

**Transformational Change in Teaching and Learning  
Recasting the Educational Discourse**

**EVALUATION OF THE VIEWPOINTS PROJECT  
at the University of Ulster**

**[Project funded by JISC UK]**

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**July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012**

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# VIEWPOINTS EVALUATION

## 1. Executive Summary

Curriculum design in higher education is not a formal activity and there is little support, formal or informal, provided in most higher education institutions to help academics become better at designing learning activities, modules and courses. The Viewpoints project, funded by JISC under its curriculum design and development programme, sought to address this issue through a programme of work within the University of Ulster. The main objectives of this work were to develop a set of practical tools to support academics as they engaged in curriculum design processes and to identify ways that institutional policies, processes and procedures might help support the embedding of these new modes of curriculum engagement.

The tools developed through the Viewpoints project include sets of artefacts, conceptual and pragmatic, that can be used to support dialogue amongst academics and others as they engage in curriculum design activities. The conceptual artefacts comprise cards with prompts in the form of educational ideas; the pragmatic artefact is a timeline worksheet. Four sets of conceptual artefacts have been produced with each set providing a different educational 'viewpoint' or lens on curriculum design and the learner experience. These viewpoints are assessment and feedback, learner engagement, information skills and creativity.

The Viewpoints project mapped out a workshop process for the discussion and manipulation of the educational ideas on the prompt cards in relation to the timeline worksheet. A typical workshop might involve members of a module or course team discussing the ideas triggered by the prompt cards while addressing a curriculum challenge that they have identified, and in relation to a course or module timeline that they have mapped out. As they are doing this, members place the prompt cards or ideas that they generate and that are written on post-it notes on the timeline worksheet. In this way, in these workshops, the artefacts become tools that help members of course teams to reflect on, discuss, review and ultimately storyboard the redesign of a module or course.

Over 34 redesign workshops were run by the Viewpoints team using these tools with participants ranging from academics through to Course Directors and Heads of School. Also, numerous workshops were led by senior academics or co-ordinators in Schools.

The Viewpoints project is in many ways a direct descendant of Re-engineering Assessment Practices [REAP] project that was led by the University of Strathclyde: it had similar aims, namely, to promote institutional change in curriculum design and, importantly, it drew on REAP resources for its main theme – assessment and feedback. Hence, the starting framework and lens for the evaluation of the Viewpoints project is the model for transformational change in teaching and learning proposed by Nicol and Draper (2009), and based on their evaluation of REAP.

The evaluation of Viewpoints addressed three questions. First, what is the value of the Viewpoints workshops in supporting curriculum design? Second, what has been the wider impact of the Viewpoints workshops on conceptions and actions related to curriculum design and educational thinking beyond these workshops? Thirdly, how has the Viewpoints project interacted with and impacted on other University processes? The evaluation methods included semi-structured interviews with key informants who had participated in workshops or who had a role in extending the scope of the Viewpoints work or were engaged in related developments, informal discussions with University staff recorded as field notes, workshop observations and post-workshop interviews and an analysis of University documentation including policies, plans and procedures. Also informing

this evaluation was post-workshop data collected by the Viewpoints team and initial data from a final survey.

In brief, the following are the findings of the Viewpoints evaluation:

1. The Viewpoints curriculum design process and tools provide a highly supportive framework and procedure for engaging academics in productive dialogue about curriculum design, at a module or at a course level. In the workshop these tools help participants, usually members of a course team, to identify solutions to curriculum design challenges and to maintain an educational rather than content focus, a learning focus rather than a teaching focus. The workshop process also provides a conducive, social and non-threatening context for the sharing of ideas about teaching and learning across experienced and inexperienced staff alike. The face-to-face nature of these discussions is important to the success of the process as is the emergence, as the workshop progresses, of a concrete and visible design plan.
2. The evaluation data show that although the conceptual resources (the educational ideas on the prompt cards) associated with all four themes do help trigger, support and shape curriculum design discussions, there are differences in the pedagogical scope, research basis, coherence, structure and format of the prompt cards for the different themes. The question of the best format for prompt cards is raised.
3. The impact of Viewpoints development work at the University of Ulster has extended well beyond supporting course design workshops. Specifically, the assessment and feedback principles that comprise the conceptual artefacts of that Viewpoints theme have been adopted as University policy and have been used extensively in a range of other contexts (e.g. revalidation, course review, staff development programmes, as a framework for lifelong learning support) involving different groups of staff and students. Also, these principles have been referenced in a range of other University documents, policy and procedural, and are referenced to wider educational agendas.

Overall, the evaluation provides strong evidence that the assessment and feedback theme, and specifically the principles defining that theme, had a significant impact across the University of Ulster in facilitating policy developments and new thinking and practices relating to curriculum design and education. It also suggests that the varied contexts of use of these principles, and their existence in University documents and texts, laid the foundation for their embedding and for the sustainability of this new thinking and practices. The reasons for this are interpreted in the evaluation report and a change model is extrapolated.

The model of educational change deriving from the Viewpoints project, and from REAP before it, envisages change as the result of interventions that seed and support the emergence of a new educational discourse. The model highlights the value of the Viewpoints workshops which 'gave the principles legs', and made them the subject of a live and developing discourse that spread across the institution. This was also seen through the use of the principles as objects of discussion in many other university forums, their embedding in university documents and the requirement that they be revisited and used in numerous formal contexts. The report ends with a discussion of the conditions necessary for the spreading of a new educational discourse across an institution; and it argues that the change model extrapolated from the Viewpoints development work could usefully inform other institutions wishing to implement transformational change in their own educational context.

## 2. Background and Context

The Viewpoints project is one of 12 funded across the UK by the JISC to 'review course design and validation processes, and the ways these are supported and informed by technology, in order to transform learning opportunities to address an identified issue or challenge of strategic importance to the institution involved'. Within this context, the overall aim of the Viewpoints project was twofold: to develop a suite of tools that would support academic staff as they engage in the processes that comprise curriculum design and to identify ways that institutional policies, procedures and support systems could be modified and adapted so that these new modes of engagement with curriculum design processes were embedded institutionally and sustained over the longer term.

The initial Viewpoints plan was to develop a suite of interactive software tools that would provide educational and practical support to academics as they engaged in curriculum design or redesign activities. However, in piloting the educational resources (i.e. the conceptual ideas) to be embedded in this software, the Viewpoints team discovered that greater benefits could be obtained if these resources were instead repackaged and used to facilitate face-to-face discussions about curriculum design by course teams: in particular, it was found that this not only facilitated individual reflection on learning design but it also resulted in productive educational dialogue by members of a course team of a kind not commonplace in higher education. Given this change in direction, the outputs of the Viewpoints project now comprise a workshop process and sets of artefacts, conceptual and pragmatic, that are used to facilitate discussions by course teams as they storyboard a module or course design plan.

Four themes have been piloted in Viewpoints workshops, each giving a different lens or perspective for the discussion of curriculum design – assessment and feedback, learner engagement and information skills and creativity - and each theme having a different set of conceptual artefacts (see below). However, the assessment and feedback theme has been the most widely used in workshops and it has also been the theme that has influenced developments in educational policy and strategy within the University of Ulster. Hence, it is this theme that is the main focus for this evaluation report. Also, it should be noted here that the creativity theme is only mentioned here for completeness and is not discussed further in this report. The reasons for this are that the conceptual resources for that theme were provisional (i.e. not a fully workable version), that the theme was at a very early stage of testing and that it has been difficult to extract any reliable data specific to that theme.

The JISC call for curriculum design projects stated that

*Projects will need to implement a plan for embedding successful innovations into institutional processes and practice so that they can be sustained beyond the end of the project without additional external funding.*

(JISC Circular 05/08: Call for projects on institutional approaches to curriculum design).

In the original Viewpoints project plan it was stated that sustainability would be achieved through liaison with key institutional learning support departments including the Academic Office, Quality Management and Audit Unit, Library, Staff Development and the Centre for Higher Education Practice. It was also proposed that the project team would work closely with academic staff engaged in curriculum development work to ensure that project outputs are of perceived value to practitioners engaged in curriculum design. The following sections will show that in relation to the

assessment and feedback theme that the Viewpoints project has exceeded expectations with regard to liaison and institutional embedding.

## **2.1 Supporting curriculum design processes**

Curriculum design can be defined in different ways but essentially it is a process of planning the learning that will take place within a specific programme of study and of planning how that learning will unfold through relevant teaching, learning and assessment activities. Curriculum design is an important process as the nature of the design plan that is produced, whether made explicit or tacit, significantly determines how the curriculum is delivered. This in turn determines the quality of the students' learning experience and the learning outcomes achieved.

Even though curriculum design is a fundamental educational process in relation to the students' learning experience, little is actually known about how academics go about 'designing' learning activities, modules and courses and, within higher education, there is an absence of guidance materials or formal structures or processes to support such design activities. Also, it is arguable that curriculum design practice should be informed by what is known about student learning from educational research. Yet most academics are not knowledgeable about the research on teaching and learning in higher education (which is a discipline in itself); and even if they have studied the published literature they may have little experience in translating educational ideas into actionable learning design plans in their discipline.

The Viewpoints project was intended to address some of these issues. Specifically, it sought a means of supporting academic staff both educationally and pragmatically as they engaged in curriculum design activities.

## **2.2 Brief description of the Viewpoints outcomes and outputs**

The Viewpoints project created a series of simple, user-friendly artefacts that are used by academic staff while participating in workshops where they engage in curriculum design or redesign activities. The artefacts comprise two components, conceptual and pragmatic (i) a set of 7-9 prompt cards that contain ideas, educational and practical, that help facilitate and frame curriculum design discussions by workshop participants, for example, members of a course team, and (ii) a poster-sized worksheet (size A0) which is used by the participants to map out the timeline of a learning unit (e.g. module or course or project) and to design a linked series of learning activities. The Viewpoints team have also articulated a step-by-step workshop process through which the artefacts are used to help move the discussion from consideration of the overall design plan to more detailed implementation ideas. In essence, the workshop process involves participants identifying a curriculum challenge and then working round a table placing the prompt cards on the timeline worksheet as they discuss and share an unfolding design. In this way, the artefacts become tools that help course teams storyboard their design plan.

As noted above and in line with the Viewpoints project aim four sets of prompt cards have been constructed, each set embodying educational ideas from a different 'viewpoint' or perspective - assessment and feedback, information skills and learner interaction and creativity. In practice, it was envisaged that which prompt cards are used would depend on the workshop participants' goals, the perceived design challenge and which theme was seen by participants as most relevant.

For the assessment and feedback theme, the format of the cards is derived directly from the outputs of the Re-engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) project (Nicol, 2009). In brief, each card comprises a guiding principle of good practice for assessment and feedback on one side (e.g. *help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria and standards)*) and some examples of disciplinary applications of that principle on the other side (e.g. *provide opportunities for discussion and reflection about criteria and standards before learners engage in a learning task*). The complete set

of assessment and feedback principles, and hence the set of prompt cards, define a pedagogical stance. Indeed, in REAP the complete set was intended as a summary of the published research on good practice in assessment and feedback from a learner self-regulation stance (see later in this report).

For the two of the other Viewpoints themes, learner engagement and information skills, the prompt cards are different in their pedagogical scope, in format and in detail although in use their function is still to address curriculum design issues and to generate productive conversations and dialogue amongst workshop participants. Within these two sets of prompt cards there are also differences in the nature of the information provided on each side of the card when compared to the assessment and feedback cards. These differences are returned to later and at the end of this report where the value afforded by different types of prompt cards for curriculum design is discussed. [As noted earlier the creativity cards were provisional, had only been tested once or twice and the evaluator was not able to analyse this set].

In summary, using educational prompt cards, a timeline sheet and a clearly articulated workshop process, course team members engage in conversations and discussions as they work together to design or redesign a module or a course from a specific educational perspective. The outputs of a Viewpoints workshop include the rudiments of a learning design plan that can be shared and discussed further with both students and with other university staff (e.g. with learning technologists, administrators and other academic colleagues) before implementation.

The Viewpoints project has had an influence and impact across the University of Ulster. In particular, seven of the assessment and feedback principles drawn from the prompt cards within that Viewpoints theme have been embedded in University policy and articulated through a range of institutional processes and procedures.

The Viewpoints workshop process, themes and associated resources have also been presented and trialled at other UK Universities and at educational conferences and events.

### **2.3 Purpose of the Evaluation and core evaluation questions**

The overall purpose of the work reported here is to evaluate the extent to which the Viewpoints project has enhanced curriculum design processes at the University of Ulster and, to ascertain the influence and impact of the Viewpoints development work in helping and promoting wider transformational change in conceptions, practice, procedures and policies relating to teaching, learning and assessment across the whole institution. Importantly, this evaluation provides an 'interpretation' of the mechanism behind the change process at the University of Ulster. Issues raised and lessons learned are also discussed so that others using these resources or engaging in transformational change can make informed decisions about the way forward.

#### **Core Evaluation Questions**

1. What is the value of the Viewpoints workshop process and its associated artefacts (thematic perspectives, timeline) in supporting the processes of curriculum design?
2. What has been the impact of the Viewpoints workshops beyond the event itself? In particular, how have the assessment and feedback principles and the workshop processes stimulated changes in conceptions and behaviours related to teaching, learning and assessment?
3. How has the Viewpoints project influenced, intersected with and impacted on other institutional processes and systems in the University of Ulster?



4. What lessons can other institutions learn from the Viewpoints project regarding enhancing curriculum design and educational processes across a whole higher or further education institution?
5. What can we learn about the mechanisms underpinning change from the Viewpoints experience and what model of change might be extrapolated from that experience?

## 2.4 Target population and sources of data for the evaluation

This evaluation draws on interview data from the following key informants employed at the University of Ulster who had been involved in Viewpoints workshops and/or in the promotion or development of Viewpoints ideas (see Table 1). The evaluation also draws on an analysis of University documents (policies, handbooks, reference documents etc.) in relation to the Assessment and Feedback theme and on informal discussions with academic staff from across the university. The latter were written up as field notes by the evaluator. Finally, the evaluator also attended presentations of Viewpoints externally and observed Viewpoints workshops and interviewed those participating about their experiences.

Table 1: Key Stakeholders for Interview

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Experienced and new academic staff (4)</li> <li>2. Course Director</li> <li>3. Head of School</li> <li>4. Student Representative</li> <li>5. PVC Teaching and Learning</li> <li>6. Head of Academic Office and another</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Chair of Assessment and Feedback Working Group</li> <li>8. Head of Lifelong Learning</li> <li>9. Members of Viewpoints project team</li> <li>10. External user of Viewpoints resources – University of Greenwich</li> </ol>
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## 2.5 Related Work/Studies

The Viewpoints team have already collected considerable survey data on participants' experiences of the workshop process. This survey data was collected immediately after academic staff or others took part in Viewpoints workshops. This data has been scrutinised and informs the findings reported in section 4. A more recent survey has been administered to all those who have participated in Viewpoints' workshops asking about the impact of Viewpoints and how they have interacted with and used the Viewpoints resources and ideas following the workshops. The data collected so far from this survey informs the findings in section 5.

