

External Review of the UBC Learning Exchange, December 2021

Response from the Learning Exchange Leadership Team, 14 April 2022

Key Findings of the Review Committee

- There is significant support for the Learning Exchange to continue and strengthen its work in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) from the DTES community, Learning Exchange patrons and partners, and faculty, staff, students and leaders at the Point Grey Campus.
- The Learning Exchange model, and the staff and infrastructure associated with it, are generally acknowledged to provide a foundation to good work in the DTES and in the field of community engagement more generally. The Learning Exchange is unique in the Canadian university context and is a strong model for place-based community engaged units that serves as an exemplar for post-secondary institutions to draw from.
- UBC should continue to support the Learning Exchange and the DTES community based on this strong record of achievement and acknowledged reputation.
- The next stage of the Learning Exchange should address three key priorities: i) developing a renewed vision and strategy for the Learning Exchange; ii) addressing the structural deficit of the Learning Exchange and resolving the need for new space; iii) developing a communications strategy with dedicated resources to amplify the stories and recognition of their work and impact in community engagement and the DTES.
- Specific recommendations are intended to help support, grow and amplify the work of the Learning Exchange as well as UBC's commitment to community engagement.

Key recommendations of the Review Committee and the Learning Exchange response (April 2022)

The Learning Exchange Leadership Team sought input to their responses to the recommendations from the Learning Exchange Team (meetings on 28 January and 11 March) as well as the review sponsors (Associate VPs), key partners and administrative leaders at UBC. We have responded to each of the major recommendations separately, although we note that many are interlinked.

Recommendation 1: UBC confront the structural deficit and adequately support the Learning Exchange's General Purpose Operating Fund Budget to accommodate current activities and future growth.

Response: We have received confirmation from the VP External Relations portfolio that \$350K of our \$450K structural deficit will be covered in 2022-23. However, this one-time funding does not adequately respond to the reviewers' recommendation for General Purpose Operating Funds to address the ongoing structural deficit. Without this budgetary stability, our capacity to respond to all the other recommendations in the external review is limited. Further, if the deficit is not filled it will continue to affect staffing and activities, and increase operational and safety risks.

Recommendation 2: The university resolve the current ambiguity related to the Learning Exchange's space and location.

Response: We are pleased to report that on January 11, 2022 the Property Committee of the Board of Governors of UBC granted preliminary approval for the Learning Exchange Relocation: Space Purchase and Tenant Improvement Project. The approval included: preliminary program and schedule; location; proposed funding sources; and capital and operating costs. The decision provided the authorization to continue negotiations for the purchase of an Air Space Parcel within the development being pursued, which is within the Learning Exchange's desired area for relocation. The preliminary approval is significant as, after six years of active searching in a challenging market, we have found only one viable option for a suitable and fully accessible space. It is expected that full board approval will be granted by the Board of Governors in December 2022, given the substantial due diligence completed to date and unique opportunity that the project presents.

Recommendation 3: Develop a renewed Vision and Strategic Plan for the Learning Exchange, replacing the 2013-14 version.

Response: We fully agree with this recommendation. The previous strategic plan was initiated by the then VP External and was developed internally by the Learning Exchange Team. We propose an 18-month timeline to develop a renewed Vision and Strategic Plan in order to have clarity on the level of ongoing budget support, take into account opportunities afforded by the new location which we expect to move into in 2025, and involve the new Academic Director as a priority activity during their first year. We will seek input from academic leadership and collaborators at UBC to determine how best to involve the wider university and DTES communities in the strategic planning process. We expect that the process will reveal whether there is a need for a more formal collaborative model for responding to needs of the DTES as the review team suggested.

Recommendation 4: Develop a communications strategy with dedicated resources to amplify the stories and recognition of their work and impact in community engagement and the DTES.

Response: We fully support this recommendation as critical for our ability to act on other recommendations in the review such as broadening and deepening connections across UBC, including with senior leaders, and facilitating the strategic planning process, and transition to a new location. In addition, Learning Exchange stories support multiple institutional communications priorities including: equity and anti-racism; reconciliation with Indigenous peoples; community engagement; teaching, learning and research excellence; and social sustainability. UBC's central communications team does not have the staffing or subject matter expertise to support Learning Exchange communications requirements. An ongoing dedicated, embedded role that understands the unit context and can manage the sensitivities of portraying UBC's work with vulnerable communities is required, and is an effective model that has been replicated in other units at UBC. It is critical that our current communications specialist role be maintained to ensure continuity, quality, and ongoing effective relationships with UBC's broader communications network and infrastructure. However, the one-time allocation of \$350K to meet the current budget shortfall in 2022-2023 excluded funding for the Learning Exchange communications specialist role and will therefore limit our ability to respond to this recommendation.

Recommendation 5: Establish a more formal governance structure for the Learning Exchange involving the establishment of a Steering Committee consisting of the Associate VPs and the Director and Academic Director.

Response: We have consulted with the Associate VPs and we, and they, agree that a formal governance structure for the Learning Exchange is not necessary at this time, although we recognize that this may change as we go through the strategic planning process. Instead we will focus on developing mechanisms for periodic consultations with Deans and Vice-Presidents as part of the strategic planning process, especially the VPRI and VPS – we agree with the review team that they should be more regularly engaged.

