**The death of a course: a case study of degree closure**

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**Abstract**

As marketisation, stratification and performance measurement besiege Higher Education, managing change becomes a critical leadership and administrative skill. Managing the student experience and organisational reputation take on renewed significance. Yet whilst much attention is paid to quality assurance and validation processes as Higher Education seeks to develop programmes that address stakeholder demands, little work has been done that looks at course closure. It is suggested that fresh perspectives drawn from change communications scholarship, can provide practical value to university leadership teams. In particular, by recognising course closure as a form of trauma, then universities might be better placed to communicate with and support students on closing courses.

**Keywords**

course closure, grief, change communication, trauma, student experience

**Introduction**

This article focuses on course closure and is based on an exploratory qualitative study conducted with students in the final year of their closing programme. It explores student experiences and recommends approaches that will maintain student satisfaction and engagement, whilst contributing to organisational reputation.

In the current political economy of marketisation, performance measurement and stratification (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017), managing and administering change is integral to academic leadership and the student experience. There has been much focus on quality assurance and validation processes, but less attention paid to course closure. By drawing on insight from change communication literature, course closure can be investigated from an interdisciplinary perspective, to provide practical value to university leadership teams. Change is seen as a critical management and administrative skill (Cornelissen 2011; Quirke 2008) and reflecting on change within different organisational settings has value.

The paper, therefore, aims to bring fresh conceptual insight to the little-researched subject of degree course closure. Firstly, it looks at the literature on change reflecting on the insights this can provide course closure teams, before investigating a specific course closure case, categorizing the types of issues that were raised by students. It then brings these insights together to recommend course closure approaches.

**Context**

***Defining change***

Organisations are often in a state of flux as they adapt to complexity and stakeholder demands (Cornelissen 2011; Quirke 2008). Change involves a disruption of the status quo. Trice and Beyer (1993, 395) describe it as a ‘disequilibriating process’ requiring a break from the past, where cultural continuity is disrupted. Restructuring and altering products and services are key examples of change. Sometimes change is comprehensive affecting the entire organisation, whilst on other occasions it can be localised or even gradual (though cumulative over time). In other words, change can be evolutionary (slow) or revolutionary (quick), as suggested by Greenwood and Hinings (1996).

We argue that course closure usually falls into evolutionary change, given the need to close a course to new intake, then teach out the remaining year groups. Although if a number of courses are closing simultaneously (for example, as the HEI modifies its service offering), then the organisational structure may alter completely, making it substitutive change, which prompts an entire redefinition of vision, mission and values.

***Communicating change***

Communication is fundamental to the way change is formulated, explained and successfully implemented. In our study the key stakeholders are students and academics that have been involved in course closure. Consequently, change communication needs to be part of the closure strategy.

Kübler Ross (1969) likened change to grief, arguing grieving people go through five phases: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance. She argued individuals involved in change experience trauma. We suggest good communication can support and facilitate this grieving process in the context of course closure. Often change implies negation of what has gone before leading to confusion, concern and hurt. We suggest students and academics should be encouraged to celebrate the past, to better accept decisions about the future. Understanding this cycle of grief may be helpful for imagining how students and staff may react to course closure, and useful in shaping the accompanying communications with sensitivity.

Additionally, scholars (Argyris 1999; Kotter, Rathgeber, and Mueller 2006) stress the importance of communicating a clear vision and mission as to why the change is necessary, whilst understanding the importance of relationships and relevant networks. We advise that communicating a clear vision about how course closure fits within a bigger picture, and highlighting the significance of student networks and course relationships beyond the HEI should be built into the closure process. Such an approach would address concerns that organisations struggle to communicate and embed change well (Wheatley, 2006; Quirke, 2008). Part of the problem appears to be the failure to turn rhetoric into specifics, with too much focus on the rational rather than emotional. This is at odds with standard best practice approaches (e.g. Gray and Castles 2006) stressing the importance of inspiring, informing, listening and deeply involving stakeholders in times of change.

Work on codifying communication strategies (Clampitt, DeKoch, and Cashman 2000; Smyth 2007) suggests a variation between a focus on telling and selling information and one based on inclusion and co-creation. Those focusing on the latter tend to cultivate willing collaborators contributing to successful change. For localised course closure, greater collaboration is clearly possible allowing for communication rather than mere distribution of information. Communication implies a higher level of mutual understanding and trust (Elving 2005; Grunig and Hunts 1984) based on two-way, symmetrical communication and conversation. We suggest student trust is a key course closure issue, so communicating (not merely informing) is vital for a positive experience. This requires a particular style of management. Somerville and Mroz (1997) and Heifetz (1999) suggest change requires supportive, collaborative and adaptive leadership qualities. These are qualities to reflect on when choosing course teach-out teams.

