University of Salford MANCHESTER

Adapting and responding to wicked problems in higher education

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Session Overview

This session is designed to be interactive and reflective. To that end, the session will:

- Provide participants with activities to complete to identify challenges and acknowledge successes.
- Invite individual reflection and an opportunity to work collaboratively to create strategies for quality enhancement.
- Provide opportunities for discussion and questions throughout.

Activity 1: What is your Six-word story?

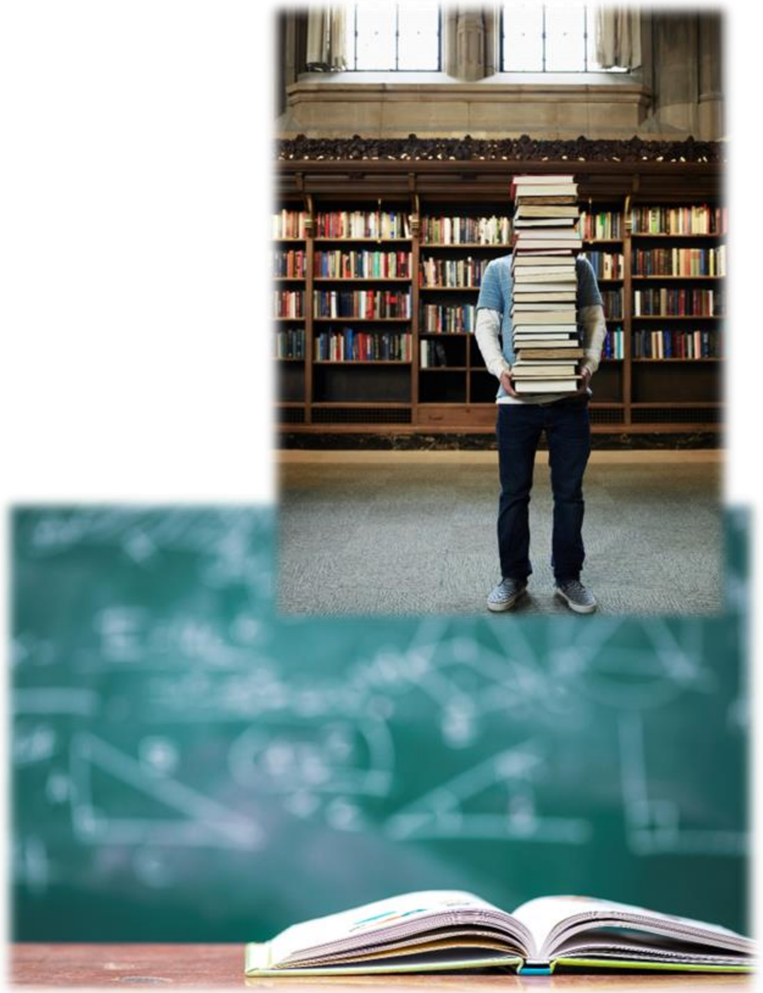
- You have six words; take a few moments to think about your story of working towards responsible and adaptable institutional change.
- Write your six words on single post-it notes and then add them to the wall space.
- Once you have added your own story take a few moments to read the stories of other attendees.
- Examples include:

  ‘When talk matters, make it count.’

