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# Developing the curriculum within an institution using a Change Academy approach: A process focus

Nancy Turner <sup>a</sup>, Mick Healey <sup>b</sup>, Susan Bens <sup>c</sup>

Corresponding author: Nancy Turner, Ph.D. Director, Teaching and Learning Enhancement Room 50 Murray Building, 3 Campus Drive Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A4

Ph: (306) 966-1804 or (306) 966-2231 nancy.turner@usask.ca

#### Notes on contributors

Nancy Turner is Director, Teaching and Learning Enhancement at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. Her research interests include development of teaching and learning practices at the department level, informal learning, and developing core skills in higher education.

Mick Healey is Managing Director of Healey HE Consultants Ltd and Emeritus Professor, University of Gloucestershire, England. His research interests include students as partners, research-based education, and bringing about change in teaching and learning in higher education.

Susan Bens is an Educational Development Specialist within the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. Her research interests include educational leadership and action at the level of program change.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>a</sup> Teaching and Learning Enhancement, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>b</sup> Healey HE Consultants, Howden, UK and University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>c</sup> Gwenna Moss Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

# Developing the curriculum within an institution using a Change Academy approach: A process focus

Institutional approaches to curriculum development often privilege outcome over process. This paper explores the use of an adapted Change Academy approach, originally developed for teams from different institutions, to supporting teams from different disciplines within the same institution. The approach was evaluated through analysis of the experience of members of four teams collected through a survey and focus groups alongside reflections of the facilitators. We argue that educational developers supporting curriculum development should pay as much attention to the process as the outcome, and that a well-designed Change Academy approach can be effective in implementing curriculum change across an institution.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Curriculum development process; Change Academy; intra-institutional change; educational development; academic development

## Strategic curriculum development and the Change Academy process

Strategic initiatives to design and implement curricular change in HE have received increasing attention (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Blackmore & Kandico, 2012). Most institutional approaches to developing the curriculum focus on the implementation of the institution's learning and teaching strategy or a particular outcome, such as constructive alignment, research-based education, or embedding e-learning and blended learning. Less attention has been paid in the literature to the *process* of developing the curriculum. Here we explore an adapted Change Academy approach (Bradford, 2009; Healey, Bradford, Roberts, & Knight, 2013), shifting from teams from different institutions connected by a particular curricular outcome to supporting teams with diverse curricular directions/outcomes within the same institution through the process of curriculum development. In the US some universities run

week-long course design institutes (Palmer et al., 2016). However, these are focussed at the level of the individual course (module) rather than the level of the program. By focusing at the program level, educational developers may support strategic change better across an institution (Gibbs, 2013).

The Change Academy approach was developed by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), UK, as a year-long process to support teams from different higher education institutions develop and design learning and teaching initiatives, the core of which was a 4-day residential event. Teams usually consisted of 5 to 7 people and involved a 'diagonal slice' through the institution, including senior and junior faculty/staff and a student. The event was facilitated by change consultants. Time was split between teams working independently on their project, with the help of a consultant where needed; undertaking facilitated group activities; sharing experiences and issues with other teams; and some social networking activities (Bradford, 2009).

The HEA model has been adopted and modified in a variety of ways. For example, Sheffield Hallam University, UK, designed an institutional Change Academy (Oxley & Flint, 2010); while the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences Subject Centre, UK, developed a national discipline-based Change Academy with a 48-hour residential (Healey et al., 2013). The HEA has also used this approach to investigate various topics, including recognition and reward enhancement, students as partners, and change programmes (HEA, 2012, 2013). The HEA and the Leadership Foundation established a national 'Leading Transformation in Learning and Teaching (LTLT)' course with three one or two-day meetings over the year for individuals enacting their own initiatives. This course, led by Steve Outram and Doug Parkin, has run more than ten times. Mick Healey and Beth Marquis developed an international 3.5-day 'Change Institute' focussed on students as partners (SaP), with at least two faculty/staff and two students per team. The Institute has run annually at

McMaster University, Canada, since 2016 with one International SaP Institute at the University of Adelaide Australia in 2019. Drawing on these experiences, the authors designed a strategic curriculum development initiative at the University of Saskatchewan in 2017-18 using the Change Academy approach.

Although we recognise that effective curriculum change may involve a multitude of stakeholders (including professional associations, accrediting bodies, employers and governments) the process we discuss in this article is designed for engaging faculty and students on campus in an intensive 2-day workshop with other programs going through curriculum change, supplemented with course-specific preparatory and follow-up meetings.

