that 'the pairing with personal commitment is important – to move from recognition to action'.

The Big Change project process

The Big Change project was part of a four-year cross-institution strategic project to facilitate the development of inclusive approaches to teaching at a large metropolitan institution in the northwest of the United Kingdom. Fundamental to this project is a partnership between the Students' Union (SU) and the university; as part of this partnership, the SU employs Student Ambassadors from across the institution to provide a voice for students of colour as part of their advocacy and outreach role. The Student Ambassadors are recruited via an institution-wide call for applications and interview process, followed by a month of training to prepare them for their role. Up to 12 Ambassadors are employed each academic year as student partners, and they are named Ambassadors to acknowledge that their positions have a diplomatic focus: they are a bridge between students of colour and senior administration.

The team was conscious of potential power imbalances and of the need to give the students an active voice as experts in experiencing university life, without expecting them to take responsibility for the changes in structural frameworks that would be needed to improve inclusion. Despite this awareness, it took some time to build a project team that felt equal. In the first year of the project, good intentions were not sufficient to build trust (Gamote et al., 2022); some direct and challenging conversations were needed to achieve working relationships in which the power was appropriately balanced. As Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2018, p. 2) point out:

> While partnership aims to overcome the power hierarchies that create distance between students and staff, partnerships have also been found to reinforce those accentuated differences between partners – particularly when it comes to labelling who is 'student' and who is 'staff'.

They found that there is a need for much more complex consideration of identity than 'staff' and 'students'. In this project, as in many other partnerships, students were also employed as members of staff, tasked with important institutional roles. This meant that they met with staff in different contexts such as sitting on appeals panels, attending seminars and meetings, producing resources for staff and students, or discussing service development. This engagement provided opportunities for adding value in the ways described by Cook-Sather et al. (2021), by creating multiple spaces for students and staff to work together and so facilitating overlapping conversations in student-staff partnerships.

In the first year that the Ambassadors worked on this project, both students and staff found it difficult to find the right ways to work together, and to achieve a fully trusting 'commons' relationship across the team. The project team's previous experiences of collaborative working showed the challenges of achieving trust and accountability in the partnership (Gamote et al., 2022), even though everyone shared a common goal and good intentions. Cook-Sather et al. (2023) discuss the delicate balance between providing dedicated fora for staff and students of colour and achieving wider change by involving everyone.

From these experiences, the project team recognised the potential for harm and retraumatisation of students of colour in the role of Ambassadors. We tried to recreate the concept of a small, trusted network of colleagues, able to discuss difficult issues in teaching and service provision, but with access to expert colleagues via specific anti-racist training and weekly meetings for debrief, reflections, and personal support. White members of the project team also had separate anti-racist training to ensure that they understood potential issues.

As part of their work, the Ambassadors were introduced to the awarding gap and worked with colleagues to propose ways to cross the apparent chasm between intention and practice. In partnership with the SU, the students proposed the Big Change project to provide an empowering space for open and non-judgmental conversations with senior staff about what it means to be a student of colour in a modern university, and to support those senior staff in making achievable and accountable commitments to change. The aim was to develop a meaningful way to change attitudes and actions, promoting genuine and actionable reflections for senior colleagues on how they could create inclusive communities across a large UK university.

The project used a form of scrutiny in a public setting, which is similar to that used in the UK by parliamentary select committees. In such committees, specialist witnesses are questioned by elected representatives about their progress and activities towards national objectives. For instance, university leaders could be called to talk about how they are working to reduce awarding gaps, or health service managers to explain their procurement processes.

In the Big Change, the Student Ambassadors acted as the expert select committee. Senior university staff were the witnesses, and there was also an independent observer within each of the sessions. Before the senior staff completed the conversations with the student ambassadors, they had three training sessions with an

experienced training provider, to introduce them to principles of anti-racist practices such as identifying potential areas in the department where race might impact on student and colleague experiences, being prepared to speak up, establishing clear goals for change, and facilitating discussion about the experiences of students of colour and how these might affect their academic and professional success. They also reviewed departmental data on differential attainment with colleagues.

To prepare for the meetings, the Student Ambassadors reviewed awarding gap data and the commitments that each department had made, and prepared a series of questions that were shared with the witnesses before the meetings. The language of 'select committee' and 'witnesses' was used to underline the importance and seriousness of the work, and the meetings were conducted in a cordial and professional manner, as mostly happens in the parliamentary equivalent. The sessions were video recorded and then published alongside a summary of the commitments the witnesses had made. The process is summarised in Figure 1, and a more detailed account is available in Hamshire et al. (2023).

