A good practice guide to Action Learning in Higher Education
Welcome to Action

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This guide is aimed at Organisational and Staff Developers in Higher Education who would like to set up an institutional or cross-institutional action learning programme.

It was developed as a result of the success of a collaborative action learning programme designed and delivered by a group of universities in the North West of England.

We would like to thank the Leadership Foundation for supporting the development of this guide.

Our intention was to develop a guide that is accessible, interactive and provides you with the methodology, templates and resources to run your own Action Learning project.

The members of the project team (pictured below) contributed to this guide and would be more than happy to answer any queries related to it.

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We wanted to enable a group of universities to deliver cross-institutional Action Learning to enhance our networks and communities of practice. Agreed objectives were to set up an initiative supporting women in the first instance; adopt a project management approach to maximise sustainability and evaluate the project to be able to demonstrate impact. At each session set members were able to raise and discuss challenges, problems and opportunities they were currently facing and the sets worked together to question and coach their colleagues to determine their own options for resolving the challenge, problem or opportunity.

Discussions commenced early in 2015 and we worked to establish a consistent approach to the initiative, with a website and communications, marketing, recruitment and delivery strategies to support the programme which was officially launched in October 2015. The Action Learning sets met four times between October and June 2016 with a second cohort beginning in October 2016.

Action Learning Set meetings were held at all the participating HEIs to encourage staff to broaden their knowledge and understanding of other universities in the region, as well as creating the opportunity to visit other institutions. Meeting rooms where Action Learning sets could be held were arranged at University of Liverpool, University of Chester, University of Central Lancashire and Liverpool John Moores University.

The Action Learning Sets were aimed at female staff. The cohort initially comprised of 42 participants from academic and professional services, who registered to join the programme from seven universities in the North West: Chester, Cumbria, Huddersfield, Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores, Manchester and University of Central Lancashire. Participating institutions set their own criteria but on the whole the offer was promoted to those holding management, senior administrative, lecturer and senior lecturer positions. A target group of participants already existed in some universities (via Aurora alumni). Facilitators were all Organisational Development/Staff Development Professionals from participating universities and it was agreed that facilitators would rotate between sets.

Project Team: Meriel Box, Karen Chubb, Gemma Coombes, Gemma Edwards, Tracy Ellis, Denise Fieldhouse, Nikki Lambourne, Annette Robinson and Martin Plant

Athena Swan
Aurora
Leadership Foundation
One of the key advantages of running a programme with colleagues from other Higher Education Institutions include the participants being exposed to a variety of differing perspectives and the chance to gain insight into practice at a range of organisations.

Members of the Action Learning Sets said they felt less constrained if they were with people who they didn’t know as they were able to express themselves more openly about work-related issues.

Other benefits they discovered included:

- Setting realistic goals
- How to approach issues from different perspectives
- Issues can be shared to be solved
- Improved questioning skills
- Resisting the urge to suggest a solution
- Increased confidence
- Learning to listen and reflect
- Finding a flexible approach to solve problems

Facilitators also reported personal and professional benefits from involvement with the programme. The most obvious was the chance to practice Action Learning facilitation skills. In addition, as the facilitator role rotates, there was also the advantage of hearing multiple issues, intended actions and resolutions, broadening the facilitators’ understanding of the breadth of challenges that exist within institutions.

In a word...

Facilitators’ one word feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Absorbing</th>
<th>Transformational</th>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
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<td>Satisfying</td>
<td>Useful</td>
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Participants’ one word feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enlightening</th>
<th>Collaborative</th>
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<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
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Download a PDF of the benefits of Action Learning at www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk
What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is an approach to solving real problems that involves taking action and reflecting upon the results, so helping to improve the problem-solving process. It requires a group of people (a set) who are supportive of one another to meet over a period of time to listen to, ask questions, take action and provide feedback with the objective of individual and shared personal and professional growth.

Professor Reg Revans (pictured above, 1907 – 2003) pioneered Action Learning, widely considered to be one of the most important ideas in the field of organisational development.

His influences included his experience training as a physicist at the University of Cambridge. In his encounters with talented scientists he realised the importance of each one describing their own ignorance, sharing experiences and communally reflecting to learn. He then developed the method in the 1940s while working for the National Coal Board. He encouraged managers to meet in small groups, share their experiences and ask each other questions about what they saw and heard. The approach increased productivity by over 30% and the theory of Action Learning was born.

