



## **'Activism On and Off Campus': Communication, Participation, Decision Making and Accountability**

**By Benjamin McElwee**

*In this project, students with lived experience of mental health problems tackled the issues they have identified as contributing to stigma and discrimination on campus, supporting off campus campaigns, and developing a network of mental health activists. More information on the project is available on the [About the Change Networks](#) page.*

The project aimed to work on campaigns reducing stigma and discrimination led, designed and delivered by students with lived experience. The National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland worked with three colleges and universities to support students with lived experience to take become Ambassadors and take a lead to direct projects that would have an impact on the issues that they themselves feel contribute to stigma and discrimination. Quotes in this report are from an interview with the Change Network coordinator.

### **Supporting people**

A key element to supporting people to participate and exert influence in the array of projects falling under the overarching project, 'Activism on and off campus', is "making sure that people don't feel pressured and don't feel alone." This is particularly relevant in the Forth Valley poster campaign where students faces are being used alongside descriptive words or phrases that they've been subjected to. Students were made aware that the student association at the college is there to support them. Similarly, all Student Ambassadors (at the 3 institutions) were encouraged to challenge stigma and discrimination - for instance by speaking to lecturers about their experiences - and made aware that "support is there and the support structures are there".

### **Tailoring the volunteering experience and training**

Another facet of how the overarching project supported students was, "making sure that people have [the necessary] skills." At the start, NUS ran "a volunteer training assessment, where [they asked students], 'What do you want to learn? What do you not want to learn? What do you want to do as a volunteer? At the end of the year what you like to have gotten out of [volunteering]?" In this way they knew what skills students needed and what they wanted to achieve. Thus, the training was fluid and dynamic in response to these factors, and "used quite a lot of the techniques that NUS would use to train activists," but with a mental health slant.

### **Training and techniques**

These techniques included community mapping (identifying allies and people that could offer support), along with identifying potential human barriers (people who might be encountered who would present challenges), and mapping out actions based on the desired outcomes (working back from the ultimate goals to identify potential means of achieving them.) NUS have "got a really robust training and support program in place."

Students were also linked up with people working on other campaigns (e.g. LGBT, black students, etc) so they could see "that there are lots of students working on lots of different causes... and they can be supported by [them]."

### **Case studies**

Related to this, as part of the training students were shown case studies of previous campaigns "that happened in universities and colleges across the world (ranging from the present to the past 2-3 years) so people could see what had been done and what worked or what had the potential to work in Scotland," and then from this they would be able to transpose previously effective campaigning strategies to their own institutions.

### **Personnel**

In terms of personnel, there was support available in Laura (the project leader), Jenny (the campaigns officer at NUS), and the expertise and staff found in the relevant students' associations and the NUS more broadly.

### **Involving people with lived experience**

All the people directly involved with the projects (staff members from the institutions, elected officers from the students' association, NUS staff, and student ambassadors) had lived experience, which "wasn't deliberate, it just happened."

### **Assets**

At workshops flipcharts featured prominently, along with post-its and "lots of haribo." Rooms in colleges and universities were used for the running of workshops, and cafes were used along with these for meeting up with students no longer studying.

### **Communication channels**

Social media was intensively used (e.g. different private Facebook groups at each institution) for planning and discussing actions, and also as a form of peer support. These groups were private as some students "didn't always want their role as ambassador to be known to the institution [because] there was a bit of fear there as being seen as a kind of troublemaker."

More external resources were tapped into as well, such as the geographical health boards (like NHS Lothian) and the local authorities to make sure they were aware that the project was taking place and what it was about, and also so that they could help advertise it (using Facebook, Twitter, and emails) to try and widen the net of potential student involvement.

In terms of internal communication, ambassadors were able to feedback what they wanted to do through the Facebook groups, whilst Laura maintained a role on the periphery - available for guidance and practical support (for instance in coordinating the printing of bookmarks at UWS, or being present at the Learning and Teaching Conference to assist the officers and ambassadors running workshops with anything they needed).