# 3 Evaluation Approach

## 3.1 Design of evaluation

### 3.1.1 Type of Evaluation

The evaluation reported here is primarily qualitative in nature. It examines the perceptions and actions of a range of organisational actors in higher education who have interacted with the Viewpoints project and its resources. In particular, using evidence from interviews, field-notes, workshop observations, surveys and documentation analysis it provides an evaluation of the nature and extent of change in curriculum design processes, practices and support systems that have taken place across the University of Ulster as a result of the Viewpoints project.

The evaluation is summative to the extent that it takes stock of what has happened to date, of the potential for this work to continue and how these changes might be interpreted. However, it is also formative in that it is intended that this account will help the University of Ulster move forward and build on current developments. It should also enable others, in HE and FE to learn lessons from the Ulster experience and to make informed decisions about how to implement successful institutional change in curriculum development processes in their own contexts. See section 3.3 for limitations of this evaluation.

### **3.1.2 Approach to the evaluation**

This evaluation has been carried out by a consultant external to the University of Ulster. The evaluator (David Nicol, the author of this document) has a background in educational development and has over 20 years experience in supporting innovations in curriculum design in higher education. He has also published research in the area of assessment and feedback, in e-learning and on transformational organisational change (e.g. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Nicol, 2009; Nicol and Draper, 2009). The evaluator therefore brings to this work both experience in implementing projects of this type and of evaluating them.

For the record it must be also declared here that the evaluator is not a disinterested party in the Viewpoints evaluation as he was the author of the assessment and feedback principles that comprise the main Viewpoints theme and he has promoted the use of these principles in other UK universities and through JISC work. Also, the Viewpoints project draws on ideas from an earlier large scale project, the Re-engineering Assessment Practices project (REAP) which was led by the author. The REAP project was similar in intention and in focus to the Viewpoints project. Indeed, it itself was funded as a 'transformational change' project and it involved supporting the redesign of assessment and feedback practices in modules and courses across a range of departments and faculties in three different HE institutions in Scotland (see, [www.reap.ac.uk](http://www.reap.ac.uk)).

### **3.1.3 Framework for the Evaluation**

This evaluation draws on the model for educational change proposed in *A Blueprint for Transformational Organisational Change in Higher Education: REAP as a case study* by Nicol and Draper (2009), a paper that drew on the findings of the REAP project.

The central idea in the paper was that educational principles could be used as rhetorical resources to promote and sustain educational change across a whole higher education institution: rhetoric referring here to the act of persuasion. From this perspective, principles were seen to serve multiple roles: as a framework to support academics as they engage in course redesign activities; as a catalyst to promote and shape a new educational dialogue at different levels in the institution; as reference points within policy documents to reinforce and give validity to change processes. Essentially, Nicol and Draper (2009) proposed that if educational principles are cast as rhetorical resources and systematically and consciously deployed not as a template but as a catalyst for further dialogue, then diffusion of new educational ideas and widespread organisational change would result (see also, JISC Webinar, Nicol, January 2012).

In this evaluation, the Nicol and Draper model provides a lens to interrogate the nature and construction of the pedagogical ideas that are used to inform change in the Viewpoints project, the mechanisms for the sharing and dissemination of these ideas and the impact of these ideas both locally in curriculum design activities and institution-wide.

## **3.2 Data Collection and analysis**

### **3.2.1 Methods used and why they were chosen**

As stated above, this evaluation uses interview data, informal discussions recorded as field notes, workshop observations and post workshop discussions to capture stakeholders' perceptions of their experiences in participating in Viewpoints workshops and to capture their perceptions of the impact of these experiences on their thinking and actions beyond the workshops. Most of this data relates to workshops where the theme has been assessment and feedback but a few interviews have also provided some data on the learner engagement and information skills themes. These methods were chosen, in part, because there is already considerable post-workshop survey data available, all of it quite consistent in showing that the workshop process was perceived as beneficial. Interviewing enabled the evaluator to revisit users' perceptions of the workshop process, to focus on areas not addressed in the survey data, and to gain some insight into the longer term impact of workshop participation on thinking and action. It also enabled the evaluator to ascertain how those who participated in workshops perceived the Viewpoints project and its activities in relation to wider developments around assessment and feedback at the University of Ulster.

Evaluation of the influence and impact of the Viewpoints project on institutional policies and procedures also involved analysing the development of Viewpoints from a project to an important component in institutional strategy and the project's role as a tool for the implementation of that strategy. The methods used include documentation analysis and interviews with key informants at a senior level, in particular, the PVC Teaching and Learning, the Convenor of the Working Group on Assessment and Feedback Heads of School, Academic Office and Leaders of support services [see stakeholder list in section 2.4].

In summary, the main aim of the interviews was to explore the experiences and activities of those who had engaged with the Viewpoints project in different ways and their perceptions of the benefits of this engagement both initially and over the longer term, including their perceptions of how the Viewpoints development work fitted in with university policy and strategy. The interviewees were chosen to represent a range of different roles and responsibilities in the university, from new to experienced academics to senior managers and including administration and educational development staff.

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured, that is to say they were supported by a broad template of questions (see Appendix 1 and section 3.2.2 below) which had been sketched out in advance. The actual template was refined after the first three or four interviews; at the same time all interviews were open-ended to the extent that the topics for discussion depended on the interests and experiences of the interviewee. Interviews took approximately 45 minutes.

Overall, this evaluation is not only intended to inform the funders of progress made and the lessons learned but also to enable the University of Ulster to build and enhance further its own course design and teaching, learning and assessment practices. Hence the approach used to gather evaluation data also draws on ideas and methods of Appreciative Inquiry to the extent that the interviews and field notes which provide the main interview data involved collecting views about what stakeholders found as positive and good in the Viewpoints process and about how they thought that process could be improved.

In effect, the evaluation should be seen as part of an ongoing process which is continuous and developmental.

*The approach to organisational change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes and dreams are themselves transformational. Appreciative inquiry suggests that...change, at its best, is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation.*

[Whitney and Torsten-Bloom, 2003]

### **3.2.2 Instruments and Tools Used**

An open-ended approach was used with regard to the one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders. For those who had participated in Viewpoints workshops the template of questions centred on four themes (i) the workshop process (ii) the assessment and feedback principles/prompt cards and the timeline worksheet and, where possible, in a few cases the learner engagement and information skills prompt cards (iii) the impact of the Viewpoints project on the interviewee beyond the workshop and (iv) what is happening across the university in the area of assessment and feedback, how it was influenced by the Viewpoints work, how it is conceptualised and how valuable it is. Appendix 1 provides some trigger questions used in the evaluation, however, as noted above the direction of travel in the interviews also depended on the interviewees' interests and experiences and on what they chose to discuss.

Documentation analysis involved analysing institutional documents: policy documents, those used to frame procedures such as for course approval or course re-validation; to provide advice such as aid memoire on feedback to external examiners or the assessment handbook; to articulate policy and strategy such as the teaching and learning strategy. Where template documents framed procedures, samples of how staff had used the template were also examined. Other resources that were examined included web resources on assessment and feedback used within Ulster.

### **3.2.3 Other sources of Data**

Other data is available through end of workshop evaluations and through a recent survey (see above). The Viewpoints project has also produced baseline and interim reports and has some evaluations from workshops conducted in other UK HE institutions.

### **3.2.4 Approaches to Interview Analysis**

The interview data were transcribed and a process of thematic analysis was carried out. Emergent themes were identified and related to the core evaluation questions and the interview question template. New themes emerged out of the lived experiences of the interviewee. This evaluation report draws from across all the individual interviews, and draws on clusters of ideas that were similar across interviews to paint a bigger picture. It also notes where perspectives and experiences were different.

## **3.3 Evaluation limitations**

The main limitation of this evaluation might be seen to be the sample of stakeholders/informants interviewed. All interviews were with those who had engaged with the Viewpoints project and its resources and there are no interviews with those who did not interact with these resources. Such a comprehensive analysis was beyond the scope of the evaluation. Nonetheless, representatives from all groups of key stakeholders involved in the Viewpoints project were interviewed from senior managers, to academic and administrative staff and the wider influence of Viewpoints was also ascertained through the referencing and embedding of its ideas and outputs in procedures that in practice would themselves call for actions by staff from across the University. So while no claim is made for representativeness, data has been drawn from a variety of sources and is also informed by prior survey data collected now by the Viewpoints team and data from a recent survey that will form part of the 'institutional story'.

### **3.4 Structure of the Evaluation Report**

In line with the core evaluation questions identified earlier this report is structured into four sections with the last section being the extrapolation of a change model. Specifically:

Section 4 begins with a description of a prototypical Viewpoints workshop and an evaluation of participants' reported experiences and their perceptions of the value of these workshops.

Section 5 evaluates the potential impact of the Viewpoints experience on participants beyond the workshop; the focus is on how the workshop has influenced subsequent thinking and behaviours related to the planning and implementation of teaching, learning and assessment.

Section 6 involves an analysis of the influence and impact of the Viewpoints project on institutional policy, processes and practices.

Section 7 is the final analysis which draws together and interprets the findings from this evaluation of the Viewpoints project. It analyses the processes of change effected through the Viewpoints project and through related activities and from this it proposes a model for transformational educational change within higher education. This model should enable others wishing to effect such change in their own context to build on the Viewpoints findings. It also identifies issues and possibilities for further research.

## **4 Evaluation Findings: The Viewpoints Workshop Process**

The core questions being addressed in this section is:

What is the value of the Viewpoints workshop process and the artefacts/tools in supporting the processes of curriculum design?

This section begins by explaining the different contexts in which Viewpoints workshops have been carried out. It then describes the actual workshop format including how the artefacts are typically used to facilitate discussions. The artefacts used for this illustration of workshop format derive from the assessment and feedback theme. This description is based on observations of Viewpoints workshops and data from the interviews. This is followed by an account of participants' perceptions of the workshop process including perceived benefits for them individually and collaboratively and of any problems or limitations encountered. There is also a brief account of the use of the artefacts from two of the other three themes – learner engagement and information skills. The section ends with an analysis of the value of the Viewpoints process and its conceptual artefacts as curriculum design tools and an interpretation of how these artefacts can serve as the genesis of a transformational process in the discourse of curriculum design.

### **4.1 Description of the Viewpoints Process and the Artefacts in Use**

#### **4.1.1 Contexts for Viewpoints workshops**

The prototypical Viewpoints workshop process involves a group of academics, normally a module or course team, discussing how they might improve the design and delivery of a module or course. In some cases, although this has not been a common scenario at Ulster, the process might involve the design of a completely new module or course. Design here refers to the design of the teaching and learning activities and their sequence in the module or course. Some workshops, usually where the aim has been to provide a 'taster' or some experience of the Viewpoints process and where the participants are from different disciplines or different institutions, have centred on a hypothetical scenario or challenge (e.g. how to enhance the first year experience). Examples of these include both workshops provided as part of Ulster's accredited certificate on Teaching and Learning for new academic staff and workshops provided in the context of academic seminars and conferences to showcase the Viewpoints project to members of staff from other HE institutions in the UK (e.g. HEA events, ALT-Conferences). A few workshops have formed part of a 'Training-the-Trainer' process where participants have not only engaged in a design event but they have also learned how to facilitate a Viewpoints workshop themselves using the recommended process and artefacts.

At the University of Ulster, the Viewpoints process has primarily been used at module level although there have been an increasing number of course-level planning workshops linked to preparation for revalidation processes (see below). There have also been workshops for service departments (Lifelong Learning) and for the Students' Union (who designed a module for class representatives). It is quite difficult to disaggregate the data gathered through the post-workshop surveys so as to comment on these different contexts separately.

The Viewpoints Handbook provides detailed guidance about how to run a Viewpoints workshop (see section 6). To date, most workshops have been led by the Viewpoints team who designed the process but there are a growing number of examples of workshops being facilitated by those who have participated in an earlier workshop or by those who have been advised or trained by the Viewpoints' team. Designated champions in Schools who have been tasked with helping programme teams to embed the assessment and feedback principles have played an important role in this regard (see section 6)

#### 4.1.2 The workshop objective and context

Viewpoints workshops are focused on an objective, a challenge or an issue that has been identified by the group of participants attending. This focus might be agreed in advance with the workshop facilitator or it might be discussed and agreed at the beginning of the workshop, after the facilitator has presented the viewpoints tools and the format of the session. A typical objective or challenge might be 'how to enhance learner engagement' or 'how to encourage more action on feedback'. Sometimes where the focus has been on module or course 'revalidation' the emphasis is more general, for example, 'how to enhance teaching and learning in the module or the course'. However, even for revalidation this general goal would normally be translated into a specific objective or challenge based on where participants or the course leader felt that development was needed.

#### 4.1.3 The Workshop format

Viewpoints workshops usually take place in a room where discussants can cluster around a table and have face-to-face discussions about curriculum design in relation to an agreed objective or challenge while interacting with the Viewpoints artefacts, the prompt cards and timeline worksheet. In use the artefacts become tools to support learning design.

#### 4.1.4 The Viewpoints timeline worksheet

The Viewpoints timeline worksheet is a glossy poster sized sheet (A0) marked out with four time-zones to represent the phases of module/course. Participants determine the exact nature and focus for these time zones at the outset of the workshop. For example, the timeline for a course might be defined in years whereas for a module the units of the time-zone might be clusters of weeks (e.g. weeks 1 and 2, weeks 3-6, weeks 7-10, weeks 11 and 12).

#### Image of timeline worksheet

Objective(s):

e.g. Induction Place cards here...  
Your plan...

e.g. 1st Year / First few weeks Place cards here...  
Your plan...

e.g. 2nd Year / Mid-semester Place cards here...  
Your plan...

e.g. 3rd Year / Final phase Place cards here...  
Your plan...

