

# Charrettes for success – A case study of a collaborative workshop approach to driving curriculum change to address awarding gaps

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## Abstract

This case study presents the ‘charrette model’ based on work undertaken by the University Alliance (UA), but refined and implemented at the University of Portsmouth to address a key university objective to address awarding gaps between graduates of different ethnicities. First the model, and how it can be used to bring staff and students together to co-create solutions to awarding gaps, will be introduced. The model focuses on what happens in teaching spaces and curricula. We first outline how the UA developed and brought to ‘proof of concept’ a ‘sandpit’ focused on innovative curriculum development for the 21st century. Then the model was further developed as a ‘charrette’ for course teams and students to work together to address the awarding gap at university level. The case study goes on to present further development, where charrette participants concentrate on bespoke and tailored changes at course and subject level, and work with student ambassadors in a focused way. Finally, lessons learned from the roll-out of the charrette model are presented, along with plans for future development. The case study is intended to provide insight for how to implement a similar initiative in other institutions.

## Keywords

awarding gap, curriculum development, co-creation, student success, charrette

## Background

As members of the University Alliance (UA) Teaching Excellence Alliance we developed, and co-facilitated, with UA colleagues, a ‘sandpit’ for over 60 front-line teaching and learning staff. Sandpits are intensive discussion forums which drive lateral thinking and radical innovative approaches to address a shared problem. Frequently used by Research Councils in the UK, they are designed with a

fast-paced, highly interactive format to allow for cross-faculty/institutional interdisciplinary activity, for staff-student interaction, and

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for integration of external parties into university activity. The UA sandpit adapted the format and style of these sandpits and followed a similar process:

- Defining the scope of the issue
- Agreeing a common language and terminology amongst diverse backgrounds and disciplines
- Sharing understanding of the participants' expertise
- Using creative and innovative thinking techniques in break-out sessions to focus on a problem
- Turning sandpit outputs into a research project (in the UA case a programme design).

The UA sandpit took place in September 2017 with staff and student representatives from member universities, and was focused on curriculum development for the 21st century. As part of its initial work, the UA Teaching Excellence Alliance had identified a number of principles of distinctive practice of programmes in the UA, which were felt to result in unique learning experiences for students in UA institutions to produce graduates who are adaptable, knowledgeable and ready for work. The UA sandpit was designed to explore new and creative ways of using these principles to create curricula that exemplify the outstanding experiences offered to students at UA universities in terms of real-world learning and addressing societal issues. Therefore, as a group during the sandpit, we focused on the core principles which unite teaching practices at UA institutions. Then, using a range of prompts, we directed cross-institutional teams to conceive and plan an undergraduate programme, within 24 hours, addressing the problems of an ageing global population. This was based on the agreed shared set of values of all UA institutions about the importance of supporting each and every student, and of engaging with the world of work in the technical and professional education they provide.

The UA sandpit allowed us to develop to 'proof of concept', that is, to provide evidence, from this pilot of the approach, that it is feasible to use the 'sandpit model' for innovative course design.<sup>1</sup> At Portsmouth we then took the model and further developed it for wider use as a 'charrette', a collaborative design workshop, for course teams and students to work together to address the awarding gap between students of different ethnicities. Addressing the awarding gap was both a key University Strategy and an Access and Participation Plan (APP) objective. APPs in the UK are required by the government's Office for Students, and set out 'how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore the 'charrette model' presented here is not just applicable in the University of Portsmouth setting but also in the wider UK and higher education sector, as institutions address equality, diversity and inclusion.

