



Change Academy Case Study

York University, Toronto
Supporting Academic Innovation

WHY CHANGE ACADEMY AT YORK, TORONTO?

York University had invested CA\$2.5million in an Academic Innovation Fund (AIF) to support innovation and change intended to advance York's strategic priorities in relation to teaching, learning and the student experience. The AIF projects were clustered around three strategic themes: eLearning, experiential education and the first year student experience. Provost and vice-president Academic, Professor Rhonda Lenton, led a team from York that participated in a national Change Academy in the UK in 2011-12 with a view to bringing the learning from the Change Academy process back to support the AIF programme. The overarching aim of the process was to increase the sustainability of the AIF projects, and move these on from being 'interesting' projects to having sustainable institutional impact (ie making the learning from the projects transferable across the university, with a focus on the process of change as opposed to the content of projects).

WHO CHAMPIONED CHANGE ACADEMY AT YORK, TORONTO?

The initiative was led by vice-president Rhonda Lenton and Suzanne Killick, director, Learning and Organizational Development, both of whom had participated in the national Change Academy in the UK.

WHAT DID CHANGE ACADEMY AT YORK, TORONTO LOOK LIKE?

The York team invited the UK Change Academy programme directors to propose options for design and delivery of the York Change Academy. The co-design process with York was led at a distance by the Leadership Foundation's Dr Lesly Huxley, through skype and email conversations and exchanges of draft material. A team of four from the UK (Lesly, Professor Bob Thackwray, Leadership Foundation; Steve Outram and Dr Abbi Flint, HEA) were to spend four days on-site in Canada: one day working with the team of change supporters drawn voluntarily from across the institution, a two day non-residential with the project teams and a one-day follow-up with supporters and Change Academy leads on evaluation and follow-up. Constraints around staff time (evenings/residential not feasible), time of the year (start of term and Hallowe'en) and logistics of UK facilitators making the most of four days on site, led to a compressed non-residential programme co-designed by the York and UK teams. The design was negotiated to ensure as much team-working and cross-institutional networking as possible; the two-day event was based on the York Campus and the University undertook all support arrangements. Suzanne Killick also led a number of development sessions with team supporters prior to the two-day event and the Leadership Foundation facilitators 'walked' them through the whole process on their first day on-site.

WHAT DID PARTICIPANTS SAY ABOUT CHANGE ACADEMY AT YORK, TORONTO?

The teams at York were at varying stages of working together: most had met and worked together before, but a few were newly-formed and one had never met. Their projects were also at different stages of development. The compressed nature of the two-day event, with no residential element, posed challenges to the networking and social elements but the explore-challenge-apply model and application of the divergent-convergent approach in the process design over the two days helped mitigate against this. The activities pushed some people outside of their comfort zone, particularly around 'stepping back' to critically reflect on their project and the unstructured nature of team time, but overall feedback was positive at individual and team levels.



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"The involvement of students in the process was a huge success and they feel they can contribute beyond the projects"

"We've made progress, refined thinking, begun to think about the complexity of the change we're trying to achieve, and have developed as a team"

"We were 'galvanised' and recognised we had a range of working styles and expertise in the team (coming from ideas and pragmatic angles)"

"We 'flipped' our question and made the project feel more 'active'"

"We covered a lot in a day and would have appreciated more time for both activities and team working".

"Just what the team needed – they've focused on [their project] more clearly"

The most important thing for many people was the opportunity for a different kind and quality of conversation, across roles, which the process and structure afforded: protected time away from the day-job to work with others on their project.

WHAT VALUE HAS CHANGE ACADEMY AT YORK, TORONTO DELIVERED?

Professor Rhonda Lenton said ... "I wanted to send a personal note of thanks to all of you. It has been great working with you, and the York Change Management Academy exceeded my expectations".

Suzanne Killick, head of organisational development, said: "Just to echo Rhonda's comments - last week was a terrific experience for everyone involved. Your mentorship exceeded our expectations."

Subsequently, Suzanne reports that: "we are launching the Phase 2 of the AIF projects and have come up with a variation of the Change Academy embedded in the support we will provide to project champions. We have melded change management, project management and design thinking. We plan to assign a change coach to each project champion and their team and address project needs and change needs in real time through the year of the project".

LESSONS LEARNED FOR CHANGE ACADEMY PROCESS DESIGN

There was unanimous agreement that the event had worked well as a team development process, especially for those teams that had not met before. As teams were at different starting points the distance travelled varied. There was a sense that the process had a greater impact on newer teams and projects which were at an earlier stage of development. Established teams tended to finish activities a little sooner, and projects that were already well underway struggled with the concept of deconstructing and critically reflecting on their project. It was clear that the open nature of the event, and the unstructured team working time, was a departure for many participants from their usual ways of working on projects. People came with different expectations of the style of presentations and activities they thought would be involved in a 'change academy', with some expecting more traditional change/project management content. In some cases this led to a certain amount of frustration and discomfort that is characteristic (and indeed an essential part of the learning process) of change academies. Whilst the Change Academy team articulated the purpose and rationale for the structure of the programme, the 'road map' of the process was not immediately clear to all participants. In a sense this is one of the challenges of the Change Academy process – it has to be experienced to be understood, which makes promoting investment and participation in it difficult. It may be no coincidence that most in-house Change Academy processes arise from participation in a similar external event.