



## **Building Sustainable Networks around students: Sustainable, Flourishing or Transient? by Benjamin McElwee**

*For more information on the 'Activism on and off campus' Change Network, go to the About the Change Network section of the toolkit.*

### **Sustainable, Flourishing or Transient?**

During a discussion about whether the Change Network that has been developed by NUS (National Union of Students) for the Activism on and off Campus project was sustainable, Laura Caven, the project coordinator, felt that whilst it can be maintained to an extent without project activity, the focus will change in line with student officers' priorities and other funding streams.

Laura felt that flourishing might not be as necessary as sustainability, as when seeking change "we just need to get things done!" Furthermore, she said that the student movement is interesting, because effectively it entails skilling people up and changing attitudes and behaviours for them to take with them on to whatever they do after leaving education. As a result of this, the transient nature of the group, it is imperative that there is a consistent message and focus.

One of the benefits of having a network that will change each year, if not more often, was believed to be the fact that it meant the reach of the network was much more than just the sum of its (current) parts, "because people move on (taking with them the skills, behaviours, attitudes that have hopefully been instilled)". It's also a bonus that there are guaranteed fresh ideas as the people involved will change on a rolling basis, however sustainability is dependent on on-going projects/workers/funding.

### **The most important resources in supporting NUS network's sustainability:**

1. Administrative and/or practical support
2. Volunteers
3. Money and time
4. Talents and skills

N.B. The involvement of people with lived experience was felt to be a prerequisite or a positive inevitability as from NUS' experience the people who get involved are the ones with lived/living experience).

### **The greatest challenges to the sustainability of the network:**

- Funding for staff
- Competing priorities of officers and staff

Laura pointed out that, in terms of sustainability, NUS run specific programmes like Healthy Body Healthy Mind and Student Mental Health Agreements, which ensure that institutions maintain a focus on issues related to mental health.

### **How has the network changed and why?**

The network that was initially proposed in the Change Network grant application form has changed, as the NHS contacts who signed up were difficult to engage in this particular project. Laura is of the belief that the project might have been "too small for them to be interested in and they didn't perceive it to bring enough benefits to them." This might have been a missed opportunity as a recent report (Blank, 2015) looking at building sustainable health and education partnerships indicated how vitally important they can be for achieving better outcomes. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of cross-sector working and facilitating leadership opportunities, whilst ensuring that there are appropriate supports and services in place to enable wellbeing, holistically, for all students.

Laura also indicated that the institutions and students' associations who signed up "were difficult to keep engaged because of competing priorities and because none of them had any dedicated staff time for the project."

The network is dependent on staff at NUS Scotland continually encouraging and supporting the colleges, universities and students associations to focus their time and resources on it, providing workshops and training, and pulling together and sharing good practice. To an extent the projects developed over the year were dependent on officers and staff in those associations, but the projects are less of a focus than the overall messages and the overarching project aim: challenging discrimination at a structural and behavioural level in colleges and universities.

### **References:**

Blank 2015: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josh.12311/full>