Two years and counting..................

April 2020

All the kind messages I received via LinkedIn congratulating me on being the CTO at the University of Glasgow for two years made me realise that: two years have flown by; I’m loving living in Glasgow and being back in Scotland; and folks in HE are very generous, open and share willingly. My anniversary made me reflect on what we’ve done, what we have learned and what comes next?

I wanted to share the headlines from my reflections in the hope that they are helpful to others; for my contacts in HE and those in transformation roles. I am keen to get your feedback and connect with even more folks interested in these topics. So, please read on, comment and share widely.

What have we done?

I am acutely aware of the faith placed in me by senior leaders at the University of Glasgow when they appointed me and supported the creation of an internal team. Transformation in Higher Education is hard for lots of reasons; many of them rational and logical because of the devolved and complex nature of a university and some of them more emotional and harder to navigate. Of the many things we’ve achieved, the most important have focused on the foundations for change:

- creating a purpose led transformation team focused on facilitating and enabling change and an environment in which transformation can happen, helped by building capabilities such as user led design and Agile;
- engaging across the University by collaborating with academic colleagues, students and colleagues in our Professional Services functions; and
- growing the wider transformation community via our Change Network.

And we have delivered many projects with great outcomes:

- we worked with HR colleagues to improve our recruitment service – delivering a much better experience for both hiring managers and candidates;
- introduced a new student support service in collaboration with colleagues in Information Services – ReachOut – and a new service desk for staff;
- defined new ways to undertake assessment & feedback, led by academic thinking on policy and practice as well as starting to change the underpinning operational activity in terms of people, processes and technology; and
- we created a Responsive Solutions Service - to understand and resolve the day-to-day frustrations colleagues face, delivering small-scale changes rapidly. Recent work includes introducing a community of practice for core IT systems, introducing Agile ways of working and developing & sharing collateral to support remote working in response to COVID-19.

Of course, we have made mistakes along the way. We are not pushing hard enough if we are not making mistakes. It takes time to learn an organisation as complex as the University which poses challenges for a new team, therefore we won’t always get it right. So, we apologise, we learn and we do it better the next time (and we ensure that our mistakes are small and discrete).

What have we learned?

Change isn’t all about large-scale programmes of work; it’s as much about being adaptable, responsive and supporting change in all its forms. As someone who has led several transformations, I knew this, but I am increasingly struck by how important it is to focus on the people that make our University what it is. We need to work hard to understand their rational and emotional motivations as best as we can. This is about winning hearts and minds and we need to be good at understanding
how both work. We are therefore very aware of the language we use to talk about change, engage as creatively as possible with as many people as we can, listen actively and be bold and responsive in our delivery.

**What did we do when COVID-19 hit?**

Over the past few weeks, like everyone else, we had to quickly refocus our resources and attention to deliver important activities as part of the University’s response to COVID-19. We are not a big team in terms of actual numbers, so I’m really pleased that the team has been able to deliver quickly and collaboratively, working with colleagues across the University on activities that provided immediate support to our students and staff.

Some of the headlines from our work in the past month:

- Supporting new approaches to Teaching and Assessment: working with our academic colleagues, members of the Transformation Team have helped support the development and implementation of new online teaching and assessment approaches to enable the exam diet to take place. This has been a massive piece of work for everyone involved and a great example of how the University responds positively to challenge.
- Developing the COVID-19 Response Helpline - the team helped established a physical and virtual call centre - resourced with volunteers from across the University - in only 3 days. Almost as soon as the Helpline was up and working the team moved on to working closely with Information Services colleagues to design and implement the longer-term helpdesk functionality that is now ready to support the preparation for the exam diet. A great example of collaborative working.
- ‘Modern Ways of Working’ web presence - creating the information resources to support staff and students working from home: We all know that this is a challenging time in terms of having to move to remote working incredibly quickly and the challenges this presents for many of us. We’ve worked closely with IT, People & Organisational Development, Communications and Change Network colleagues to develop and share materials that focus on health & wellbeing and modern ways of working.
- Planning to get through this – as you would expect from a team that includes project management in its kit bag, we have been supporting senior colleagues to develop the medium-term plans that will enable us to move out of the initial crisis period and take the necessary steps to establish our ‘new normal’.

As the UofG Transformation Team, we must demonstrate we can adapt quickly and flex to deliver new priorities. The crisis meant pausing some of the larger-scale projects that we had in progress. We are determined to continue to focus on those activities that support our staff and our students during this challenging time.

**What happens next?**

In the main, it has always been and will always be, about the people and that persists even if the situation is radically different to what any of us might have imagined. Oh, and I’ll be working hard to ensure the Transformation Team provides as big a nudge into ‘digital’ for the University as we can. I’ll come back to this in a later post.

I hope this was of interest; it was certainly cathartic for me to look back on two years as part of looking ahead. Please comment and share. I look forward to hearing from you.