***Making sense of change***

Key to change communications is sense making which describes how people seek plausibility in understanding ambiguous or confusing events (Colville, Brown, and Pye 2012; Maitlis 2005; Weick 1995). This has relevance to any study addressing organisational culture and how people understand what is happening around them. Sense making requires mental understanding, a social dimension with people-to-people interaction and a discursive element. To make sense of situations people need to digest initial communication and have conversations and concerns recognised. We argue this is how students will best understand what is happening to their course. Interpersonal communication is critical (van Vuuren and Elving, 2008). The manner and style of interpersonal communication becomes even more relevant when the academics involved in course closure are themselves facing uncertain futures.

***Change in HEIs and student identity***

Change is radically transforming higher education (Wilms and Zell 2003) and they argue HEIs are often ill-equipped to respond effectively especially at an operational level. In particular, Stensaker et al*.* (2013) suggest that strategic change is challenging, as HEI staff tend to be driven by social values, with high levels of negotiated functioning and decision-making ability.

Nonetheless, change is a continuing feature of a HEI landscape fuelled by reforms. We suggest that change within HEIs needs to be linked to student satisfaction and engagement as well as quality assurance. For Eagle and Brennan (2007) the student as consumer is an accepted factor of higher education, accompanied by a consumerised notion of quality (Dean and Gibbs 2014). They point to performance indicators of student satisfaction, rather than learning or scholarship. Educational consumerism seeks to satisfy tangible manifestations of a satisfying consumer experience, including value for money, and measurable outcomes such as cost efficiencies, academic papers per scholar, contact hours, turnaround times etc. This then drives higher education policy and strategy via systems such as Excellence Frameworks, the QAA and the NSS.

There is connection between these quality assurance frameworks and what it means to be a graduate and the employability benefits this brings. Holmes (2013) talks of an identity focused approach to students, whereby individuals become a graduate not only through their university experiences, but also via how they present themselves (and are therefore viewed) as graduates. University is part of a wider identity transformation process. Students on closing courses may feel deeply concerned about employer perceptions of poor quality and wasted money. Their ‘finding of a life course’ (Dean and Gibbs 2014, 8) has been disturbed, as has how a university contributes to students’ emotional development (Hamshire et al. 2017). It is this interruption that contributes to the idea of trauma.

We argue that the ability to sensitively and coherently manage the student offer, against the backdrop of ever re-validating, changing and closing courses, should become an integral feature of academic leadership. The literature indicates an opportunity to synthesise the scholarship from change communications into the HEI environment to provide fresh insights.

**Research approach**

Our inductive, exploratory case study (Merriam 1998) consisted of ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Seven students from a single closing undergraduate degree course were individually interviewed; as were three academics involved in other UK degree course closures. Semi-structured interviews allowed specific topics to be raised whilst allowing variation to take into account emergent ideas. A student focus group was convened, where students were asked to consider their thoughts and feelings around course closure, first via writing on Post-it notes, then in group discussion.

Qualitative studies are subjective and can lead to bias so both researchers embedded reflexivity. A single course case was felt most appropriate at this exploratory stage. Yin (2003) advises this may be suitable if it provides an opportunity to observe and analyse a phenomenon that perhaps is under-explored. Although this reduces generalisability it does bring rich insights. Thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) was used to analyse data. Initial themes were identified and put into categories (open coding). This then moved to conceptual coding, reflecting on the terms and language used by interviewees (Strauss and Corbin 2008) to establish first order basic themes. The analysis then moved to axial coding, where relationships were sought between the concepts to create second order themes. Finally, these themes were consolidated into several overarching global themes.

Ethical considerations were informed by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) and Miles and Huberman (1994) and embedded into each stage of the research process including: ensuring privacy, voluntary participation, informed consent, transparency, confidentiality, anonymity and reducing potential embarrassment, stress or harm. Care was taken to reduce participant error and bias through clarity and reassurances of anonymity. To improve validity, the two data collection techniques were used, full transcripts produced and reflexivity embedded. There are clear limitations: it is a single case, although informed by wider experiences from the academics interviewed. We do not claim that all students have the same experiences of course closure.

**Research results**

Two global inter-connected themes emerge with university management and staff showing a perceived lack of empathy and understanding of the student experience and needs. This was compounded by an apparent lack of communication and engagement with the student body.

