

# Researching Organisational Change in Higher Education: A Holistic Tripartite Approach

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## Abstract:

In the UK context, it is important to acknowledge that there are multiple change drivers in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that result in a proliferation of foci. Gornitzka (1999) and Allen (2003) suggest that the distinctiveness of governance, professional autonomy and the tradition of academic freedom in HEIs should be reflected in change processes, and therefore traditional frameworks for change could be adapted in an attempt to research and manage change. This paper explores how theoretical and practical tools for managing and researching change can be integrated in order to support change, whilst reflecting on the methods used. The journey of the authors towards the development of a holistic framework for researching and supporting change in Higher Education (HE), with a focus on two HEIs, is explored. The synergies of Lean Management (Wincel and Krull, 2013), Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperider and Srivastva 1987), and Participatory Action Research (Greenwood et al, 1993) are examined through three stages of practice-based fieldwork to establish their positioning within a holistic tripartite framework for researching and supporting organizational change. The benefits and challenges of this framework are discussed with attention to the importance of future research to provide more evidence of the impact of this framework.

**Keywords:** Appreciative Inquiry, Organisational Change, Lean Management, World café, Story-telling, Participative Action Research.

## 1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to unpack the development of a holistic framework for researching and supporting change in the UK Higher Education (HE) context. There have been three stages of research undertaken in which we demonstrate the incremental development of the framework. Each research stage allowed the research team to enhance their understanding of the Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperider and Srivastva 1987), Participative Action Research (Greenwood et al, 1993) and its integration with progressive Lean organisational change tools (Wincel and Krull, 2013). Whilst there is a vast array of literature, providing theoretical underpinning of the many change theories and models, it has been recognized that existing prescriptive and often generic models of change are not readily adaptable for application within the dynamic Higher Education context (Gornitzka, 1999). This paper explores Lean Management as a change theory with associated change models because of its fundamental focus on people, process and culture, and potential to create synergies with appreciate inquiry and participative action research.

## 2.0 Literature Review

The field of research into organizational change in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is relatively under-developed, and has been largely focused on case studies of individual institutions (Bleiklie 2014). The distinctiveness of HE Institutions when compared with corporate organisations is highlighted in their roles of societal transformation and educating future leaders in a global context (Stephens and Graham 2010; Radnor and Osborne 2013; Hoover and Harder 2015; Farrington 1994). Methods of effecting change in HE have been attempted in individual cases, and some of these have been investigated by researchers, but a clear research framework set in the distinctive culture of HE remains to be designed. This review will investigate the existing literature surrounding methods for researching change in HE, in an attempt to surface useful approaches and their potential challenges.

Organisational change in the current climate of globalisation, engendering fast-paced technological advances, international competitiveness, mergers, environmental concerns, individualism and other drivers is a topic of concern for modern managers and academics (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994; Branson 2008; Hoover and Harder 2015). This has been accompanied by an unprecedented rise in the development of theories and frameworks for managing organizational change (Cummings and Brocklesby 1997). This dynamic, and at times ambiguous, environment has led to scepticism about the possibility of planning for long term results and suggested a need for new theoretical and methodological paradigms (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994), particularly in public services and HE institutions (Lane 1987).

HEIs in the UK have a long-standing and distinctive culture, and even the more 'modern' post-1992 HE Institutions can be slow to evolve when outside forces dictate change (Stephens and Graham 2010). A need for reconsidering traditional HE governance and management structures and processes has been recognised in light of the dramatic changes throughout HE worldwide (Allen 2003; Baker and Baldwin 2015) including:

- new teaching approaches and technology (Baker and Baldwin 2015),
- evolving national and regional policies on HE (Chmutova and Andriichenko 2017),
- 'student as consumer' discourse (Griffioen and de Jong 2017)
- environmental and sustainability concerns (Hoover and Harder 2015), and
- the requirement to engage with businesses to meet upcoming demands for the labour and skills market along with the need to justify the market value of a degree (Vaira 2004).