Action Point(s):

Reflection(s):

Viewpoints Project, Access and Distributed Learning, University of Ulster  
<http://viewpoints.ulster.ac.uk/resources>

Viewpoints Project funded by the JISC

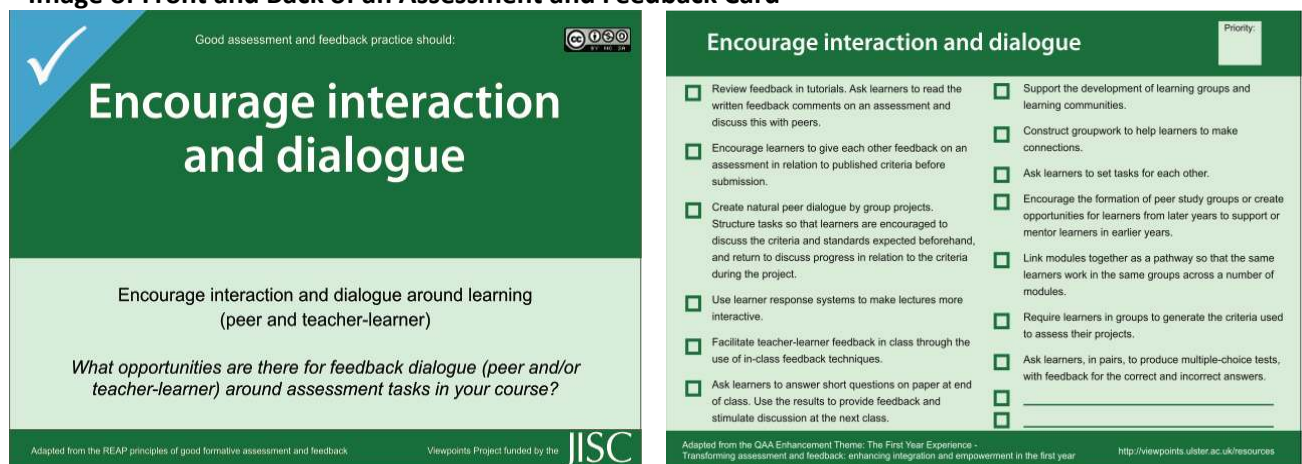
#### 4.1.5 The Viewpoints Assessment and Feedback Principles

In this section, the prompt cards (principles) that comprise the Viewpoints assessment and feedback theme are described. Then, in subsequent sections, there follows a description of the workshop process as it would occur using these prompt cards and an evaluation of the experiences of participants who have participated in workshops where these prompt cards have been used. The

rationale for this primary focus on assessment and feedback is threefold; that almost all those interviewed had taken part in workshops using this theme; that this theme has had most currency in the Viewpoints project; and that it is with regard to this theme that the Viewpoints project has had an influence on University policy, processes and procedures. In section 4.4 however, for completeness, there is a discussion of two of the other three themes in relation to the workshop process, and in relation to the assessment and feedback theme. Also, the topic of themes and specifically their importance in seeding a new discourse is discussed in section 7.

The assessment and feedback principles used in the Viewpoints project and their formulation derives from the earlier REAP project: a detailed presentation and elaboration of them is available in a publication produced by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (Nicol, 2009). In Viewpoints, nine principles have been selected from the twelve in the QAA document and instantiated as prompt cards that are used in workshops to facilitate dialogue. Each card has the same format. On one side there is a short headline version of the principle in large letters (e.g. *Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning*) and a longer text version with marginally more information (e.g. *Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning (peer and teacher-learner)*). The short headline version makes it easy to see the principle when it is placed on the timeline worksheet. At the top of each card in small letters is a common stem that precedes all principles – the stem says ‘*Good assessment and feedback practice should*’. Each principle then begins with an action verb such as clarify, encourage, provide, deliver to emphasise that an action must be carried out by someone in order to implement that principle (Nicol, 2009). On the same side of the card as the principle there is also a question that designers might ask about this principle in relation to their course or module (e.g. *What opportunities are there for feedback dialogue (peer and teacher-learner) in your course?*).

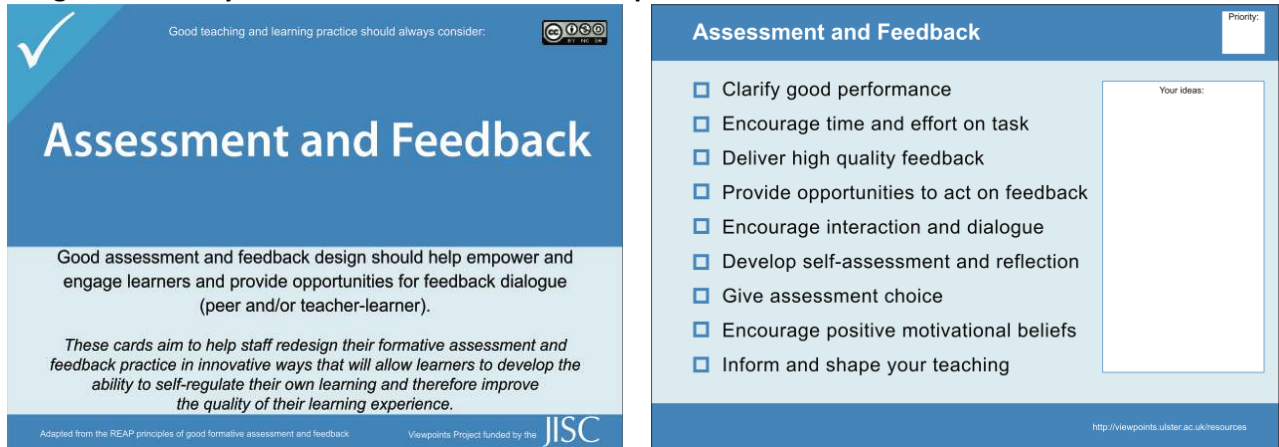
#### Image of Front and Back of an Assessment and Feedback Card



On the other side of each principle card are examples of how that principle might be implemented. These are formatted as brief ideas: for example for the principle ‘*Encourage interaction and dialogue*’ one example is ‘*Ask learners to answer short questions on paper at the end of a class. Use the results to provide feedback and stimulate discussion at the next class.*’ There are two bullet pointed columns of such examples on each card. Importantly, at the end of the second column there are two bullet points without examples but with a line to write an example in. These were added to the cards during their piloting by the Viewpoints team so that those using the cards would realise that this was not a definitive or final set and that participants could easily develop their own examples.



## Image of Summary Assessment and Feedback Prompt Card



The image shows a summary assessment and feedback prompt card. The card is divided into two main sections. The top section is blue with a white checkmark icon and the text "Good teaching and learning practice should always consider:" followed by a small logo. Below this is the title "Assessment and Feedback" in large white letters. The bottom section is light blue and contains the text: "Good assessment and feedback design should help empower and engage learners and provide opportunities for feedback dialogue (peer and/or teacher-learner)." and "These cards aim to help staff redesign their formative assessment and feedback practice in innovative ways that will allow learners to develop the ability to self-regulate their own learning and therefore improve the quality of their learning experience." At the bottom of this section, it says "Adapted from the REAP principles of good formative assessment and feedback. Viewpoints Project funded by the JISC".

**Assessment and Feedback** Priority:

- Clarify good performance
- Encourage time and effort on task
- Deliver high quality feedback
- Provide opportunities to act on feedback
- Encourage interaction and dialogue
- Develop self-assessment and reflection
- Give assessment choice
- Encourage positive motivational beliefs
- Inform and shape your teaching

Your ideas:

Adapted from the REAP principles of good formative assessment and feedback. Viewpoints Project funded by the JISC

<http://viewpoints.ulster.ac.uk/resources>

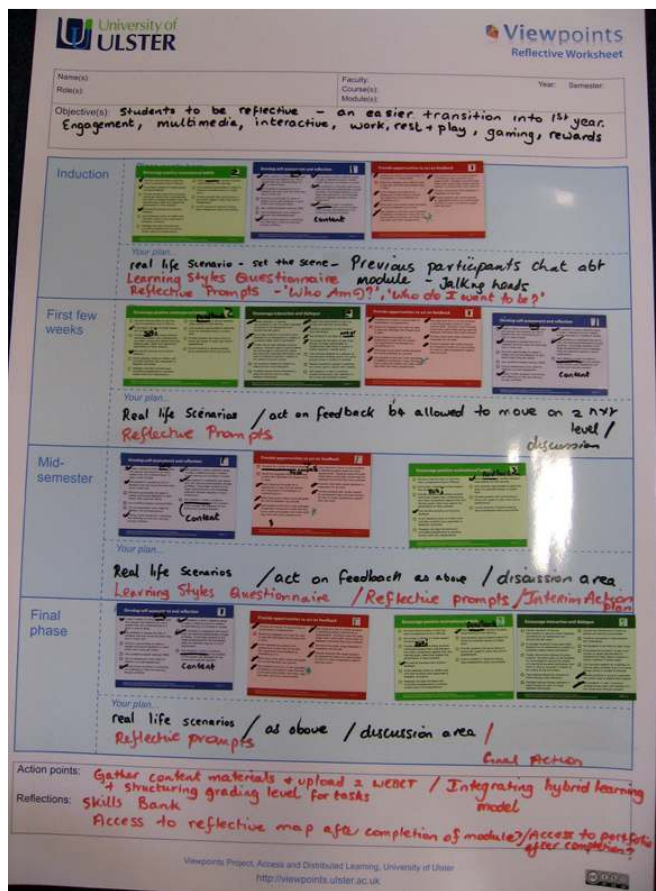
As well as the nine conceptual cards, there is also one summary card: one side of this card states the big pedagogical idea behind the principles (*'to help empower and engage learners and provide opportunities for feedback dialogue'*) and the purpose of the cards, (i.e. *'to help staff redesign their formative assessment and feedback practice in innovative ways'*). On the other side of this card the nine principles to be used in the workshop are represented: these are the same principles as represented individually on the other cards.

### 4.1.6 The workshop process: a rich description

What follows here is a description of how the assessment and feedback prompt cards and the timeline worksheet are used in a Viewpoints workshop. This is based on the observations of workshops by the evaluator, descriptions of the process by the Viewpoints team and by workshop participants in the interviews, examination of photographs of the outputs of workshops (see below) and of the printed procedure that is recommended in the workshop handbook. Having said this, the workshop process is flexible so many subtle but important variations are possible both based on the agreed challenge to be addressed, what participants bring to the workshop and how they choose to interact.

At the start of a workshop after participants have identified an objective, a challenge, a focus for the event etc., they are given a set of principles cards. Normally they will look at the summary card and be given time to flick through the other cards reading the principles: the facilitator will encourage them to look primarily at the side of the cards with the principle statements although many look at both sides to get a feel for the ideas and the cards. Next they will be encouraged to select an initial set of principles that they might use to get started in the planning. Following this, participants will place the cards on the timeline worksheet based on their discussion with colleagues and on their individual reflections. The timeline worksheet will already have been demarcated by participants based on their own interpretation of the important phases of learning. Most participants start with the first time-zone and work forward (i.e. down the timeline worksheet) placing cards to represent what is important. The facilitator will have provided many sets of the same cards so repetitions of cards in the same or different time zones are normal.

## Image of Timeline worksheet with Assessment and Feedback cards



Once participants have created a big picture of the course or module and identified the important ideas in addressing the objective, challenge or issue the facilitator will move them on to the next level, to consider in more detail how these assessment and feedback ideas will be implemented. To support this they are encouraged to look at the other side of the card at the examples. Discussions about this result in some ideas being selected from the cards, or selected and then modified, with implementation ideas being put forward by participants drawn from this and their own experiences and with new ideas being generated through discussion. The mix here seems to depend on the composition of the group, their interaction patterns and their own teaching experiences. At this stage participants might tick relevant examples on the cards, write in a new example on the card or record the example on a post-it note and place it on the timeline worksheet.

Essentially what is described above is how a group of participants storyboard a sequence of teaching and learning activities while engaging in dialogue supported by conceptual and practical artefacts.

Given that the principles on the prompt cards are used to facilitate discussions during Viewpoints workshops about how to improve the module or course, it is inevitable that the participants' interpretation of the cards and the timeline worksheet to a large extent frame the discussion that ensues. It is not just however that these artefacts frame the ongoing discussion, but it is also the shared visual representation of the developing process that is important. As participants place cards on the timeline worksheet and create and place post-it notes describing some implementation ideas, the unfolding discussion is given concrete realisation in a visible output. Usually the final output is photographed by the facilitator to provide a permanent record of the redesign thinking, then posted on Flickr and the link sent to participants.

#### **4.1.7 The facilitator's role**

The facilitator's role in the Viewpoints process is to introduce the workshop format and the artefacts and to facilitate timekeeping through the Viewpoints process (see Handbook). The facilitator might also encourage participants to formulate a challenge if they don't already have one, will move participants from thinking about the principles in relation to the course/module (the big picture) to thinking about how that big picture might translate into actual implementation ideas (the other side of the card). Importantly, however, what is discussed is primarily facilitated by the educational principles on the cards and the time frame that participants have constructed and not by the workshop facilitator.

With the above general description in mind the following provides an account of participants' experiences in Viewpoints workshops where the theme was assessment and feedback. This account is based on interviews, on informal conversations recorded as field notes and on observations of Viewpoints workshops and on post-workshop discussions with participants. It also draws on a large database of post-workshop evaluation survey data of participants' experiences.

## **4.2 Workshop participants' experiences**

This section foregrounds dialogue as the most important outcome of the workshop process. It discusses how the Viewpoints artefacts influence the nature of that dialogue, its progression and its different manifestations. It then highlights some other processes that stem from this facilitated dialogue including individual reflection, the engendering of creative design ideas, the taking of a learner perspective and a focus on a high-level course perspective. Quotes in the text below are derived from the interviews and from the post-workshop evaluation data collected by the Viewpoints team and are offered as illustrations of participants' perceptions of the experience.

### **4.2.1 A dialogical process**

All participants agreed that the workshop process facilitates dialogue. In part this is because the workshop provides an opportunity to bring a group of people together, usually a course team, for a structured discussion about curriculum design. Such discussions are not commonly held by module or course teams and even if they do happen they are not usually structured or, importantly, facilitated by educational ideas in the form of prompts, in this case principles on cards.

#### ***Sociability of a board game***

Typical general comments about the Viewpoints workshop process were that it 'gives teaching teams a forum to discuss and develop their ideas' and that it involves 'working in a group to rethink curriculum in a fun and productive way'. Others noted that it 'allowed a range of different opinions from colleagues to become discussed in an open forum, to enable them to take stock of what elements of the current course to retain and which ones to reform or innovate'. Still others talked about the non-threatening nature of the experience which 'provided an open and honest environment within which the team could engage in a facilitated way with good structure and alternative ideas'.

