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# Barriers and enablers of youth as drivers of social change: University students' perspectives

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## Abstract

As a progressive society, there is an expectation for young people to become the social leaders and innovators of tomorrow. Not only does this expectation imply an intergenerational 'passing of the baton' but also this scenario assumes that young people value social change and possess the self-efficacy that empowers them to ignite positive social change. Added to this is a fundamental assumption that social constructs will enable young people to work as change agents, rather than create hindrances. A complexity for higher education institutions is how to develop young people's capacities for social change given the inevitable variance in how much their students value and believe they have the ability for 'changemaking'.

This study explored university students' conceptions of social change and their perspectives on the tools and resources needed to engage in social changemaking. Two focus groups were held at the University of Northampton, which elicited students' ( $n=10$ ) views on 1) their conceptions of social change and social innovation, 2) their perceptions of what enables young people to engage with social change and 3) their beliefs about the barriers that exist for young people in being or becoming change agents.

Findings from this study offer important implications for higher education institutions that aim to engage in positive youth development as part of the curricular or extra-curricular provision. By illuminating the perceived barriers and enablers for youth in driving social change, higher education institutions will be in a stronger position from which to nurture this generation of 'changemakers'.

Key words: Social innovation, social change, changemaking, youth, higher education

## Background

The University of Northampton aims to be the foremost university for social impact in the UK. Indeed, the University has a significant profile as a leader of Education for Social Innovation and Social Impact, regionally, nationally and internationally. In 2013, its work in this area earned the University the designation as the UK's first AshokaU Changemaker Campus<sup>2</sup>. Not only has this status validated the University's efforts towards social impact but also it has been a source of pride and momentum for advancing this mission.

AshokaU has the 'ultimate goal of making everyone a Changemaker' by helping individuals embrace the 'unifying principles' of social innovation listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Unifying principles for "everyone a Changemaker" (Curtis, 2013)**

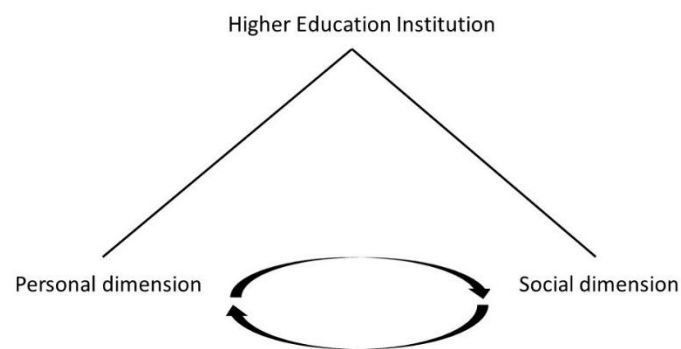
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1. Believe in a responsibility to make positive changes in society.
  2. Have the power and resources to make a difference (tangible and intangible).
  3. Take initiative to bring about innovative change, local and systemic.
  4. Work with others to maximise impact, working in groups and networks.
  5. Know and live authentically according to one's values.
  6. Practice empathy by engaging in another person's world without judgement.
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<sup>2</sup> AshokaU is a global network of universities who nurture social innovation across their campuses. See <http://ashokau.org/> for more information.

These principles suggest that the development of personal values, beliefs and activities lead to one's ability to influence positive social change. Phrases such as 'Believe in...', 'Take initiative...', 'Practice empathy...' all point to an individual's capacity. Whereas phrases such as '...make positive changes in society' and '...make a difference', imply a social dimension. Inherent in these principles is the reflexive and overlapping nature of developing the individual's capacity through active social engagement (e.g. 'engage in another person's world', 'working in groups'). In this way, the personal and the social can develop, experientially, in a learning cycle.

The AshokaU initiative to foster social innovation across universities campus offers an extension to this model by suggesting that it is the higher education institution that can mediate this learning process. The present study was conceived on the basis of a theoretical understanding of the role of higher education in mediating the learning from students' personal and social dimensions for the purposes of social betterment (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: The role of the HEI in mediating positive social change through personal growth (Alden Rivers et al., in press, a)**

In understanding the ways in which universities can fulfil such a societal role, it is germane to understand the views of university students. Understanding what students perceive to enable and hinder their ability to create impact within society provides universities with a meaningful set of drivers and constraints around which to develop the curriculum. Without such insights, the efforts of universities to promote social innovation and social impact may be in vain.