***Global theme one: Perceived lack of empathy and understanding of student needs***

Students felt concerned and worried when news of the course closing and the departure of course leaders came out. This was amplified by the limited communication between the university, departmental and course staff and the student body, with some students not realising until a few weeks before the start of the final year that the course was closing and existing staff had left.

*Organising theme: Uncertainty*

Uncertainty tended to stem from not knowing who was going to teach on the final year and whether suitable academics could be found. As student 3 said:

I said to X, who are you going to find in two weeks and who is in charge of recruiting?…is there a department for course closure, who are they to know what we need because the people who did know that are gone.

Student 6 reinforced concern about continuity:

…it is that you lose the continuity, you build a rapport with the teachers, you know what they like, what they don’t like, then you have to go into the final year - the most important year - and you have to work out their marking styles and different teachers go hard on you [for different things].

Some students described feelings of abandonment. Student 4 said: ‘quite selfishly, first instinct was, what are we coming back to?’. This unsettling ambiguity was echoed by three other students. One comment from the Post-it note exercise stated: ‘Abandonment – I came back from placement to a new department, new tutor, new class and had no preparation or information about the year’. This was reinforced by student 3 who asked her departing tutors: ‘Why are you abandoning us? Now what?’. Other comments included: ‘concerns brushed under the carpet’, ‘the unknown’ and ‘let down’, with one sticker clearly stating that there was a ‘lack of understanding of the cohort needs’.

*Organising theme: Worry*

Related to these concerns was worry about whether the course had closed due to poor quality; and how the degree would be viewed by employers and lack of visibility on the university website. This led to concern that their degrees might be devalued. As student 8 said: ‘I was obviously concerned that when I graduate with my degree in [X]… is it still going to have some sort of validity? …and I am worried that I may have to argue my case’. This was echoed by student 7 who argued: ‘It was worrying because like when you search our course it doesn’t come up and you like get certificates when [you] graduate, but I don’t know how good it looks to employers’.

As the students were never given any reason why the course was closing they tended to assume it was due to poor quality. As student 4 suggested: ‘It makes you feel almost that you have chosen the wrong course. Why is your course closing, is it not good enough, something the matter with it?’. This led to students reflecting on their chosen discipline, student 6 stated:

It affects how you feel about what you have been trained in. So, I feel very strongly that I want to do [X]. I think you can make a good living in [X]. It is a lovely career to have if you do it right. Then to have somebody tell me that the [X] course is closing makes me feel… well have I come to university at the wrong time, not a viable career, why is it shutting down?

Student 4 neatly summed up feelings: ‘Uncertain, apprehensive, uneasy and confused and never had an explanation as to why it was closing’. The vacuum of concrete information was filled by anxiety and self-doubt.

***Global theme two: Lack of communication and engagement between university and students***

There was a perceived lack of communication between the university and students with students feeling they were invisible with no voice and that the university was deliberately keeping silent.

*Organising theme: Student invisibility*

It was apparent that students felt ignored during the process of course closure. During the Post-it note session, the comment was made: ‘felt irrelevant and unimportant’. In particular, those students on placement felt completely invisible. As student 3 said:

I was on placement and I texted my friend from the course who was graduating and she said by the way [X] and [X] are leaving and they are just telling us now, but that was about them going not about course closing... I was on holiday from placement (in summer before term starting) and I texted my friend and she said about the course closing.

Also, students felt they had no voice. As student 6 said: ‘Students opinions are not taken on board. They are dismissed’. All students felt that they could at least been have given an opportunity to comment on the course closure. Not because they could stop the decision, but that feedback about the course, what worked and what worked less well could be useful. As academic 2 said: ‘Students and their experiences are important to harness’. This was reinforced by student 6 who argued:

We should have an opportunity to give feedback, give opinions, not so that people can shout and roar, and say this is awful and argue but just so that they can say OK what would you prefer to happen…more of a role in general.

This linked to the idea that students felt disregarded and disrespected - one Post-it note stated: ‘extremely unprofessional conduct from the university and teachers’. As student 4 mentioned: ‘not having any communication is quite disrespectful*’*. This was reinforced by student 6 who said: ‘[it] felt very disrespectful….it was kind of we will tell them if they find out’.