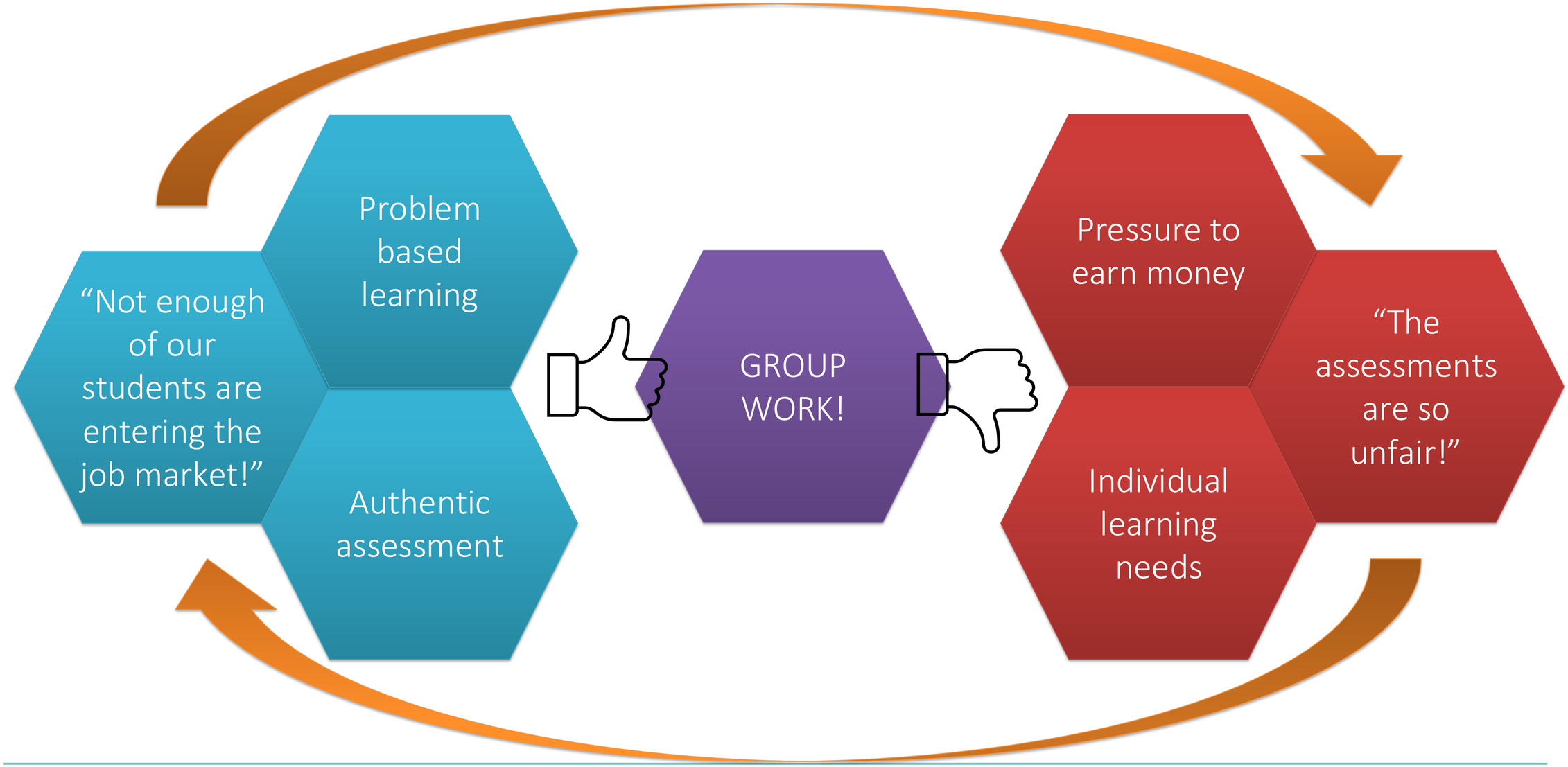
  ‘Not quite what I was planning.’

What do we already know?

- The importance of quality assurance in higher education is widely assumed (Cardoso *et al*.2015).
- However, relatively little scholarly work has discussed the development and enhancement of a quality culture that embeds consideration of quality across a university (Legemaate *et al*., 2022).
- A significant quantity of research involves relatively small-scale and short-term surveys with a focus on performance indicators that can oversimplify complex problems and overlook interlinked elements (Hamshire *et al 2017 and* Harvey, 2022).