Our argument in this paper is that educational developers supporting curriculum development should pay as much attention to the process as the outcome, and that a well-designed Change Academy approach involving teams of faculty, staff and students can be an effective way of advancing curriculum change within an institution.

## Context

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of a Change Academy approach undertaken at the University of Saskatchewan and present the results of an evaluation of the process against its intended outcomes. As a moderately large (24,000 students) Canadian HEI, the University of Saskatchewan has undertaken institutionally coordinated activities related to teaching and learning enhancement for over a decade. During this time there has been an increasing focus on programmatic enhancement activities with a recent strategic plan for the institution including a goal of having program level learning outcomes developed for all programs. In 2010, the institution also developed and approved graduate attributes (called learning goals) to which all program learning outcomes were intended to be aligned. This shift in strategy arguably required more collaborative work within academic program teams

and possible shifts in conceptions of curriculum (from, for example, a collection of courses to a system of learning). This shift has been reinforced by subsequent institutional priorities as well as the approval of an institutional mission, vision and values that has collaboration as one of its key principles (University of Saskatchewan, 2016).

Despite these institutional strategic shifts, the typical experience in curriculum development was leadership and progression by one person in a department with little faculty collaboration. This isolated planning would often be punctuated by broader departmental consultation as the work progressed. Of relevance here as well are the results of three institutional research projects (Greer, 2011; Patrick, 2016; Turner et al., 2016) that reported faculty members' desire for opportunity to develop community around innovation in and enhancement of teaching practices with explicit descriptions of teaching at the institution being quite a lone endeavour. This echoes earlier research in Canada and England that found the freedom of academic life was often paired with isolation in one's work (Knight & Trowler, 2000). Additionally, the need for development of effective curricula as a system of learning, rather than "every course as an island", is increasingly important as higher education is called to demonstrate student achievement of outcomes in quality assurance or, in some jurisdictions, funding processes (Basken, 2019). The approach outlined here was intended to support a more collaborative approach to curriculum development within and across departments or workgroups so as to reap the benefits that this type of approach to teaching and learning has been evidenced to achieve (Kezar, 2005).

# Our approach: the practical

The Change Academy process was led from the University of Saskatchewan Teaching and Learning Centre, a central unit that provides support for professional and curriculum development across the institution. The ongoing work in the Centre allowed for identification

of four groups that were believed to be well-positioned to participate in the Change Academy process. Specifically, these were groups pursuing program level change that Educational Developers at the Centre predicted had the potential to assemble a suitable group on the set dates and participate constructively in the existing format of a Change Academy. The groups were approached individually, through team leads already known to Educational Developers. The pilot Change Academy was most intensely experienced as the two-day workshop. Each team then continued at their own pace and focus, with varied contact and involvement by the assigned educational developers. At the time of writing, 26 months since the program began, each group is continuing to advance toward their ultimate curricular goals.

To begin and participating in a supportive capacity to the initiatives of each of the groups, Educational Developers introduced the opportunity, answered questions, used questions from the groups to finetune the plans, and then sent Change Academy application forms to each team lead. Forms gathered information on team composition, intended curricular change and reasons for that change, timelines, and preliminary expectations for the Change Academic experience. Teams were alerted to the requirement to involve students meaningfully in this process, and specifically, to involve them in the two-day workshop as core members of the team. Those involved in planning the Change Academy process inherently saw the value students would bring to curriculum teams. However, since this role for students was new to the local institutional context, it was helpful to be able to communicate that the international facilitator required such membership. For two teams, the two-day Change Academy workshop included 2 or 3 student members known to be engaged in student networks and interested in curriculum change. In the case of two other teams, individual graduate students with specific personal insights and perspectives joined the two-day workshop.

The intent was for Centre staff to serve as Change Academy guides-on-the-side, collaborating to offer helpful and timely structures, support and encouragement, resources, and prompts for the 2017 Change Academy teams. In the weeks leading up to the event, the focus was especially on helping teams prepare to take what was called a "deep dive" into their projects. To that end, the first time together as a whole group occurred three weeks prior to the two-day workshop. The 90-minute session was designed to be useful for entire teams and to provide an opportunity to get a good launch into the Change Academy experience.

More specifically, the purpose of this time together was for participants to:

- Meet and learn about the other three teams accepted into the inaugural 2017
   Change Academy
- (2) Review the Change Academy process, including an outline of the two-day workshop
- (3) Explore the resources available in the e-portfolio designed exclusively for Change Academy teams
- (4) Prepare their Theory of Change (Hart et al., 2009) worksheet.