One respondent wrote in his post-workshop evaluation the following comment which captures the essence of the process: 'with people standing around a table discussing and placing cards gives the process the sociability of a board game'. There were many other comments both in the interviews and in the post-workshop evaluations that might be seen to centre on this idea of artefacts serving as social objects, for example, 'the process involved the use of tactile materials to stimulate debate and make the event enjoyable', 'the visual approach was easy to grasp and it gave a focus for the discussion', 'easy to see it...(the design)...as it appears in front of you in a short period of time', 'a relatively quick and easy way for a group of people to work through a complex design issue', 'a good

way to visualise curriculum development’ and ‘the value of the Viewpoints process is being able to focus on specific aspects of curriculum design using cards and a worksheet that support thinking and discussion – very helpful’.

When asked specifically about the physical format for Viewpoints workshops most interviewees thought that the ideal set up, and the one invariably used, involved participants working round a table with the timeline worksheet placed on top. Those interviewed thought that this set-up facilitated productive interaction and dialogue: ‘they...(participants in the workshop).. can contribute in different ways, to the face-to-face discussions, in suggesting an idea, in placing or moving a card or by writing a post-it or placing it’. The Viewpoints project team in particular were clear that the use of an overhead rather than a table with people standing around ‘would result in one person leading or taking a directive role in the discussion....which would undermine the process’.

### ***Addressing hypothetical versus real challenges***

Those who participated in a Viewpoints workshop as part of a conference or seminar expressed similar opinions about its value to promote discussion. For example, ‘the process and the cards allowed open and frank discussion and engagement’ and ‘the group could work together with a good structure and alternative ideas’ and ‘it generates dialogue and critique of the principles of good curriculum design’.

Some of those interviewed who had participated in both ‘taster sessions’ with the Viewpoints artefacts and in sessions where the participants were colleagues teaching on the same course, claimed however that the workshop process worked better when it was focused on a real scenario and when it brought together ‘real people with a real issue or problem to discuss’ rather than when it was a mixed group addressing a hypothetical challenge. Another commented that: ‘It was a ...[hypothetical]...scenario and task to be done as part of the workshop and the materials were helpful but if it was a real situation and you were working with colleagues it would be more helpful: at the time it was part of a made up thing that did not really apply’.

### ***High-level discussions transcending disciplines***

One Head of School talked about how the Viewpoints workshop had facilitated discussions across staff responsible for different degree programmes. She maintained that the Viewpoints process, its principles and tools had helped academics whose ‘identities and thinking are primarily framed by disciplinary affiliations to engage in cross disciplinary discussions about how to create coherent change in learning across different professional groups’. The catalyst for these discussions were the ‘assessment and feedback principles...[which]...provided a framework that everyone could buy into and that allowed people to discuss issues that are common and relevant across all disciplines’.

Another senior academic involved in course revalidation noted that the high-level nature of the principles, and the fact that they were accepted as representative of good practice, was important as ‘it helped ensure that module coordinators kept discussing the overall picture of the course rather than slipping back into discussing their own module’.

### ***Discussions shaped by principles and questions***

All interviewees were of the opinion that the assessment and feedback prompt cards were critical to the success of the workshop process as they helped ‘shape the discussions’. As one interviewee stated the principles ‘gave direction and guidance about the things you should look at, at different stages...which as a course team would not happen in normal planning’. Some of those interviewed talked about how the prompt cards kept the course team focused; ‘if they drew away from the topic the cards bring them back – it can be difficult for course teams to keep focused without this input’. Others talked about the actual information on the prompt cards: ‘we wouldn’t have had the

knowledge to include these ideas and we wouldn't necessarily have known they were important'. Still others talked about how the prompt cards helped them to identify solutions to problems: 'the cards are brilliant as they identify solutions to problems and help you develop effective teaching practices'.

Interviewees also highlighted the different kinds of discussion that might result from a consideration of a single principle on a prompt card. For example, one respondent discussed how their focus on the principle '*Help clarify good performance*' led them to consider whether they were expecting too much of students in the early weeks of their course and whether they expected too much of students generally: 'we expect them to come to grips with different terminology and we do progress too quickly and the Viewpoints cards made us question this – is that the best thing to do?'

Other interviewees commented on the value of the questions on the cards. For example, on the principle card *Provide opportunities to act on feedback* there is a question *To what extent is feedback attended to and acted upon by learners, and if so in what ways?* With reference to this question on interviewee noted that 'this question helped us...(the course team)...to think about the timing and use of feedback in order to optimise the students' experience - it helped us consider when you give feedback and when it can be used'.

In some cases, the cards themselves raised new questions in participants' minds that were not scripted on the cards: for instance, questions might arise as participants discussed a principle that they hadn't consciously or systematically thought about before. For example, one interviewee recounted how the principle '*Encourage self-assessment and reflection in learning*' resulted in their group discussing 'the importance of this idea (of self-assessment), questioning how it might be put into practice and how it would be formally assessed or integrated into the course on a regular basis'.

### ***Reaction to the principles***

In interviews with Viewpoints stakeholders one interesting finding was that no-one took issue with the assessment and feedback principles or rejected them. Indeed, participants talked about them as 'ideas that represented good practice' and as 'a useful starting point for a discussion about curriculum design'. Others commented on their research basis, for example, 'good use of building on existing research' or referred to them as 'a validated set of pedagogical ideas to support curriculum design'. Another interviewee who was responsible for an e-learning support team talked about how the principles provided high-level ideas and a language to support others engaged in course design using technology: 'I was happy with the principles and terms and the use of language as they are tied to a sound pedagogy so that made me personally confident and that was the language I wanted to promote in my team'.

### ***Progression of the discussion***

Also highlighted through the interviews was the different ways in which discussions about course design were progressed using the principles and the examples on the prompt cards and the timeline worksheet.

In most Viewpoints workshops, after the curriculum issue or challenge has been agreed participants are asked to focus on the side of the prompt cards with principles. Normally, only a few principles are chosen by participants at this early phase to get the discussion started. However, most participants felt that the principles 'blended into each other' or 'called for each other' or that 'you can't look at one without looking at another'. By the end of this first phase most participants had visited and discussed all, or most of, the nine available principles. Having said that, it was also clear from the interviews that some principles had more currency than others as evidenced through their

being the first choice and/or through their frequency of use (i.e. repetitions of placing on the timeline worksheet) during this first phase.

In the second phase of a typical workshop the facilitator who is primarily managing the timings encourages participants to turn their attention away from the principles to the other side of the prompt cards to consider the examples. This switch gives the discussion a more pragmatic focus. As one interviewee recalled: 'We initially looked at the overarching titles of the cards with regard to the stipulations...(i.e. principles)...and then we positioned them where we felt they fell within the course year 1, 2 or 3 and then on turning the card over we had examples and we discussed and evaluated whether these examples were appropriate to our needs'.

While the principles introduced new ideas to the discussions and helped course teams think about the bigger picture regarding curriculum design most interviewees commented that the examples were equally essential as they helped them to translate these ideas into practical classroom activities. As one interviewee noted; 'moving to the examples made things more meaningful as we were now thinking about the practical implementation of these ideas'. Others mentioned the range of examples; 'they covered different kinds of scenarios and disciplinary contexts, 'there are lots of good ideas on the cards'. Others talked about the value of this range, 'the cards with alternative suggestions helps a lot', 'the practical examples provoked thinking about issues in our teaching practice', 'the cards added to our own formulation of ideas', 'the ideas on the cards provided a stimulus that helped us create our own ideas to put in practice'.

The timeline worksheet was also important in shaping the progression of the discussions. The four time zones on the timeline worksheet were given substance by participants. This depended on the context, on whether the workshop was focused on a course or a module: for example, the timeline for a course might be defined in years whereas for a module the units of the time-zone would be clusters of weeks. The timeline might also depend on the actual challenge or issue being utilised to prompt discussion: for example, if the challenge for the workshop is enhancing students' use of teacher feedback in new assignments then time and sequencing considerations are paramount. Interviewees were positive about the value of the timeline worksheet maintaining that 'it walks you through the learners' experience', 'it is a useful visual tool as it allows strategic mapping', 'I was better able to see key moments in the semester and match them to appropriate feedback tasks', 'it is an effective visual aid which allows alterations when considering different aspects of a course'.

In part, the value of this timeline worksheet derived from the fact that it provided a concrete representation of the unfolding discussion with the final output, which was photographed by the facilitator, serving as a record of what had been discussed. Some course leaders and module co-ordinators reported using these outputs to help them construct a report containing ideas for redesigns, or a set of agreed actions for improvement for their own course teams, often writing up these ideas in course documentation or in teaching and learning strategy documents especially when the context for the redesign workshop was an upcoming revalidation.

#### **4.2.2 A reflective process**

There are opportunities for individual reflection at the beginning of the Viewpoints workshop process when individuals are scrutinising the prompt cards on their own. However, invariably when the facilitator encourages participants to look through the prompt cards and to select some principles for the discussion, a dialogue ensues that enhances this individual reflection. As a Viewpoints facilitator noted: 'When we introduce the principles to staff they pick them up and engage in a lot of reflection immediately, but then they turn to colleagues and ask - do you think this is important? – even putting them...(the principles cards)...on a timeline and moving them from left or right prompts discussion and debate as well as individual reflection'.

Many of those engaged in group discussions of a module or course did report reflecting back on their own teaching practice. Typical comments were that the workshop process 'allows the individual to look introspectively and analyse what could be done differently to enhance the learning experience', 'it reminded me of the reasons for my usual practice' or 'listening to others talk about their teaching practice led me to re-examine my own practice'.

Importantly, the end point of a Viewpoints session is not a very detailed plan, rather it is a high level plan with some learning tasks/activities articulated; as such the process relies on individual teachers reflecting and taking something away from the workshop, and using the ideas they take away to redesign an aspect of their own practice. From the interviews there is evidence that this is exactly what happens with individuals making changes in their own practice after these workshops. This is discussed in section 5 below.

#### **4.2.3 A creative process**

Many participants report that the discussions they have during the Viewpoints workshops, which are supported by the principles and examples, result in their generating a range of creative ideas. This occurs in part because participants are examining and thinking about the design of a module or course in ways that they have not done before. The survey and interview data suggest that both the workshop process is seen as creative (e.g. in the way the discussions are structured using the artefacts) as well as the ideas that emerge from that workshop process (e.g. the design plan that is created and the implementation ideas that are generated). Where the workshop focused on the course level this, for some, also resulted in creative insights about how modules and the course inter-related. Example comments about this creative process include: 'stimulates debate and encourages thinking out of the box', 'enabled a fresh look at the course in ways not done before', 'a new way of looking at module structures emerged' and 'I had not thought about all that is included in curriculum design before'.

#### **4.2.4 A learner-focused process**

For many participants a key feature of the workshop process is that it results in a specific focus on the learner perspective while designing. For some participants taking a learner perspective was not seen as common practice. In working through a module or course design, the catalyst for the learner perspective was often the challenge or issue that was highlighted at the start of the workshop. This was mostly framed as a challenge or issue about learning rather than teaching (e.g. How can we get more engagement from learners? How can we encourage deeper reflection? How can we ensure that they make use of the feedback we give them?). At a course level the focus of one team was 'the different skills we wanted students to acquire as they progressed through the course', another learner perspective.

However, it was apparent in the workshops that for some it was not the challenge but the wording of the principles as prompts that fostered a learner perspective, as they suggest things that teachers should put in place to encourage more active learning (e.g. *Facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning: Encourage time and effort on task*). The following are some general comments derived from the interviews: 'the process helps staff think about what is important for students', 'the workshop appears to put the experience of the learner at the forefront of discussion which inherently drives the workshop along that perspective' and 'helped focus on teaching and learning from a student viewpoint'.

#### **4.2.5 An integrative process: a course perspective**

Some Viewpoints workshops where the driver was revalidation were focused on the course level where the participants were module leaders. Different approaches were used to ensure that

participants maintained a course-level orientation; for example, the focus might be on the design of a representative module from the course offerings or on the skills that students should develop across the three year programme. However, it was clear from the interviews that keeping the focus on the course level required good facilitation: for example, the facilitator might signal when the discussion was dropping down to module level.

Respondents reported that this was often the first time that they had engaged in a structured discussion where they had tried to picture how the modules might fit, and indeed fit better, into the course to make it more coherent and to provide a more consistent learning experience for the students. Where the Viewpoints process and its artefacts were used at this course level respondents reported positive benefits such as the following: 'it highlighted how my teaching is relevant in the context of other modules', 'it got the team to think about which modules are essential in this course and should be built upon and also highlighted opportunities to do new and exciting things to link modules together'. Another person commented that the Viewpoints process focuses 'the team on the overall course design and goes beyond their individual modules'.

### **4.3 Some criticisms of the Viewpoints workshops**

None of those interviewed for this evaluation were critical of the Viewpoints workshop process. Indeed all were highly positive about it as were the vast majority of those who completed the post-workshop interviews carried out by the Viewpoints team. However, within that survey data which spans 34 workshops, a small number of participants in a small number of workshops did raise some specific issues about confusion of objectives and about the related complexity or lack of clarity of the workshop process. In scrutinising this data it is clear that in workshops where the participants were from a single discipline or from cognate disciplines and where the discussion was about a single module or a single course that participants had joint responsibility for teaching (i.e. where it was a module or course team) and was about a single theme that had been agreed then the evaluations were usually very positive. Where criticisms were levelled, it was related to scenarios where there was a mixture of participants (internal and external to Ulster, or from unrelated disciplines in Ulster), where the topic was invented for the purpose of the workshop (mentioned by one interviewee – see above) or where there were many themes or challenges rather than a single theme or challenge and where the numbers in the workshop were large (e.g. requiring many different groups working in the same or even different rooms) or when there was some mix of the foregoing variables.

Essentially this suggests that it might be a good idea to limit the number of participants to a workable group, for example, limit the number to twenty and/or take more time to explain the purpose and structure of the workshop session when numbers are large or participants do not know each other beforehand and/or have more facilitators at the session. Regarding mixed disciplines there is obviously value in this but the possible reasons why this is valuable might need to be communicated to participants or they might be encouraged to identify their own reasons. Many of these issues relate to workshops in general and not just to these Viewpoints workshops.

### **4.4 The other Viewpoints themes: learner engagement and information skills**

Strong evidence has been provided above that the Viewpoints workshop process - with the use of assessment and feedback principles and examples as prompts - leads to productive dialogue about curriculum design by course teams. An important issue is how the actual content and the format of the prompt cards influence the dialogue that ensues and the design ideas that result from this.

One way to explore this issue might be to compare users' experiences with the prompt cards used in the other Viewpoints themes – learner engagement and information skills –with their experiences in the assessment and feedback theme. Unfortunately, this is currently problematic because it is not



possible to separate out this variable easily from the post-workshop evaluation data, even though it spans a large number of workshops. Also, the information collected through the interviews is also limited as few interviewees had participated in a workshop using these other themes.