Recommendation 6: Leadership of the Learning Exchange be periodically invited to report on updates and activities as well as seek input from academic leaders, including Deans and Vice-Presidents, at appropriate intervals throughout year.

Response: We agree that this is an important recommendation. We have existing relationships with some Deans and will seek advice about how they would like to get updates and provide input, and what specifically they want to know about the Learning Exchange. The appointment of the new Academic Director may provide an avenue for interaction with the Committee of Deans as occurred when the inaugural Academic Director was first appointed. We will consult with the Provost about this recommendation. Should we be able to act on Recommendation 4, we would be able to provide at least an annual report to update the university leadership on Learning Exchange activities.

Recommendation 7: We recommend that the Learning Exchange’s connections across the university be reviewed with the intention of broadening and deepening collaboration with units across the university and clarifying the Learning Exchange’s role as the main bridge between the DTES and the university.

Response: The Learning Exchange has substantial, long-standing connections across the university (over 200 individual faculty and staff from 18 Faculties). The external review has already generated new connections, and new initiatives are being stimulated with the easing of COVID restrictions. New UBC collaborations include EDI initiatives, key goals within the Indigenous Strategic Plan, and the Sustainability Hub. It is expected that the new Academic Director would bring additional UBC connections. Although broadening and strengthening UBC connections is desirable, we must ensure that we have the capacity (budget, space, staff) to enter into sustainable relationships, and that collaborations fit with priorities identified in the renewed strategic plan. Opportunities for the Learning Exchange to play a strategic and practical role in coordinating other UBC units / departments in the DTES would be identified as part of the strategic planning process. We disagree that the Learning Exchange has a role as the “main bridge” between the DTES and the university. This is neither appropriate or feasible, and would risk push-back from units at UBC with existing long-standing DTES connections, as well as from researchers. Our role is to promote good practice, and facilitate connections. We offer support, coordination, and assistance with orientation to the DTES and advice, especially to new UBC members. Community partners do not want the Learning Exchange to be a gatekeeper but to facilitate connections. It is important that we are well-informed about current UBC activity in the DTES but have found that this information is often difficult to get. We hope that better two-way communication with university leadership and units on campus will result in mechanisms to get timely information. As an

example, we are working with the Office of Research Services to create mechanisms to routinely get information about new research projects in the DTES.

Recommendation 8: Review current staffing, JDs and salary classifications with appropriate considerations of unique character of work at the LE and that ongoing positions be continuing on longer term or permanent appointments, not subject to short term renewals. Encourage diversification among the staff to better reflect the diversity of the DTES community.

Response: The review team made several important recommendations regarding staffing, which we address in turn.

a) Review current staffing. Action on this recommendation is dependent on satisfactory resolution of the budget deficit and would then require further discussion with the Learning Exchange team. Staffing levels are connected to sustainability and staff mental health and wellbeing. We continue to integrate tailored wellness supports into multiple aspects of team meetings, culture and one-on-one supervision, and are exploring stronger connections to additional supports available for front-line workers in the DTES and community care settings.

b) Review job descriptions and salary classifications. We agree with this recommendation but are also conscious that our previous attempts to review job descriptions and job classifications have not resulted in satisfactory outcomes. We are working with HR to understand UBC's ability to do a full review of the team's job classifications and to understand if other community engagement roles at UBC have similar classification issues.

c) Move from short term to permanent positions. We have long wanted to make this move but have been unable because of the ongoing budget deficit. It is our intent to make positions ongoing as soon as we have certainty about our future General Purpose Operating Fund budget. The one-time allocation of \$350K for 2022-23 has allowed us to extend staff appointments for a year.

d) Encourage diversification among the staff to better reflect the diversity of the DTES community. We have formed a working group with broad representation from the Learning Exchange's employee groups, to identify and support improvement of hiring processes that can increase team diversity, as well as inclusion and retention post-hiring. We will coordinate with UBC HR to ensure processes are appropriate and understand what processes are within a unit's control versus being tied more broadly to practices and infrastructure at UBC.

Recommendation 9: The secondment of Academic Director be increased to at least three days/week to meet the needs of the position and continue to amplify the solid foundation created by inaugural Academic Director.

Response: The position has been advertised as "fractional secondment between 0.4 and 0.6 FTE" so there is flexibility to negotiate the time commitment. Decisions about time commitment are also budget-dependent. The search is currently underway following confirmation of the Learning Exchange budget for 2022-23.

Recommendation 10: The Learning Exchange explore the interest in forming a more formal DTES Community of Practice and identify resources needed to support such an initiative.

Response: The Learning Exchange philosophy is to align with existing Communities of Practice in the DTES established to meet community-identified needs, such as Urban Core, the DTES Literacy Roundtable, 'Infoculture' (DTES Information Workers Network), the DTES Frontline Collaborators Group and the Coordinated Community Response Network. From our experience these groups appreciate the leadership and neutral convening role that Learning Exchange team members are able to provide. It is unclear at this time what purpose an additional formal DTES Community of Practice would serve, and whether this would be a priority for our resources or the limited resources in the DTES. However, we will explore future interest as part of our strategic planning process.