In the UK context, it is important to acknowledge that there are multiple change drivers in HEIs which result in proliferation of foci including education, research and business engagement/knowledge exchange/consultancy. Hence, Allen (2003) highlights that HEIs are in fact 'symbiotic communities' which rely on collegiality. The reasons for and effects of changes in HE is therefore not the same as those felt by commercial and manufacturing organizations, and it has been suggested that recent pressures to become more 'business-like' fragments HE faculties and alienates academics (Allen 2003). Arguably, HE institutions must be responsive to societal *and* business needs in order to survive (Radnor and Osborne 2013).

In this dynamic context, HEI culture is prone to management challenges, particularly in terms of inter-departmental barriers to meaningful communication. There is a recognised need for greater accountability in all HE institutions (Vaira 2004) which has led to increased processes, procedures and paperwork (Morley 1997; Adserias et al 2017). Allen (2003) emphasizes that a culture of rules and procedures (bureaucracy) is continuing to create conflict and paperwork. Gornitzka (1999) suggested that the distinctiveness of governance, professional autonomy and the tradition of academic freedom in HE institutions should be reflected in change processes, and therefore traditional frameworks for change could be adapted in an attempt to manage change within HEIs.

In our study we investigated the literature around change in HEIs and have noted that the Lean Management approach to continuous improvement has had traction in HE (and the wider public sector) for a number of years (Thirkell & Ashman, 2014; Svensson, Antony, Ba-Essa, Bakhsh & Albliwi, 2015). The use of Lean (progressive management) as a continuous approach to organisational improvement, developed from the Toyota Production System, is an approach to leading, thinking, improving and managing in a way which focuses on respect for people, reduction of waste, efficiency, value and cost effectiveness, and has been highly successful in manufacturing and mass production organizations (Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990; Radnor and Osborne, 2013). Hines and Lethbridge (2008) observed the establishment of the Lean value system in a university, and while some of the concepts were noted to be useful, for example in purchasing and administrative tasks, the authors found that in an academic environment some of the Lean concepts, for example seeing students as clients or viewing accepted support systems as non-value-adding, were problematic. In the existing research into Lean in public services, such as healthcare and government, it has been noted that in adapting Lean to suit non-manufacturing organizations, some of the core principles were lost (Radnor and Boaden 2008; Radnor 2009; Burgess and Radnor 2013). There is also a danger of an organization becoming 'too Lean', where it is starved for resources and innovation (Radnor and Boaden 2004). Radnor and Boaden (2008) also highlighted the challenges of understanding and respecting people, or individual journeys within the institution; which processes might be applicable for Lean tools; and longer-term sustainability of the system within the institutional culture. In order to address these Lean implementation challenges in the dynamic HE environment, this paper is informed by the the lean framework for change suggested by Wincel and Krull (2013) which focuses on the three key areas of People, Process and Culture. In qualitative studies like those included in this paper, Hoover and Harder (2015) highlight that these areas emerge most strongly.

One approach for developing a rich understanding of people, processes and culture, and for opening new possibilities for organizational understanding is Appreciative Inquiry or AI (Grieten et al 2018). An Appreciative Inquiry prompted by an asset focused question or statement supports the discovery, the inquiry and the narration of the organization's 'life-giving- stories' (Cooperider and Srivastva 1987). Bushe and Kassam (2005) suggest that the transformative potential of appreciative inquiry rests on two important qualities; firstly, a focus on changing how people think instead of what people do, and secondly, a focus on supporting self organising (improvisational) change processes that flow from new ideas. Many change management models tend to be applied prescriptively, which are arguably negative instigators that may solve

problems but do not normally create long term resilience, innovation or positive development (Grieten et al 2018). AI was first discussed in a paper in 1986 as a new concept for organizational theory which proposed to maximise benefits for all members of organizations (Srivastva and Cooperrider 1986). Applications of AI have storytelling and narrative at their core and include application to organizational development (Mantel & Ludema, 2000), change management (Bushe, 2013; Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan & van Buskirk, 1999), and evaluation (Jacobsgaard, 2003). As an action research approach which focuses on co-operative and participative inquiry, AI gives positive attention to the strengths in any situation and the best outcomes (AI Commons 2018). AI is not a deficit-orientated approach (Grieten et al 2018) which Cooperrider and Whitney (1999; 2005) suggest may become a degenerative spiral. This is not to say the deficit based/ problem solving approach is not valid - future work to develop this approach to build frameworks to combine asset and deficit approaches to organisational improvement is needed.