## Context

Charrettes have long been used as collaborative workshop sessions to bring people together to rapidly design solutions to issues. The term 'charrette' originated in the field of architectural design and is described as 'a process of collaboration, intense dialogue and deliberation among participants to promote understanding and facilitate planning activity' (Kotval and Mullin, 2014: p. 494). Charrettes are frequently used in educational settings (Carlson et al., 2021) and were notably used in the 1970s in the United States of America to deal with the transition to racial integration in schools. According to Smith et al., (2020), as a community-based participatory research tool, charrettes are used as 'a collaborative planning process that harnesses the talents and energies of all interested parties to create and support a feasible plan that represents transformative community change. The goal is to accelerate research while providing technical assistance to enhance the

design, implementation and dissemination of community-engaged research'. Kennedy, 2017 meta-synthesis provides a set of characteristics of charrettes while Hughes' 2017 research proposes that charrettes effectively increase participation of multiple stakeholders and promote applied, creative problem-solving.

Given the educational focus on inclusion, and the collaborative, rapid-design, solution-focused methodology of charrettes, it was felt that employing this method was an enhancement on the sandpit for addressing the awarding gap in a university setting. Charrettes were therefore established as a co-creation mechanism to enable students and staff to work together to develop projects and initiatives to address the awarding gap between graduates of different ethnicities by making changes in curricula or teaching spaces at a university.

At Portsmouth, the enhancement of the student experience is undertaken by a leadership team which takes an authentic approach to leadership. The authentic leadership approach (George, 2003) means being clear about one's values, but also deliberately taking a step back to allow others the space to develop and voice their own views: 'Such leaders also solicit views that challenge their deeply held positions' and they are 'especially interested in empowering their followers to make a difference' (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leaders also allow others to develop the scope of the projects, and then enable these to be developed in genuine partnership. This is at the heart of the charrette model where we actively champion the role of students as 'active collaborators' (Dunne in Forward to Dunne and Zandstra, 2011: p. 4) and work with them as active partners (Bovill and Felten, 2016; Healey et al., 2014) in developing their higher education experience.

One of the four primary components of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011) is 'balanced processing of information'. An authentic leader 'objectively analyse[s] all relevant data before coming to a decision'. (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Balanced processing of information is thus key to our leadership of

the charrette model which is data-led. We gather relevant data and evidence that participants and facilitators digest before the charrette takes place. Enabling everyone participating to have a shared understanding of the issue being addressed.

At Portsmouth, data from two Office for Students (OfS)-funded projects, in which we had been partners (Basi et al., 2019; Office for Students, 2018), told us that:

- Institutional average awarding gaps may hide substantial variations and outliers
- Re-cohort data collected indicate that awarding gaps cannot be explained by a student's tariff on entry (qualifications) into university
- Staff and students who have growth mindsets are more likely to want to create inclusion and to overcome bias
- Universities should develop strategies to tackle awarding gaps using learner analytics to examine existing institutional data to better understand and address patterns of inequalities at the school (department) or course level
- Universities should be open about discussing awarding gaps and use evidence and research on awarding gaps to ensure students are not left with a view that they are at fault.

Our assessment of performance, which led to the setting of our University Strategy and APP targets and priorities in 2019, highlighted the need to focus on the awarding gap between Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and White students. This gap was above the sector average of 13%. In particular, we were concerned about the awarding gap between White and Black students which was 26% in 2017/18, compared to a national awarding gap between these groups of 23%.

Our University Strategy commits us to reduce attainment gaps: 'We will significantly improve outcomes for all, including our black and minority ethnic students, by providing an

inclusive and accessible learning environment where every student is engaged to fulfil their potential’.

In our APP 2020–21 we committed to:

- Ensuring that all our students, who have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, flourish and benefit from the education and student experience we offer, and achieve success
- Significantly improve attainment of BAME students, with a particular focus on black students, and males from the most deprived areas
- Improve access and remove performance gaps for other priority groups.

### Portsmouth Charrette model

Student-staff teams (where the staff are both from professional services and academics) are brought together to design a solution to a single *challenge* (the participants having undertaken some pre-reading and having understood the data in relation to the challenge). Inputs are provided in a staged way over a set period of time. The staff-student teams present their solution, with action plans and evaluation plans, and can then take the solution away for further refinement.