What are the features of Action Learning?

Research carried out by Isabel Rimanoczy in 2004 and published in 2008 with Carole Brown introduced Action Reflection Learning (ARL) as a learning methodology that can contribute to and enrich Action Learning programmes.

The research outlined 16 elements of ARL and ten underlying principles.

What mindset is required for Action Learning?

People have to be aware of their lack of relevant knowledge and be prepared to explore the area of their ‘ignorance’ with suitable questions and help from other people in similar positions.

Questioning is the cornerstone of the Action Learning method and Revans had a strong desire to help people understand the importance of asking questions for the purpose of learning from our reality so that reality could be improved.

His work cites examples from countries across the world where Action Learning has now become widely accepted.

Why Action Learning Sets Work

Action Learning is different to usual interactions between colleagues in several ways.

Firstly, the presenter, or problem holder, is given the time and attention of their peers, which is different to the usual approach of problem solving in a busy workplace.

Secondly, the presenter is empowered by taking responsibility for action. The set members are not considering what they would do if in
the same situation, they are asking questions to elicit what the presenter is prepared to do. It is useful to hear ideas and visualise how set members view their challenge but the purpose is to help the presenter to re-frame or re-conceptualise the situation. The presenter takes the responsibility to ask for what they need from the set, they listen and reflect on the questions asked by peers and then conclude with actions and the important next steps.

Finally, Action Learning offers reflection time.

The Action Learning meeting provides time out of our busy schedules to consider a challenge from multiple perspectives and then provides time for us to reflect on the actions taken and report back on what has been learned.

Questioning following the reporting back supports the re-framing of the challenge and offers new insight on the situation.

What learning comes from Action Learning?

The process allows set members to practise their own listening and questioning skills and to learn from their peers through observation.

There is also time to reflect on the acquisition of new skills such as questioning, listening and feedback. The evaluation exercise we carried out reported learning that included logical problem-solving, an improved approaches to planning change, improved confidence, increased awareness of Higher Education, listening and questioning skills, reflection skills and enhanced management style.

REFERENCES

www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk
Before you embark on your project think about what you hope to achieve and what you would hope to be a successful outcome. Set out your aims and objectives, identify your stakeholders and use this simple 15-step plan to help your project run smoothly.

Managing an Action Learning project checklist
www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk

1. Formulate a project team
2. Appoint a project Lead
3. Develop a project plan
4. Prepare a Gantt chart
5. Set up a communications portal
6. Provide facilitator training
7. Organise set meetings in advance
8. Promote the programme

Read more about managing your Action Learning project
step by step

15. Hold a programme review meeting

14. Share the results of the evaluation

13. Evaluate the programme

12. Launch the programme

11. Remind set members of forthcoming set meeting

10. Send out joining instructions

9. Select the set members

www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk
Rising to the challenge

1. Establishing trust and confidentiality

2. Attendance and commitment

3. Communication

4. Expectations of facilitators

5. Expectations of participants

Click on the hand by each challenge to hear more from the facilitators.

Click here to download transcripts for each of the videos.
The Post-it™ Method was introduced to us by one of the project team members. Using Post-it™ notes helps set members to prepare questions as the presenter tells their story and then allows the presenter to organise the questions as appropriate to help them prioritise and prepare their responses. It’s simple but highly effective and enables the presenter to continue to review and reflect on the questions posed after the set meeting. To ensure consistency in our approach all the facilitators were trained on the use of this method.

How does it work?
Set members bid for time - they indicate they have an issue to present.

The facilitator schedules time slots according to the time available and number of presenters.

The presenter tells their story while set members listen and form questions relating to the issue - one per Post-it™.

After the presenter finishes the facilitator invites set members to offer their question.

Each member responds by writing one question on a Post-it™ note and then hands the question to the presenter.

The presenter may choose to answer any questions that set members wish to ask for clarification purposes immediately, as appropriate. This could include factual details that will help set members formulate useful questions.

The presenter may group, categorise or discard questions as they see fit and when ready will address the questions that they wish to answer in the order they wish to respond. Set members may probe and follow up on responses.

Who does what?
The Presenter presents their issue, responds to questions and seeks to commit to an action or actions back to their workplace.