The present study elicited university students' perspectives on social change and the extent to which they feel equipped to be agents of positive social changemaking. Findings from this study will inform the University's current projects to embed changemaking into the curriculum. This study will also contribute a new University project to support the development of young people as drivers of social change across the European Union.

## **Introduction**

As a progressive society, there is an expectation for young people to become the social leaders and innovators of tomorrow. Not only does this expectation imply an intergenerational 'passing of the baton' but also this scenario assumes that young people value social change and possess the self-efficacy that empowers them to deliver social innovation and ignite

positive social change. Added to this is a fundamental assumption that social constructs will enable young people to work as change agents, rather than create hindrances for them.

Social innovation can be defined as the ‘changes in the cultural, normative or regulative structures [or classes] of the society which enhance its collective power resources and improve its economic and social performance’ (Heiscala, 2007, 59). Conversely, social change can be defined as any action ‘whether progressive or regressive, and whether “effective” or not, in changing particular outcomes’ (Pratto et al., 2013, 139). In this paper, the two terms are used together when discussing youth engagement toward positive social change, regardless of whether these changes would be classified as social innovation.

A challenge for higher education institutions is how to develop young people’s capacities for social change given the inevitable variance in how much students value and believe they have the ability for positive social changemaking. Drawing on theories of youth engagement, the present study explored university students’ conceptions of social innovation and social change. The study examined students’ perceived enablers and hindrances for being agents of positive social impact.

Specifically, this study sought to address three research questions:

- 1) How do university students conceptualise social innovation and social change?
- 2) What do university students perceive to enable young people to be agents of positive social change?
- 3) What do university students perceive to hinder them being agents of positive social change?

### **Youth and social change**

Youth participation in society is essential to promoting the identity of young people as citizens within a democratic context, to developing their skills in applied situations and to supporting their personal development (Checkoway, 2011). Through participation, young people become ‘the frontiers and catalysts of positive social change’ (Nejati et al., 2012, 411). With these key social and personal benefits in mind, it is important to question just how young people are being encouraged to participate and to live up to this expectation to be ‘harbingers’ of the future (Roberts, 2012). This section explores literature to address this question, starting with the assumption of a generational social contract and moving through the role of technology, motivation, and engagement strategies. Finally, a case is made for a greater focus on the role of higher education to support youth as social participants, which provides a frame for the present study.

### ***Youth participation and the older generation***

A plausible notion recognised in research is that older generations are playing a central role in preparing youth as agents of social change. On the contrary, the notion of the ‘gender gap’ and the factors that influence generational differences, such as values, perspectives, clothing, behaviour, opinions and approaches to technology, suggest an alternative arrangement (Inglehart, 1990; Ferkiss, 2012, 162). Contextually, there are several ways to consider the

generation gap. One way is to consider the social patterns that have influenced the movement of the older generation away from the younger. Powell (2014) described the role of education, training and work in reordering the conception of one's life course. As humans move through their life stages into retirement, they are developing identities that are separate to youth, creating a sense of intergenerational detachment. Ferkiss (2012, 162) also suggested that education plays a key role in the generation gap, particularly when there exists a sense of 'bitterness' toward youth among the least educated of the older generation.

Conversely, another way to consider the generation gap is to note the social patterns that are seemingly moving younger people away from the older generation. Allison (2013) referred to a new generation of 'digital natives'—youth between the ages of 13 and 30—who share a preference for digital, 'across boundaries' communication. Within some cultures, the notion of youth as 'digital natives' is explored as a factor in moving young people further from the older generations. Wallis (2011, 415), for example, concluded that phenomenon of digital natives has formed a 'vast generation gap between Chinese youth and their parents'.

Using a similar lens, there is scope to consider how post-materialistic values influence the movement of youth away from the values of the older generation (Inglehart, 1990). This post-materialist focus among youth includes the prioritising of several issues over and above economic growth and individual gain, including environmental protection (Skogen, 1996), animal rights (Nilsen, 2012), challenging discrimination (Thomson, 2000), human rights and political activism (Ellis, 2006). These differing values (materialist versus post-materialist) can create barriers to inter-generational cooperation. Furlong and Cartmel (2012, 13) noted that 'age-related similarities', such as differences in political agendas that are shaped by generation-specific priorities are factors in the generation gap. Examples of this include the different importance placed on tuition fees by young people or on pensions by the older generations.