The core principles of AI include (Fitzgerald et al 2001; AI Commons 2018; Grieten et al 2018; The Centre for AI 2018):

- **The constructionist principle** – that reality as we know it is partly dependent on our perceptions and personal experiences.
- **The simultaneity principle** – change begins the moment we ask a question.
- **The poetic principle** – creating our world can drive endless learning.
- **The anticipatory principle** – that hopeful anticipation creates positive action and transformation. And lastly,
- **The positive principle** – that positive questions lead to optimistic momentum and amplification

These principles have been amended more recently to include themes of free choice, wholeness, and the transforming power of narrative (AI Commons 2018).

The original '4D' stages of the process for managing change through AI were joined by another, a first and critical stage: Definition (Fitzgerald et al 2001), where the parameters of research and the focus of the enquiry is defined. Next, Discovery, building a database which collects the impressions of organization members in order to uncover participants' experiences. The Dream stage envisions best case scenarios from the past. The fourth stage, Design, creates positive affirmations which identify and share key positive organizational facets. Finally, Deliver (sometimes referred to as Destiny) is the stage where groups work on implementing the themes from the above phases into action plans. The stages are not discrete or separate, they may begin before previous stages are considered complete and re-thinking previous stages is encouraged (Fitzgerald et al 2001; AI Commons 2018).

Cooperrider and Avital (2004) however, rightly draw attention to the practice-based nature of AI and highlight the limited focus on the role of AI in enriching scholarly approaches to inquiry. Critics of AI (Fitzgerald et al 2001, Rogers and Fraser 2003) also claim that it is so focused on the positive (Dick, 2004) which skews outcomes and fails to address real problems. Rogers and Fraser (2003) suggest that people who prefer to plan for the worst case scenario or a singular effective strategy might experience anxiety when faced with an entirely optimistic paradigm for envisioning organizational development, and what they see as unrealistic expectations for

transformation. Others claim that that AI is more focused on affirmative 'group hugs' and positive thinking than hard data (Fitzgerald et al 2001). Further, Pratt (2002, p. 119) emphasizes 'the need to honour the multiple and undivided realities of human experience in organizations', while Reason (2000) queries the 'danger of ignoring the shadow'. Rogers and Fraser (2003, p. 77) explore whether AI encourages 'unrealistic and dysfunctional perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour'. Notwithstanding this critique, case studies have evidenced AI to be a feasible approach (Rogers and Fraser 2003), which is data driven and effective in a wide variety of organizational settings and sectors (Fitzgerald et al 2001). The perceived imbalance towards optimism is a search for the strengths, rather than weaknesses, and in no way ignores negatives. Positive thinking aims to hold on to affirmative discourse, and is a useful technique for individuals, but AI differs as discourse is constantly re-created by the collective (Fitzgerald et al 2001), and positive outcomes can be generated particularly in situations where long term change is desirable (Rogers and Fraser 2003).

In response to these critiques, Grant and Humphries (2006) suggest the integration of Appreciative Inquiry and Critical Theory which they define as Critical Appreciative Processes (CAPs). Although they appear as opposing paradigms, both appreciative inquiry and critical theory share a common research objective - their commitment to emancipatory change and growth- researchers in both paradigms ultimately seek to encourage and facilitate 'human flourishing' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). One key aspect of Critical Appreciative Processes is the acknowledgement and understanding of the distribution of power and how this impacts on change processes for both the individuals (participants) and the researcher. Both also follow social constructionist epistemology, which uncovers the meanings behind language and highlights reflection as a crucial element of change research (Grant and Humphries 2006). This balances risks associated with uncritical optimism and an unconscious acceptance of power imbalances which may be critiqued in AI, harnessing engagement and empowering those on diverse levels of the organizational hierarchy. Therefore, CAPs inform our approach to researching change.

In the academic literature, organizational change and stories are strongly embedded in the anthropological tradition, as opposed to the often prescriptive organizational change literature. Stories, which are at the core of the AI approach and can support the uncovering of people, process and culture areas of Lean management in a changing context, can have an important impact on the decision making process (Boje 1991). In fact, the very process of change can be seen as a story that can be cathartic and inspirational (Maas 2012).