The facilitator team provide the pre-reading and data, and the staged inputs. They do not provide input to the design of solutions. Their role is to keep teams on track. Depending on the challenge, the charrette can be carried out in half a day, a day, or over a longer period of time.

In addition, two elements are provided to enable staff-student teams to focus on designing solutions rather than becoming fixated on elements they cannot resolve within the charrette itself. The ‘magic wand’ and the ‘car park’ (see below) are designed to prevent elements like institutional regulation, process and policy getting in the way of creativity for staff who are unable to make change at that level or in the charrette timescale. The participants can therefore focus on designing solutions, and decision-

makers and leaders can take away highlighted barriers or solutions and address them in a non-time-bound way.

Completed proposal action plans should address:

- How the proposal aligns to University Strategy, APP Priorities and Targets, or equivalent high-level strategic framing document.
- What the proposal aims to achieve – the problem you are looking to solve.
- Key features of the proposal and intended outcomes.
- How the impact of the proposal will be measured.
- Perceived barriers to change – what needs the ‘magic wand’ treatment – at either departmental/Faculty or institution-wide level.
- Anything that needs to go in the ‘car park’ – what is going to cause too much of a barrier to developing the action planned and needs to be parked for later consideration potentially at departmental/Faculty or institution-wide level.

### University charrette

At Portsmouth, we took a staged approach to implementing our charrette model. This was so that we could: socialise the model and familiarity with the awarding gap data; approaches to tackling it in partnership with students; and train up a set of facilitators to lead the charrettes at the later levels of implementation of the model.

The first step was to hold a University level charrette, which was centred on ways to improve significantly the attainment of students from minoritised ethnicities and backgrounds. This overarching focus was in line with our University Strategy and our APP objectives, as the Portsmouth charrette model we established requires. That is that, in an authentic leadership and data-led approach, we bring participants together to rapidly co-create curriculum

solutions to the challenge of awarding gaps framed by high-level strategic objectives.

We also specified that the focus would be on making changes in the curriculum and within teaching spaces, in line with outcomes from two OfS-funded projects in which we had been involved (Basi et al., 2019; Office for Students, 2018). See Context section above. These reports were provided to charrette participants as part of the pre-reading and also referenced in the welcome section of the charrette.

Thus, in the charrette, the facilitators made it clear to student and staff attendees that the challenge was that we have an awarding gap between BAME and White students above the sector average of 13% and that this is not acceptable. The pre-reading and data provided clearly indicated the nature of the awarding gaps at the university-level. In particular that the awarding gap between White and Black students was 26% in 2017/18, compared to a national awarding gap between these groups of 23%. It also highlighted, as our OfS-funded projects (Basi et al., 2019; Office for Students, 2018) recommended, that this was not about a deficit on the part of students, so we must examine and change what we do in our curricula and teaching spaces to address this challenge.

The University charrette took place in October 2019 at Portsmouth, where course teams and students worked together with a particular focus on black students, as highlighted in our institutional-level data. The morning session included action planning for ‘quick wins’ that would be achievable by the end of our first Teaching Block (there are two per term, each around 12 weeks). The afternoon session focused on more strategic planning for September 2020 or beyond, which also might require intervention at other levels and consideration of items needing to be given the ‘magic wand’ treatment or helped to leave the ‘car park’.<sup>2</sup>

All proposed actions were accompanied by action plans and evaluations. The set of solutions were available to all charrette participants. Examples of initiatives, projects and enhancements which have been developed include

assessment design, in line with the new Curriculum Framework Specification, known as Curriculum, 2019 (University of Portsmouth, 2018) and its new Assessment for Learning Policy which had just been launched. Also elements of personal tutoring which were fed into the new Personal Tutoring and Development Framework which we launched in June 2020. Longer-term actions and work which is part of some of our extended university-level projects continues. For example, we have longer-term projects being undertaken on the transition to higher education, and on developing an ongoing sense of belonging, which draw upon ideas surfaced through the charrette.