Despite the negative tone surrounding the gender gap, there is a sense of hope in some pockets of literature. Youniss et al. (2002) called for bridges to be built between generations to work toward social betterment. Similarly, Bynner (2012) proposed the need for a renewed social contract between generations, where each generation agrees to uphold their end of the bargain. Researchers such as Jones et al. (2010), when talking about the notion of 'digital natives', claimed that the two generations were not necessarily distinctive, and that to suggest this is an oversimplification. What is perhaps clearer and more tangible are research findings that point to a lack of political representation among young people (Henn et al., 2002), as well as an under-appreciation of how young people are affected by the socio-economic decisions of the older generations (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012).

### ***Youth participation and digital technology***

Whereas there is a perception that the older and younger generations are failing to connect, youth are more connected to one another than ever before. Mobile technology is changing the daily lives of young people (Allison, 2013). Despite reported negative impacts of technology on young people, such as cyber-bullying, time-wasting and loss of privacy (Hume and

Sullivan Mort, 2012), research from Australia and Sweden suggests that the use of mobile devices provides an important means of escape and sense of belonging for young people (Cahir and Werner, 2013).

Indeed, there is a case for mobile technology to be an agent of social change. Mesch (2012) claimed that the fast dissemination of information, ability to form and nurture social networks and the increased autonomy from parental figures, which are all affordances of the Internet and mobile phones, are also factors for enabling social influence. Social movements, such as the 2011 student demonstration in Chile (Valenzuela et al., 2012) and the 'Arab spring' in 2011 (Allison, 2012) were broadcasted and mobilised with the help of social media. Examples of movements such as 'Kefaya', the April 6<sup>th</sup> 'Youth and We are all Khaled Said', reportedly found social media to be advantageous in helping the opposition leaders gain clarity and purchase on issues, platforms and offline social movements (Lim, 2012). Despite this potential for mobile technology and social media to be used by youth to raise awareness, gain momentum and catalyse positive social change, there exists a deeper layer of investigation in understanding young people's motivation to participate in society.

### ***Youth participation and motivation***

Although there is clear potential for digital technology to support youth as agents of social change, it is not a means of motivation in itself. Dawes and Larsen (2011) outlined three theories of engagement: 1) flow theory, where there is motivation through being suitably challenged by a task; 2) interest theory, where the task is personally meaningful to the participant and 3) self-determination theory, where the task is integrated into one's self and internally regulated. These theories imply that motivation to engage comes through extrinsic and intrinsic connections between the activities and one's own goals. Or, in other words, the young person can see the value in participating and can feel that, through their participation, they can influence change. For example, Nejati et al. (2012) found that the more youth in their study were aware of poverty and the more they felt it was important to address poverty through collective action, the more engaged they were in such activities.

Certainly, there are cultural differences among youth that will influence the extent to which youth will participate in society (Walsh, 2012; Brake, 2013; Walker and Stephenson, 2013). However, the motivation for a young person to participate in society is influenced by a variety of factors, including a person's values, goals, beliefs, expectations and the beliefs of others in their lives, such as their parents (Dawes and Larsen, 2011; Helve and Evans, 2013). Interestingly, this latter aspect is quite important because the role of the family and of parents as traditional authority figures is one area of social life that does not appear to have been weakened in the post-materialistic world (Thomson and Holland, 2002).

Furthermore, it is also important to consider the inter-relational dynamics in empowering youth to participate. Christens (2012) claimed that transformational relationships with others provide impetus for collective action through organisation. The notion of collective action is explored in the literature as requiring certain conditions. Hanleybrown et al. (2012) outlined five 'conditions of collective impact', a term that is described as collaborative problem-

solving to address global issues. These conditions include: 1) a common agenda, 2) shared measurement, 3) mutually reinforcing activities, 4) continuous communication and 5) support from others.

However, the notion of youth engagement in collective action is not exactly straightforward. Thomson and Holland (2002, 111) suggested that although young people may engage with collective values and reciprocal relationships, this engagement is centred on a moralistic individualism that is related to their own 'moral biography'. This can mean that young people see a need for collective action to deliver social innovation and change, but do not see themselves, individually, as potential leaders or agents of change (Ellis, 2006). This can also have the effect that they do not engage in social innovation, rather seeing it as the responsibility of the institutions and state actors that they have, to a degree, become disengaged from (Ellis, 2006). Giddens (1990) referred to this phenomenon as 'de-embedding', to mean a rejection of traditional forms of authority (such as formal institutions) in favour of an individualised focusing on the development of the self. Thomson and Holland (2002) argued that when engaging in societal change through the reshaping of values and institutions, young people are, in effect, also engaging in their own moral development. This leads to what Giddens (1991, 209) termed 'institutional reflexivity' and the penetration of the 'local and the global' in which individual growth can also have macro-social effects both in communities and globally.

