

The Need

Our client, a leading University has a number of strategic priority focus areas, with a number of research centres. Our sponsor believed there was an untapped opportunity to increase **Interdisciplinary Thinking and Research**, to enable broader research programmes to address some of the bigger challenges facing society. We were commissioned to design and run a workshop which would become the start of a journey leading to strong and effective collaborations between areas of expertise to deliver interdisciplinary, premium research, which will be valued and therefore attractive to funding bodies. Whilst the workshop was the start of the journey, there was a huge appetite to demonstrate some early success by delivering tangible output that could be taken forward into the funding processes.

The Event

As always to deliver a successful 'event' we invest time during the preparatory phase to really understand the needs, drives, thoughts, feelings of the sponsor(s) of the event. On this occasion we quickly reached a shared understanding that the workshop would be deemed successful if:-

- Some new, innovative research ideas have emerged to be championed to funding proposal stage by some newly formed interdisciplinary teams
- Participants have an insight into the Sustainability agenda – and the potential for this University to contribute
- Participants to have developed a shared understanding of complimentary research capabilities relevant to the sustainability agenda

On this basis we were able to design the event, providing a roadmap for the 1-day workshop. In our experience it is always important to provide a 'big-picture' roadmap for any event. It is always important to explain to participants the purpose of the event and to paint a picture of the journey to get there. Thereafter individual steps in the journey are introduced and described by the Facilitators as the journey progresses.

Thus during the workshop we started the day with the some scene setting, then used our 'table-mats' to help people to start to engage with each other, as is frequently the case, some people knew each other well at the start, others were strangers. Of course, bridging those 'divides' is a source of potential breakthrough thinking.

Building from the scene setting, we introduced a form of 'expert witness' sessions to bring external knowledge, in this case of funding body priorities into the event, without swamping participants with volumes of 'dry' PowerPoint slides. In the following high paced sessions we frequently we mixed and remixed groups to provoke discussion on potential new areas of research. We used a mixture of our 'white space' and 'world café' processes, and these semi-structured discussions achieved the objective of gathering wide, and sometimes wild!, ideas without allowing detailed analysis or dominating individuals to shape thinking.

After lunch, we allowed a period of reflection, to ensure that everyone could consider the new ideas and thoughts that had started to emerge. Thereafter we worked through some convergent processes to articulate the potential areas of focus that were emerging. At this stage the participants were taking ownership of the emergent ideas and with little guidance from us, natural teams started to form around key ideas. We intervened and suspended discussions a couple of times for 2 minute updates from each group, encouraging people to 'vote with their feet' and explore other ideas being discussed within the room.

The Results

The level of interaction across disciplines was excellent, and people spontaneously organised follow up discussions in their diaries. Indeed two of the new focus areas identified were judged to be worthy of progression to a feasibility stage and initial funding was agreed shortly after the event.