The change intended, the drivers and the motivation for each group to participate in the academy as expressed in the application forms of each group are outlined in table 1 below.

Table 1. Intended changes described by our participating teams.

Academic unit	Desired curriculum change	Drivers for Change	Stated Interest in the Change Academy
Program A (Health Science 1)	Curriculum     review and     innovation in a     health science     undergraduate     program	<ul> <li>Timeliness for review of a new program at 5-year mark</li> <li>Concern for curriculum drift and lack of documentation</li> </ul>	Ideas for presenting clear curriculum processes that are more likely to support

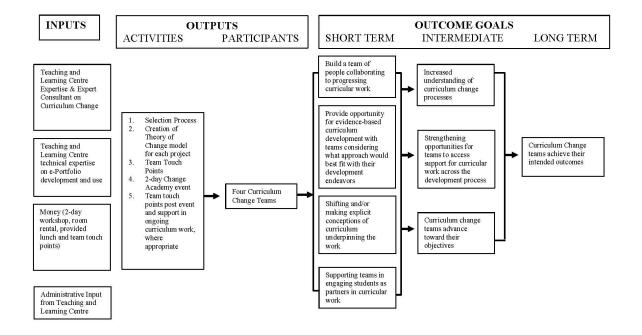
		Need for increased engagement of all instructors and stakeholders	consensus- building
Program B (Graduate level interdisciplinary science)	Redesign of existing professional Masters degree programs	<ul> <li>Improve focus on selected subject areas</li> <li>Attract target professional audience</li> <li>Increase enrolment for financial health of home unit</li> </ul>	Time for focused work on a continuing project with support from experts
Program C (Professional, Science focused)	Redesign of first year of a professional undergraduate degree program	<ul> <li>Learning gaps, including lack of preparation for year 2</li> <li>Enrolment and retention issues</li> <li>Student stress and wellbeing</li> <li>Reputation</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Advice on delivery and structures</li> <li>Ideas for getting buy in</li> </ul>
Program D (Health Science 2)	Address content overload in a clinical degree program	<ul> <li>Student feedback on current gaps related to clinical practice</li> <li>Student stress and wellbeing</li> </ul>	Strategies for developing collective responsibility for a program rather than individual responsibility for courses

The two-day event, facilitated by an external consultant (Mick Healey) involved a mixture of team activities that focused on topics like approaches to curriculum design (Healey, 2019), thinking creatively, prioritising ideas, project planning, sustainability, and action planning. Additionally, there were several team sharing ideas and experiences, including a Liquid Café (Seel, 2006) as well as time for teams to work independently developing the design of their curriculum project with the support of the educational developer serving as a resource person (Appendix 1). Together these elements were designed to encourage positive communication within and between program teams, use divergent to convergent thinking to help them to think differently about their initiatives, accept greater openness to uncertainty of the outcome and trust in the process of collaboration, and build

individual and team capacity for change (Advance HE, nd). Moreover, the structure challenged pre-conceived notions about the curriculum that in some cases resulted in a shift of emphasis from a focus on content to one on the process of delivering graduate attributes. The post-event support was responsive rather than structured with educational developers remaining available in the months following the two-day event and taken up to varying degrees by the program teams.

Figure one shows the program logic model (Julian, 1997) for the approach and highlights the overall intent for the Change Academy process in supporting teams advancing toward their intended curriculum change outcomes.

Figure 1. Program Logic Model for Change Academy



# Our approach: the theoretical

Our approach is grounded in the idea that practice, conceived here as patterns of actions, is socially constructed (Sedlačko, 2017). Additionally, we draw on socio-cultural conceptions of change and contend that teaching and learning practice is recurrently produced and/or developed at the department level of higher education institutions, sometimes called

the 'meso' (see, for example, Knight & Trowler, 2000; Trowler & Cooper, 2002; Trowler, Fanghanel, & Wareham, 2005).

Put another way, each workgroup or department within an institution has unique teaching and learning practices, elements of which are tacit. Teaching and learning practices are rooted in the traditions at a site, and both shape and are shaped by collective values, assumptions, ideas, language, ways of relating to one another and available resources (Kemmis et al., 2014). The lone leader approach to curriculum development noted earlier, often led to resistance to any change that required shifts in practice (i.e. were predicated on changes in ideas, technologies used and/or ways of relating to students). As such, the idea of bringing together a group of people from a work group to collaborate, learn and plan together was intended to assist in collective examination of practice and engender group commitment to proposed changes.