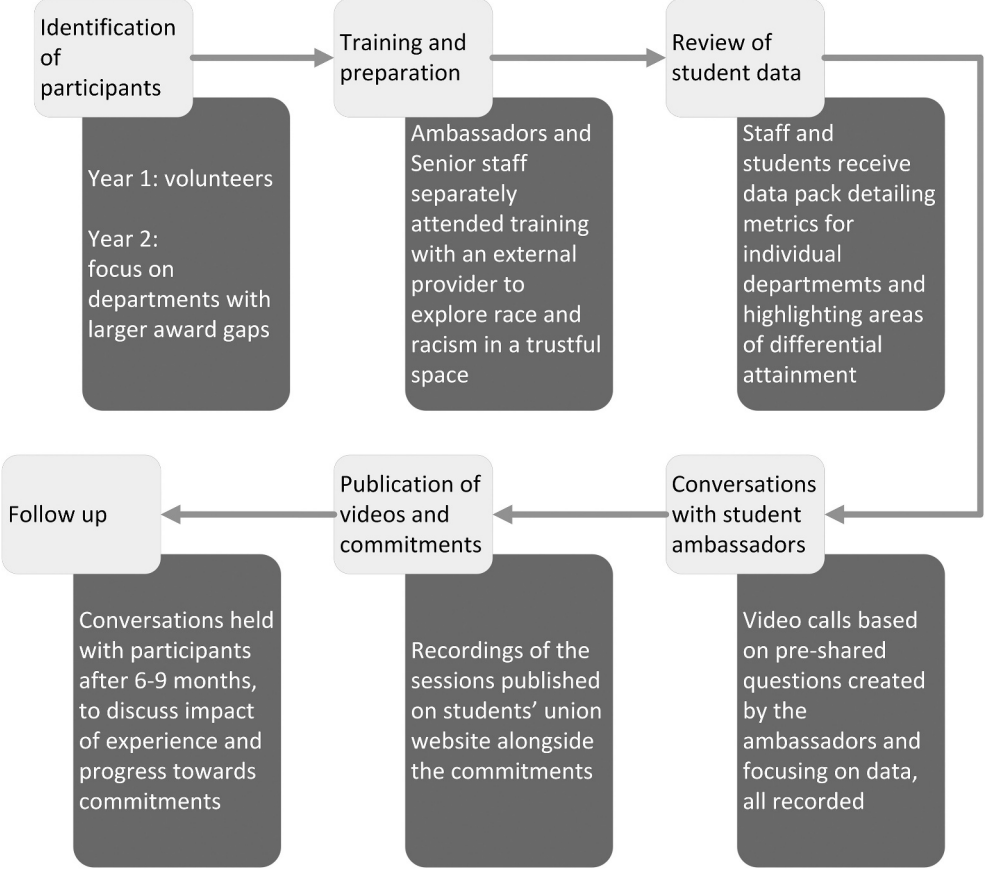

Figure 1. The Big Change process.

Methodology

Following The Big Change conversation sessions with the Student Ambassadors, which took place in both 2021 and 2022, the staff that participated were invited by email to attend online focus groups using Teams to reflect on their experiences and evaluate the process. Listening to the staff was central to these focus groups, and therefore, we used a phenomenological design to explore the staff lived experiences in a conversational style (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Each focus group was unstructured, apart from an initial narrative prompt that encouraged the staff to reflect on participating in the project beginning wherever and however they felt was most appropriate (Gubrium, 1993). This approach allowed the staff to focus on what was most important to them, with follow up questions at the end to further explore topics of interest. Involvement in these focus groups was voluntary and ethical committee approval was given by the institution.

The focus groups ($N = 5$, with one to four participants in each) lasted for an hour on average and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, with each transcript reviewed alongside the recording to ensure accuracy. There was a focus on conversational exchange in relation to the experiences and outcomes of the Big Change process. A thematic analysis was subsequently undertaken by the three researchers with the analysis leading to an agreed set of emergent themes that were identified, discussed, and verified by the researchers (Spencer et al., 2013). Phases of familiarisation and indexing led to the development of three themes: valuing student conversations, accountability, and trust.

Findings

Valuing student conversations

The narrative focus groups provided a space for wide-ranging conversations, allowing the participants to share their personal thoughts and feelings about the project as well as describing the impact the academic development process had within their departments. All the staff who participated were positive about their experiences and noted the personal impact that their participation in the interviews with the students had, in line with the findings of Cook-Sather and Bala (2022). There are some examples of effective conversations with student partners in the literature (Cook-Sather & Bala, 2022; Stacey & Chan, 2021), in which the students are employed and valued as consultants or curriculum co-designers. The opportunity to work in partnership with the student ambassadors was highly valued by the senior staff, despite some initial concerns:

> Participant 6: It was quite nerve racking, to begin with, but it was great to speak to students in that space. And I really feel privileged to have had that space to speak with students and colleagues.

