

## **Thinking Point – The Lean in Higher Education movement, by Vianna Renaud**

Vianna Renaud, current Trustee of ASET and Regional Coordinator for IASAS in the UK, e-connected with Steve Yorkstone from Edinburgh Napier University in the UK and Svein Are Tjeldnes from the UiT the Arctic University of Norway to learn more about the Lean in Higher Education movement.

I recently presented a session at the Lean in Higher Education Annual Conference in Tromsø Norway. With such an international scope of delegates, compelling programme of sessions and a clear dedication to continuous improvement, I wanted to learn more about how and when this movement came to the UK and elsewhere. For this I turned first to Steve.

### **I understand that you were a founding member of the UK LEAN in HE group. How did the idea come about?**

Back in, oh, 2013 I think, there was a small number of conferences about the application of lean in universities here in the United Kingdom. There was a group of about half a dozen of us practitioners who had attended each of them and we'd gotten to know each other. After one conference, we met in the pub, and we were discussing - as people like us are blessed (or cursed) to do - how the events could be improved. We concluded that it would be good if "someone" set up a group to enable the continuous improvement of a conference series itself, so that any conference was self-reflexive and would grow through, and with, its attendees. We were certain that this was the way a conference about continuous improvement ought to be run; in a way that continually improves. So, with our own improvement activity phrase echoing to us, 'If someone ought to do it, why don't you!?', we agreed to meet regularly to make it happen.

We called ourselves the Lean HE Hub, as like our practice, we wanted to be facilitators of the process, rather than owners of content. We set our purpose;

*To ensure that continuous improvement philosophies within Higher Education (HE) are themselves always improving. We do this for the good of all those whom HE serves.*

And that's how the Lean HE community of practice was born.

For Svein, the Lean story at UiT The Arctic University of Norway (UiT) started back in late 2011, as the Faculty of Health Sciences was inspired by the work done at the University Hospital of Northern Norway. After the initial work with our first processes, we felt the need to learn from other universities. At the time we were the only institution that was doing Lean in HE in Norway. As we searched for other universities to hook up with, we quickly found that there were many institutions in the UK with experience and knowledge that was very interesting to us. In 2013 we visited Christine Stewart at Cardiff University which I would say was the tipping point for us. Christine pointed us in the direction of the Lean HE network, and we were able to participate at the conference in Cardiff in 2014. From there on we have not only been a full member, but also a driving force within the Lean in HE network.

### **So after such a great start, Steve, how has it been so far?**

If I am honest, when we first began, I had assumed that there would be some other, more established and "grown-up" organisation doing this work and that we would be able to hand off

responsibility to them... there are other excellent groups in the sector (NCCI in the USA, Planet Lean etc) but we've never found an existing group that quite fitted with our mission. And I have learned to be comfortable with that! I am constantly reassured, impressed and inspired by the cumulative experience and achievements of our community. It is simply brilliant.

It's been a rollercoaster so far. We chatted with existing conference series and shared what we were doing. Despite our humble beginnings, there was quickly interest from outside. By the time we ran our first event in Cardiff 2014, we had a number of international delegates attending. We realised that we had already learned so much from our colleagues in different countries and that we had to start thinking even bigger; there was an opportunity to grow.

As there was international interest on how to apply lean in higher education (HE), we did just that, and we grew. Our community of practice now extends across three continental divisions; Europe, the Americas and Australasia. And we're inclusive of all of our delegates; our second conference was held in Waterloo (Canada), the third in Stirling (Scotland), the fourth in Sydney (Australia), and most recently in Tromsø (Norway).

### **How about the impact you have seen Steve from the annual conference and other related events?**

Our conferences have been wonderfully successful. That's down to the efforts of the conference teams in each host institution. Whilst they all reflect Lean HE practices, they have all given us something unique and special.

For us, we deliberately set our operations to be lean themselves and therefore not limited by traditional administration. All Lean HE operations are designed to optimise, engage with and enact our values as a community of practice. Each conference is not-for-profit as they are never dominated by corporate messages. They are not too large and the delegates who attend take responsibility for creating their own value from the event. This includes the value of social activities built into the conference as well. By building informal connections with people doing the same kind of work, the relationships endure beyond the event. Attendees regularly tell us that attending the conferences really feels like becoming part of a special and welcoming community; we like that!

Our local events and the conference all work together to support people working in their universities. When we sat in that pub and dreamed the Lean HE Hub up all those years ago, we'd never have imagined the reach and connectivity that our community might have.

### **Regarding the benefits of incorporating LEAN principles on campus, Svein, what have you seen?**

This isn't an easily answered question! I think that there are so many aspects to applying lean thinking or lean as a philosophy at our Uni. For us, the main benefits have revolved around the concept of continuous improvement and Lean tools that both individuals and teams find quite easy to incorporate. University processes can be very complex with layers upon layers of tasks combined with historical reasons. Lean thinking gives us an incentive to make both innovative and incremental changes while providing a framework to organize the great work done each day by our colleagues. Easy-to-use tools function as fast-track-routes into a more holistic approach to continuous improvement as an overall philosophy, rather than just pick and choose tools.

**In looking into the future, Steve, what do you see for Lean in HE, not only in the UK but internationally within a global context?**

As a sector that is deeply interconnected with the world around us, there is only going to be more change ahead for HE. On the one hand, Universities are producing more amazing research than ever before, and education has a broader reach than it ever has before. Yet on the other hand, the societal challenges that we face are not diminishing.

The real question is how do we keep up, or stay ahead of these challenges? How do we continue to enable our core business of education, research and social contribution? I am aware that we need to keep looking outwards; to other industries, other organisations, perhaps most importantly to the quiet voices that aren't often heard. In this way we can continue to learn, continue to experiment, continue to discover and continue to grow. Lean thinking helps us here as it is about deeply respecting our people and always striving to become ever better.

Engaging with the world around us, and doing so globally, is so important. For many delegates at conferences, the support of their own organisations (shout out to everyone who works to enable mobility!) have enabled the exchange of valuable stories, powerful experience and insightful learning. This is pretty special as it is how the Lean HE community is nourished and continues to flourish. Therefore a huge 'thanks' is due to all of our home institutions and colleagues for enabling your own learning and ours.

With the intrinsic benefits of engaging and sharing our stories globally comes a responsibility to ensure that we really add value and support universities in finding solutions for social challenges. I believe in universities; I think they are a key part of our collective global future. We can help make them even better. It is a privilege to find ways to make a difference for our students, for our researchers, and for the world around us, and it is with that thought that I charge you to find one way to improve your university today....and then again tomorrow.....and every day. Don't stop improving!

For more information; [www.leanhe.org](http://www.leanhe.org)

Video from the 2018 Conference in Norway: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kd-B08dK9OU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1YICgUnfbawpoNRNNCCqPC\\_H7FkxR9aoh-3l\\_d7DBpxXyMQNZ3xjS8u3Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kd-B08dK9OU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1YICgUnfbawpoNRNNCCqPC_H7FkxR9aoh-3l_d7DBpxXyMQNZ3xjS8u3Q)