The Facilitator allocates and manages time, helps the questioning process run smoothly and intervenes if presenters are being bombarded, interrogated or if any behaviour is displayed which might be unhelpful in supporting the presenter to find their own way.

The Set Members are there to support and challenge presenters appropriately, helping them to explore their issue. They ask helpful questions with a focus on trying to provoke insight for the presenter rather than solely seek clarification. The set member and avoids “telling” and “advising”.

It doesn’t end there…
Mutual learning will take place during the set as questions are posed and answered then following the meeting members can reflect, revisit their experience and explore it in greater depth in a process of continuous learning.
Ground rules

Here are some standard ground rules that a set might wish to consider:

**Confidential**  Set members’ wishes are strictly adhered to if they request an issue to remain within the set.

**Attention**  Set members should state their commitment to aim to give priority to this activity and attend all meetings. They should also be committed to giving their full attention to support peers to solve their problems.

**Shared learning**  Set members need to agree how they will share the learning that takes place with a view to some of that learning becoming a learning experience for the group. Set members can allow the facilitator to support this process during and following the set meeting through questioning and feedback.

**Respect**  Set members agree to treat each other with respect by listening to each other without interrupting. Presenters will not be pushed into discussing something which makes them feel uncomfortable. The facilitator can support this by monitoring and calling any behaviours that are against this.

**Equality**  All set members are given equal opportunity and the facilitator can support this by ensuring that nobody dominates the discussion or exhibits behaviour that does not support equality.

**Punctuality**  Set members commit to arriving on time to ensure that the set is not interrupted and to create a relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to thinking and learning.

**Methodology**  The set meetings will follow the Action Learning methodology agreed by the set. Although some flexibility will be necessary to allow agreed adaptations, having a set methodology such as the Post-it™ method, allows a structure to support the management of set meetings and the learning process. There can, however, by agreement of the set, be some room for flexibility in the format of each meeting.

It is critical that set members collectively develop a set of Action Learning ground rules which specify the way they will work together. Establishing these at the outset gives the set clear and agreed guidelines to work to. It is important that there is ownership of the ground rules, and therefore involvement in creation rather than imposing a set of ground rules is highly advised. However, it can be helpful to give examples of typical ground rules to help start the thought process.

At the beginning of each set, it is recommend to recap on the ground rules to give set members the opportunity to modify them, if required, and reaffirm the parameters they have previously agreed.
What does a set facilitator do?

The role of the Action Learning Set facilitator is a varied one, with the main aim of managing the process of Action Learning.

A skilled facilitator is an invaluable asset to the learning experience and outcome gained by Action Learning.

The facilitator supports the set in maintaining a non-directive approach to problem solving and the role permits feedback to set members on behaviour that supports or detracts from the process.

The facilitator also helps maintain the ground rules which are agreed by the set.

Facilitators will
- Help Action Learning Sets to establish a set of ground rules
- Role-model the skills needed relating to effective listening, questioning and feedback.
- Manage the process including timing, bidding to present challenges, summarising and managing behaviour.
- Report back and communicate with the programme lead.

Key Skills
- Active and empathetic listening
- Interpersonal skills
- Effective questioning
- Building trust and rapport
- Being assertive to manage unhelpful behaviour in the set
- Emotional intelligence
- Knowing when to intervene

Responsibilities
- Setting and agreeing ground rules and confidentiality with the set
- Managing the behaviour of the set to ensure that members stick to asking questions rather than giving advice
- Allocating and managing the time within the group to ensure that all set members get an opportunity to contribute
- Supporting the set members and championing the member whose issue is being discussed.
- Facilitating the questioning process
- Intervening if the presenter is being bombarded, interrogated or if any other behaviour is displayed which they consider unhelpful in supporting the presenter to address their issue
- Attending to the administrative details of setting up and organising space for the set meetings and facilitating contacts between the group.
- Ensuring the focus is on reflection and action planning.

You can download a PDF of the role of a facilitator at [www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk](http://www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk)
Listen and learn

Being a set member
Set members have a crucial role in the Action Learning set meeting - listening carefully to the presenter’s issue, clarifying their understanding, asking open and helpful questions to help the presenter identify and be clear about the crux of the matter and helping the presenter to identify possible actions which may address the issue being explored.