It is pertinent to investigate strategies that empower young people to work as agents of social change. The literature points to multiple examples of community based programmes to support youth participation. Blanchet-Cohen and Cook's (2014) study highlighted the impact of youth grants in catalysing positive social change. Haynes and Tanner (2013) reported on the positive findings of empowering young Filipinos to raise awareness of disaster risk by creating and disseminating videos. Still, other studies examine the ability to engage youth in social change through the use of social media (see, for example, Valasquez and LaRose, 2012). Additionally, there is an abundance of literature regarding the engagement of youth through participatory research. Youth participatory action research, or YPAR, is sometimes referred to in the literature alongside the term community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Jacquez, 2013). Both focus on an approach to research that values various social participants as collaborators, with YPAR focusing on youth as researchers (Bautista et al., 2013). There is much to support the idea that, through YPAR, young people will be more aware and more empowered to effect positive social change (Powers and Allaman, 2012; Richards-Schuster and Aldana, 2015).

### ***The role of higher education***

There is great potential for higher education to play a significant role in empowering young people to participate in social change. Bynner (2012) supported the idea that education and employment were the key starting points for renewing the social contract between generations. Facer (2011, i) outlined a set of social developments that are driving the need to rethink the future of education:

1. The growth of new relationships between humans and technology
2. The emergence of new intergenerational relationships
3. Struggles over new forms of knowledge and democracy
4. The intensification of radical economic and social inequalities

There are many examples of how principles for changemaking are being embedding in learning and teaching practices. Arches (2013, 37) described ‘service learning’ as a ‘structured learning experience that combines community service with course content. In these settings, students work through a set of questions: 1) what is the issue? 2) why is it an issue? 3) how can we act on it?, after which they carry out the activity and reflect on their experiences. Service learning is often cited in the literature alongside the term ‘positive youth development (PDP)’, which Lopez (2014) described as a framework based upon the accentuation of a young person’s positive traits and personal resources. Positive youth development can be used in a variety of ways, one of which is through peer mentoring (Liang et al., 2013). Arches (2013) suggested that positive youth development involves the developing of ‘five Cs’:

1. Competence for physical, social, cognitive, emotional, vocational and civic work
2. Connections to others
3. Character and integrity
4. Contribution (opportunities for)
5. Confidence

Through pedagogical approaches, such as service learning, there is opportunity for these five Cs to be developed among groups of youth. This type of higher education experience not only supports social participation, but is also a mechanism for supporting students’ persistence to graduation and contributing to a positive university experience (Arches, 2013).

Research into youth development has focused on youth as important contributors to social betterment (Flanagan and Christens, 2011) and there is an expanding body of literature around the effectiveness of youth organising social reform (Connor and Zaino, 2014). Despite these examples of research into youth participation, there is still a need to explore the everyday experiences of young people (France, 2007; Roberts and MacDonald, 2013; Tolan, 2014). Wyn and Woodman (2006) argued that greater insights into young people’s beliefs could shed light on the identity of youth within a generational context. Allison (2013) questioned whether there was enough research into the wider implications of the prevalence of mobile technology in young people’s lives, particularly into how it can be used to influence change on a macro level.

The present study explores university students’ perceptions of social change and social innovation to gain a better understanding of what they see as enablers and barriers to their social participation. Examining students’ beliefs and shifting expectations may provide much needed understanding towards what Woodman and Wyn (2013, 273) referred to as a more ‘robust social framework’ for addressing the ‘realities of young people’s lives today’.



Furthermore, these insights will provide useful findings for a more relevant approach to positive youth development through higher education.

### **The study**

Using a socio-cultural approach, this study used a qualitative methodology to prompt personal reflection, discourse and shared meaning-making among groups of university students.

### **Methods**

Two focus groups were carried out with students at the University of Northampton. Participants were recruited with the assistance of course instructors, who were known by the researchers and who were willing to help with this project. These instructors distributed a call for participants among their student groups, which yielded a total sample of ten participants. Each focus group comprised five students who were randomly selected from the whole sample. These focus group sizes are characteristic of ‘mini-focus groups’, which offer the participants more opportunities to share their ideas but may limit the overall pool of ideas (Krueger, 1994).