*Organising theme: Organisational silence*

All students agreed that they had no formal communication from the university informing them that the course was closing. As student 5 said: ‘there was no formal way of telling me it was closing. I didn’t know it was closing [until coming back from placement]’. This was reinforced by student 4: ‘There wasn’t anything formal just someone else had said – other girls who had been on placement had mentioned it – had nothing formally from the university that the course was closing’. This lack of communication appears to have fuelled all other issues surrounding course closure and contributed to the concerns and worries. As student 7 said: ‘I think everybody should be addressed formally with a letter probably to say it is closing’, to address any fears. As student 6 stated: ‘It is our degree, it is our choice to be here…we should have been spoken to. There should have been some sort of meeting. Should be some sort of communication in a formal sense’.

This then created a vacuum in which students messaged and texted each other with news of the course closure seeping out primarily prompted by the departure of the course team. As student 6 reiterated: ‘It was word of mouth and Facebook messaging hearing different things’ and as commented by student 4:

There was one person we knew from the previous year on the course and her attitude was “well, you will know when you get back”. As if we had over-reacted. But at the same time, it is quite a big deal.

This paper focuses only on the student experience but we highlight briefly two other global themes as they connect to the sentiment above. Firstly, students mentioned the energy and enthusiasm of the temporary contracted teach out programme leader. When talking about the final year experiences on the course, all students mentioned their growing confidence to go out and to do the job they had studied, and their course leader’s commitment to them. Student 8 said: ‘I don’t feel it is a dying course’, and student 5 who said: ‘I think they just need to make sure that nobody is leaving with any worries, they are on the right track, they know what they want to do’. This connects to a key point made by the academics, that often they felt they were left to deal with organisational failure and it was their resilience and commitment that ensured the course closure worked and student experience was maintained. As academic 1 said: ‘I was never actively given anything to follow in terms of process’, and this was reinforced by academic 2 who said: ‘I had no practical or emotional support for course closure’. There are wider lessons here for the HEI community in terms of how it supports those who teach on and lead closing courses.

**Discussion and analysis**

This section draws together the findings and discusses these against the literature. It reflects on the key threads that have emerged and how they contribute to understanding how students feel during course closure.

***Poor communication around course closure***

Despite scholars (Clampitt, DeKoch, and Cashman 2000; Cornelissen 2010) suggesting best practice approaches to communicating change, these do not appear to have influenced the way course closure is communicated to students. Indeed, if anything communication tended to be non-existent, withholding information, resulting in rumour and speculation. This is far removed from the recommended approaches of collaboration and engagement. As student 8 described: ‘it was rumours mostly, but [X] confirmed it was [closing]’. This directly contradicts HEFCE’s good practice guidance and indeed statements found in university quality documentation. That is not to say that pockets of good communications do not exist (as proposed by academic 3), but we tentatively suggest that these may not be the norm.

It is clear for the students that course closure is serious change, and although this may not necessarily be considered revolutionary, students did experience disequilibrium (Trice and Beyer 2003). It produced anxiety, a fear that what had been taught had been of poor quality, as well as concerns that they may not graduate. As student 6 said:

Worry about them not being replaced… and then having to put the degree back and then that affects student loans…then worry [about being] thrown into a different degree course and we would have to finish off learning something [we’re] not familiar with in our finals and that would affect our marks. Then there was the worry that we wouldn’t have any teaching at all and settle with us having a foundation degree. A lot centred around whether we would graduate and what we would graduate with.

Students in the study experienced trauma and needed to go through a process of acceptance (Kübler Ross 1969). Scholars stress the importance of recognising the need for the change - these students were never told why the course was closing. This contributed to them not being able to make sense of what was happening. Making sense of change is vital (Colville, Brown, and Pye 2012; Maitlis 2005; and Weick 1995). As this did not happen it led to confusion, misunderstanding, rumours and lack of acceptance. All affect student satisfaction. Course closure links to ideas around evolutionary change (Greenwood and Hinings 1996). This lends itself to a course closure communication strategy that allows for gradual acceptance by the student body, staff and other stakeholders. We believe this would minimise reputational damage.

***Prioritising process over student needs***

Despite the university (and others) having processes that align to the HEFCE best practice guidance of transparency, informing and consulting with students regarding course closure this does not always happen. This supports the view of Wheatley (2006) that organisations seem to struggle with doing change well. This may be because management lack a deep understanding of the importance of organisational culture and stakeholder engagement. This reinforces the view of Wilms and Zell (2003) and Stensaker et al. (2013) that HEIs struggle to implement change effectively. That said, where change appeared to be more successful, as suggested by academic 3, it was because the direct senior manager in charge understood the importance of supporting the frontline staff. As he said: ‘I have spoken to others… they don’t always feel supported and feel cut adrift… they are going down on a sinking ship you know, but I have never experienced that’.