The tame solution problem

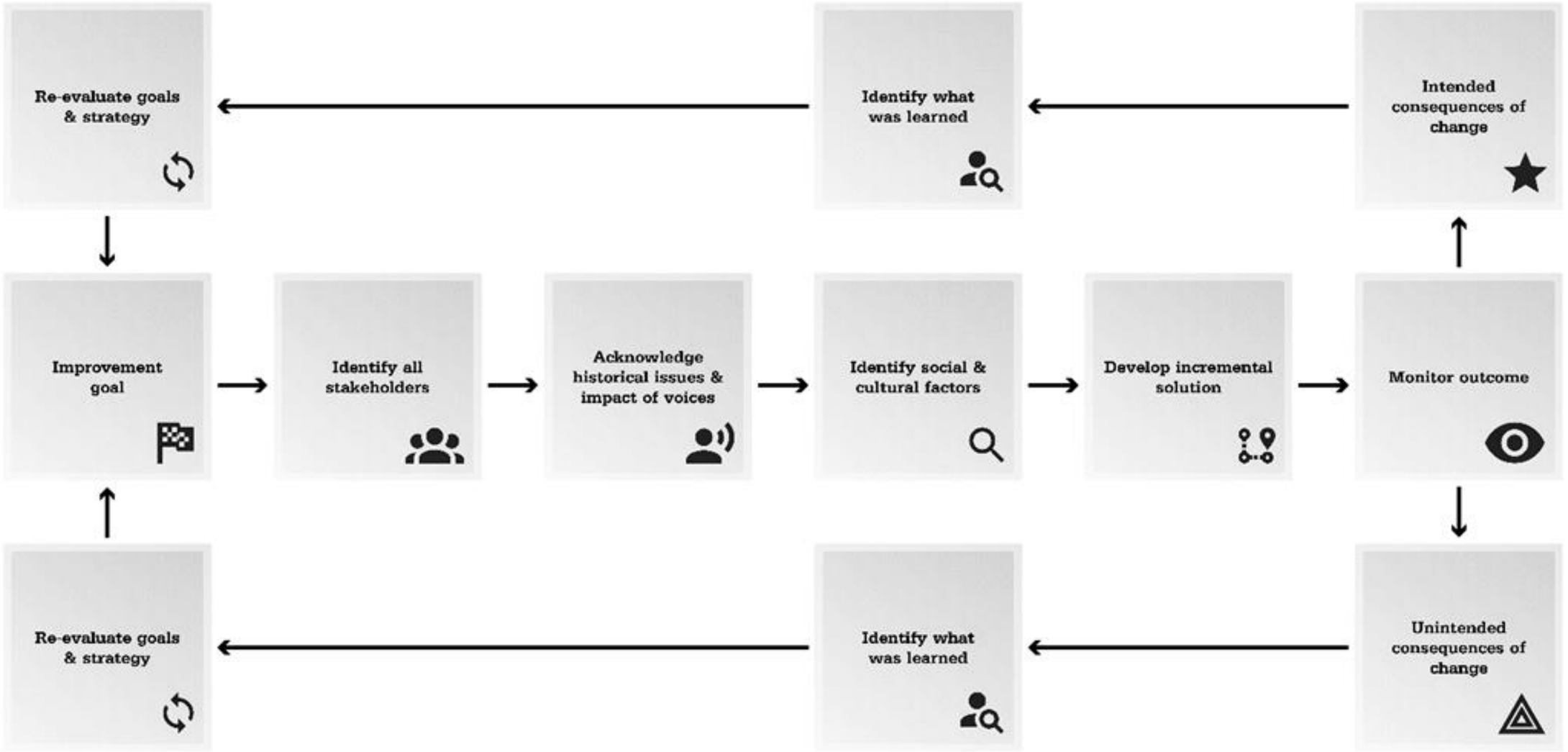


Complex educational changes are wicked problems

Characteristics of wicked problems (Rittel & Webber 1973)		What does this means in practice?
1	No clear definition of the problem	Imperfect understanding of the causes
2	Never ending solutions and amendments: no stopping point	There's always more to do
3	No right or wrong evaluation or solution	Many choices of solution, never clear which is optimal
4	No immediate test of solution	Consequences of solutions are complex and delayed
5	No trial & error phase	Can't refine a single solution, making it better and better
6	No criteria to know if all solutions have been identified	The 'solution space' of all choices is more than any of us can know
7	Each wicked problem is unique	Don't let the similarities fool you into thinking this one is the same as that one
8	Wicked problems can be the result of another problem	Nothing is in a closed system; it’s all one big tangled web of complexity and we see only a part of it
9	Framing of the problem affects and limits potential solutions	We're limited by the breadth of our individual and collective perspectives
10	Pressure on policy makers	Solve the intractable problem quicker and more cheaply!