Although a greater sample size was anticipated, the data elicited from both groups were very rich and were therefore deemed a valid contribution to this research. Table 1 and Table 2 show the demographic profile of each group. Gender-specific pseudonyms have been used instead of real names.

**Table 1: Participant profile for Focus Group 1 (n=5)**

Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Subject	Level of study
1	Sally	Female	21	Business Entrepreneurship and Events Management	Undergraduate
2	Amy	Female	29	Social Entrepreneurship	Postgraduate
3	Sanjay	Male	21	Business Entrepreneurship	Undergraduate
4	Victor	Male	31	Business Entrepreneurship	Undergraduate
5	James	Male	22	Economics and Business	Undergraduate

**Table 2: Participant profile for Focus Group 2 (n=5)**

Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Subject	Level of study
6	Petra	Female	32	Social Entrepreneurship	Postgraduate
7	John	Male	51	Business Entrepreneurship	Undergraduate
8	Shirley	Female	34	Business Entrepreneurship	Undergraduate
9	Andrea	Female	21	Business Entrepreneurship	Undergraduate
10	Tamsi	Female	20	Business Entrepreneurship	Undergraduate

Ages ranged from 20 to 51 years old, with the mean age being 28. Four of the participants were over the age of 30, which means this sample may not have been representative of the ‘youth’ under investigation. However, the aim of this study was to elicit university students’ views, and to have input from older and younger university students was deemed beneficial to this study.

Six (60%) of participants were female and four (40%) were male. Eight (80%) were enrolled in undergraduate study and two (20%) were enrolled in postgraduate study. All of the

participants were engaged in study that related to business or social entrepreneurship. This was a strength of the study in that students were able to discuss and relate to the concepts around positive social change, which made for a rich conversation. However, this was also a limitation of the study in that the research findings may not be representative of a wider, interdisciplinary cohort of students who may not be as familiar with these concepts.

Once the participants provided informed consent, they were assigned to separate rooms so that each focus group could be conducted simultaneously albeit with different facilitators. Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour, during which time each set of facilitators encouraged a whole-group conversation around a pre-set list of questions, or 'prompts'. These conversations were recorded using small video cameras.

### ***Data analysis***

The videos were converted into data transcripts so they could be analysed for particular themes around the three research questions. In this way, the utterances were no longer the unit of analysis. Rather, the typed transcripts became the source of data (Kohlbacher, 2005). 'Denaturalised' focus group transcripts, which aim to capture the informational content of the conversation, were used for this study (MacLean et al., 2004). While this approach to data analysis means that the transcriber will influence the way in which these data are presented, Oliver et al. (2005) suggested that the activity of transcription offers important opportunities for reflection on research.

Thematic analysis was carried out using the transcripts, which provided an iterative process for grouping data into meaningful categories, or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved an initial process of scanning the transcripts for themes, followed by a coding process. The coding process was supported by the use of NVivo, a software programme for qualitative analysis. Coding the data involved the use of a series of nodes (themes) and child-nodes (codes). A series of nodes, four in total, and child-nodes, sixteen in total, were set up based on the initial scanning of the focus group transcripts. Once the transcripts were coded, they were analysed thematically and utilised to address the research questions.

### **Findings**

This study sought to understand how university students conceptualise social change and social innovation. The study also aimed to elicit students' beliefs about what enables and hinders young people to work as agents of positive social change. The three original research questions corresponded fairly neatly with the four broad themes emerging from the analysis of the data: 1) conceptions of social innovation and change, 2) enablers of social innovation and social change, 3) barriers to social innovation and social change, and 4) attributes for social innovation and social change. Within each theme there were a range of sub-themes. One example of this is that under the theme of Conceptions, there were several sub-themes, such as human rights and equality, individual versus community, and innovation. This section presents data to support each theme and some interpretation, or *meta-analysis*, to understand better the sub-themes.

### ***Theme 1: Conceptions of social innovation and social change***

Participants across the two groups held a range of beliefs about social innovation and social change. Tamsi talked about social change as ‘a move towards a more equal society’ and Andrea felt it was about ‘civil rights...or any type of rights’ and ‘helping people that need help’. Social innovation was seen as being different to social change. Sally felt that social innovation was a more ‘exciting’ term, while another explained social innovation in *Schumpeterian* terms as:

‘solving new, well not new, solving these old problems in a new way.’ (Andrea)

‘taking an approach outside the box instead of just going. Taking a new idea or looking at it from another angle.’ (John)

A similar view of social innovation also emerged through the participants making links between business and social innovation (or social enterprise).