Storytelling has been applied as a research method to make sense of complex organizational change (Boje and Strevel, 2016; Boje, 1991, 1994; Gabriel 1991, 1995; Gabriel and Connell, 2010; Anderson, 2005; Beech and Johnson, 2005; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Storytelling, myths and metaphors continue to be part of the drive for creativity in research methods (Kara , 2015). Campbell (1964) described the four functions of stories as experiencing, explaining, validating and prescribing. These four functions are helpful to bear in mind in researching organizational situations, where social order is experienced and maintained similarly to that in other group settings (Kendall and Kendall 2012). These scholars have shown that a focus on stories in terms of emotions, ambiguities, omissions, silences, unusual constructs, i.e. what is missing and not told, is as

important as the narrative provided. The storytelling approach may pose ethical challenges, when one considers the potential hegemonic power of organizational leaders and the possibility that employees might replicate persuasive discourses around existing organizational culture without really generating any meaningful new data (Dolan and Bao 2012). Many case studies where storytelling has been used have legitimised the history and vision of organisations, as told by managers and those in power (Allen 2003). Some critics have argued that stories do not constitute rigorous research, and have no claim to the positivist 'truth' (Brown et al 2009). However, reflection around the functioning of an organization through storytelling can be an emancipatory process, as Tate, Brendel and Chou's (2016) research suggested. In a UK hospital setting, the use of storytelling and a focus on emotion discovered what changes were required, creating a community which developed new policies and created positive change (Bate 2004). When groups engage through storytelling, the shared understanding has the capacity to break down barriers to meaningful collaboration during change (Dee & Leisyte, 2017), and emotional issues which sometimes hamper change initiatives can be fully addressed and navigated, creating a paradigm shift for success (McKinnon 2008)

The literature has confirmed the value of integrating two key approaches for investigating organizational change in the HE environment. Lean management is not a 'one-off' approach for organizational change and fundamentally takes account of people, process and culture. This can be complemented by Appreciative Inquiry that focuses on gaining a holistic understanding of organizational environment and participant perspectives through narratives and stories. The acknowledgement of CAPs which introduce critical theory to the AI approach allows the researcher to acknowledge and address the power influences in the people, process and culture areas, which could be missed otherwise. These two approaches focus on the practice of change but for the researcher, it is argued that there must be a third area that recognizes the importance of the philosophy and practice of research in the organizational context. Thus supporting the researcher to create a tool, which has multiple impacts including organizational understanding, organizational improvement/development or change decisions for implementation, and collection of depth of data that supports researcher in making sense of dynamic organizations in the short, medium and longer-term.

### 3. Our Research Approach

The epistemological framework informing this research is 'social constructionism' which is an interpretive framework whereby individual meanings are formed through interaction with others (Creswell, 2013). Any social research which aims to be meaningful should collect data around context, providing a 'thick description' to enrich understanding (Geertz 1973). Our research approach within this context, is participatory action research (PAR); "Participatory action research is a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organizations in studying and transforming those organizations. It is an ongoing organizational learning process, a research approach that emphasizes co-learning, participation and organizational transformation" (Greenwood et al, 1993. P175). PAR also brings together action and reflection, theory and practice and is focused on the flourishing of individuals and communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Greenwood et al, 1993). Cameron (2007), argues that the 'liberatory' potential of PAR can occur when PAR is conducted for and with organizations, e.g. Street and

Meister's (2004) study of a participatory approach to implementing change in a small business. Some of the critiques are aimed at PAR as an approach or relate to specific tensions experienced by researchers in the field. Bartunekl (1993) suggests these include: Theoretical contribution (); the challenge of providing precision descriptions of the collaborative practices actually involved in interventions and the mediating mechanisms; the emphasis on participants as co-researchers suggests their ability to contribute to local knowledge and scholarly outcomes. There is also the potential impact of the researcher becoming less objective as an 'insider'. We argue that as our research is in the HEI context and the research team works within HEI institutions, that there is more likely to be an acceptance and ability to engage in both practical and scholarly discussion which aids a more in-depth situational understanding.