## Faculty/School charrettes

Following the University charrette, we implemented a cascade-effect, whereby University charrette participants were involved in running and participating in Faculty and School-level charrettes. Holding charrettes at these levels enables bespoke and tailored changes at course and subject level which is key to achieving change to address the awarding gap, and engaging staff and students with the issue without it feeling too theoretical. We implemented this staged, cascade-effect so that we could build on our work to engage and empower students and staff who had participated at the university-level. This included working with our BAME (later renamed People of the Global Majority, PGM) student ambassadors in the development and running of the charrettes and any resulting projects in a focused way. In 2020, the University and Students’ Union developed the BAME Ambassador scheme. The paid student ambassadors were attached to Faculties to undertake work related to supporting and improving the experience of BAME students. Their particular focus was on ‘decolonising’ the curriculum and diversifying the student experience.

The charrettes were directed in the same way, although over a shorter timeframe (half a day rather than a full day). Faculty staff

involved in running charrettes report that these were useful opportunities to anchor the conversation and align staff activity and priorities with Faculty plans and the University Strategy. A lead Faculty Associate Dean described the approach taken thus: ‘Our focus was to set out a data-informed approach to make it clear to staff just how much ground we had to make up. We were also very keen to ensure that colleagues were clear that there were institutional drivers for this’. The same Associate Dean summarised this as setting out ‘the national picture, the University picture, and then brought it down to department level, showing how the Schools and our Faculty ranked in our institution league table’. The Faculty staff leading charrettes at this level provided the rationale for the charrette approach, made space for focus, reflection and discussion. They were also able to ensure Faculty, School and course buy-in as they were able, as we had hoped, to look at the data and issues at the more local level, resulting in more informed action plans. The same Associate Dean highlighted how they engaged staff who would ensure change at the front line: ‘We stressed the importance of a level playing field for students and our commitment to support every student to achieve their full potential. We felt winning hearts and minds was vital if we wanted to see that trickle-down effect to bring about change on the ground’.

Empowered attendees at Faculty charrettes were then able to run their own departmental charrettes. They focused on identifying barriers; partnerships with students; course-level action plans; assessment changes for inclusivity; and proactive personal tutoring.

Specific changes that have been enacted at local levels include the following:

- Staff and students examining the content of modules and reading lists and making them more inclusive.
- The removal of examinations by one School.

- Names, images and scenarios in teaching have been made more inclusive.
- Design of new courses and modules incorporate a more inclusive and outwards-looking and global view.
- Courses undertaking Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA: <https://www.testa.ac.uk/>) workshops with some additional Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) questions.
- Courses using inclusive assessment toolkit to review assessments.

### Future plans and lessons learnt

During the Covid-19 pandemic, progress with running charrettes slowed, as the approach did not lend itself to being run in a socially-distanced way, or fully online. Now that students and staff have returned to campus, we have begun to run charrettes again. Our focus is particularly at the course and subject level and working closely with our PGM Ambassadors in Faculties.

One of the key lessons learnt is to fully train and prepare facilitators. A benefit of the cascade-effect of the charrette model is that staff and students who have participated in a charrette may become facilitators for charrettes undertaken at subject/course level. The cascade-effect is about winning both hearts and minds. The ability to work at a more local level with data at Faculty, course or subject-level, and obtaining buy-in for the approach, is certainly helped both by having facilitators who have experienced charrettes and/or who have been involved in projects to implement solutions which have been designed following a charrette. A key outcome of the charrettes is some community-agreed and owned projects which are then led by participants to deliver change related to the initial challenge.

