Case study: Northumbria University embraces agility at its London Campus by nurturing agile Lecturers

Recognising a rapidly changing Higher Education landscape characterised by the emergence of new private sector providers, shifting student expectations of learning and teaching and increased focus upon skills development and the need for more flexible modes of delivery, the University has embedded an agile culture throughout the London Campus.

Agile Business Consortium

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Acknowledging its academic and professional support colleagues are critical to the success of the campus, the leadership team actively embeds and encourages an agile philosophy in its team.

Key points

Challenges:

- Increased student expectations of learning and teaching
- Increased focus upon skills development not just academic
- More flexible modes of class delivery
- Changing Higher Education landscape

Successes:

- Approachable friendly team
- Strong collaboration and everyone working towards a united goal
- Campus philosophy embedded through an effective onboarding process for both staff and students
- Innovation and change initiated through regular retrospectives and reviews
- Informal feedback from both students and lecturers – recognising provision is continually being adapted
- Semesters broken into 12 sprints

Northumbria University London Campus was established in 2014 with a vision to offer a research-rich and vocationally focused portfolio which recognised the distinctive needs of the London learner profile, rapid growth in digital technology, changes in opportunities for the way knowledge is shared, taught and absorbed, and the values and perceptions of Millennials and GenX and their relationship with HE.

In order to achieve the ambition, it was recognised that new ways of thinking and working were required. A partnership approach to the design, delivery and management of the learning experience was considered a beneficial way to ensure the campus has the appropriate skills, knowledge and most importantly mind-set to create a distinctive and evolving offer. A team-based approach at managerial, academic, student and professional support services ensures effective governance and maintenance of quality assurance processes at the highest levels. Such practices support the partnership code and best practice as promoted by the ambassador of Higher Education in the UK; the Quality Assurance Agency.

Quality is at the heart

Quality is at the heart of what the provision would be but it was essential the campus should be differentiated; the portfolio and way of doing things needed to be agile and shaped by the people who would deliver and engage in the provision. Whilst typical university governance and oversight remained in place the campus philosophy was designed around being a small, friendly, encouraging, technology-driven and supportive culture. This culture was embedded into all aspects of recruitment, selection and onboarding. It was essential everyone on campus had a shared understanding and commitment to the philosophy, values and passion being sought. It is the sharing of core values, open communication channels and access to competencies which act as the foundations of an agile culture.

Reflecting the pioneering work of Professor Pamela Eddy on how 'partnership capital' builds and shapes partnerships in Higher Education, Northumbria London Campus is a successful example of a partnership initiative. High levels of staff and student motivation support the sustainability of the partnership, its development and achievement of the agreed strategic goals. Trust and resource density have been key in the development of social capital at Northumbria London Campus which support a network of shared beliefs and norms within the partnership.

With all the staff invested in the campus ethos it was a natural transition to start implementing agile practices in how they teach.

An agile culture has helped adapt teaching to different cultures, student backgrounds and learning styles. Each class is different and by reflecting on student engagement, asking questions and receiving informal student feedback at the end of each class, lecturers can continuously inspect, adapt and evolve their teaching for next time.

Feedback

Feedback is given freely and enthusiastically, bringing to life the friendly and encouraging philosophy which embodies the campus.

This informal feedback is possible due to the campus culture helped by its smaller class sizes - typically 10-30 students. This also helps create a much more customised student experience as Lecturers can get to know all their students and support those who may not like engaging in larger classes by offering one to one support.

Lecturers and wider support staff are additionally empowered to make change, innovate and energise their provision based on the ongoing feedback. This ensures students remain at the heart of the campus and the vision of an evolving portfolio meeting shifting students expectations is achieved.

Learning and innovation

Learning and innovation is also encouraged between staff members. New staff are set up with a buddy system and are given the opportunity to peer review and learn from more experienced lecturers. Furthermore, an open office structure for the 60-70 lecturers and investment in meeting and social space encourages an open door policy and more fluid communication and collaboration. A weekly meeting is also held for lecturers to attend and share knowledge and feedback, whilst also interspersed with smaller module retrospectives and reviews, thus strengthening the team culture, accountability and productivity. The weekly local meetings are further enhanced by interventions offered by the partner institution at key stages of the student's learning journey. Such interventions are either top-down or bottom-up initiated and act as support mechanisms of the partnership capital and development of Northumbria London Campus.

