

An evaluation of Change Academy: an innovative, year-long, process facilitating institutional change ((0220)

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We have experienced rapid and complex change within the sector over the last two decades and are about to enter perhaps an even more challenging decade. 'Understanding and thereby being able to work with multiple institutional webs of complexity are crucial to the development and enhancement of the sector. 'Traditional', linear, rationalist change programmes can be effective in delivering 'products', but may not be as effective at delivering sustainable capacity for change – what we call 'change-ability' – across the various inter-linked relationships that characterise higher education institutions (HEIs)'. (Buining, Huxley and Bradford, 2010) Chambers et al (2007) found that HEIs in the UK have adopted a range of approaches to organisational development and change; they argue that successful organisational development occurs in environments "in which people are more likely to be agile and fleet of foot" and where institutions are "seeded with change agents". Since 2004 Change Academy has been attempting to facilitate a better understanding of change within the sector and perhaps help seed institutions with change agents.

The idea for Change Academy emerged from a visit to an AAHE's summer retreat in Utah in 2003 by a UK team, which included the author. The team adapted the idea and applied it to a British context. They developed Change Academy into a year-long process, centred round a four-day residential event for about 15 institutional teams. They added an initial team-leaders meeting and a final leaders meeting with visits between these meetings and the four-day event. They negotiated sponsorship from the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation, two newly formed organisations. The structured process has developed since 2004 but its major emphases still remain: understanding complex change, using creative techniques and engaging others within the institution.

The paper evaluates the effects of Change Academy on the individuals, the teams and their projects and the institutions, and through these on the wider sector. It draws evidence from evaluations of participants at the four-day event, the leaders' reflections at the final meeting, and a set of visits a year or more after the event to meet teams and individuals. Modified focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used. The research poses questions such as would the project have taken place without Change Academy? What effects has participation had on the project, the individuals, the teams, the institutions and more tentatively the sector. The author is very aware both of his position as an evaluator of a process in which he has been intimately involved and of the difficulties of attributing cause within a complex world.

Although participation is based on developing a project, the effects of Change Academy are much greater than just the impacts of particular projects. Sometimes the project has even come to nothing, but the effects on personal development and the adoption of new ideas of change have led to new ways in which the institution approaches change. In other instances, the project, or often more appropriately, the initiative has been very successful and has been an exemplar of how further change may be approached. The teams often comment on the significance of the 'time and space' that has allowed them to develop their project much faster than if they were back at base, and in a more carefully thought-through, more creative, often re-focussed manner. They also comment on the importance of working alongside other teams from whom they learn.

The effects on individuals include a greater understanding of their institution and change, greater self-confidence, and the use of new techniques, such as liquid cafe and creative techniques, in staff development and in both postgraduate and undergraduate teaching.

The effects on teams cover team selection and team development. The selection of a team based on a 'diagonal slice' across the institution which includes a student has proved a very powerful alternative to a 'standard committee structure' for developing and implementing a project. The intensity and the structured nature of the four day event and the interactions with other teams present an opportunity for very rapid team learning, refocusing of the project and the development of sustainable energy for return to their institution.

The effects on institutions include new ways of approaching change, developing staff and running meetings of governing bodies and setting up internal change academies (Dandy, 2009; and Oxley and Flint, 2009). They also include some very profitable, lasting linkages between institutions.

The paper will further illustrate some of the complexities of the above effects, opportunities taken and constraints encountered. It will highlight the significance of conversations and stories for evaluating complex change, as against more standard evaluative techniques. The latter are too often used by the sector which reinforces a rational-technical approach to change and loses the complexity of cultural change.

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