A number of staff also described how the conversations with the students had a significant effect on their sense of self as they explored issues around discrimination and anti-racism:

> Participant 3: I found it really powerful, just being part of it.

> Participant 7: . . . it makes you think that we need to have these conversations more rather than just ignoring it and hoping it will go away to an extent. It's really difficult and we're not going to deal with it [the awarding gap] until we have those conversations. So, I think it's made me think, you know, we need to talk more to students and be more proactive and be open to discuss these difficult issues.

> Participant 8: The student ambassadors' involvement, that really differed. It lifted it, energized it. It brought life to it, it was a dialogue.

The impact of these conversations was so significant that the academic staff talked about them months after the recorded sessions:

> Participant 8: I wish I'd known that that session was gonna be so brilliant. The students were just so professional, so amazing. I just thought it was an absolute privilege to be interviewed by them. I really, really enjoyed it. I found it really useful and it was a lovely afternoon.

And the shift in the usual status quo between staff and students was valued:

> Participant 1: The power is shifted, isn't it? The students on the project were basically there to scrutinise, but they are absolutely not responsible for solving anything.

For several of the staff the conversations with the students and the subsequent academic discussions with colleagues had had a transformative impact upon their academic practice and they valued the training and project training:

> Participant 4: I think it was transformative, for me, personally, it was absolutely transformative and it was a massive wake up call. I keep talking about it now, so I am nothing but positive.

> Participant 6: I feel massively privileged to be a part of this and especially the training that was offered to us and I feel that the rest of the university would massively benefit from similar sort of training.

Accountability

Fundamental to the Big Change process was the goal of ensuring that the process was transparent and that the conversation sessions would be made publicly available to both staff and students via a webpage. This visible accountability of the conversations had a powerful impact on those that participated (Hamshire et al., 2023) and the staff talked at length about how this had made the conversations so much more significant than personal discussions with colleagues:

> Participant 2: It's that we will actually be transparent, out front, actually talking about stuff rather than, kind of, it just existing, I suppose, in this strategy and/or an action plan that [if] only I knew where it was kept and remembered what's on it.

A number of the staff also spoke about how the public element of the project was important in shaping their conversations because it focused them on the impact of the project:

> Participant 1: I've been reflecting, just a little bit, about why this has had more impact than any other time that we've tried to look at diversity. What's made it feel different is the level of accountability and that we never published what we're going to do previously. You know, we

> never went out and said, 'These are the changes we've made and we want to make them sustainable' before. . . . That's been of interest to me. So when I when I went back and I had a look at the video . . . and just the act of going out there and saying something and the fact that it's there in the ether means that, I've been mindful of it the whole time and we've been pushing the organization forward when things haven't been done, you know, I've been getting worried that we won't make the progress that I wanted to. And so it's had a real impact, a bit like you know when you go to the gym and you buddy up with someone. It's got that same kind of feeling to it, . . . an accountability, but it's not to an individual, it's an accountability to every student that watches that video or hears about the project or knows that we've committed to doing something.

Other members of staff noted that one of the advantages of the public nature of the sessions with the student ambassadors was that it normalised such conversations as part of curriculum development discussions:

> Participant 3: These are common conversations that nobody is exempted from so I think that's something that we were really, really mindful of . . . not [to] have this as a niche thing, really kind of tell everybody that, you know, we all have a stake in this within the university and beyond.

Another focus was on the impact of feeling accountable to the Student Ambassadors who led the conversations in the sessions:

> Participant 11: I suppose it is where we kind of put our money where our mouth [is] and, you know, it did make you really think, and I think that's . . . the action that I'm talking about because you don't ever want to soft soap students. You want to be able to say, 'This is . . . what we recognize as an issue or learning need or something that we need to be doing, and this is our action plan, and it was because of the work we have been doing. I felt really proud to be able to say to the students, you know, we recognize this and this is what we're doing. And this is what we want to continue to do and I think being held to account by students . . . having to face students and listen to them and be interviewed by them directly and on their terms, I think it's, I think it was brilliant. I think you know that could be an approach throughout many areas in the university, not just for EDI.

Several staff also noted how the public accountability provided by the open conversations with the students had enabled them to reflect on how they could demonstrate a coherent strategy on race for their department:

> Participant 10: I found [the process] really useful for thinking about strategy, so it's not just going kind of case by case every time something goes wrong, it was really useful for developing strategy and thinking more long term about kind of, what we want the department to look like, what we want student and staff experience to be like.

> Participant 6: I think recognising that actually the title is 'The Big Change' . . . I feel like we're part of something bigger here and I feel great that the university is committed to something bigger.