Data can be challenging. Awarding gap data may be difficult to analyse and unpick, and it is a particularly sensitive topic. Nevertheless, charrette participants are required to understand it and then work with it in a

time-bound session. Facilitators need to move charette participants on from questioning the data and considering that anything regarding the students needs to be changed – hence our focus on what we do in our curricula and within our teaching spaces. One of the key benefits of undertaking the charrettes, at any level, is that they raise understanding of the student experience of students from minoritised ethnicities and backgrounds. The projects designed within a charrette are also designed with a project and an evaluation plan. As a result of some of the initial work undertaken at an institutional level, the awarding gap for Black students has reduced from 26% (2017/2018) to 19% (2020/2021). Students who undertook TESTA workshops with additional EDI questions said things such as: ‘I found that students with minoritised characteristics were able to successfully integrate in group work’ and ‘As a person with minoritised characteristics, I never felt that the environment was not inclusive’.

One of the other lessons we learned was how to fully involve students across the university as a whole. The students who were invited to take part in the first University charrette were those who had expressed an interest in the area of the awarding gap and belonged to the then student network of BAME students. This network was set up in partnership with the Students’ Union Elected Officer (representative) at that time. We also set up the University charrette with the Elected Officer who suggested the BAME network as the source of student participants. This was agreed for the purposes of developing student expertise among willing student participants. However, drawing from this one source could not represent the actual experience of learning, teaching and assessment within teaching spaces of a wide range of students. In addition, some of the invited students did not attend, meaning that the balance between students and staff was not as intended. Furthermore, against intention, some of the students from the BAME network expressed that they were expected to represent students and

ethnicities with an awarding gap rather than share their own experiences. The lesson learnt was to provide more training to the facilitators regarding the authentic leadership skills of soliciting views and developing others’ voices.

In later charrettes, further students from across the wider university were solicited, which was important in order to gather wider representation and experience. The new role in the Students’ Union, that was developed around the time of the first Faculty charrettes, that of BAME/PGM Ambassador, took an active interest in certain Faculties. We welcomed this and feel that this is a critical part of the charrette model. Student engagement and student voice in the process is key. As we have begun to run charrettes again post-pandemic, the role of the BAME/PGM Ambassadors in developing the local-level charrettes and supporting students to input into them is a central element.

The active involvement of students who wish to participate is exceptionally important, and they need to have some understanding of the issues – which, prior to the charrette, is provided by the pre-reading materials and accompanying data. Learning occurs for staff and students both before and during the charrette, and more importantly the innovation materialises within the open exchange of ideas from all participants. If we are to achieve student success for *all* students we must make it a joint endeavour. We must be clear on what we are trying to achieve and we must be focused on the evidence. As an ‘authentic leader’ the skill needed for a charrette facilitator is in ensuring that all voices are objectively heard, and that all ideas are considered and deliberated upon. However, the objectives need to be achieved, so, in some cases, opinions have to be managed and ideas reframed. The role of the facilitator is to create a space where: co-creation can occur; solutions are based upon evidence; and all voices are equal. This means that all participants must be made to feel like peers. Everyone should feel that their view is welcomed and solicited. Finally, everyone must focus on developing community-agreed and achievable solutions. Not all ideas will be



accepted for development, and there is a need for groups within the charrette to be brought to that understanding. Ideally, they manage that on their own, if not then the facilitator will need to help them arrive at that realisation.

## Concluding comments

How do we drive curriculum change to achieve student success for *all* and enhanced equality, diversity and inclusion? It starts with getting the right people into the room. Then giving them all of the information and evidential-data that they require. Give them both the time and the space to understand the issue and create innovative responses. Listen to them carefully, and draw out all of their ideas. Then institute projects and/or initiatives, which they will then lead, to implement the best, community-agreed ideas which have emerged from the process. If that does not result in enhanced equality, diversity and inclusion, then... loop, and try again.

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## Notes

1. University Alliance (UK) (2017) The Teaching Excellence Alliance (TEA) Sandpit: [www.unialliance.ac.uk/2017/10/19/the-tea-sandpit](http://www.unialliance.ac.uk/2017/10/19/the-tea-sandpit)
2. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/>

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