Commitment
Action Learning works well when set members commit their time to meet regularly for the duration of the process. The set member’s role is to maintain equal focus on actions whilst remaining open to experiencing learning from the presenter’s reflections; learning from their own reflective processes.

Asking useful questions
A set member should be prepared to ask questions that help clarify and deepen the overall understanding of the problem for all set members. Questions which challenge the presenter can also be helpful at the exploratory stage of the process. Set members must restrain themselves from giving advice as the presenter must come up with their own solution.

Clarifying Understanding
Ask useful questions to clarify understanding, for example:
• What exactly happened?
• How do you see the situation?
• Why do you say that?
• How do you feel about the situation?

Skills
Set members can develop a valuable skillset:
• Active and empathetic listening
• Effective questioning
• Developing trust and rapport within the set
• Effective communication
• Time management and prioritisation to ensure that set meetings are a priority.

Listening actively
An effective set member has a genuine interest in supporting the Action Learning set, especially when listening to the presenter’s issue. They are also attentive to the feelings and words used by the presenter, do not intervene when the presenter is telling their story.

Following the agreed approach
A set member should be willing to adopt the agreed approach to the action learning process, such as The Post-it™ Method.

You can download a PDF of the role of a set member at www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk

Useful questions
Presenting the challenge

Presenters present their issue, opportunity, challenge or project, together with the success criteria, to the set members. The issue being presented to set members should be open-ended, in other words, it should be something that can be openly explored to identify the crux of the problem.

Preparing for the meeting
The issue to be presented must be something that is real, urgent and important as this will stimulate creative and exploratory thinking. Presenters should aim to identify a sponsor or champion, who is able to remove barriers or influence change, ideally someone who is a more senior member of the team or department. The presenter may want to prepare by answering questions including what is happening, what should be happening and what is getting in the way of what should be happening?

Tell your story as openly as you can
The issue should be presented openly and honestly, providing the appropriate information to place the issue in context. Focused information should be presented to allow exploration through the set members’ questioning.

Be open to the questions asked
Remain open minded when set members are questioning. The crux of the problem identified may be different from the initial issue presented.

Commit to action
A number of approaches and actions are likely to be generated from the discussions around the issue being presented. The presenter must commit to putting into practice an action or try out a number of actions to see if they are effective. Make sure that the rationale for not selecting an action to try out is also made explicit to the group.

Remember to reflect
Reflection is an important part of the experience gained from the Action Learning process. Reflection in and on learning can facilitate development in role and personal growth. Learning takes place during the set as questions are posed and answered and reflection on learning takes place following the set, allowing members to revisit their experience, challenge their assumptions and explore it in greater depth. Using the Post-it™ method enables set members to review the questions posed following the set meeting and reflect upon them further.

Be ready to take action
The progress on the presenter committed to will be brought back to the next meeting for further discussion and analysis. A log of events, learning and reflection is helpful when trying out new actions. This will help with the process of feeding back to the members at subsequent meetings.

Be prepared to feed back
It is important to capture the learning from the experience of trying out new actions and not just to share successes or failures. This learning can be shared with other set members for future reference. The presenter should also be prepared to share their own reflections on what they could have refined or done differently.

You can download a PDF of the role of a presenter at www.highereducationactionlearning.co.uk
Start your meeting with an agenda to keep you on track and keep your discussions focussed. The agendas for the initial and final meetings will be different from those meetings that take place during the process. Here are our suggestions for three agendas, one at the start, one for midway and one at the end.

### Initial Action Learning Set meeting agenda
- Welcome and Introductions
- Purpose of Action Learning Set
- Setting of Ground Rules
- Explanation of the Action Learning process
- A brief practice session on the questioning skills as even the most senior people can find this daunting especially if the organisational culture is directive.
- Invite members to present their problem or challenge
- Facilitate set member questioning
- Ask the presenter if they have a new understanding/insight to the problem and their ideas on taking action
- Summarise the meeting and confirm arrangements for the next Action Learning Set.

### Mid Action Learning Set meeting agenda
- Welcome
- Review of Ground Rules
- Invite members who have previously presented to share their experiences of taking actions
- What did they learn from the experience and how are they going to integrate that learning into their daily practices?
- Invite members to present their problem or challenge
- Facilitate set member questioning
- Ask the presenter if they have a new understanding/insight to the problem and their ideas on taking action
- Summarise the meeting and confirm arrangements for the next Action Learning Set.