Trust

Trust and acknowledgment of the positionality of all involved is requisite for providing a space in which staff and students can work in partnership to develop a meaningful way to agree upon actions and facilitate cultural change to create truly inclusive communities

(Spitzner & Meixner, 2021). This was fundamental to the conversations within this project:

> Participant 8: I felt that I could trust everybody even though I didn't really know them, because they were very professional and because the guidance that was sent out, they just explained what we were going to ask, what was going to happen and everything. And I thought, 'Yeah, I can, I can trust these people . . . and just their approach, their energy, their enthusiasm, the complete professionalism'.

Creating conditions in which senior staff were willing to be vulnerable required expertise within a non-judgemental environment, and the staff training sessions prior to the recorded conversations with the students provided this space. The conversations within these closed sessions enabled the academic teams to understand and challenge their own unknown racism as the staff gradually built trust within the closed groups (DiAngelo, 2019):

> Participant 4: I think trust has got a lot to do with it, it's really it's, it's the trusting that you can make mistakes, feel that you will be really properly listened to and you can be understood. Yeah, for me, it's trust . . . It doesn't happen overnight does it? You have to build that kind of personal relationship which takes time.

> Participant 10: One of the most productive things was being able to have all those conversations and with the students doing the interviews. One of the things that I find hardest in my EDI lead role is making sure that those conversations are ongoing with students, and that also kind of takes a certain amount of trust.

Conclusions

The staff who participated in The Big Change project gave generously of their time and demonstrated serious commitment to curriculum development to reduce awarding gaps for students of colour. In line with the findings of Cook-Sather et al. (2021), the staff reported that working in partnership with students to have conversations was highly valued and viewed as both innovative and rewarding in terms of professional satisfaction. The opportunity for staff to review and reflect on the process in focus groups has provided insights into how institutions can develop trustful yet accountable spaces for conversations about race and racism. Following these conversations, the staff teams made over 20 commitments to institutional change with a focus on four areas: undertaking research to explore students' learning experiences and identify best practices; working towards an inclusive campus; undertaking further staff training to create safe spaces and enhance students' sense of belonging; and changing existing practices to enhance student belonging and empowerment. You can see the full set of commitments on the Big Change project website (https://www.theunionmmu.org/student-voice/big-change-project).

Based on the results presented in this paper, we suggest that the Big Change process is a good way to facilitate conversations to support staff through institutional change. The process detailed here enabled a safe space to explore difficult ideas, to begin to accept the existence of structural barriers to change, and to develop solutions which are specific to the department or service. It is carefully structured so that students are genuine partners, bringing their own experiences and expertise, and so that university staff can begin to have safe and trusting conversations with each other and with students, admitting to vulnerability and uncertainty about the next steps, but without judgement.

The cross-institutional context of the project, coupled with the structured academic development approach, provided a supportive environment for professional discussion and learning among the academic staff. This approach could be used in an academic development context to address a range of different change agendas. In addition to the experiences of historically minoritized students, you might consider using it to develop digital transformation, academic integrity, or active learning, for instance. We are aware that the focus on anti-racism across the institution during the project may have contributed to the success of the project, as it is so important, but we think that it is worth trying for other initiatives too.

We would recommend four key points for anyone interested in using this approach. First, students and staff from historically minoritized communities have important lived experience to share but should not have to shoulder the burden of change. That work needs to be done by service and academic leaders. The select committee approach allows students to ask insightful questions and gain commitments from senior leaders, helping the leaders to set out their plan of work for the future.

Second, intentions, strategies, and action plans are not sufficient to achieve genuine institutional change in this area: honest and non-judgemental conversations are needed for everyone to move forward comfortably. Structured facilitation can move these conversations along and provide an evidence base for leaders, who can then go on to cascade the approach into their departments in a culturally relevant way.

Third, the sharing of responsibility and co-constructed actions can lead to authentic and demonstrable outcomes, and these need to be widely shared to bring a sense of accountability. Because the commitments to change are produced by the participants themselves, they should be appropriate and achievable. The reflective focus groups provided a way to share experiences and co-construct approaches for acting on these intentions. Academic development teams can provide focused support for these specific actions, rather than generalised resources for a generic institutional aim such as 'reduce the award gap' or 'increase the use of digital tools'.

Finally, because the project created a supportive network of staff, it enabled collaboration and change in an often non-hierarchical way. This was, at times, top down (e.g. focusing on the key aim of reducing the award gap) and sometimes bottom up (e.g. sharing examples of excellent teaching), and the process led to a genuine mix of student- and staff-led outcomes. Some outcomes were formally expressed, while others were informal (e.g. realising the value of accountable promises). Regardless of this, there was a sense of accountability and at times a mutual vulnerability. These feelings need to be acknowledged and supported within the network, and academic developers are likely to be skilled at achieving the right balance of facilitation and support for autonomous activity in the network.

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