Having said that what the post-workshop data does show is that overall participants are positive about the workshop experience no matter what theme they engaged with. This finding was also confirmed in the course of an interview with an educational leader in another UK University who had made less use of the assessment and feedback theme but who still reported that he had achieved positive results with the other three Viewpoints themes and their conceptual resources.

Further insight into this topic comes from other interviewees, namely the Viewpoints project leader, two people who participated in a workshop centred on the two other themes in question, and a senior manager who was involved in a high level strategic discussion about all three themes.

The Viewpoints project leader highlighted the rationale for the different themes. He noted that the different conceptual themes were intended to provide different perspectives on curriculum design and that the value of each theme would depend on the challenge or issue being addressed. In discussing the vision of the project he stated that

*The key benefit I saw with Viewpoints was it gave course teams a choice of prompts that aligned to their problem space... the idea was to provide a number of viewpoints on the learner experience.*

The interviewee who had participated in a workshop using the learner engagement prompt cards also commented positively on their value in supporting dialogue and discussion. More specifically, in her description of the use of these prompt cards she stated that 'we used these prompt cards to think about learning activities, it was a very practical exercise – we discussed where the content needs to go and what activities should come after that'. This is consistent with the main ideas on the learner engagement prompt cards which provide descriptions of different kinds of learning activities that students might engage in a course (e.g. the titles of the cards are *receive, create, debate, explore, experiment, imitate, practice and meta-learn*). In effect, the discussion that these cards produced for this course team were precisely about the kinds of activities students might engage in and when in the course this should happen.

The interviewee who had used the information skills cards had done so in a workshop where the discussion was about how students might utilise information so as to be successful when working through a large project. The cards here are headed with prompts *identify, scope, plan, gather, evaluate, manage and present* – and their text describes how a project might start and progress and what information is needed by students at different stages to effectively carry out the project. The prompts on the cards also depict a natural sequence of engagement with information when carrying out a project task.

The above highlights that although the learner engagement and information skills prompt cards are similar to the assessment and feedback prompts in that they all contain educational ideas, they actually differ quite significantly from those cards in their pedagogical scope and in their format. Also, as will be discussed later, they also differ in the amount and in the distribution of ideas and examples that they carry within and across the sets. From a pedagogical perspective the information skills cards are specifically focused on how to develop students' information literacy skills while the learner engagement cards are promoting activities that will engage the learner. The Viewpoints project leader expressed these differences in the following way:

*the cards reflect a spectrum of closed lists that span formal educational principles to practice level activities with the assessment and feedback theme at one end, the learning engagement prompts at the other and with information skills...in the middle.*

To conclude, this analysis suggests that all three sets of prompt cards representing the different Viewpoints themes stimulate useful dialogue in relation to curriculum design. More however needs to be done to establish the implications of differences in content and formulation of prompt cards on the nature of the dialogue that results.

#### **4.5 Interpretation and Discussion**

A key objective of the Viewpoints project was to devise a set of tools that would support and enhance curriculum design activities in higher education. The foregoing evaluation of participants' experiences in Viewpoints workshops indicates that this objective has been achieved in a novel and powerful way. The Viewpoints process has been shown to facilitate rich and productive dialogue and reflection amongst members of a course team at both a conceptual and at practical implementation level. The Viewpoints workshop process has also been shown to be applicable when designing at module or course level.

This section of the evaluation discusses the features of the Viewpoints process that, from the author's perspective explain, its effectiveness. Again, the focus is the activities around the theme of assessment and feedback as this constituted the main theme for development work at the University of Ulster.

The Viewpoints project chose as its primary conceptual artefacts a set of principles and examples which had been formulated and robustly tested through a large-scale transformational project, the REAP project (see [reap.ac.uk](http://reap.ac.uk): Nicol and Draper, 2009). As such, these principles and examples had already been shown to be effective in supporting curriculum re-design activities by course teams. In that project, the principles taken together were intended to provide a high-level pedagogical framework, a summary of current research, to support and inform changes in curriculum design practice. Considerable effort had also gone into the format the principles, the language used to represent them, their action-orientation, their tight-loose structure, their accessibility and immediate impact. Importantly, in that project, the assessment and feedback theme was chosen as the driver for curriculum change both because it was recognised as an area of educational practice that is seen by many academics as problematic and worthy of attention, and because it provided a lens through which all curriculum design issues can be addressed. The examples of application produced in that project, and adapted for Viewpoints, were formulated both to give additional meaning to the principles and to illustrate their applicability across different disciplinary contexts.

The principles used in Viewpoints have already informed many projects both nationally and internationally. However, the Viewpoints project has arguably extended and heightened their usefulness and value by re-packaging them as useable conceptual artefacts, as tangible social objects that can be manipulated and used to generate meaning at an individual and at a shared level, and by pairing them with a practical timeline worksheet. From this perspective, the Viewpoints process is an especially efficient and powerful way of engaging academics with principles and examples as a support for curriculum redesign activities. One of the strengths and innovative features of the Viewpoints process is that course teams actively interact with these educational ideas as design tools with little help from a facilitator and without direct support from an educational expert. Also, course teams themselves choose the principles to work with in relation to a problem space or challenge they have defined, with the principles shaping the discussions that ensue but with the interpretation of the principles being elaborated and contextualised through those discussions. This puts ownership of the principles and the resulting design firmly in the hands of the course team. Another strength of this process is that both inexperienced and experienced users find the workshop

experience non-threatening and motivating. Importantly, a further feature of this process is that it starts from where participants are and builds on their own design experience. All workshop participants can contribute: even when this only involves pushing the prompt card to a different place on the timeline worksheet, they build on their design knowledge from there, internalising ideas from the artefacts, through interactions and sharing with others, with everyone taking some new ideas away from the Viewpoints workshop. This is consistent with the literature on design which maintains that 'all design is redesign'.

Also, critical to the Viewpoints process is the timeline worksheet which provides a locus for placing, arranging and re-arranging design ideas (principles) and examples. The timeline worksheet and its artefacts display the pattern, the structure and sequence of the activities that comprise the developing curriculum design. While a timeline is fundamental to design discussions and outputs it is not a familiar feature of most course team discussions or of the requirements of course documentation.

In summary, the Viewpoints workshop process offers an innovative and successful way to engage course teams in meaningful dialogue about curriculum design. At its core, it provides a context for the emergence of a new discourse around curriculum design. The sections that follow describe and evaluate how this discourse was continued, enhanced and embedded in other informal and formal contexts in the University and the implications of this in terms of transformational organisational change.

## 5 Evaluation findings: Impact beyond the workshops

The core question being addressed in this section is

*What is the impact of the Viewpoints workshop beyond the event: how does it change the thinking and actions in relation to teaching and learning of those who have participated?*

### 5.1 Changes in thinking and practice

All those interviewed, and who had a teaching role, reported that the Viewpoints workshops had influenced what they subsequently did in their own practice with regard to assessment and feedback. For example, many talked about how they had used the assessment and feedback principles to address an issue with respect to a module that had been running for some time or a new module they were planning.

For example, one lecturer who said she had ‘personally changed my own practice’ as a result of the Viewpoints experience talked about how thinking about the principles had led her to hold a special feedback session with students, after an assignment, to clarify with them what they should have done and what constitutes a good mark and what good performance looks like. ‘I highlight areas where they were failing and how they could identify those areas themselves’. This lecturer also discussed the work of one of her colleagues who had changed her practice after the Viewpoints workshop and now gets students, after they have received their marks, to write reflection on how they prepared and how they feel their preparation was reflected in the mark. She noted that it was ‘remarkable how this affects the way in which students prepare for future assignments’. Another lecturer had arranged a meeting with two colleagues some time after the Viewpoints session to explore how they might help students use the feedback they received on one assignment in the next assignment. She found that the ‘assessment and feedback principles provided a useful focus to address this issue’. Indeed they began by considering the issue in relation to three principles but ‘in the discussion others were brought into the discussion’.

Another respondent discussed how the Viewpoints workshop had led the department to acquire and use audience response systems to embed feedback into lectures so as to enhance feedback dialogue and time on task. A further example was a module that had been redesigned by a team after a Viewpoints session with the intention being to take away the end loaded assessment and to introduce more regularly spaced tasks with students getting marks and feedback for a range of outputs thereby ensuring ‘time on task’ with ‘timely feedback’ so that a better learning sequence is provided. Another lecturer had met with two colleagues some time after their participation in a Viewpoints workshop to explore how they might help students use the feedback they received on one assignment in the next assignment.

In each case, where respondents discussed the influence of their Viewpoints experience on their own or course team practice, it appeared that certain principles had high currency: those mentioned most frequently were ‘clarify good performance’, ‘time on task’, ‘act on feedback’, ‘reflection and self-assessment’ and ‘motivational beliefs’.

### 5.2 Naming and use of the principles

All those interviewed were asked if they could state the assessment and feedback principles they had worked with in the Viewpoints workshops they had attended. No-one could name all nine principles and some could not name any from memory. However, it was clear that everyone had internalised some ideas from them at a deep level. Many, for example, could give wide-ranging definitions and arguments for a principle such as *Help clarify good performance* without being able

to remember how it was worded but still using overlapping language (e.g. it is important to clarify expectations...). Also, as soon as the cards were shown this triggered an exclamation of recognition – ‘yes that’s the one I was talking about’ or ‘aha yes’.

Another aspect of the principles is how they are used after the workshop. Some academic staff reported actually using the prompt cards when they were discussing a design idea whereas others reported using the list of principles to inform the discussion. In these cases the principles might be printed out or those discussing them might refer to the Viewpoints website or the principles in the University policy (see section 6)

### **5.3 More discussion and collaboration about curriculum issues**

As indicated also in section 5.1, the Viewpoints workshop not only triggered the planning of new curriculum practices at an individual level but respondents also reported that it has also led to continuing discussion, co-ordination and collaboration amongst module and course teams. A typical comment was:

*I think you come out of the Viewpoints workshop with a different perspective, a different way of thinking. I think it leads to greater openness amongst the course team – the cards encourage that sort of open discussion and willingness to share and change....This continues after the workshop*

The Viewpoints workshops were often initially provided at a School or course level with the result that course teams often carried their discussions and actions forward after the workshop. For example, in one course, the team introduced an induction process between modules; the module leader from the previous module now comes to the induction of the follow-on module to discuss students’ progress and to provide guidance about how they might address weaknesses found in their assignments in the previous module in the next module. This process involves different module leaders coming together and requires, according to this interviewee, ‘not necessarily more collaboration but collaboration of a different type’ than occurred in the past including ‘a more conscious effort to address issues about module co-ordination’.

### **5.4 Collaboration about curriculum in context of re-validation processes**

In many cases the catalyst for this continued collaboration, beyond the Viewpoints workshop, has been the programme of revalidation at the University of Ulster; because the Viewpoints workshop roll-out and subject revalidation occurred in an overlapping time frame there were natural synergies which were capitalised upon both informally and through formal University processes (see section 6). In one School, for example, coordinators, who had participated in the Viewpoints process, have gone on, without any further support from the Viewpoints team, to use the Viewpoints resources, principles and timeline worksheet, to run workshops by themselves and to spread the Viewpoints process across the School. In addition, in another School a plan has been put in place to use the Viewpoints process with teachers who are delivering an overseas programme; the idea is that this would raise that team’s awareness of the assessment and feedback principles and the pedagogy that underlies the programme.

In most cases where the Viewpoints process was introduced to teams considering revalidation, one output was that the person responsible for the revalidation documentation, usually the course leader, would write up in a school or departmental document the outcomes of the workshop process, in the form of some ideas for implementation or as guidance for the team about good practice. This provided a permanent record of decisions made that other teachers could refer to when they were introducing changes in the modules they were responsible for. Evidence that Viewpoints had had an effect on the strategic plans for learning and assessment practice in one

School was the four commendations for assessment and feedback that were made by the external Subject Revalidation Panel with respect to the plans for the coming years that the Schools had submitted. The Head of School noted that 'the positive comments across all programme reports would not have been consistent or positive had staff not participated in the Viewpoints workshops'.

Another course coordinator also commented that given that revalidation was cyclical that they would certainly return to the Viewpoints process at the next revalidation. This coordinator also remarked however that in the interim period between revalidation, that the intention was that those modules 'that show a high student failure rate would be required to revisit the Viewpoints process as a means of addressing this issue'.

### **5.5 Spreading of Viewpoints through other support teams**

A further example of the extended benefits of the Viewpoints process and resources at the University of Ulster has been their take-up and use by other members of staff who have a role to support curriculum design activities in the institution. One example here is the Lifelong Learning Unit. As in other higher education institutions, the remit for this unit is to increase access to the university and to help develop students' skills for professional practice. At Ulster, the Lifelong Learning unit comprises the Head and three academic staff. A key role for this team is to act as curriculum design consultants, supporting those who wish to provide courses, often online or blended, aligned with University's lifelong learning agenda.

The Head of Lifelong Learning reported that, based on her own experience with Viewpoints, she and her team are now using the assessment and feedback principles as a reference point when they work with course teams. Specifically, her team are using the prompt cards as a tool in their consultancy with others as they 'add value to the consulting.' Her team are also supporting further applications of the full Viewpoints workshop process. In the interview the Head of Lifelong Learning maintained that the assessment and feedback principles provided a common language not just for working with external clients but also as a 'means for sharing of pedagogical ideas across her team and for promoting a consistent approach to support work'. In effect, the principles now provide 'an agreed framework for the team when they work with clients on curriculum design'. Some other comments from this interview were:

*They..[the team]...were confident to go back without me to engage in the [Viewpoints] process..They could use the language on their own and they were excited and that was good...They found it reassuring to have a framework....I was happy with the principles as they were tied to a sound pedagogy*

*They have taken to it quickly too coming from different backgrounds... it helps build the confidence of the team.*

Based on the positive experiences of those participating in Viewpoints workshops The Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP) has also assumed a role for extending the application of the Viewpoints processes. This unit has a remit to support educational development work across the university and members of the unit had already worked collaboratively with the Viewpoints project team in delivery of workshops. One aspect of this development work is helping academic units achieve enhanced performance in the assessment and feedback scores they achieve through the National Student Survey. Another aspect of CHEP work is to support strategic educational developments in the University.

## **5.6 Summary**

There is a great deal of evidence that those who attended Viewpoints workshops carried ideas from their experience forward into their own practice. This 'transfer of ideas' derives from participants' positive experiences during the workshop but it has also been influenced by the University's revalidation process where academics are required to consider ways of improving the modules and courses they teach. One reason for this area being a focus for curriculum enhancement, according to many interviewees, is the National Student Survey results which show, not just at the Ulster of Ulster, that students are less satisfied with assessment and feedback than with other aspects of their course. Another reason for this focus has been the development of a new policy on assessment and feedback at the University of Ulster which embodies principles, similar to and based on the principles used by the Viewpoints team in workshops and printed on the prompt cards for that theme. This is discussed more fully in section 6.