### Final Action Learning Set meeting agenda
The final meeting is when all members have had the opportunity to present a problem/challenge, try out a new idea, had the chance to reflect upon their experiences and embed changes to future daily practices.
- Welcome
- Review of Ground Rules
- Invite members who have previously presented to share their experiences of taking actions.
- What did they learn from the experience and how are they going to integrate that learning into their daily practices?
As the North West Cross Institutional Action Learning (NWCIAL) Programme was a pilot it was important to measure its effectiveness.

Kirkpatrick’s Four-Level Training Evaluation Model helped us to prepare an evaluation strategy that objectively analysed the effectiveness and impact of the programme, to prepare for improvements for the future and for sharing our findings in this Good Practice Guide.

**Evaluation: Our approach**

1 | **Reaction**

At this level we aimed to measure how the set members reacted. Did they believe that the action learning programme was a valuable experience? How did they feel about the location venues, facilitation, topics covered, format, communication and the overall presentation?

It was important for us to measure reaction, because this would assist us in understanding how well the programme was received by the set members. It also helped us determine where to improve the programme and identify any factors that might be missing from the programme.

Examples of the questions used were: “Were your expectations met?” and “Was there anything that exceeded your expectations?”

2 | **Learning**

At level 2, we wanted to measure what the set members had learned. How much had their knowledge increased as a result of the programme? When planning the action learning session, we started with a list of specific learning objectives: these were the starting point for our measurement. Of particular interest was the measurement of learning in changes to knowledge, skills, and attitude.

Examples of the questions asked were “Please detail ways that the programme has enabled you to improve or develop” and “In the context of work, how confident were you after participating?”

3 | **Behaviour**

At this level, we wanted to evaluate how far the set members had changed their behaviour, based on the experience and information gained from their set members. Specifically, how was the learning applied back in the workplace?

It’s important to note here that behaviour can only change if conditions are favourable. For example, perhaps their line manager/supervisor would not allow them to apply new knowledge in their role.

Examples of the questions asked were “To what extent do you agree that this change is a result of taking part in the action learning?” and “Please describe how the programme has influenced the way you act and/or your behaviour” and “Please provide an example of how you have, or will in the future, apply some of the learning in practice, back in your workplace.”

4 | **Results**

At this level, we analysed the final results of the programme. This included outcomes the set members determined to be good for their institutions and good for their institution employees and colleagues with whom they worked.

Examples of a question asked was “In your work context, please rate how strongly you agree or disagree that participation in this programme has enabled you to effect positive change.”

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Donald Kirkpatrick, Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin and past president of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), first published his Four-Level Training Evaluation Model in 1959, which was updated in 1975 and again in 1994 and more recently (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2009).
EVALUATION - METHODS AND FINDINGS

Evaluation: Our methods

- Verbal feedback after each set meeting.
- An online survey questionnaire was conducted in November 2015 following the first action learning set in October 2015 (20 respondents)
- An in-depth online survey was conducted with members of the facilitation team (7 respondents)
- A detailed online survey was conducted with the participants once the programme was completed (17 respondents)
- A series of telephone interviews were conducted with participants some of whom had withdrawn from the programme and others who subsequently provided case studies.
- A 4-hour feedback session was facilitated following the final action learning set sessions with 24 members of the cohort. This involved participants providing comments on Post-its™ attached to a “smiley” flip chart.
- Three case studies emerged from dialogue with participants.

Some of the common themes that emerged from our evaluation:

- Line-management-issues
- Work-life-balance
- Staff-management
- Managing-Difficult-People
- Career/job
- Staff-issues
- Difficult-managers
- Work-relationships
- Managing-Difficult-Situations
- Team-relationships
- Communication
- Career-development
- Poor-management-practices
- Personal-development
- Work-relationships
- Reorganisation
- Career-progression
- Guidance-issues
- Staff-issues
- Sexism
- Workload
- Reorganisation
- Guidance-issues
- Sexism
- Workload

References
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The full evaluation report can be seen here.

Click here for the summary of evaluation (slides)
As part of the evaluation process we asked Participants to share their experiences by charting their Action Learning 'journey'. Here are some of their responses.

Click each box to view the individual experience.
Here is a selection of online resources to help you plan, manage and evaluate your Action Learning project successfully:

Click each box to download the selected information.