(Rittel and Webber 1973)

Wicked problem framework (Hamshire et al. 2019)

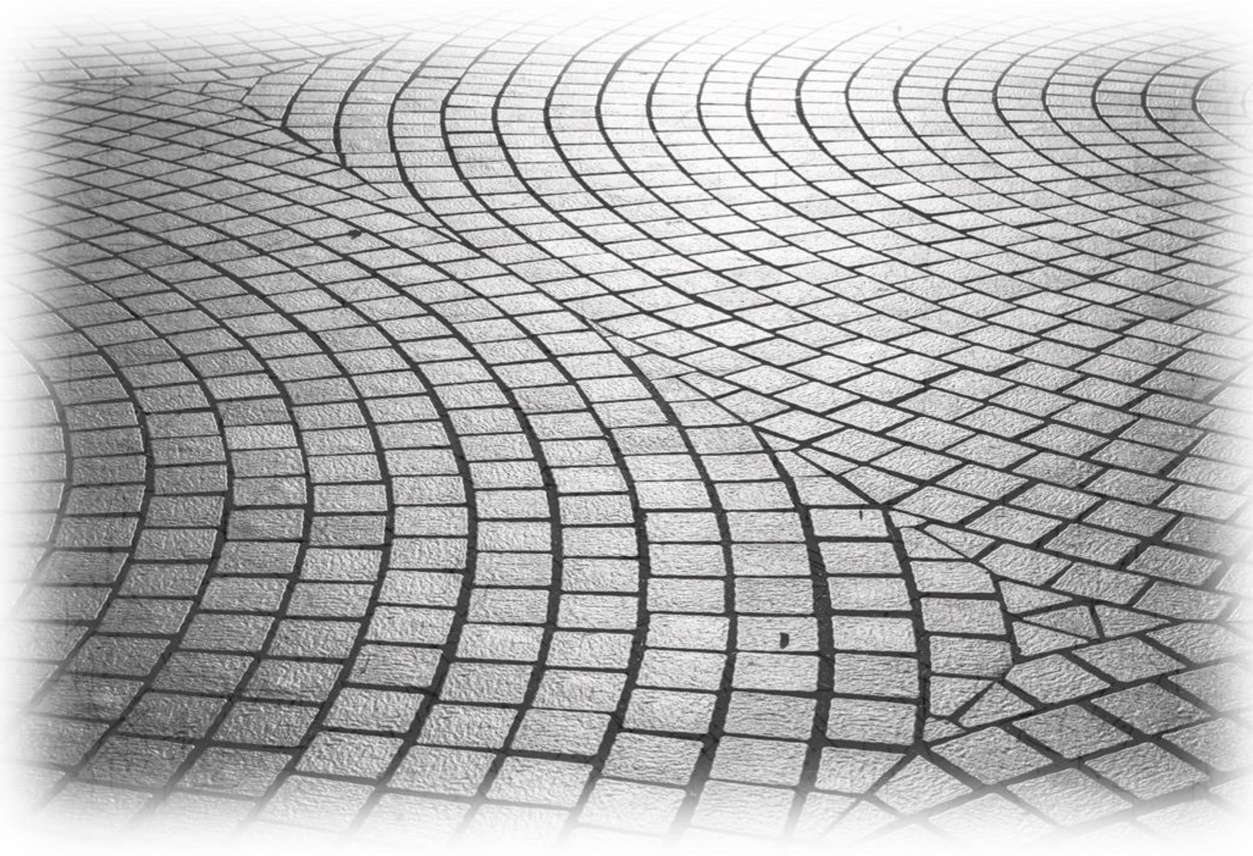


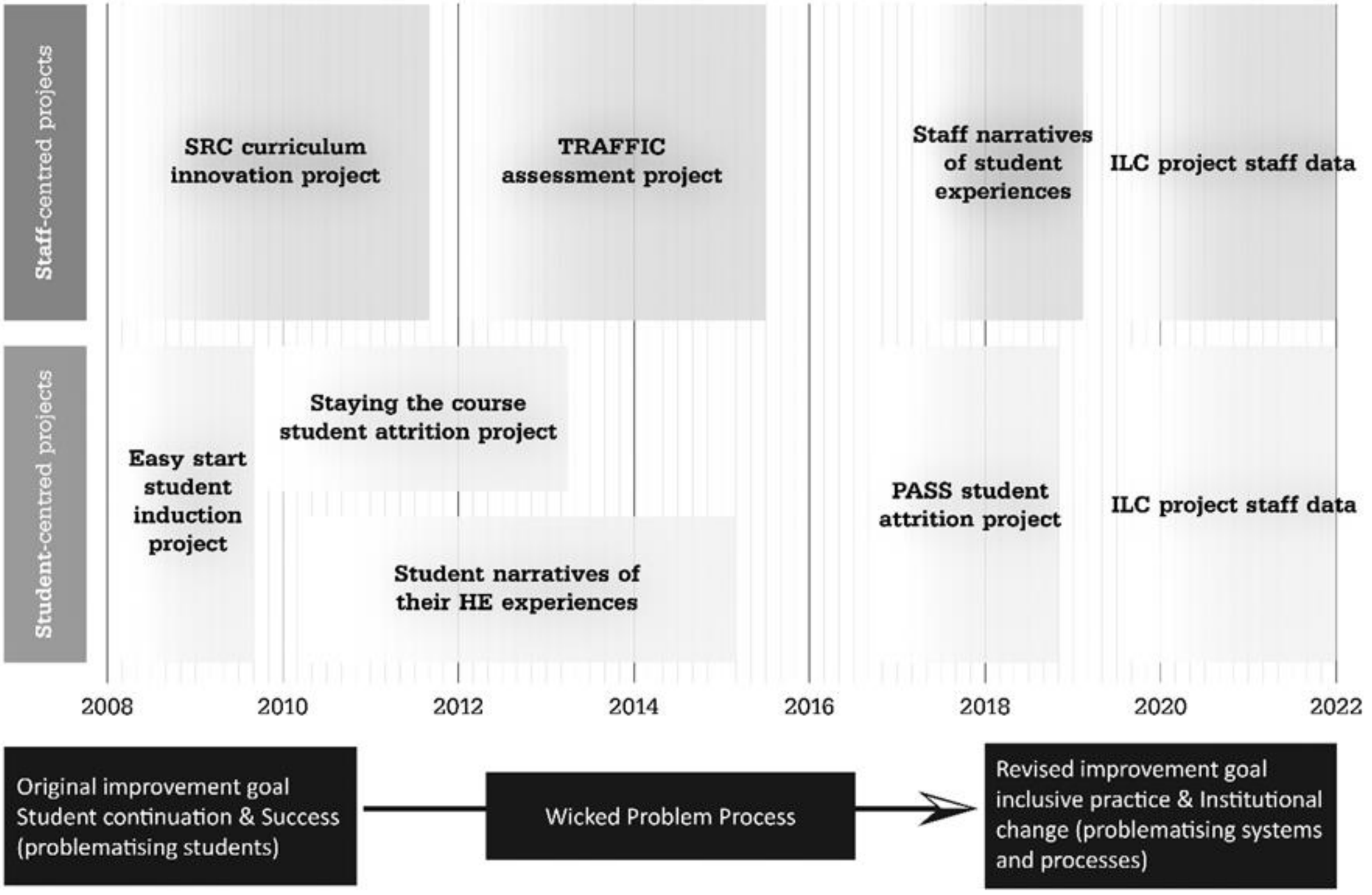
Activity 2: Identifying your stakeholders & historical voices

Get started	Form groups of 4 or 5
Mapping	Identify stakeholders
Consider	Historical voices

Concatenated research

- A form of longitudinal qualitative exploration.
- A series of studies are linked, as if in a chain, leading to cumulative grounded theory.
- Each exploratory study unfolds with an accumulation of research and application of theory,
- Provides opportunities to explore both the intended and unintended consequences of institutional change. (Stebbins, 1992 & 2001)