## **5.7 Interpretation and discussion**

In section 4, evidence was provided to show that the Viewpoints workshop process, and the use of conceptual and pragmatic artefacts, supports academics as they engage in curriculum design activities. At core, the artefacts shape how people think about curriculum design, how they talk to others about it and how they act. In section 5, it has been further shown that this new discourse started through the Viewpoints workshops often extends beyond the workshops influencing thinking, dialogue and teaching behaviours. Principles-facilitated dialogue has occurred in informal settings by individuals and course teams, for example, to address a perceived teaching, learning or assessment issue. It has also regularly taken place in formal settings, for example, to address a University requirement such as course review or revalidation. Even though not all those interviewed could define the Viewpoints principles with accuracy after the workshop, the evidence available still suggests that individuals have constructed meanings, both individually and shared, from their interactions with the principles.

This section considers both the value of this spreading discourse around principles and the importance of the different application contexts that have been put in place at the University of Ulster. In the earlier REAP project it was shown that the assessment and feedback principles could be deployed as rhetorical devices to facilitate and shape change in educational thinking and discourse across a whole higher education institution (Nicol and Draper, 2009). In that project, the tight-loose structure of the principles was seen as critical in shaping that discourses. At the surface level, the principles (tight) were constructed as headline statements or entry points that would signal a direction of travel for new thinking and action about assessment and feedback. In other words, they were intended to communicate information about the kind of change that is desired. However, in practice change cannot be communicated, rather it must be socially constructed by stakeholders within the institution. In this view change is about seeding and sustaining new conversations about curriculum design, a new mindset, a new discourse and new actions. Indeed, the principles were structured with this idea in mind as this was the rationale for their loose framing. By not over-elaborating their meaning the principles require a constructive act from the user; it is through dialogue that the principles are given meaning.

If change in curriculum design thinking and action is to be embedded institutionally and be sustained then an important consideration is that these new discursive practices, grounded in principles, take place many times and at multiple levels within the educational institution and in multiple contexts. At the University of Ulster many contexts have been created where conversations about principles are called for; academics are required to discuss them when engaging in re-validation activities; others are exposed to them through their interactions with University support centres (Lifelong Learning and CHEP); and School champions have recently been appointed with one role being to help programme teams embed the ideas signalled by the principles in their disciplinary course provision. Moreover, in section 6 it will be shown that not only have curriculum design

conversations been influenced by the principles but they have also been embedded in the University of Ulster policy and strategy which in its different manifestations has also called into play further contexts of use for the assessment and feedback principles.



## 6 Institutional texts: Embedding in policy and practice

The core question being addressed in this section is

*How has the Viewpoints project impacted on other institutional processes and systems in the University of Ulster? How are the ideas being embedded?*

The Viewpoints project was funded by JISC as a strategic initiative intended to help the University of Ulster better implement its own developing work to enhance teaching and learning. From this perspective and from its inception the Viewpoints project was aligned with a number of key institutional objectives relating to the quality of curriculum processes and with other educational developments taking place in the University. Indeed, looking back it can be seen that the Viewpoints work and the wider institutional work on assessment and feedback have been parallel developments that have interacted with and reinforced each other.

The following section begins with a description of strategic work on Assessment and Feedback at the University of Ulster. This account takes as its starting point the minutes of a meeting held by the University of Ulster, Teaching and Learning Committee on the 15 June 2011 where an assessment and feedback strategy was mapped out. This descriptive account is then followed by a broad commentary on how these developments related to and intersected with the Viewpoints project activities. This commentary draws on interviews including those held with senior officers of the University, and especially the PVC Teaching and Learning and the Chair of the Working Group on Assessment and Feedback, on interviews with those responsible for quality monitoring and the scrutiny of curriculum documentation and on an analysis of changes in university documents and resources.

### 6.1 Strategy and Implementation Plan for Assessment and Feedback

A specific milestone with regard to institutional work on assessment and feedback was the decision in early 2011 by the PVC for Teaching and Learning to set up a Working Group of the Teaching and Learning Committee with a remit to examine this area and to make recommendations for enhancement. The working group had a wide representation including the Student Union, the University's Academic Office, the Project Leader for Viewpoints, Heads of School representing a campus and faculty-wide spread, School teaching and learning leaders, and the University's Staff Development section. It was directed through the Director of the Centre for Higher Education Practice and chaired by a Head of School with experience in university-wide teaching and learning strategy development and implementation through a previous role.

In May 2011 this Working Group produced a draft set of 15 Assessment and Feedback principles and an implementation plan. The Teaching and Learning Committee, while endorsing the principles in general, asked the Working Group to 'consult further with Faculty Teaching and Learning co-ordinators with a view to reducing the number of principles and streamlining the implementation plan'. Following this March meeting a reduced set of principles were drafted by the Working Group and sent to Faculty coordinators for onward consultation with their respective Faculties. A further meeting was then held by members of the Working Group to discuss feedback from the coordinators and also to address a directive from the Pro Vice Chancellor about the need to align the work on principles with other Ulster initiatives, with the Corporate Plan and with the ongoing work to develop Statements of Graduate attributes.

Based on these meetings and further consultation in the Faculties a revised set of seven assessment and feedback principles and a revised implementation plan including a timescale and responsibilities was submitted to the Teaching and Learning Committee on June 15<sup>th</sup> 2011 and was agreed. The account above highlights the extensive consultation that took place before the Teaching and Learning Committee finally endorsed the principles and the action plan. It also indicates that there was significant senior management support for this initiative.

## **6.2 University Principles for Assessment and Feedback**

One key output of the Working Group has been the adoption by the University of a set of seven assessment and feedback principles in policy. These principles are almost identical to those used by the Viewpoints team in workshops.

### UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

#### PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK FOR LEARNING

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Assessment and Feedback for Learning should:

1. Help to clarify, from the early stages of a programme, what good performance means (goals, criteria, standards)
  2. Encourage 'time and effort' on challenging learning tasks which recognise the importance of learning from the tasks, not just demonstrating learning through the tasks;
  3. Deliver timely learner-related feedback information that helps students to self-correct and communicates clear, high, expectations and professionalism;
  4. Provide opportunities for students to act on feedback and close any gap between current and desired performance through complementary and integrated curriculum design and pedagogic practice;
  5. Ensure that all assessment has a beneficial, constructive, impact on student learning, encouraging positive motivational beliefs, confidence and self-esteem;
  6. Facilitate the development of self- and peer-assessment skills and reflection on learning, to enable students to progressively take more responsibility for their own learning, and to inspire a lifelong capacity to learn;
  7. Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning and professional practice (student-student, lecturer-student and lecturer-lecturer) including supporting the development of student learning groups and peer learning communities.
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The significant overlap between the principles in the University policy and those used in the Viewpoints workshops was not a coincidence. The Chair of the Working Group on Assessment and Feedback had participated in Viewpoints workshops where she was exposed to the Viewpoints principles. In the evaluation interview she reported that the work of the Viewpoints project had a profound influence on her thinking about the strategic approach. She also maintained that while the principles would give a direction for the strategy that a key means of engaging staff with them was through the University's course revalidation processes. In effect, she saw the Viewpoints workshops as an important mechanism to facilitate engagement and roll-out across the University as all disciplines would at some time have to engage with revalidation processes. The work of the Chair of the Working Group was supported and endorsed by the PVC for Teaching and Learning. The PVC's role in, and perceptions of, these developments is discussed below.

Although this list of principles is similar in their pedagogical intent and content to those used in Viewpoints workshops there are some minor differences worth commenting on. One concerns the wording which for some of the Policy principles is longer than the definitions used in the Viewpoints

set. The other difference is that in the Viewpoints workshops nine principles are available for use rather than the seven adopted as University policy.

### **6.3 Implementation Plan and Progress**

A second output of the Working Group was an implementation plan. This was devised by both the Chair of the Working Group for Assessment and Feedback and the Head of the Director for Higher Education Practice (CHEP) with support from the PVC Teaching and Learning. It is quite clear from an examination of the implementation plan that considerable thought went into the approach to the roll-out of the assessment and feedback principles across the University and into their embedding in current procedures and practice. In the interview, the Chair of the Working Group discussed the limitations of previous university initiatives and of the need for a fresh approach:

*...the changes we were proposing in thinking and practices would not occur or be sustained by changing 'bureaucratic processes' - bureaucratic change is superficial and is likely to disappear.. real change requires...community based changes in values and goals regarding assessment for learning and a commitment to develop and implement new ideas and practices*

Hence the plan for the implementation of the new assessment and feedback principles was far reaching and staff from many different functional areas across the institution were assumed to play a role: administrative personnel from Academic Office, Quality Management and Audit Unit, Human Resources personnel, support staff from the Centre for Higher Education Practice and from the Access and Distributed Learning Unit. Also to be involved in leading or supporting developments through revalidations contexts were academics, including Deans, Heads of School and Course Director and representatives from the Students' Union. To support and reinforce changes in thinking and practice with respect to assessment and feedback across the institution it was also proposed that web-based support resources be created and that curriculum documents and guidance information were updated.

The implementation plan is laid out in the minutes of the Teaching and Learning Committee document of 15<sup>th</sup> June 2011. The key features are summarised in the sections below together with some indication of progress to date.

#### **6.3.1 Curriculum Design Activities**

The implementation document lays out plans for review of the assessment and feedback at the Subject/School level and for activities to encourage embedding of the principles. It states that at the Subject/School level,

*...a review of Assessment and Feedback performance should take place – this should include evidence from the NSS data... and that where underperformance is revealed Subjects/Schools should develop appropriate action plans to ensure the immediate implementation of the Principles. Where possible action plans should be developed in consultation with students.*

*...workshops will be facilitated by School 'champions' to enable programme teams to embed the principles.*

It also suggests that the assessment and feedback principles should become part of the thinking of course teams and that their use should be evidenced in Programme Management documentation

*...ownership of the implementation of the Principles must be encouraged at programme and module level...and a sound evidence base...[should be developed]...to show effective staff engagement with the principles..*

And it proposes that evaluation/revalidation processes should specifically take into account the assessment and feedback principles, for example,

*Briefing events for subject teams and Panel members will include the Principles of Assessment and Feedback...as a separate agenda item. Participants at these events must be made aware that the implementation of the principles must be included within the documentation and will be explored by panel members, with staff and students*

From the interviews it emerged that a range of activities had already taken place to ensure that there was ownership of and actions with respect to the principles. The Head of the Viewpoints project, the Director of the Centre for Higher Education Practice and Professional Education Development Officers from the Staff Development section along with the Chair of the Working Group had run numerous workshop training sessions for Revalidation Panels. These training sessions were designed to familiarise panel staff with both the Viewpoints workshop process and its resources as well as with the University-wide work on assessment and feedback principles. In addition, the Head of the Viewpoints project with the Chair of the Working Group, with a key professional development officer, ran two university-wide workshops for Heads of Schools and school champions around their leadership role in driving change forward. The idea is that each School follows this up by running their own subject specific workshops. To help with this it has been proposed that 10 recently appointed Fellows attached to CHEP [CHEP Fellows] and drawn from across the University, and who have a commitment to supporting teaching and learning, will support Heads of Schools and School champions in running subject workshops with academic staff using the Viewpoints resources. At the time of this interview, it was stated that a reminder was about to go out to Deans, Faculty coordinators and Heads of School to find out what progress had been made with this. The core idea is to devolve responsibility down to the School level as each School has its own substructures and learning communities.

Overall, the activities achieved so far show a clear intention that members of academic and administrative staff actively engage with the assessment and feedback principles across a variety of contexts and that their use is evidenced through university procedures and documentation.

In order to further support this roll-out the implementation plan also states that the principles be embedded in staff development programmes and activities.

### **6.3.2 Staff Development**

Under staff development, changes were proposed in induction for new staff and in the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PGCHEP) to 'incorporate a changed focus on assessment and feedback for learning'. It is also stated that there will be an induction for Course Directors where the importance of the Principles are highlighted. To support these activities

...training and guidance materials (including revised Viewpoints materials) will be developed to enable roll-out of the Principles

These activities have begun and are ongoing. Interviews with academic staff indicate that there is a high level of awareness that the University has adopted principles and about where information and guidance materials can be located.

As well as activities and support for staff there is a clear intention that students are partners in the roll-out process.

### **6.3.3 Student Engagement**

The implementation plan first notes that Student Officers have already been key contributors to discussions; there was a student representative on the Working Group which agreed the principles. It also notes that students will also 'be actively involved in the implementation process'. In

particular, the plan states that the principles will be translated into student friendly language so that they 'can be understood by, for example, a first year undergraduate'.

The plan also proposes that Student Representatives be trained so that they are 'confident to work with staff to improve assessment and feedback practices'.

There is evidence that these plans have been progressed. A student leaflet entitled 'Focus on Feedback' has been created by students for students and this leaflet includes the University assessment and feedback principles. The University Student Representative has also collaborated with academic staff to jointly make presentations about the feedback principles to students across a range of departments. Also, students are also represented on formal course revalidation panels. Indeed the student representative who was interviewed talked about how the representatives taking part in re-validation panels had prepared for them by evaluating course provision against the assessment and feedback principles before attending revalidation meetings.

#### **6.3.4 Documentation and resources**

As well as identifying actions and responsibilities relating to ongoing curriculum developments, the implementation plan also outlines where in University documentation the principles should be articulated and where in procedures academics should reference them. There is also a clear intention to augment the resource base to support assessment and feedback activities. The following are specific documents that were developed afresh or changed

- The Teaching and Learning Strategy was amended to require the clear articulation of the assessment and feedback principles
- The Module Specification Template was amended to include reference to Assessment and Feedback for learning.
- Evaluation/Revalidation briefing events for subject teams and Panel members include the Principles for Assessment and Feedback for Learning as a separate agenda item
- The Aide-Memoire for Revalidation Panels was amended to guide panel members to explore explicitly the implementation of the Principles in meetings with staff and with students.
- The External Examiner's Handbook was revised to include Principles. It is also noted that new examiners will receive induction into the principles.
- University's Assessment Handbook was revised to include the principles and links to relevant online resources.
- Posters of the Principles to be created and placed on staff notice boards around the University

Online resources have also been made available including a clear articulation and explanation of the Principles, including examples of implementation in different disciplines at [http://ee.ulster.ac.uk/assessment\\_and\\_feedback](http://ee.ulster.ac.uk/assessment_and_feedback) . Also available is a complete package of Viewpoints resources and tools for download at <http://wiki.ulster.ac.uk/display/VPR/Home>

#### **6.4 Infrastructure support, inter-connections and dialogue**

It was noted earlier that the Chair of the Working Group and the Director of the Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP) were instrumental in devising the implementation plan. However equally important to this evaluation is an understanding of how this plan emerged and how it was supported by senior management. In this regard, the interview with the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning provides some important background to these developments.