Sharp, Dewar, Barrie & Meyer (2018), champion a hybrid approach in the health sector that incorporates Participatory Action Research with Appreciative Inquiry – Appreciative Action Research (AAR). AAR promotes reflexive iterations between reflection and action, makes change tangible and thereby more available for meaning making and creating knowledge. Conversations and language matter in situational sense making and consideration of possibilities (Dewar, 2011; Dewar et al., 2017; Egan & Lancaster, 2005; Zandee & Vermack, 2012). Sharp et al (2018) emphasise the importance of thinking and doing to impact people and systems to make fundamental changes. Shifts in perspectives, assumptions and values or 'double-loop learning' is critical to AAR's success (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985).

This research project, collects data through three stages - each stage delivering method(s) based on the learning from the literature review and the previous research stage. Each stage had a specific organizational change focus around improvement that included aspects of people, process and culture. Two post-1992 Universities that form part of the Lean in Higher Education Network participated in this research, in order to respect anonymity they will be referred to as HEI1 and HEI2.

**Stage 1:** HEI1; Group participation; two specific events exploring NSS improvement and experiences of change in HE; World Café method

**Stage 2:** HEI1; Individual participation; exploring what makes staff 'Brilliant'; AAR interactive interview method

**Stage 3:** HEI2; Community participation; exploring what is going well in the organization; AI coupled with core Lean Management tools

These three stages are discussed below.

#### **4.0 Undertaking Research into Change in HEIs**

##### **Stage 1:**

The authors first experienced AI through the work of Dewar & Macbride (2014), who adapted AI as an ethos to enhance patient care within the NHS. Intrigued by the findings, the authors became interested in exploring AI and specifically the impact it could have in understanding factors that influence organisational change in HE. This section will discuss the research journey undertaken by the authors.

In the UK the National Student Survey (NSS), is used to assess the student experience of eligible final year students across a number of categories, ending with a question that asks students to assess their overall satisfaction with their course. As competition increases across the sector the importance of the NSS results in driving league table performance is well documented. Whilst the NSS does provide a useful mechanism to drive improvement and measure impact (Cheng & Marsh 2010), it can also create adversarial undercurrents that damage internal relationships within institutions (Farquharson et al, 2015). This is often the result of established organisational performance routines focused on deficit approaches, singling out poor performances in the NSS and directing effort towards finding the cause of the problem, in the hope that this will point towards finding the solution.

Using the NSS data at HE11 to identify academic staff to participate in the inquiry, to 'discover' what works. Invites were sent to potential participants explaining the appreciative approach and the reasons they had been selected based on their involvement in programmes which had performed well in the NSS. In total 15 participants from four faculties agreed to take part and were asked to attend for a two-hour celebration and inquiry event.

After an introduction to AI and the 4D model, participants were given the opportunity to explore their professional practice in relation to their success in the NSS. This followed the AI principles of discovering what works and sharing these insights in informal gatherings. The participants were asked to work in pairs and discuss their key strengths and attributes which they considered to be the most important in the context of creating a positive student experience.

Initially some participants admitted to being uncomfortable with taking credit for strong NSS performance and emphasized the importance of the wider team. This was addressed often by peers who provided reassurance the insights being shared were inspiring and needed to be published more widely.

The researchers and participants found the event to be energized and fun, the group connected and shared their experiences openly, everyone was engaged and supportive. The researchers experienced at first hand the generative qualities of an appreciative inquiry into 'what gives life to organisations when they are most alive' (Cooperrider et al 1987).

The learning for the authors included developing confidence in using an appreciatively focused inquiry, and experiencing the positive engagement of participants. The authors were initially concerned that misconceptions around AI ignoring problems and that focusing on the positive aspects of organisational life would be considered overly optimistic, could result in participants being reluctant to engage with the method.

### **World Café Event**

Having experienced the willingness of participants to embrace positively framed questions, an opportunity arose to host a table at an HE Sector World Café Event. This allowed a further exploration in asking positively framed questions. The authors



once again anticipated that some participants would demonstrate preferences to focus on problems and could find the positive framing of the question challenging (Rogers and Fraser, 2003), however, whilst this preference was observed initially, as the group discussion developed all participants were willing to tell their story of “what happens on a good day in HE?”