Furthermore, by breaking the 12-week semester into sprints the module teams are constantly reviewing progress to ensure they have the highest quality and provide students with the best experience. Lecturers - especially those who are at the early stages of their careers - become more cognisant that they must constantly adapt and improve whilst they acquire more experience. Applying concepts of agile methodology to their teaching practice ensures that their own reflections are given a clear structure. University semesters also fit well with the methodology as teaching is divided in weeks, which can mimic the length of sprints in agile. Taking some time out for 'sprint planning' ahead of the week for example, ensures that lecturers understand what needs to be done and what should be prioritised. The module leader somehow adapts the role of a scrum master.

Sprint review and retrospective

The two key agile principles **'sprint review'** and **'retrospective'** guide lecturers in their teaching and interactions with students as well as their ability to self-reflect. Splitting reflections on their teaching in this manner allows lecturers to better analyse not only how they develop and deliver the content but also on their own interpersonal skills as tutors. The sprint review, is concerned mainly with the product itself in agile scrum methodology, however this is adapted in teaching to mean the content which is delivered and how well it is understood by the students. So the lecturers are constantly asking themselves questions such as: did we cover all the content/material we wanted to? Did the students understand it? Are students ready to move on to the next topic? These questions help tutors to monitor the learning and development of the students throughout the module on a weekly basis.

The sprint review is a critical part of the scrum agile framework and it is essentially a reflection on all things that affected the sprint, for example, what went well, what went badly, etc. Its application by tutors in their teaching

offers them the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practice, looking at what went well and what did not go well during the week. This reflective time allows them to ensure that they analyse not only what can be improved but how lecturers can really improve their teaching. The short time each week lecturers take to reflect on their review and retrospective help them in providing a framework for constantly improving their teaching practice. The open office and informal management and buddy support structures create an enabling environment for all tutors to implement change and ultimately improve upon their teaching practice.

Recognising the success of the approach, not only has Northumbria London Campus created an agile culture amongst the staff, the full post graduate suite has embedded an introduction to agile methodologies. Recognising continual feedback lies at the heart of this, with an introductory study skills module teaching students how to give and take feedback and to continuously inspect and adapt whilst working in sprints.

With the disruption of Covid-19 and universities having to shift all programmes online, Northumbria London Campus made the transition within a week, demonstrating its business agility. Online learning as a format is very different to classroom-based, however, with a 'can do' culture already embedded amongst students and staff the campus was able to respond without fear. All forms of learning shifted online and feedback mechanisms moved to one-to-one or group video call. A team of "e-learning champions" were further established to support staff and students and enable rapid response to the ideas and innovative thoughts of all stakeholders. Reflecting the agile culture of Northumbria London Campus, staff were already used to a self-organised, well-regulated and semi-autonomous work ethic which allowed for a swift and effective response to the uncertainty caused by Covid-19 and the introduction of new learning and teaching practices.

Results:

- High levels of student satisfaction
- A loyal and stable workforce
- Rapid growth in portfolio recognising market demand
- Growth in students numbers from 50 to 2000 in 5 years

Conclusion:

Recognising a rapidly changing Higher Education landscape and student body who require learning to be individualised, flexible, career relevant and contemporary in focus, the university has embedded an agile culture throughout its London Campus through the development of a close knit and responsive team who embrace feedback and recognise the opportunities change can bring. Campus Director, Dr Guy

Brown summarises this, noting, "we can only be successful through learning from our people, whether they are our staff, students or wider stakeholders. To achieve a culture whereby feedback is the norm, we needed to create a distinctive campus philosophy which shouted out 'we want to learn, we want to evolve and we want to continually be ahead of the game'. I am proud all of my team embrace this and as a result thrive on agility."

"The journey towards agility of course needs to be supported by a clear development programme which develops the tools and techniques to operate in such a manner. In instilling this culture we found the Learning Organisation model as a great way to articulate how we wanted to operate – a shared vision based around a team ethos supported by clear, tangible mental models".

How to find out more:

Northumbria University:

Northumbria is a research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. Northumbria is one of the largest universities in the UK with almost 34,000 students from 132 countries. Ranked top 50 in the UK for research power and had the 4th largest increase in quality research funding (REF 2014). According to Times Higher Education, Northumbria had the biggest rise in research power of any university in the UK.

Learn more about Northumbria University at:
www.northumbria.ac.uk

Agile Business Consortium:

The Agile Business Consortium is the leading not-for-profit professional body for promoting and enabling business agility worldwide. We work with partners and alliances to promote Agile practices, and to develop, curate and share Agile resources with the wider world. The direct descendent of the DSDM Consortium, we encourage an agnostic and client-centred approach to the use of Agile methods and frameworks.

We are the brains behind AgilePM®, AgileBA® and AgilePgM® and organise the longest running Agile Business Conference in the world. With the support of APMG International we have accredited over 300 training organisations worldwide and certified over 150,000 Agile Project Managers, Business Analysts and Programme Managers; and we're still growing.

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