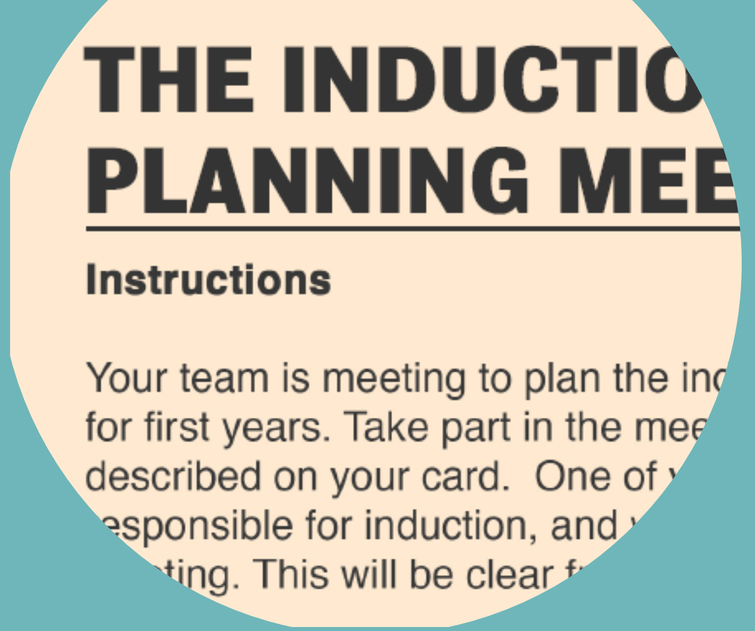

Staff-centred projects
Student-centred projects
SRC curriculum innovation project
TRAFFIC assessment project
Staff narratives of student experiences
ILC project staff data
Staying the course student attrition project
Easy start student induction project
Student narratives of their HE experiences
PASS student attrition project
ILC project staff data
2008
2010
2012
2014
2016
2018
2020
2022
Original improvement goal Student continuation & Success (problematising students)
Wicked Problem Process
Revised improvement goal inclusive practice & Institutional change (problematising systems and processes)

Activity 3: What social and cultural factors impact on institutional change?

Prepare	• Form groups of 4 or 5
Read	• Look at the *Same* but *Different* resources.
Plan	• Work through the prompt questions

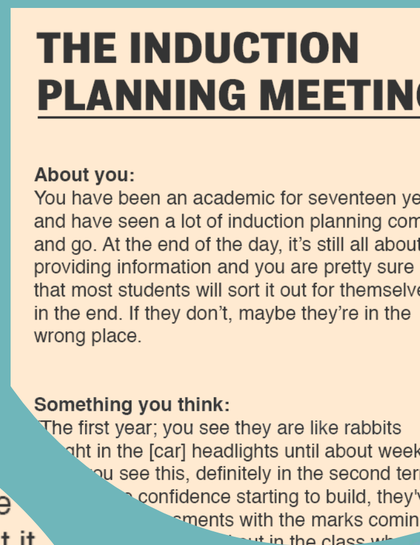
Activity 4: Develop incremental solutions

Get started	Form groups of 4 or 5
Prepare	Look at your role
Do	Make a plan together


THE INDUCTIO
PLANNING MEE

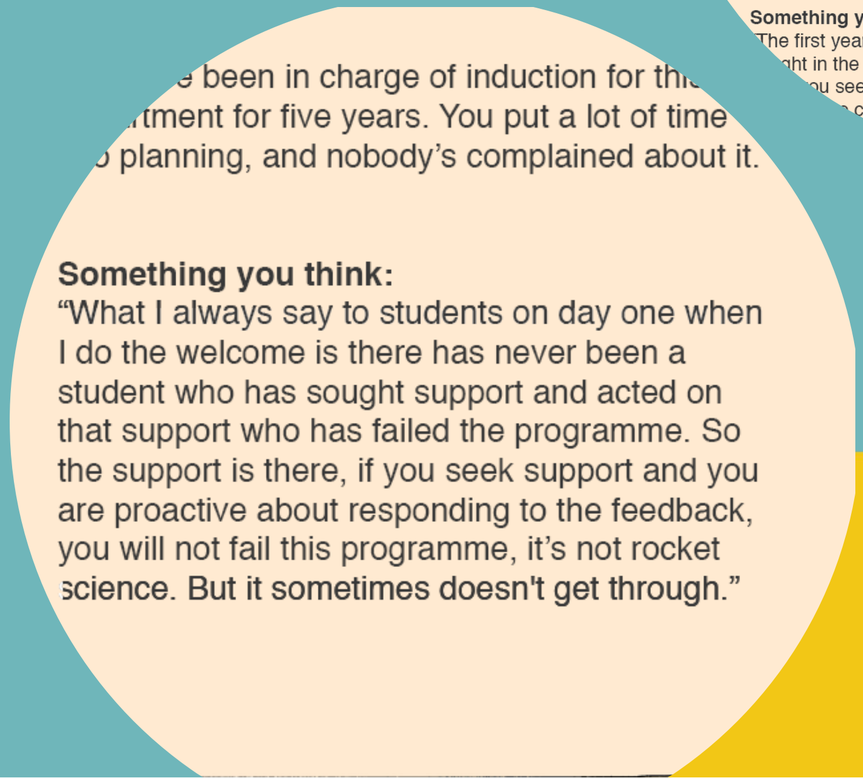
Instructions

Your team is meeting to plan the inc
for first years. Take part in the mee
described on your card. One of
esponsible for induction, and
ting. This will be clear f


THE INDUCTION
PLANNING MEETIN

About you:
You have been an academic for seventeen ye
and have seen a lot of induction planning com
and go. At the end of the day, it's still all about
providing information and you are pretty sure
that most students will sort it out for themselve
in the end. If they don't, maybe they're in the
wrong place.