The theme of the World Café, was ‘transformational change’ within a HE context, and invited a number of staff involved in supporting change from across a number of institutions to attend and take part in an exploration of their experiences of change within HE. Around 45 people took part and were asked to participate in a question set by each table host, and after a period of time to move to another table, until they had visited and contributed to the discussion on each table.

The authors will continue with the World Café format as part of the developing AI method, and full data collection and analysis will be undertaken after a number of other similar events have taken place. The initial outcomes and reaction to the question for the majority of participants immediately initiated storytelling and descriptive recounting of what happened on a good day. This led to the sharing of specific examples of projects, initiatives and organisational norms, ceremonies and community activity which were considered to be a force for good.

The discoveries could be themed as follows: -

- activity which brought the staff and students together, engendered a sense of fulfilment to staff
- responding to a positively framed question tended to increase the focus on the student outcomes rather than the impact of change activity on staff;
- face to face interaction often resulted in a good result in terms of getting other staff to ‘buy-in’ to changes;
- a day free of minor annoyances was productive and conducive to high stake conversations.

### **Stage 2:**

HEI1 has been running the You’re Brilliant Awards for more than 6 years. This award initiative is run and owned by the Student Union at HEI1 and gives students the opportunity to nominate a member of staff from any part of the university for an award if they feel they have experienced service excellence. The authors decided to undertake research focused around which behaviours, actions or attitudes result in staff being nominated for you’re brilliant awards. Drawing on the existing ‘You’re Brilliant Award’ information as a base, this research sought to focus on the ‘discovery’ aspect of AI. The project looked at this from a staff perspective, exploring the perspectives of those who had been nominated and extracting stories from them around what they believe makes them ‘brilliant’. The proposed outcome of this project was to set out a framework of staff attitudes and behaviours which could enhance interactions with students.

The overarching approach taken to this research was ‘Appreciative Action Research’ (AAR). AAR was seen as particularly useful as it embraces differences in the kinds of dynamics at play when people are discovering, elevating, and extending strengths.

From an ethical perspective it also avoids stereotypical answers through supporting participants to tell 'their' stories rather than answering inflexible or structured interview questions. The foundation of the AAR approach for this research is co-creation of narrative touch points - 'emotion words' and 'scenarios' from a participant perspective. In this context the interviewer takes on a 'facilitator' role, allowing a 'participant-led' approach rather than a 'subject-based' approach to the research. The Touch-Point technique interview structure is explained as below:

- Participants will first be asked to select three "touch-points" that they feel best describe the reason for the nomination. Touch-points are provided on cards in the packs and there is also the option for participants to make their own touch-point.
- Participants will select the touchpoint they wish to discuss first and will then select words from the pack (e.g. creative, powerless, connected, atmosphere) to describe it, thinking about the You're Brilliant nomination. They should select five words, at least one should be positive and one negative.
- A photograph will be taken of the touchpoint with words including the participant/researcher number for analysis.
- Using the words selected, participants will be guided to discuss what they feel was important in the You're Brilliant nomination and what made the interaction excellent.
- Once the first touch-point has been discussed, the process (steps 2 – 4 above) will be repeated for each of the other touch-points.

The discussions were recorded with the participants consent in order that they could be transcribed for thematic analysis in NVIVO. A purposive sample was taken from the database of all staff who had received a You're Brilliant Award in the past 2 years. These staff were from a range of different faculties and central teams, job roles and levels across HE11. The research approach did not intend on being representative, but instead focused on gaining the most detail around which attitudes or behaviours make staff 'brilliant'.

There were a number of challenges to using this type of approach.

- Balancing active listening, note-taking and probing whilst on the participants story-telling journey
- Ambiguity was still prevalent as the scenarios and words used to elicit participant discussion were broad. The facilitator needed to be skilled enough to recognise where stories became tangential and where they added value.
- Maintaining open attitudes and patience towards participants which allow their meanings to emerge from their stories.
- Temptation to go into coaching/mentoring mode – the researchers as facilitators had to ensure that they did not get overly involved in trying to make suggestions or resolve any issues which arose during the interviews, as this could result in a modification of participant perspectives or stories around their experiences.
- Building trust and confidence in a new technique – The team ensured that they had attended a session delivered by an external expert prior to using the

approach and conducted several pilot interviews using the method, which was then proceeded by reflexive sharing on our experiences of using the method.

