

Strategic curriculum change: identity and role (0123)

Introduction

A recent international study of strategic curriculum change in twenty-five institutions (KLI, 2010) highlighted the difficulty of change, even where clearly adopted as formal university policy. All took many years; some failed. The study explored such difficulties, drawing on institutions' experiences. Curriculum change initiatives are an outward expression of major tensions in contemporary conceptions of the purposes of universities. Interviews with a range of stakeholders in all of the institutions underlined the significance that issues of academic identity and role had to play in such changes. Leaders needed to adopt a range of strategies to facilitate change.

Context

Trends in higher education have implications for roles and relationships in universities. Mass higher education raises questions of universities' purposes and brings a wider range of students into university. In institutions such as those we studied, in an era of mass higher education the instinct for small scale education remains, as Scott (1995) has commented. Employability is increasingly an explicit aim of universities. This may run counter to many staff conceptions of university purposes, introducing another tension. Education is increasingly seen as a commodity, with the student a customer. This has implications for academic work. Many activities previously dealt with by academic staff are the domain of specialist professional staff. The pressures of research mean it is increasingly hard to sustain the traditional tripartite academic role. Globalisation affects both staff and students as the international flow of both changes the composition of universities and as international competition to attract the best sharpens.

Academic cultures and identities

All curriculum change requires the active engagement of academic and professional staff, bringing into question their roles and indeed their identities. The ways in which people characteristically work are significantly influenced by prevailing culture. Organizational culture has been defined in many ways (Schein, 1985; Barnett, 1990). Various widely known models of organisational culture (McNay, 1995; Berquist, 1992) share the view that an institution does not have a unified culture. However, an overall trend toward a more managerial culture at an institutional level has been noted (Deem, 2001). Corporate approaches may encounter the loyalty of academic staff to their discipline rather than to their institution (Jenkins, 1996). The extent to which academic staff are socialised into disciplines is contentious. An essentialist position is not sustainable, but a wide range of research suggests that disciplinary difference may be a factor in academic leadership and management (Blackmore, 2007). It has been claimed that the department is more important than the discipline (Lovitt, 2001).

The department is the most significant site for exploring academic identity because of the importance of disciplines. The KLI study found Bourdieu's (1986) conceptions of habitus and capital – cultural, social and economic – valuable in exploring motivation within departments. Attitudes to academic role and change may vary by discipline and career stage (Henkel, 2000); such factors were also found significant in the KLI study.

In institutions we visited, the perceived origin and ownership of the change was significant. The KLI study found the fact that strategic change is almost invariably an institutional initiative

significant in influencing staff attitudes, as is the implementation – whether top-down, bottom-up or middle-out. At departmental level, academic staff seldom mentioned institutional plans. They referred to the discipline, the department and their programmes.

The strong disciplinary foci of many staff were challenged by conceptions of curriculum founded on different notions of coherence, such as skills development rather than subject understanding. The KLI study suggested that some disciplines appear more resistant to change than others. Whilst an obvious explanation is the strength of professional body requirements in some disciplines, this was not borne out. Humanities departments sometimes seemed resistant to strategic change, preferring a more piecemeal, bricolage approach, whilst Medicine, highly regulated, was often in the vanguard. The worldwide shift of medical education to integrated, theme-based curricula may have enabled medicine to take a lead in university-wide curriculum change.

How roles are changing

There is increased pressure on academic staff to be excellent in both research and teaching, and a consequent tendency towards an “unbundling” of the traditional tripartite academic role. In some cases, significant new professional groups have emerged, an obvious example being the learning technologist. This growth in “hybrid” roles has been noted (Whitchurch, 2008). Much of the growth in support staff has taken place in a relatively piecemeal way, with staff distributed widely across an institution, often poorly networked with one another. Many staff join the academy in mid-career, particularly in professional and vocational fields, generating a need to value that expertise as highly as traditional disciplinary knowledge, as the boundaries of academic life become a great deal more permeable.

Understanding of issues in identity and role is essential. The study noted universities had on the whole given relatively little attention to changing staff roles, even when introducing significantly different approaches to teaching and learning. Change initiatives that did not take account of those who will deliver the change were unlikely to be successful.

Leadership issues in curriculum change

Leading curriculum change is challenging. Our work showed wide belief that change required strong and consistent senior leadership support if it was to be successful. However, hyper-rational change processes that took no account of local context were ignored or explicitly resisted. Alongside strong senior support is needed a more distributed view, which enlists a large number of staff in the change project, delegating responsibility extensively. There was widespread recognition that academic work was becoming faster and more complex, and that professionalized leadership was required.

Successful initiatives engaged key stakeholders. There are usually strong efforts to engage academic staff in curriculum change, but students, employers and community representatives are thoroughly consulted less often. Assumptions were sometimes made about the views of groups not consulted. Openness of process was important, one university leaving an extensive “paper trail” and another using a website as its central repository. Information about other peer institutions’ initiatives offered a useful lever. Networks of academic supporters in key positions across the institution often helped to make change possible.

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