Additionally, the two-day Change Academy event that brought all program teams together was undertaken for two key purposes. First, it allowed for focused and facilitated collaboration time for teams. Second, it provided opportunity for the four teams to interact and learn from each other, providing a means of comparing practice across contexts, exposing participants to new perspectives or activities and, at times, making more explicit the tacit aspects of practice within their own departments/teams.

The inclusion of students in each of the teams is a long-running feature of many Change Academies. It is based on the rapidly growing literature on students as partners (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014, 2016), which attempts to break-down the traditional hierarchies in higher education so that faculty/staff and students may work in partnership to bring about change and enhance the quality of learning and teaching. An important principle of working in partnership is the recognition that all participants bring

their own different experiences and expertise to the table (Healey, Lerczak, Welsh, & France, 2019; Matthews, Groenendijk, & Chunduri, 2017).

# **Evaluation of the approach**

Evaluation was undertaken utilizing the program logic model approach (Julian, 1997). This evaluative method begins with the setting of intended outcomes, followed by working back to determine what activities will allow for their achievement alongside needed resources. The evidence generated to determine achievement of outcomes included, (1) a questionnaire sent to all faculty and staff participants after the two-day event with 20 responses received (90% response rate), (2) a focus group with the four team leads held seven months after the two-day event, (3) progress reports from the four team leads two years after the even, (4) reflections of the educational developers involved, and (5) an assessment of the extent to which the teams achieved their stated outcomes. The focus group was conducted by an independent facilitator, not part of the Change Academy team. During the focus group an evaluation specialist captured key points from the conversation related to the intended Change Academy outcomes. Descriptive statistics were generated from questionnarie responses and a summary of the open ended questionnaire responses and the focus group summaries were undertaken by the facilitator and research analyst to determine the extent to which the Change Academy process led to achievement of the intended project outcomes (Figure 1). The four program leads were also contacted two years after the Change Academy and asked for a brief progress report on their intended curriculum change. Additionally, the educational developers involved as advisors to the teams reflected on the process and perceived outcomes of the teams with which they were working and, through the writing of this article, furthered those reflections and identified opportunities for enhancing the

approach to supporting collaborative program development.

The sections below report on the evaluation outcomes against the short and intermediate Change Academy goals and the final section, overall outcomes, includes a summary of the progress made by each curriculum change team against their intended outcomes.

#### Team collaboration

Outcomes of the questionnaire and the focus groups indicated a strong sense that team collaboration was enabled through the Change Academy and particularly through the two-day facilitated event. Individuals reported enjoyment of the unique opportunity to have dedicated and extended time to work together with colleagues and felt that their team's capacity to collaborate was also strengthened due to the experience. As one participant wrote,

"having the time to explore ideas and thoughts in a supportive environment was very beneficial to the team. It was also nice to hear how other colleges were addressing their own problems. The process of hearing others' problems/concerns kind of helped my own team bond. Personally, my confidence in participating in the discussion improved as the academy progressed."

Of note is the extent to which this type of activity was seen to be anomalous with the typical processes and experiences of team members. There were discussions of this countering the previously experienced lonely endeavor of curriculum work, allowing participants to see curriculum work as possible, despite it not being perceived as rewarded by institutional tenure, review and promotion processes. Additionally, the time needed to undertake this collaborative approach was noted by many as was the shift this required away from starting with a clear end destination in mind,

"You don't need to get everybody on the same page. You just need everyone to agree that the current state is not where we want to be and to agree to learn collaboratively and explore and you don't know what the outcomes are going to be but you're going to agree to find them together. This sits awkwardly in organizations / institutions that are used to outlining the end point and get people there."

Individuals also noted that the connection with other teams was useful in extending collaboration beyond one's own team. Educational developers additionally noted benefits to teams in comparing practices to those from other departments/units, opening up new ideas and allowing for a recognition of alternative ways of practicing within a particular unit.

"It was generally healthy to have different perspectives from different fields. If you are looking to facilitate real change and be innovative, specific things are normed in your organization/discipline, so it was good to have those outside perspectives."

Considering these comments and the ways in which participants juxtaposed this experience with what was typical in their practice reinforced the ways in which the structures and practice traditions of the institution supported the perpetuation of more individualized development processes. This experience countered what was previously common in curriculum development.