In the interview, the PVC stated at the outset that the assessment and feedback developments at the University of Ulster were not the result of a 'master plan that was clearly articulated'. The Viewpoints project with its focus on assessment and feedback was a 'bottom-up initiative that

proved to be a catalyst to get people engaged, to get them thinking about important educational issues' and 'as the project became more visible' it also served as a 'vehicle to make connections across different agendas... graduate attributes, employability and research-teaching linkages'. In effect, the PVC saw the Viewpoints project.

*.... as something bigger than just assessment and feedback. I see it as a means for getting better engagement leading to enhancement, and that enhancement in terms of academic practices, pedagogies and their positive impact down the line on the student experience*

In discussing drivers for change the PVC stated that a driver

*...would have to be something that colleagues and students would know is important...you wouldn't have to justify it...it should bring key players around the table to discuss it...*

The PVC believed that assessment and feedback met this criterion and she was of the opinion that the other themes in Viewpoints – learner engagement, creativity and information skills - were not sufficiently rich to act as the catalyst for widespread change or to enable connections across different agendas. One reason for this was 'that there were external drivers for that..[the assessment and feedback theme]... there was a growing national agenda [the NSS] and internal drivers in that it was something we were not very good at'. She also commented that, unlike the assessment and feedback cards, there was 'not a clear pedagogy embedded in the other Viewpoints cards'. In the interview the PVC recounted early senior management discussions about the Viewpoints workshops, the themes and the use of cards

*...in the early days there was some frustration about what is this about, what are the outputs of this – show me what the deliverables are? Cards, is that all we've got, just a pack of cards? The senior managers wanted to be sure that the workshop activities had relevant outputs and fed into and were integrated with other university processes.*

The PVC also discussed what she meant by 'connections across agendas'. Referring to the university work on graduate attributes or qualities she noted that:

*...if these..[assessment and feedback]...principles are applied and the curriculum reflects them then graduates will have these qualities and it will be easier to evidence them.*

Going further she stated that 'the graduate qualities are actually the outcomes of adopting this approach to assessment'.

The PVC was of the opinion that although there appeared to be many educational agendas in higher education that 'everything leads to the same core ideas' and that

*...the assessment and feedback ideas are entry points for many agendas and that many agendas could be addressed through this, for example, student employability, research teaching linkages, it is the same agenda.*

In relation to the Viewpoints project and its assessment and feedback theme, the PVC saw her role and that of the senior management team as being to put in place an

*..infrastructure support to facilitate developments and to enable the spreading of ideas and that would encourage co-ordinations and connections to be made by others...*

but she also noted that this infrastructure

*...should not be too obvious or heavy handed*

She maintained that the function of this infrastructure is to:

*...make the linkages across the different agendas visible to others and to enable different groups of staff to have discussions about these ideas.*

The implementation plan described above exemplifies the different ways in which this infrastructure has been developed.

## **6.5 Interpretation and Discussion**

Two important ideas emerge from the evaluation data presented in section 6 according to the author of this report.

First, section 6 highlights that choice of theme to be used as the catalyst for educational change is critically important in a transformational project that is intended to have an influence across a whole institution. The theme should be something that is of high interest to academic, administrative and support staff in the institution and to students. It should also intersect and be seen to intersect with a range of other educational ideas and agendas in the institution. Although four themes (three actively) were piloted through the workshops, in the Viewpoints project it was the assessment and feedback theme as expressed through the principles that emerged as the focus to drive further curriculum and educational developments beyond these workshops. This was a development which was strongly supported by the PVC for teaching and learning.

Secondly, this section also highlights the necessity of creating appropriate infrastructures embedded in policies and procedures to support and perpetuate the educational changes suggested by the theme and its principles. Such infrastructures should afford opportunities for discursive activity in relation to the principles at different levels in the institution, by different groups of staff and in different contexts. In Viewpoints such contexts include revalidation, module and course review, induction and staff development courses, external examiners meetings etc. In all these forums the agenda, while including assessment and feedback, has a much wider scope. Also, reference points to the theme and to the principles should be instantiated in institutional, school, faculty and department documents, in texts that define policies and in guidelines for processes and procedures and where relevant these texts and guidelines should also be cross-referenced to other educational agendas.

More importantly, this section highlights the requirements for embedding and sustainability of change, which both require a powerful thematic driver, which includes a new language and ideas to shape a new educational discourse, and appropriate infrastructures to ensure that this discourse is continually constructed, re-constructed, and co-constructed in multiple contexts.

Although it is difficult to prove categorically the extent to which the Viewpoints project has embedded and will sustain new ways of thinking about and of engaging in curriculum design activities, the evaluation data in section 6 arguably suggest that the conditions are very favourable for this. Certainly the Viewpoints work has begun to change mindsets in the institution about assessment and feedback and about curriculum design processes and the infrastructure developments are designed to ensure that these changes continue for some time to come.

Having presented the evaluation findings in sections 4, 5 and 6 it is now time to step back and reflect on the mechanisms underpinning change in curriculum design thinking and action at the University of Ulster. In the next section, a model of transformational change is proposed based on the Viewpoint evaluation and some guidance is offered to those who might wish to apply this model in their own institutional context.

## 7. A Model for Change in Educational Thinking and Practices

In this section a model is presented which, in the interpretation of the author, encapsulates the change process as triggered by the Viewpoints project and enhanced through subsequent events, planned and unplanned. The model which is depicted in Figure 1 illustrates the key features of that change process and how they inter-relate. In order to make sense of their complexity, the model depicts these processes as linear and sequential from planning to implementation even though they often occurred within simultaneous and overlapping time-frames. The value of this model is that it extrapolates from the Viewpoints experience a blueprint for transformational change at institutional level, one which, importantly, is underpinned by a recasting of the educational discourse around a specific theme. In the model the theme is assessment and feedback, consistent with the experiences described and evaluated in this project. However, it is not argued here that this is the only valid theme to effect transformational educational change. Others might well serve the same purpose as long as they embody the necessary requirements that are discussed in this section.

As well as offering a blueprint for those contemplating a new change initiative, as was the case with the Viewpoints project, the model presented here should also prove useful to others involved in change initiatives that are already underway. In this case, the model offers a frame of reference within which to locate ongoing activities, evaluate progress and identify gaps and areas that warrant further attention, from a wider strategic institutional perspective.

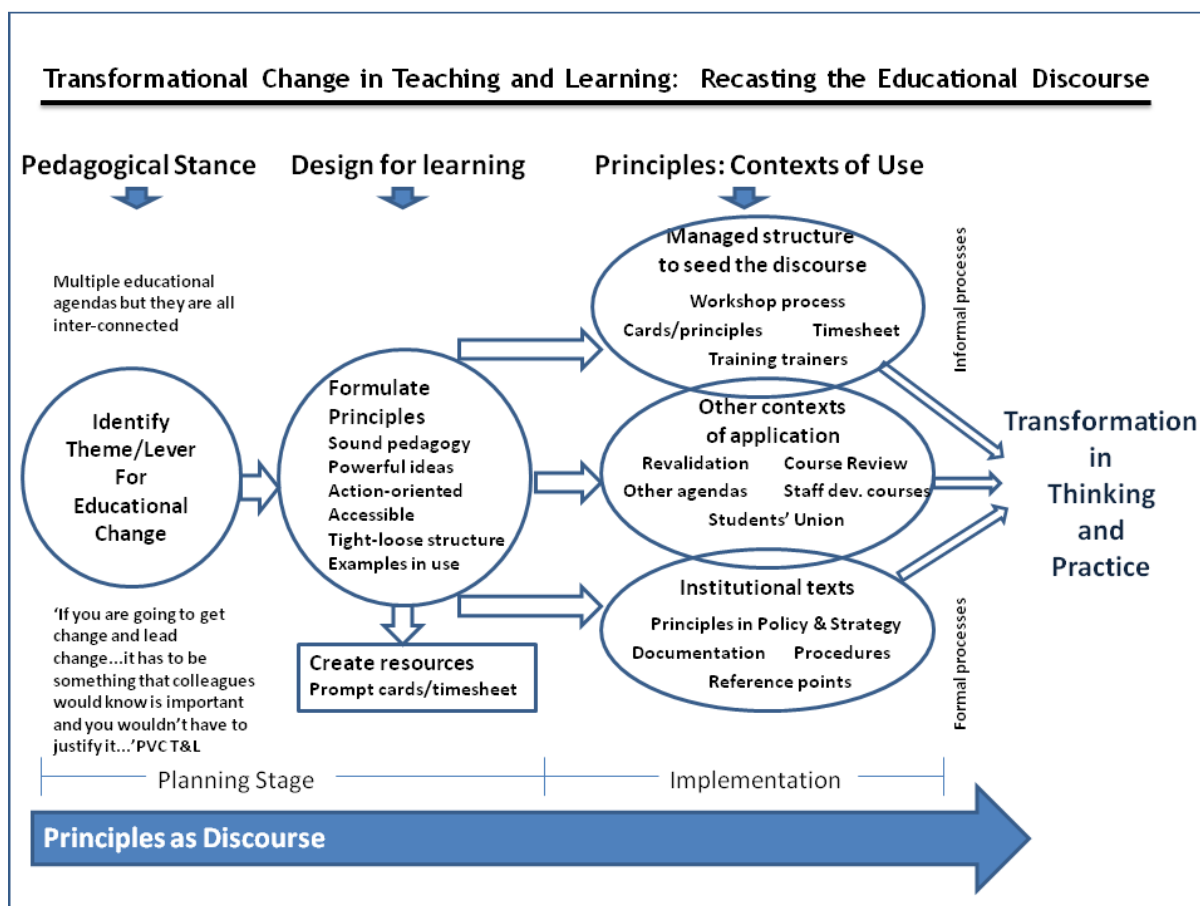


Figure 1



## 7.1 Pedagogical stance: the theme or lever for change

As illustrated in Figure 1, the first issue of importance in effecting change through curriculum design thinking and practice is to identify the lever or theme that will drive change across the whole institution. A number of considerations will inform that choice. First, the focus for change has to be seen as important by a wide range of different organisational actors. In Viewpoints, the PVC stated that 'it has to be something that colleagues would know is important and you wouldn't have to justify it'. In Nicol and Draper (2009) it was argued that lever should embody a 'deep and worthwhile aspiration' and address 'a recognised problem domain'. Secondly, as Viewpoints has shown, the lens for change should also bring into view and resonate with wider educational and institutional agendas. Thirdly, it is important that the conception of change to be promoted is pedagogically sound and is based on a firm foundation in research (Nicol and Draper, 2009). This point is, importantly, about 'pedagogical stance'; it is about being clear about the educational objectives of the proposed change and hence the philosophy and values that will underpin it.

In relation to the Viewpoints project two issues might be raised regarding themes. Firstly, should one utilise more than one theme or lens to promote educational change? This question is important as four themes were used in the Viewpoints workshops— assessment and feedback, learner engagement and information skills and creativity - and the use of different themes was a stated objective in the original project plan. Secondly, why did neither of the other two main Viewpoints themes - learner engagement or information skills - not spread across the University of Ulster and become engines for institutional change?

In the Viewpoints interviews, those who took part in workshops, where the theme was learner engagement or information skills, reported that these themes (and their prompt cards) did elicit productive discussions. In addition, both the Viewpoints project leader and other interviewees have argued that there is merit in offering workshop participants a number of themes as this enables them to choose the theme that will best address their perceived concerns. Hence, in terms of the workshop process, one would have to conclude that any theme that motivates course teams to engage in discussions is arguably worthwhile, given that such discussions will normally open up new curriculum possibilities. Indeed, a key output of Viewpoints is the incontrovertible evidence of the value of the workshop process.

Having said this, if the goal of the change initiative is to promote a new and shared discourse across the whole institution, then it might be advisable to focus most of one's effort on one strong theme or driver, as shown in the model, rather than a range of themes which might weaken and perhaps ultimately undermine the ability of the process to engender new understandings and specifically a new and shared institutional discourse. What this might mean in practice is that those workshops linked to formal institutional processes such as validation might be best focused on the theme chosen to drive change.

In addressing the question, 'why the other Viewpoints themes did not become engines of change?' we must return to the criteria suggested above, regarding the selection of the theme or driver. From this perspective, the other themes might have had limitations for the following three reasons. First, even though some academics saw them as 'challenge areas', perhaps these themes did not seem to hold sufficiently wide appeal, or were not perceived as sufficiently important or 'mission critical' to invest time and effort. Some evidence for this was provided by some senior managers interviewed. A related consideration, not evaluated, is whether students would have perceived them as important. Secondly, these themes might not have resonated enough with wider educational agendas or might not have appeared to have sufficient depth to be revisited on multiple occasions. Thirdly, these two themes, at least as articulated in Viewpoints through the prompt cards, arguably do not promote a pedagogical stance even though there are pedagogical ideas behind them, nor were they explicitly derived from a systematic review of the research. This last limitation might

however derive more from the way these themes had been formulated as artefacts (prompt cards) to be used in the workshops rather than from inherent limitations with these themes themselves (see below).

## **7.2 Design for Learning**

### **7.2.1 Formulating principles to seed and support a new discourse**

The next step in planning change is to create some conceptual resources that define the theme and its constituent educational ideas, and that will support teachers as they re-design their curricular practices. It should also be easy for teachers, senior managers, administrative staff, students and others to make links from these conceptual ideas to other educational processes and agendas in the institution. This is about seeding a new educational discourse and therefore the format and language of these conceptual resources are critical factors.

In the Viewpoints project it was the assessment and feedback principles that triggered a new discourse and, with it, changes to educational thinking and practices. These principles were derived from the REAP project at the University of Strathclyde, where considerable work had gone into their formulation and where they had been robustly tried and tested (see Nicol, 2009: <http://tinyurl.com/dyna3wf>). The pedagogical stance behind the REAP assessment and feedback principles was 'self-regulation', the underpinning idea being 'to help develop in students the ability to monitor, evaluate and regulate their own learning' (Nicol and Draper, p193; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The assessment and feedback principles were originally conceived as tools to help teachers translate these ideas into actual teaching and learning practices.