Something you think:
The first year; you see they are like rabbits
ght in the [car] headlights until about week
u see this, definitely in the second ter
confidence starting to build, they'
ments with the marks comin


e been in charge of induction for thi
tment for five years. You put a lot of time
planning, and nobody's complained about it.

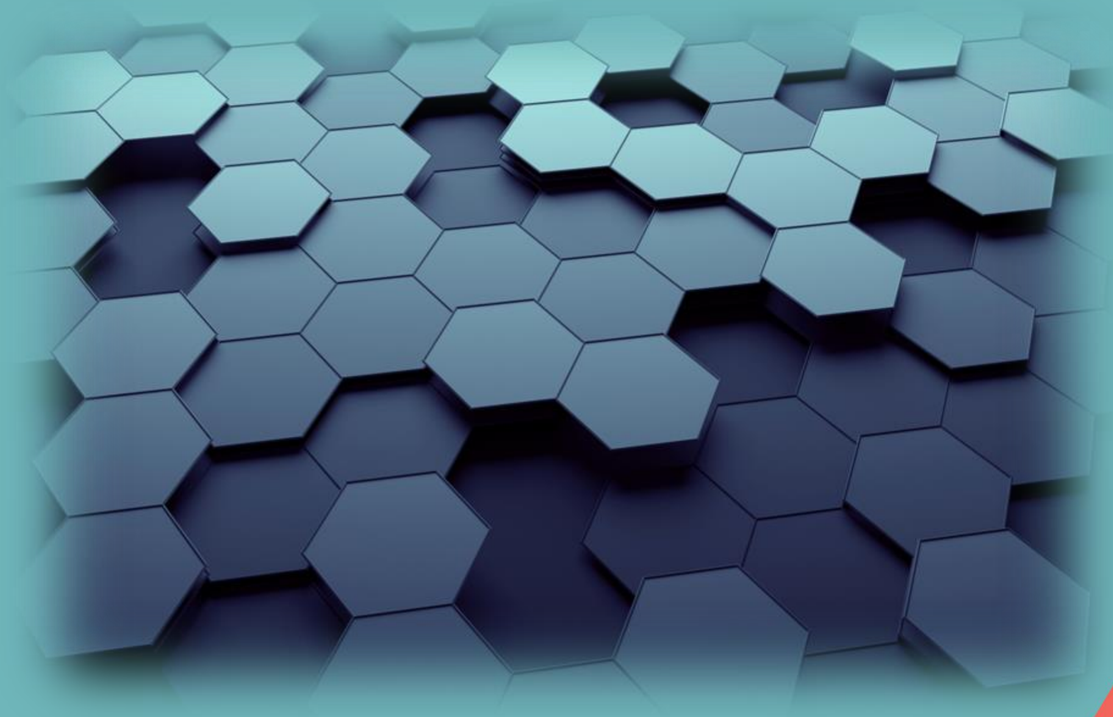
Something you think:
"What I always say to students on day one when I do the welcome is there has never been a student who has sought support and acted on that support who has failed the programme. So the support is there, if you seek support and you are proactive about responding to the feedback, you will not fail this programme, it's not rocket science. But it sometimes doesn't get through."

Effective institutional change

- Acknowledging complexity as well as valuing historical voices, in partnership with all stakeholders, enables us to focus on developing incremental solutions (Hamshire et al. 2019).
- Recognition of the multifaceted intersections of student & staff experience and acknowledgment of the unintended consequences of change, (Hamshire et al. 2024).
- Working within complex systems, staff can perceive that the solution to challenges is for students to adapt and change to fit in with a conventional institutional culture rather than substantial changes in institutional approach (Forsyth et al. 2021).

Key recommendations

- Avoid sophisticated guessing! Set up institutional structures & processes that *listen* and *learn*
- Put efforts into understanding the dynamic ecosystem (instead of justifying preferred solutions)
- Celebrate your evaluations especially when the outcome is not what was expected or hoped for
- Learn by doing



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