Students understood that they could use whatever means of communication best suited them to get in touch with colleagues, allies, and peers and they could meet at locations convenient to them. However communication has been a difficulty in the overarching project, because some of the elected officers are part-time and working different days, leading to the conversations being "more disjointed".

### **Decentralised decision making/centralised support**

The decision making process was decentralised in that students came to a consensus through debate online and in person at the workshops. Whilst students dictated the outcomes, NUS offered guidance in terms of focusing on the 'doable-ism' of project ideas, narrowing in on how realistic they were in terms of logistics and timeframes. This was primarily achieved at workshops, however if people came up with other ideas later on these were discussed through group email and Facebook conversations. If ideas were deemed unrealistic, the reasons were clearly outlined to students and alternative avenues were explored that would achieve the same or similar outcomes.

### **Shifting accountability**

Initially, accountability for delivering projects rested with the student ambassadors, however that was deemed to be "too much responsibility when they were dealing with so much else," and thus responsibility informally shifted to the officers at each student association and Laura and Jenny at NUS. Laura says that ultimately "when we're talking about stigma and discrimination at colleges and universities it mainly happens on the part of the institution, the college or the university, so they're accountable for making the changes that need to happen, [NUS and related allies] just need to be the ones that are making them be accountable," by directing the actions that bring about change. Indeed due to the low retention rates at these institutions, it wouldn't make sense for the accountability to lie with the students, especially if the project were to turn into a longer term vision.

### **Power dynamics and power**

In order to address the power dynamics within the project (for example between elected student association officers and students at the workshops), after some teething problems, the elected officers were left outside of the room because they had been too vocal previously relative to the students. This worked "a little bit better because although it's great to have their input at various points and they all have lived experience as well, it was more about the ambassadors and [being] informed by the students as opposed to informing the students which [was] a dramatic role shift for [the officers] in terms of a workshop." The other method was making sure that the students knew that it was their project "in terms of power - they had the power to design it and develop it and execute it and pass on the responsibility when they needed to."

One caveat to this, is that for the creative campaign, a brief that was formulated by the students was passed onto the Creative Industries Department, Whilst "the students need to know that it's their project to... carry out and carry on," the lines of communication haven't been completely upheld, and the finished product hasn't been seen although Laura.

### **How are people supported to participate/exert influence?**

- Accessibility: NHS health boards and local authorities externally communicated via social media and email to widen the potential network of student involvement at the start. (Along with advertisement by NUS, colleges and universities, and their related students' associations.)
- Logistical support/facilitation: support through a variety of communication channels including social media (private Facebook groups), email, and workshops.
- Training: Standard NUS training altered based on what skills and outcomes volunteers desired;

- Case studies: Previous campaigns that have taken place in the past 3 years around the world so that their methods may be transposed to campaigns at Scottish institutions.

#### **What resources are allocated to do this?**

- Personnel: Laura and Jenny at NUS, the elected officers at each students' association, University staff, student peers, and campaigning peers through communication channels: Facebook, emails, face-to-face.
- Meeting spaces: Rooms at the institutions, and local cafes.
- Training by NUS: Activism oriented NUS training with a mental health slant; case studies (see above)

#### **How are decisions made?**

- Students with lived experience made the decisions on what outcomes they wanted to achieve by discussions with each other and NUS at the workshops and afterwards.

#### **How do people with lived experience participate in/dictate the process?**

- Everyone involved in the project from the planning and campaigning side has lived experience.
- Students with lived experience and student ambassadors chose the actions and outcomes they wanted to achieve.
- NUS, the students' associations, and their elected officers offered guidance on methods, feasibility and logistics.

#### **Who is accountable/responsible within the Change Network?**

- Initially: Student ambassadors, however this responsibility informally shifted to
- Now: NUS as it was felt the responsibility was too much for the students whilst they had a lot of other things on their plate simultaneously.
- Ultimately: The institutions to enact the change.

#### **How have power dynamics been addressed in the change network?**

- Elected officers of the students' associations who had been present at the first workshops were excluded from subsequent ones in order to allow the voices of the students with lived experience to be amplified.