- Keeping to time is difficult because of openness of method.

Participants' reflections on this approach were positive:

*"It was good having specific points to talk about, I found it quite challenging having to choose emotions that linked to the topic but it got me to explore it in more depth"* (Participant A1)

*"The touch point process breaks down the topic you are exploring and makes it easier to discuss in greater detail. It gets you to really think about how and why you were feeling a certain way."* (Participant B1)

### **Learning and Practice Points:**

There were a number of very positive outcomes from this piece of research as below:

- Enlightenment for both the organisation and the individual
- Longer lasting positive impact – harnessing engagement.
- Uplifting and empowering for all involved.
- Has to be developed over time – so the purpose is clear and the team prepare for this.
- Be prepared for ambiguity - don't always know where the story is going when approach is participant-led.
- Researchers need confidence to adapt and leave the participant feeling it was a good experience.
- Interpretive – the impact of subjectivity allows researchers to embrace the participants' preconceptions, diversity and context.
- Touchpoints approach allowed some structure to be introduced in order to support participants in focusing their minds on excellent interactions with students.

Notwithstanding this, it was also clear to the research team that this method alone could not address the complexities of the HE environment or context. The focus of the research was on individuals only, and the researcher then makes decisions about what is useful from the interview data. It could be argued that this removes the opportunity for the participants to develop the framework of attitudes/behaviours and thus authentic 'meaning making' for the wider organisation is not evidenced from using this method. Thus, the research team, worked on developing another approach which provided greater opportunity for groups to make sense of their environment and support meaning making for organisational change.

### **Stage 3:**

Our third case explores the introduction of AI concepts to an existing transformation and continuous improvement initiative set up with the intention of promoting lean and process improvement methods within HEI2 . Participants involved in the in-house Lean Practitioners course, as a learning community, were given training in the

development of an AI based on the '4D' model and encouraged to adopt a strength based philosophy to organisational improvement.

Participants were asked to brainstorm 'what is going well' capturing the outputs on sticky notes, these notes were then mapped and sorted using tools traditionally associated with lean process improvement methods, such as an 'Ishikawa diagram' (fish bone). A prioritisation matrix was then completed to establish the key areas of strength within the organisation that could be further developed as real improvement projects in HEI2.

Improvement methods, often adapted within Higher Education, such as, classical forms of lean have tended to focus on the 'hard' aspects of process, eradication of waste and team based problem solving. The discussion within the lean practitioner group highlighted their propensity to focus on the 'softer skills' of leadership, including emotions and respect for people.

The introduction of AI into the Lean Practitioners course will continue to be evaluated and initial findings suggest that AI can be complimentary to improvement methods that seek to improve and streamline processes.