‘Innovation makes me think of business whereas social change I associate with a protest or non-profit.’ (Andrea)

There was a broader consensus about whether social innovation was a positive factor in delivering social change. However, Andrea felt that this depended on the economic resources allocated to delivering the social innovation.

‘It depends on where the funding comes from. Because let’s say you have a programme that’s doing a lot of us but there is this other programme that you take from the budget because it serves more people. So, I guess it depends where the funding comes from.’ (Andrea)

There were divisions amongst the participants as to whether social innovation and change were individual or community responsibilities. Some participants argued that that social change was related to community impact and collaborative working; whilst other participants argued that it was individual action that impacted communities through inclusion.

‘...the impact it [innovation] makes within the community.’ (Petra)

‘Social change obviously is how what we do affects our surroundings and if we have objectives of changing our environments it is how we actually do it...But if there is a group of you it is better to make an impact.’ (Victor)

‘...It’s [social change] what we do to affect the social community where we live. We want to include others to be part of what we’re doing.’ (Sally)

The idea that the individual and the community can both be responsible for social change and social innovation was articulated by one participant as being the collective product of individual actions through the ‘snowballing’ of effort.

‘I always think that ‘social change’ sounds quite big, big idea, but actually the word ‘social’ includes all of us. So, that means everyone can start to do some kind of change and that can just snowball into a movement. But, social change is individual change to me.’ (Amy)

Finally, there was some wariness related to the idea that everyone could be a social innovator, with some participants recognising the need for leadership and the recognition of inequality as a motivation to action.

‘I don’t think it would be a good idea for everyone to be a social innovator...I think you need a certain degree of inequality that entrepreneurs can take advantage of to exploit and to create wealth for other people and to address poverty. I think you need a certain degree of inequality.’ (James)

### ***Theme 2: Enablers of social innovation and social change***

The data revealed a number of emergent enablers of social innovation and change that were centred on educational institutions and the opportunities that they offered young people. In most cases these opportunities were imagined through the individual self and included the role of work placements, social networks, time, university-based schemes and dialogue. One participant described the personal impact of completing a University summer placement in a developing country.

‘I feel that I developed as well because I also now know how the differences are in a more developed country in comparison to a less developed country. For me it was an eye-opener. It made me realise what I’ve taken for granted in the past.’ (Sanjay)

Another participant described the way that university life influences the shaping and changing of personal views. This change was recognised as being the result of widening networks and the empathy that could be developed through these experiences.

‘[It’s about] widening perspectives and that thing about empathy. At university you meet people you might not meet just growing up and on top of that you come out with brilliant knowledge and stuff like that.’ (John)

One participant referred to the phenomenon of ‘snoozing’. University was seen to give them the time to formulate their views and to imagine what they want their future world to look like.

‘For me, this is how I think about it. Part of university is ‘snoozing’ life and when you’re at university you have time to develop your ideas about the world. In real life you don’t have time to develop your ideas and stuff like that.’ (James)

Some participants related this concept of growth through education, family and their development.

‘Youngsters, if one they are educated enough that could definitely impact on others as well. I mean youngsters they try to copy what he or she is doing. So, if we try to influence the group they might change but also the others. The child can tell the family that my teacher said...children go to school and that is where they learn the most.’ (Petra)

‘Social change has to come from the family. Because the family make the community, from families coming together makes a nation. Change needs to happen in the family before it can change others.’ (John)

The participants articulated the view that external initiatives provided by the University could provide motivation to action in relation to developing social innovation and delivering social change. These included specific initiatives run at the university, such as Changemaker Week.

‘Having Changemaker Weeks and having talks where you can talk directly to other people. Meeting other people who are interested in social change and social enterprise.’ (Petra)

Another initiative that was mentioned was the University’s Enterprise Hub, which enabled students to test and develop their ideas with expert support.

‘[The Enterprise Hub] enables students to push ideas and make a social difference. They try to encourage students.’ (Shirley)

Linked to this was the idea that business had become more social and this was having an impact on what was expected of students, they had to be more proactive to keep up.

‘We’re now in an era now where every business has some type of social enterprise or social impact...younger people are encouraged to have that mindset. We’re being pushed to be innovative with our ideas. But because it is an era we’re just coming into, we’re not equipped to. Instead of relying on other people, you need to research how to be good at public speaking, manage your time well, all these things, we’re having learnt and adapt to this change.’ (Andrea)

Social media, as indicated in the literature, was seen by these participants as holding important opportunity for supporting social change.