"Yes, by seeing the different programs. We may have come in with preconceptions and have blinkers on and this is how it has to be then you see the different ways people do things. Oh xxxx moments of how I thought was the right way and realizing this is not the case. For example, how to build a durable curriculum (linear and tick off the Gantt charts and done) but this is not the case in an academic environment. Has to be a genuine collaboration of a type. This has led me to reading about what collaboration is and expectations around it and how to get it to work - anything other will allow for failure. These are not necessarily welcome realizations but necessary."

## Evidence-based, explicit curriculum development

There was evidence of teams expanding and changing their ideas within a short time period. The quotes below demonstrate what was observed as connecting to new ideas and/or finding language to describe existing processes and practices of the teams.

"My previous understanding of curriculum development was theoretical, the workshop provided a place where I was able to interact with people from other programs that were also revising their curriculum, I guess it exposed me to other processes."

"The handouts we received on the 10 methods of curriculum development were very helpful and helped us to define which style we had embarked upon."

There was broad consensus that the participating teams moved collectively away from a focus on curriculum as content to one focused on supporting students to achieve intended outcomes. The idea of adaptive curriculum, to meet students where they are at also came to the fore for many.

"Our idea of curriculum was turned on its head."

"Going away from the idea of content and referring to it as first year graduate attributes, finish line instead of content presentation. A shift in the individual as opposed to the presentation of content information. Turns curriculum change on its head - we have a clear defined finish line but we do not control who they are when they come in. This means the curriculum has to be adaptive. The content perspective is too simplistic. The CA was incomplete, but it was one of our first opportunities as a group to bond. Our Associate Dean was able to bond with us on those days and sit down and hash out details."

These are exciting outcomes of the Change Academy process, acknowledging that our examination of outcomes through survey and focus groups occurred in a relatively short timeframe. Follow up with the teams two years post the academy suggests practices were

constructively disrupted for those participating in the two-day workshop, but remained generally entrenched for the wider faculty groups with whom the teams worked.

#### Students as Partners

We observed teams taking their first steps toward the students-as-partners model, although not all moved as fully into the process as we had hoped. Two teams had one student member who was a graduate student and well-positioned to contribute for the two days; for the two other teams were three undergraduate students at later stages in the respective programs. One team made a firm commitment as part of the Change Academy to involve students going forward. An advisory board was set up and key elements of curriculum design have been taken first to this student group for reaction and advice even ahead of testing with faculty more broadly. This curriculum team's processes have thus been changed and, while this ongoing consultation marks a significant shift for this group and an innovation for the institution, consulting with students falls short of the full partnership experienced in the Change Academy or in the students as partners approach. For the other three teams, there was an indication that students could return to their conversations at a later time recognizing the importance of the input. Teams added that the requirement for involving students had been useful and they would not have done so otherwise. Clearly embedding a students as partners approach involves a cultural change which will take much more than faculty and students working in partnership in a single Change Academy.

#### Access to Resources

Significant change in connections to the teaching and learning centre were not evident amongst the teams involved in this process. All teams had existing strong connections to the teaching and learning centre which remained. It is possible that we may have seen shifts here if a team or teams without these strong pre-existing ties to the centre had participated.

#### Overall outcomes

Overall, the results of this initiative were positive for the teams involved, the educational developers and the institution. The teams made varying levels of progress towards their goals, although none had reached the original timelines set out prior to the two-day Change Academy event. This confirms that true collaborative work takes time and consistent energy investment to progress. Nonethless, at the time of writing each team has advanced toward their intended outcomes as summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Progress of Curriculum Change teams toward intended outcomes

Academic unit	Desired curriculum change outcome (from table 1)	Status in Winter 2020
Program A (Health Science 1)	Curriculum review and innovation in a health science undergraduate program	Established structures and leadership to improve consistency in multiple section courses as well as ongoing curriculum review processes
Program B (Graduate level interdisciplinary science)	Redesign of existing professional Masters degree programs	Actively developing new speciality that responds directly to northern and Indigenous communities
Program C (Professional, Science focused)	Redesign of first year of a professional undergraduate degree program	New first year curriculum using innovative scheduling and assessment processes set for Fall 2021
Program D (Health Science 2)	Address content overload in a clinical degree program	Approved revised curriculum; ongoing collaborative work in large courses with multiple instructors

## Discussion and implications for educational developers

The results of the evaluation of this approach confirm the salience of paying as much attention to process as to outcomes in program level curriculum change initatives. Our team has taken away some key learnings, including the need to work more closely with team leads in advance, orienting them to the approach in greater detail, and helping them to prepare the elements where they will take the lead with their own teams during the two-day workshop and beyond. The following are practical points derived from this experience and its

evaluation that can guide Change Academy and curriculum development processes at other higher education institutions:

- Provide teams with the structure for dedicated time and process support as a response to the common difficulty of prioritizing the work required for curriculum change
- Provide guidance on curriculum design frameworks and effective project implementation as a means to recognize that while experts in their own disciplines, many faculty are new to curriculum design and therefore seek sound foundation on which to build their understandings and sequence their work
- Create collegial interaction across groups, especially so as to reciprocally benefit
  from the neutral observer, or clarity of distance that can be missing for faculty
  and/or curriculum teams working in relative isolation from institutional peers
- Require early and appropriate involvement of students so as to continue to shift
  institutional culture towards valuing and benfitting from their experiences, input,
  and thinking for curriculum change
- Provide teams with reporting requirements that assist them in progressing their project on their timelines to better allow what are frequently self-determined timelines to become more firm to the benefit of the group
- Provide participants the opportunity to gather and reflect on the process to prompt reflection on the activities of the Change Academy and to note the progress of their team and other teams

In addition to these practical recommendations for such an approach, the outcomes of this work also demonstrate alignment with the literature on curriculum and related change processes in higher education. The first of these is the significance of establishing structures

that enable curriculum development with students as partners (M. Healey et al., 2014). This was seen to have great potential as students brought a new and fresh perspective that made explicit assumptions underpinning practice allowing them to be questioned. Additionally, hearing directly about the ways in which students experienced a program allowed for immediate and informed considerations of program design. In this case, it may be framed more as student voice than students as partners, however, the potential of this as part of the Change Academy process is promising. While the success of this aspect of the Change Academy was limited, we are keen to determine how we might better position the teams to achieve and capitalize on co-creation of programming with students. Additionally, bringing students into the curriculum development process may also open opportunities to bring in the voices and perspectives of other stakeholders in future to further enrich the process (e.g. alumni, employers, accrediting bodies, other teaching support units).

Second, this work reinforced the value of a department-level focus in progressing complex change and the benefit of having teams interact with others from outside their immediate environment. The learning from each other was seen to be a highlight of the two-day event for many as was the opportunity to, through sharing practice and ideas with others, open up new ways of thinking, doing and relating that often go unquestioned within workgroups (Kemmis et al., 2014; Trowler & Cooper, 2002).

Third, the program level focus of this initiatve, juxtaposed with more typical course development programming, allowed for advancement of collaboration in teaching and learning alongside other institutional strategic priorities (Gibbs, 2013).

It is also salient to note that, while a departmental and program level approach enabled effective advancement of complex and strategically aligned change, it took far more time than typical approaches to curriculum development undertaken at our institution. With that said, the time put into this particular Change Academy approach was seen by participants and educational developers as a valuable investment.

## Conclusion

By focussing on the process as well as the outcome of curriculum development the Change Academy advanced the opportunity and perceived value of collaboration amongst program teams and, in more limited ways, with students. This paper has described the change academcy approach undertaken to support curriculum change in one higher education institution and has presented the findings of an evaluation of its effectiveness in enabling collaboration, evidence based curriculum development, making conceptions of curriculum that shape development work explicit, and engagement with students as partners.

We have much to learn about facilitating productive curriculum development processes that stand to counter institutional and departmental structures that limit opportunities for strategic change and collaboration with colleagues and across units. We share our experiences and evaluation findings as a means to endorse the Change Academy approach in advancing complex meso-level curricular change processes.

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# **Appendix 1: Change Academy Agenda**

# **Tuesday 17 October**

Time	Activity
10.00-10.30	Welcome and introduction to program
10.30-11.30	Approaches to curriculum design
11.30-13.00	Teams to work on projects and meet with their advisor to discuss their ToC
13.00-13.45	Lunch
13.45-15.00	Thinking creatively about change
15.00-15.15	Break
15.15-16.30	Teams to work on projects and meet with their advisor as appropriate

# Wednesday 18 October

Time	Activity
09.30-10.15	Project planning tools
10.15-12.00	Working on project, meet with advisor; develop Liquid Café question
12.00-12.45	Lunch
12.45-13.45	Liquid Café – Teams get answers from peers to their question
13.45-15.15	Teams continue to work on their project and update their ToC framework
15.15-15.30	Break
15.30-16.00	Sustainability and action planning
16.00-16.30	Next stage and evaluation of Change Academy