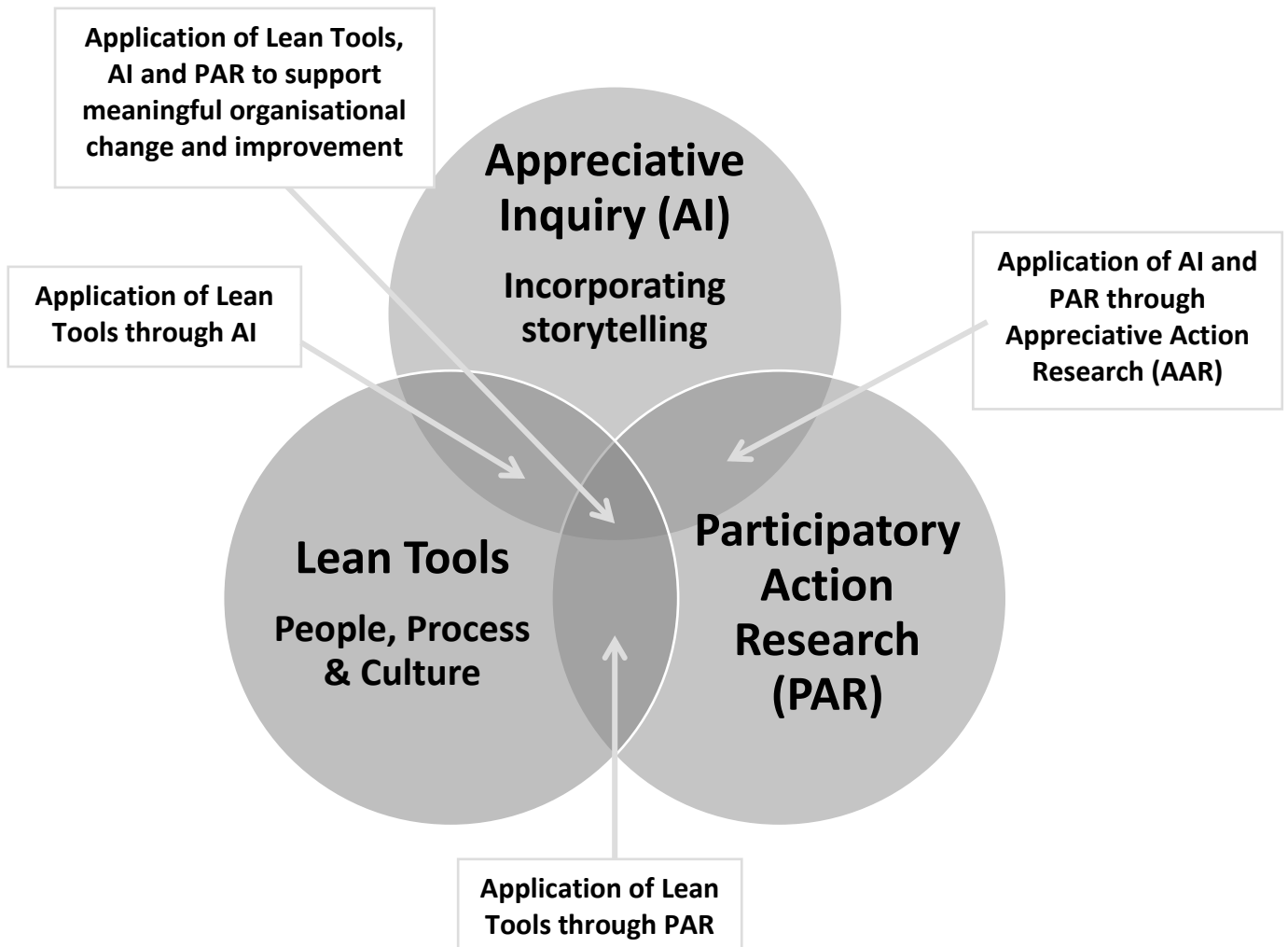
#### **Learning and Practice Points:**

- Cycles of learning and thinking are helpful in AI
- Importance of interactive lean tools and visual representations to support creative thinking
- Be prepared for people to drop into problem solving mode
- Assign roles within groups to provide focus on outcomes (Rapporteur, Time keeper, Facilitator)
- Ensure all colleagues have their voice heard
- Check assumptions made in any narratives or stories offered by participants
- Importance of flexibility to work with participants in their context
- Developing a cause and effect diagram is as powerful method for finding possible causes of what is going well, as well as surfacing problems.
- Having the courage to 'give it a go'.

#### **5.0 Creating a Research Framework**

This paper has explored the dynamic terrain of HE in order to develop a framework which is flexible in supporting change within organizations, and effective in collecting research data which helps the researcher and participants to make sense of the organisational change context (illustrated in Diagram 1). The three key areas taking center stage in our framework have obvious synergies through their multiple angled considerations of the critical lean management areas of people, process and culture. A key factor which supports success in utilizing this framework is its usability for participants, practitioners, and academics. It also retains a fluidity which allows participants to be fully involved, ensuring individual, group and/or community voice is not only recognized but developed positively to engender organizational change. It is this holistic, and inclusive approach that could impact on deep change in HE organisations. The authors recognize that this is only the first step in their research journey and that there is significant further future work to be done in fully testing the framework practically and evaluating the impact.

**Diagram 1: Holistic Tripartite Framework for Organisational Change Research**



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