‘Online campaigns, I’ve seen on Facebook with crowd-funding [laughing] like the ice bucket challenge. Arguably there is a very positive and negative affect. Online media’s ability to communicate to young people is a huge opportunity.’ (Amy)

‘Everything is mobile now. The further we go into the future, the more we develop. If you want to be in touch with someone, even games, my little brother, gets together with his friends on a game, they work together on the game. They probably wouldn’t do that if they didn’t have the game. All of these digital platforms.....In like Egypt, they used Facebook and Twitter to have a revolution. So that was social change. Digitally!’ (Victor)

Time, experience and wisdom were perceived as enabling social innovation and social change.

‘It’s that attitude of networking and get to know them...if you’ve been in the game longer you have access to network, resources, but someone like me it will take me longer because I’m at an earlier stage...don’t have that support, that

mentor, to set up these ideas. Young people might have a shorter attention span. I think that's where they need more support from the older generation.' (Shirley)

### ***Theme 3: Barriers to social innovation and social change***

Some participants felt that young people's abilities to influence positive social change were limited in terms of resources. In order to overcome this perceived barrier, one needed a positive mind-set.

'I'll get to a point where I don't have the resources to go further. [Its] a lack of resources [and] knowledge.' (Andrea)

'You still need to have that mind-set because if you don't believe in yourself then no one else will. You see the world in a much better perspective. If you're pessimistic and someone gets on top of you and you give up, just telling yourself that you can do it there is potential.' (Tamsi)

Alongside the perception of resource as a barrier to social change, there was also a question of whether others would back a young person with an idea. This idea was challenged by some participants who felt that there was already plenty of support available and that this was just an excuse to mask a lack of confidence amongst young people.

'If young people have a ground-breaking idea, but if there is a lack of support, they won't be able to do it.' (Sanjay)

'I think we lack in confidence in ourselves. If we're able to put our idea on paper there's so much support that you can get and nowadays being your own boss is something that is advertised so much.' (Andrea)

The lack of social or cultural capital was a perceived barrier by one participant.

'It has a lot to do with your surroundings. I went to an all boys' school. It had a real mix of those who got in through scholarship and those who were well-off. You can see the comparison. A lot of them came from a council estate and everything has to be rubber stamped. If you need food stamps or if you want to go on a school trip, you have to get approval. That process is quite long. You'd just stop doing it after a while. If you've got money behind you, you just do it. So, I think that subconsciously narrows your scope. You literally just think about the short term. But, if you come from a nicer background, you can travel the world, it broadens your scope.' (James)

Having an intrinsic connection or 'passion' to change a situation for the better was articulated as empathy.

'I have to have some sort of connection to it to do it. I need something inside of me to say 'go do that'. If it's something I care about.' (Victor)

'A lot of the time what motivates me to get involved is the sense of empathy, a shared set of values of knowing where you've come from. That aspect may

mean that you may or may not get involved. If you've got no concept of what the problem, then you've got no empathy of what's going on.' (Amy)

## **Discussion**

The concept of social innovation and social change is clearly complex and cannot be distilled into set ideas and nor can set groups of ideas be assigned to homogeneous groups (i.e. young people). Nevertheless, it is possible to develop typologies for certain groups within society that allow us to develop strategies designed to foster social innovation and positive social change. The research reported in this paper suggested that young people envision social innovation and social change as both an individual and collective process. While the findings of the present study support themes within mainstream literature regarding young people's attitudes to social change, the data gathered in this study suggest that the de-embedding process described by Giddens (1990) does not always occur with young people in relation to formal institutions. Indeed, the participants in this study saw the University as a crucial component in actualising young people's visions of social change and innovation. This actualisation mainly appeared to be realised through extra-curricular activities (i.e. work placements and Changemaker Week) as these activities provided students with the opportunity to engage with social problems in new ways and allowed them to build 'trust' with the University as an institution.

The participants in this study articulated a perceived tension between the role of the individual and the role of the community (or collective action) in delivering social innovation and change. Interestingly, one of the students actually discussed the role that individual development and action can have in delivering wider social change, in what can be argued was empirical evidence of the local and global penetration articulated by Giddens (1991). It is suggested that this is an example of the young seeing the need for collective action for social change and innovation, but not necessarily seeing themselves as the leaders of such action, an idea outlined by Ellis (2006). By perceiving the University as an institution that could support their individual morality, the participants were recognising the role of education in shaping the identity of young people (Powell, 2014) and in helping them develop an understanding of what their social contract should look like (Bynner, 2012).