Given the importance placed on dealing with the new political economy of higher education (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017) HEIs do not seem particularly well placed to manage change at either a macro or micro level. Our study suggests that at a micro level change may be viewed as a mechanical “box ticking” exercise, where the human dimension is ignored. This supports Elving’s view (2005), arguing there is a difference between information (one-way transmission) and communication (two-way engagement). This must include engaging the student body when course closure takes place. If effective change requires greater collaborative and adaptive styles of leadership (Heifetz 1999) this may be something for HEIs to nurture. We caution against HEI course closure processes that focus on the procedural, rather than maintaining a high quality student experience.

There appears to be a dichotomy. Given the pressures as articulated by Schulze-Cleven et al. (2017) caused by marketisation (i.e. student as customer), indicator-based evaluations (i.e. student satisfaction surveys) and stratification, it would have been envisaged that HEIs would place these drivers at the heart of course closure processes. This appears not to be the case. Not engaging with and discussing student concerns (including their employability) seems disconnected with the purpose of HEIs in terms of turning students into graduates, irrespective of whether or not a course continues to exist. Returning to Dean and Gibbs who suggest universities contribute to students ‘finding of a life course’ (2014: 8) then it is understandable that students will react negatively if they feel this is undermined. Course closure needs to be seen as interrupting a pre-planned stepping stone that a young person has chosen as part of their development and identity construction. It should be handled with empathy.

***Successful teaching-out is based on chance***

One of the reasons Wilms and Zell (2003) and Stensaker et al. (2013) assert that HEIs find change challenging is because of the social mission and values of the academy. We suggest it is precisely *because* many frontline staff within the academy have passion and commitment for their subject and care for the student body that organisational failure is rarely addressed. Academic 1 revealed that he could have moved on but was committed to staying with a course that was closing down. Academic 2 gave up a permanent role within a university to take on the role of teach-out course leader thereby effectively becoming redundant. Academic 3 who had a supportive senior management recognised that he had been lucky. The new course leader for the programme on which this paper is based was found by chance. In none of these cases did a strategy appear to be in place that would maintain a high quality student experience on the courses in question.

If organisations including HEIs are constantly adapting to their environment (Cornelissen 2011; Sculze-Cleven et al. 2017; Quirke 2008) then senior teams within HEIs should not leave change, and course closure, to serendipity. In this respect, the organisational culture of HEIs must see change as an experience rather than a process and as such create a culture that places students and staff at the heart of the change process. We argue that HEIs fail in part because they have difficulty turning rhetoric into specific actions (i.e. putting in place the type of reassurances students need); and also because they do not recognise the centrality of emotion (Quirke 2008) when designing the processes behind course closure.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

This study aimed to understand the feelings of students involved in course closure and to make practical suggestions. Students are concerned and worried by closure and display a range of emotions akin to grief as they register what is happening, often feeling shock, fear and sadness. Then they start to think about its impact on them, before realising that in fact their university experience will continue and they will get their degrees. This cycle of coming to terms with the situation needs to be explicitly supported. Often communication was non-existent or failed to address student concerns allowing speculation to flourish. Although our study did suggest that this may not always be the case, formal communication tended to be left to those managing the end of the course, rather than occurring when the original decision is taken. In terms of best practice approaches, this is a small-scale study so it is ambitious to proclaim how to teach out a course, but two key elements appear to be critical. Firstly, clear, transparent and early communication, engaging with students to address fears, and then putting in place regular, on-going, open communication channels. As part of this communication, building in opportunities to celebrate the course, its successes and the students’ futures are important. Secondly, putting in place a teach-out team (whether existing or temporary staff) that will be as passionate and committed as if it were a regular final year. This needs to be properly planned, with senior management commitment and support, and not left to chance. Indeed, we suggest senior management could use such change opportunities to nurture and professionally develop academics that wish to progress towards course leadership positions.

This is a small-scale, qualitative study. Work needs to be done across the sector to gain a better understanding of how many students annually get affected by course closure, and undertake a more detailed analysis of how HEIs in the UK manage this. This would enable more detailed practical guidance for course closure to be produced. Within individual universities, better support for staff in terms of managing the student experience and how to address the questions posed by students would prove useful. At the same time, exploring the cycle of grief as outlined by Kübler Ross (1969) and adapting this to the HEI sector appears to be a useful way to start to understand the students’ emotional journey, and how best the university can support them during this challenging experience.

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