By design, these tools or principles were deliberately expressed as short statements beginning with verbs that pointed towards a practical action without being too abstract, or being over-specific (e.g. *Provide opportunities to act on feedback*). This was called the 'tight-loose structure'. The idea was that in curriculum design workshops and in other contexts the principles would help initiate and shape dialogue, without, however, over-constraining it. In other words, users would construct their own interpretation of the meaning of the principles and of their possibilities, individually and in groups, in relation to their own context. Numerous other suggestions have been outlined throughout this report about how to formulate principles. Important ideas are that each should express a compelling idea, be written in accessible language, have immediate impact, call on others in use and be applicable in any discipline; and that taken together the complete set should define a coherent pedagogical position with regard to what is known about good educational practice.

A specific issue raised by Viewpoints concerns the number and the wording of principles to be used in a transformational change project. In Viewpoints, nine principles were formulated for use in workshops. The rationale was that nine would give participants choice and hence a wider range of entry points and ideas to facilitate discussion. However, only seven principles were adopted in the University policy, and the wording of these principles is marginally different to those used in the workshops. One reason for these differences in wording and number was that the senior officers at Ulster wanted academics to take ownership of the principles and therefore they put them out for consultation. While such consultation is important it is equally important to ensure that there is strong alignment across these two sets of principles: at minimum, the principles used in the workshops should map coherently to institutional policy level definitions. This will authenticate and support new practices even if a few extra principles are used in workshops.

As well as formulating statements of principles, in a change project where new educational ideas are being deployed, it is also important to develop or locate a range of examples of how the principles have been implemented in both numbers-based disciplines and in text-based disciplines (Nicol and Draper, 2009). This will enable the generalisability of the principles to be tested. It will also provide some very valuable resources to be used in curriculum design workshops (see below).

For more information about the formulation of principles readers might refer to Nicol and Draper (2009) and to <http://www.reap.ac.uk/TheoryandPractice/JISC.aspx> .

### **7.2.2 Creating workshop resources to support a new discourse**

Identifying the theme/lever for change and formulating principles and examples is about planning. Also at the planning stage those responsible for supporting discussions about the curriculum will have to produce workshop resources. A key question is how should a theme be unpacked and formulated into set of resources and be used to trigger and sustain a new educational discourse across an institution?

In Viewpoints, for the assessment and feedback theme, the resources included professionally produced prompt cards with a principle and a question on one side and examples of implementation on the other. These prompt cards appear to have worked well in the Viewpoints workshops to facilitate course design discussions. Also, the ideas and principles on these cards have found their way into policy and into other institutional texts.

The prompt cards in the other two themes discussed in this report – learner engagement and information skills – were also professionally produced and post-workshop evaluations, and interviews also suggest that these prompt cards stimulated vibrant discussion in workshops, which participants enjoyed and found productive. However, there is no evidence as yet of the impact of the ideas from these other theme cards at policy or procedural level beyond the workshop process.

For this report, an analysis of the formulation of the prompt cards in the other two themes has been carried out. The main findings are that the prompt cards for these two themes – learner engagement and information skills - do not incorporate ‘principles’ of good practice, rather they suggest practice activities (learner engagement) or they define skills that students should develop (information skills). Although the learner engagement cards do have a pedagogical derivation in the 8 Learning Events Model developed at the University of Liege, they do not, as packaged as prompt cards, convey a specific pedagogical stance. In turn, the information skills cards, as produced, do not incorporate pedagogy as such; rather they seem to map out what information skills a student would need to tackle a large project. Indeed, these prompts derive from the SCONUL seven pillars for information literacy model which has been used by librarians and teachers as a model for equipping students with information literacy skills.

Furthermore, many of the statements on prompt cards for both these themes are complex and difficult to understand making them less immediately usable. Sometimes this is because there are many alternative definitions of the same idea (information skills) and sometimes it is because there is insufficient information about the idea being proposed (learner engagement). Finally, on the prompt cards for both these themes, the examples of how the educational idea might be implemented is not sufficiently articulated; instead of an example of implementation another related idea is often suggested or another definition of the idea is given.

These are factors which, while not appearing to hamper these resources as discussion tools, might well have hindered their potential as change agents across the whole institution. As noted earlier more research is required on the nature of the dialogue that is stimulated by different conceptual prompts in workshops and into what kinds of prompts are most effective in seeding a new and self-sustaining educational discourse institution-wide.

### **7.3 Establishing contexts for principles-driven discourse**

The right hand side of Figure 1 is about implementation and the three circles are intended to represent the different contexts in which principles-based discourse might take place.

### **7.3.1 A managed structure to seed the new discourse**

The ideal starting point for initiating a new discourse about curriculum design, as evidenced in section 4 of this report, is to engage course teams in workshop discussions where members collectively produce a new design, using the prompt cards and the timeline worksheet. The sequence of such workshops and how they are facilitated are described in detail in sections 3 and 4. In the next paragraph a brief description is provided.

A workshop process, like that piloted through Viewpoints, is especially valuable in seeding a new educational discourse. Like many discoveries, this process is both simple to administer yet powerful in its effects. The process starts with a curriculum issue or challenge identified by workshop participants, ideally a course team. When they come to the workshop, participants are assembled around a table on which a timeline worksheet is placed; they then engage in discussions about the agreed curriculum issue or challenge while touching, moving and placing the prompt cards on the timeline worksheet. In this way, it is the ideas on the prompt cards (principles and examples) that trigger, and shape the content of these discussions becoming social objects that serve as a focus for individual and collective meaning making. Indeed, the facilitator's role is minimal and mostly involves managing the workshop timing by moving the focus from the challenge, to the timeline, to the principles (prompts) and to the examples (prompts). The outcome of this process is a timeline worksheet populated with prompt cards and post-it notes with ideas and examples of implementation which serves as a record of the process for both the course leader and members of the team.

This process is especially valuable for a number of reasons. First, it begins a bottom-up process of change through the fostering of a new dialogue and new thinking around curriculum design. Secondly, the conceptual resources (principles and examples) facilitate the dialogue giving it focus, but also supporting meaning construction or the emergence of related educational discourses; for example, participants reported that the workshop process helped them maintain an educational rather than subject content focus, a learning-centred rather than teaching-centred focus. Thirdly, the process results in members of course teams exchanging ideas, creating new ideas, individually and collectively, and learning from each other. Fourthly, this process is seen as non-threatening and socially inclusive in that it is perceived as much a social experience as a work experience with members' activities not unlike those involved when one participates in a 'board game'. Fifthly, the workshop process and resources can easily be adapted to facilitate discussions about module-level and about course level designs. Lastly, the workshop process, moving from principles to examples and the use of a timeline, ensures that pragmatic design outputs are produced and recorded, some of which can be implemented almost immediately and others of which can be recorded and turned into policy or practice recommendations or guidelines.

Fundamentally, while it has been argued thus far that key factors in laying the foundation for successful change are the nature and relevance of the driving theme, the soundness of the principles, the clarity of their formulation and so on, it was in the workshops, thanks to the way in which they were designed and implemented, that all those conceptual elements were, effectively, 'given legs'. In other words, given the right conceptual resources, the workshops provided a highly successful catalyst for a shift in the discourse around topics and issues that matter not just in the workshop but also beyond, in relation to the wider educational agenda. Indeed, the workshops succeeded, impressively, in creating change locally but, importantly, in seeding change beyond the immediate participation experience. This is not, however, a process which goes wholly unaided, as it requires further support and management, as the next section discusses.

### **7.3.2 Other contexts of use: extending the reach of principles-based discourse**

If one intends to embed new thinking about educational and curricular practices institution-wide then it will be necessary to spread the discourse of principles beyond a single workshop or single forum and into other contexts. Ideally, there should be many formal opportunities for discursive activities relating to the principles in different settings and with different groups of staff. Also relevant here is that the principles, and the ideas ascribed to them, are referred to in forums where there are discussions about other educational agendas in the institution, for example, discussions about topics such as graduate attributes, employability, digital literacy, the first year experience and so on. A further issue of importance is that students are involved in discursive activities in relation to principles as they will have to own these ideas as well as academics and other institutional staff.

Whether these discursive activities do actually extend into other contexts will arguably depend both on the aspiration, scope and reach of the pedagogy embedded in the principles and on whether others in the institution perceive these principles as relevant and see links across these different agendas, or are exposed to them by those who are acting as the agents of change. Certainly such discursive activities cannot be contrived.

Through the Viewpoints project these discursive activities did spread naturally into other forums, into established processes such as revalidation, which is cyclical, course review and into staff development forums and events. There were also initiatives to devolve responsibilities for engagement with the principles into the Schools through the identification of co-ordinators who could run workshops and through School champions. The ideas have also been picked up and referenced through other processes through lifelong learning support and through course auditing processes. Also, at Ulster the PVC for Teaching and Learning has identified the links across these principles and their relevance to other agendas, graduate attributes and employability. Indeed, the PVC stated in the interviews that 'although there appears to be multiple educational agendas they are all inter-connected'. Furthermore, at Ulster students have been involved in such discursive activities through their involvement in revalidation processes and through the leaflets they produced for the student body which involved them in making their own interpretation of and commentary on the assessment and feedback principles.

### **7.3.3 Embedding the discourse in institutional documents and texts**

Moving beyond workshops and discussion forums, for this new discourse to have a lasting impact it will need to be embedded in institutional texts that define policies and in guidelines for the management of processes and procedures. Such referencing will ensure that these new discourses are legitimised and called on in other contexts, when discussions turn to other agendas and will ensure that they are referenced through related reporting processes and procedures. Such infrastructural embedding will be necessary for the new discourse to be sustained over the long term.

To ensure that the discourse is embedded within infrastructures, buy-in from senior officers will be necessary as well as from academic and support staff. Hence the message conveyed by the principles will need to be seen as worthy of strategic focus, and will need to intersect and interact with the wider educational aspirations of the institution, as discussed in earlier sections.

In the Viewpoints project, as in REAP before it, the assessment and feedback principles did seem to meet these criteria, as evidenced by their adoption into University policy by the senior officer responsible for teaching and learning. Also, in Viewpoints the assessment and feedback principles have been formally referenced in other documents, some of which specify formal procedures, including the teaching and learning strategy, revalidation briefing documents, the assessment handbook, the external examiners handbook and the module specification template and so on. Hence there are significant interconnections to other wider educational agendas. Indeed, it would

be difficult to completely avoid contact with this new discourse as a member of staff at the University Ulster.

#### **7.4 Some final considerations**

The model proposed above assumes that change can be achieved through interventions that involve the seeding and supporting of a new educational discourse. It identifies some conceptual and pragmatic tools and the conditions required for this change process to succeed. In particular it foregrounds the role of principles in such a process.

In concluding this section a wider issue is raised concerning the validity and legitimacy of harnessing principles as a means of changing the educational discourse across an institution.

It is undeniable that using principles in the way proposed in the model constitutes a deliberate attempt to privilege the emergence of one discourse over other possible discourses. This inevitably raises issues of power and legitimacy in terms of the potential for abuse, or perceived abuse, and the resistance it may engender, which can ultimately be counterproductive educationally.

On the other hand, if one assumes that within an institution the overwhelmingly shared ambition is that of improving education, then the challenge is to create the conditions which tap into this ambition and translates it into good practice, channelling the potential for tension and conflict into rich and productive dialogue for educational improvement. This is precisely the philosophy which informs the proposed model. The message carried by the theme, and the chosen principles should be genuinely an empowering one, for all educational stakeholders, including students; importantly, the principles should be designed not as a template to be slavishly followed, rather as ideas that point to a direction of travel for good practice; and crucially, opportunities must be created for the construction, co-construction and reconstruction of this seeded discourse, for its authentication by stakeholders at different levels in the institution, and for its dissemination through dialogue and through formal and informal texts.

In the Viewpoints project these conditions must have been met, given that the discourse was authenticated and disseminated by a large and varied constituency in the institution; arguably, this helps explain the Viewpoints project's success.

## **8. Conclusion**

This evaluation report has produced three main outcomes. First, it provided an examination of the extent to which the Viewpoints project has enhanced curriculum design activities at the University of Ulster and helped embed new educational thinking and practices institution-wide; secondly, it drew out some lessons from the evaluation that would inform Ulster's continuing work in this area; thirdly, it extrapolated a conceptual model that could be used by other institutions wishing to implement educational change in their own context, and by other agencies such as JISC wishing to support such change processes. Hopefully, the model proposed will open up new possibilities for, and encourage more research into, the design of transformational educational change initiatives. This is important given that, as some suggest,

*implementing organisational change is one of the most common, yet least successful undertakings of modern day organisations.*

(Kotter, 1995)

## 8.1 References

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## APPENDIX 1 Interview Schedules

### Background information

- Role, context of involvement with Viewpoints etc.

### 1. Experience of Viewpoints workshop process

- How did it work for you?
- Which features stood out for you?
- What was valuable?
- How could the workshop be improved?

### 2. The themes and their associated conceptual artefacts

- What themes and prompt cards did you use in workshops?
- Can you state the ideas (e.g. principles, other) on the prompt cards?
- What do you think their value is?
- If more than one theme was used by them in same or different workshops, how do the prompt cards differ, did they have different effects or results in use?
- How could the prompt cards be improved?

### 3. Beyond the Workshop

- What did you do as a result of the workshop?
- What were the outputs of the workshop?
- Did you do anything differently in your teaching after the workshop?
- Did you implement something new based on your experience in the workshop?
- If involved in revalidation, how did they workshop outputs get used?
- Have you used the principles in other contexts?
- Have you discussed these ideas or used these ideas with colleagues since the workshop?
- Did the workshop change anything regarding how you interact with colleagues about teaching?

### 4. Policy and Strategy

- Do you know what the university is doing in this area (assessment and feedback)?
- Have you been involved and how?
- Is it a good/bad thing? Why do you think this relates to the Viewpoints project/work?
- How could work in this area be improved upon, in your opinion?

For those who were not involved in workshops, for example, those from academic office or in a more senior management role, the interview schedule was adapted as in Table 2. Again however there was considerable flexibility in the path of the discussion given that the methodology was based on ideas from Appreciative Inquiry.

### 1. Knowledge of and involvement in Viewpoints project

- How were you involved in the Viewpoints project?
- How does Viewpoints relate to your area of work?
- How does the workshop process relate to formal processes, such as validation?
- To what extent has the university benefitted from the Viewpoints project?

### 2. Assessment and Feedback

- What is the university doing in relation to Assessment and Feedback?
- What is the vision?
- What influenced this development: how did it start in your opinion and will it continue?
- How are you involved in this?
- Can you name any of the University principles in this area?
- What is the value of having principles?

### 3. Outputs

- What do you think has been achieved through this work?



- How are formal and informal processes and procedures related?
- Can you identify any benefits so far?
- What more could be done?
- How could it be improved?

#### 4. Policy and Strategy

- Which aspects are you involved in?
- What has been done so far?
- What do you think the reaction has been across the university?
- Is it different from things that have gone before?
- What still needs to be done?