In supporting this development it can be argued that universities are helping young people to develop cognitive images of their future through the shaping of their conceptions, beliefs, desires, knowledge and observations (cf. Polak, 1973; Guillo, 2013). The transition to adulthood that young people engage with is powerfully shaped by their 'horizons for action', which are crucial in defining the imagined futures that the young person perceives as being possible (Hodkinson et al., 1996). In assisting young people to develop their perceptions of the possible and hence expand their horizons for action, universities can play a key role in enabling young people to deliver social innovation and positive social change either individually or collectively through the reordering of their life course perceptions (Powell, 2014).

Universities can shape a young person's motivations for action through organised programmes (such as Changemaker Week). Such initiatives challenge young people both intrinsically and extrinsically by linking external challenges to the individualised moral self (Dawes and Larson, 2011). This was evidenced in this study by the young person discussing the effect that their placement in a developing country had had upon their perceptions of poverty and their life, in much the same way that prior research by Nejati et al. (2012) argued.

The participants also discussed the role of motivation in driving them to engage with social change. This motivation was both extrinsic (i.e. through University programmes such as Changemaker Week) and intrinsic through the young person's 'buy-in' to a social issue. This could also be aligned with what Dawes and Larson (2011) termed 'flow theory' and 'interest theory' and demonstrates that Universities can have a role in both extrinsically driving youth social innovation and raising awareness of social problems that may engage students in social innovation. The issue of motivation was also linked to self-efficacy (cf. Bandura, 1997), as students sometimes felt that a lack of support from other people held them back in seeking social change. Whether this signifies a lack of self-efficacy or whether a genuine lack of support exists, remains unclear and is an area for further research. However, as many of the students talked about the supportive environment provided by the University, it could be argued that perceptions of a lack of support are rooted in a young person's self-efficacy and resources (both economic and non-economic).

The issue of resources was also seen as crucial by the participants, with some young people discussing the need for economic resource to drive social change. The perception that a lack of economic resource hinders the ability to engage in social innovation supports prior research by Blanchet-Cohen and Cook (2014), who demonstrated the impact that grant funding had on driving social innovation. It also suggests that what Hanleybrown et al. (2012) termed the 'support of others' does not just relate to extrinsic motivators (or flow) (Dawes and Larson (2011), but also includes monetary forms of support. However, resource was not considered by the young people to be solely financial, with other types of support (such as social and cultural capital) also being deemed important.

Interestingly, there was a perception that class and socio-economic status (or habitus) (Bourdieu, 1990) were important in determining access these types of capital. Whether correct or not (and it is not the purpose of this paper to argue this point), the perception of a lack of social and cultural capital among economically poorer students is an area in which universities should engage. Indeed, it suggests that the role of universities in driving social change and encouraging the young to be social innovators lies within the transformative educational experiences (Bynner, 2012) that universities can bring to bear in driving 'positive youth development' (Arches, 2013; Lopez, 2014). A university-led focus on increasing levels of social and cultural capital, particularly amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds, could therefore offer a powerful method of enabling social innovation.

Finally, harnessing the power of technology was seen as important in engaging young people in social innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Mesch (2012) argued, the fast dissemination of



information and the social networks that can be built through digital technology undoubtedly have a social influence, and the young people cited examples such as the Arab Spring (as discussed by Allison, 2013) as examples of digitally-led social change. Cahir and Werner (2013) argued that digital technology provides young people with a sense of belonging that they do not feel they have in a 'de-embedded' and post-materialist world. Therefore, it is vital for a university that wishes to drive social change on its campus and in its local and global communities to find ways to engage students with digital technology. Digital technology could provide the platform that allows young people to reconcile their own moral biography with relational, collective action.

## Summary

This paper reported on a study to understand university students' perceptions of social change. The study sought to elicit students' views on what they perceived to enable and to hinder youth in being agents of positive social change. Findings from these focus groups have several important implications for higher education institutions that wish to develop students as social changemakers. By supporting students' abilities to envision themselves as agents of positive social change, either individually or collectively, and in finding ways to develop these capacities through learning, teaching and extra-curricular activities, universities have a tremendous opportunity to nurture the next generation of social innovators.

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