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Exploring leadership and organization for change and innovation in higher education

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Abstract: *This paper explores implications of certain papers presented at the 2003 conference of HERDSA. Of particular interest is the unique characteristic of the higher education teaching environment that impact on change and innovation. We considered the situation at a particular institution as well as the national perspective of a particular discipline in New Zealand. We found that the unionised job descriptions do not explicitly support change and innovation of the national academic discipline they are participating in. We also found that staff members of the institution surprisingly do not have specific requirements from their leaders in the institution about change and innovation. We conclude that administrative systems and communications could be improved to organize for performing and leading change and innovation. While working to improve resource allocation, we recommend that institutions simultaneously work around the constraints that many departments experience by creating an environment that is more favourable for change and innovation by teaching staff.*

Keywords: *Change; innovation; action learning; reflective practice; leadership; management.*

Introduction

Several of the papers at the 2003 HERDSA conference in New Zealand explored the increased management of change at higher education institutions (e.g., Kenny, 2003; Huntley-Moore & Panter, 2003; Van Schoor, 2003). In this paper we use the view of Kenny (2003) regarding change and innovation. Projects following the implementation of a radical strategic direction are likely to involve change and innovation. An idea, practice, object or combination of these that is perceived as new by staff is referred to as an innovation. Adopting an innovation or several innovations bring about change in the organisation. Effective change is sometimes also caused by the use of ideas, practices or objects that are already known to staff. The implementation of radical strategic directions will however most likely imply the use of innovations to achieve the change required.

New Zealand ITPs (Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics) have been going through major changes since the late 1990s due to changes in funding by government. Change and innovation management by higher education institutions therefore appears to be a very relevant field of study for ITPs, and is likely to be expected from each area to differing degrees. But how do academic staff operate in practice?

Bates (2000) noted that academic/teaching staff members (educators) operate as independent professionals in relation to their teaching. When change is managed in these educational environments, several key points must be addressed. Most important is an appreciation of how educators interact with their peers, adapt to change and grow professionally. The independent nature of academic work, impacting on educational innovation, is also a major consideration. Education staff also needs time for interpretation, understanding and adoption during implementation. And finally does the full implication of educational innovation only emerge during implementation. The involvement of teaching staff must therefore be encouraged during the whole process, lest resistance impede necessary change.

Any educational innovation is likely to require that new understandings and skills be incorporated into teaching practice. This requires teacher change which comes about when the teachers themselves consciously examine their own activities and critically reflect upon their own practice, the situational constraints in which they work and the consequences of their action (Kenny, 2003). Given the independent work of teachers, the need to change teaching practice requires the involvement of the practitioners themselves. They can study their own practices and determine how these might best adapt to requirements for change. Past research (e.g., Gilbert, 1994; Walker, 1993) has shown that this reflective practice is a common way in which teachers improve their own practice, so extending this model to incorporate needed change would not use unfamiliar processes.

If teachers should create structure and habits for examining their own experience, they can create their own environment for their own active learning - to learn from doing, discussing and taking action. This “habit” could hypothetically also be integrated in the project methodology of change initiative projects by arranging for facilitated discussions. Participants are then enabled to, for example, share observations regarding the outcome of the project to date, the manner in which the project is conducted and even how they came to hold specific insights. This could then support an environment of action learning. Invariably, the leader or manager of the change project initiative will have to ensure this happens.

In ITPs, the heads of departments are typically the change *managers*, linking the teaching environment of teachers with strategic management, though they sometimes *drive* change rather than just managing it (see Bruce-Ferguson, 1999). They are the people who should know how to lead change initiatives. Potgieter and Bruce-Ferguson (2003) explored implications for heads of department of ITPs in general. However, it is likely that the need for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) heads of department to manage change will even be higher, considering the nature of ICT and the dynamics of the ICT industry. Because of these dynamics within their sector, ICT teaching staff are likely to face far more demands for change and innovation than may be the case for teaching staff in other areas. How can managers help to manage these processes, and assist their staff under such conditions?

Organizing for change and innovation

Kenny (2002) reported on key success factors for projects involving radical change in educational environments. Apart from the usual issues of clear support from senior management and sufficient time, two other items are imperative for success in educational environments. The establishment of several self-managed project teams with open communication processes, conducting action learning/action research, is very important. Linked to this is accountability processes emphasizing documentation of learning, iterative

development, periodic reporting after each research cycle and dissemination to the organization.

Kenny explained that the emphasis is not solely on achievement of goals, but also on learning. Projects start with a planning phase, continue with a design and development phase and conclude with an evaluation phase. These might appear to be the same stages used by other change projects, but project occurrences are more frequent (with smaller targets) and each project contains high provision for learning experiences. The sequence follows a common action research cycle, and is practiced in a range of environments.

Bruce-Ferguson (1999, 2003) described how academic staff and heads of departments at ITPs are faced with challenges to carry out and manage research along with other activities, and described the stresses this situation can cause. These challenges are often not appreciated by non-academic management at ITPs. Managing change to develop a research culture at an ITP institution is clearly a mission in itself! In a recent paper, Potgieter and Bruce-Ferguson (2003) asked whether there is a need to assist heads of department at ITPs manage change and innovation. Teaching staff, especially teaching staff involved in ICT courses, may also need assistance in this area.

So far, we have presented issues arising from research literature that suggest academic staff need change and innovation skills. We now argue that the performance criteria of ITP staff should reflect their responsibility to practice change and innovation. We will explore the situation at a specific ITP institution using the documentation negotiated with the union less than three years ago. More than 60% of the teaching staff members are members of the union, with up to 80% of the ICT teaching staff.

Staff performance criteria at one institution: Do they reflect skills needed?

For the purpose of this paper we will assess the documentation of Performance Criteria at one institution, looking particularly for direct or indirect references to requirements to perform change and innovation. At this institution, the performance criteria were negotiated with the national staff union (ASTE) a few years ago and are still in use. They are also applied to non-union members when considering promotion of academic staff.

Three levels of job grades exist for academic staff. The most junior job level is simply referred to as ASM (Academic Staff Member). This is followed by Senior ASM (SASM), and then Principal ASM (PASM). Each has increased/additional duties and performance requirements. We will consider the role of PASM because one would expect senior staff to be performing and leading most of the change and innovation.

The Performance Criteria are described in the following categories of duties, namely Generic, Discipline/Subject Area, Teaching and Learning, and Professional Commitment. It is interesting to note that teaching dominates in the document, and that there is *extremely* little reference to change and innovation that might be required to meet challenges faced by ITP's.

The Performance Criteria document is eight pages long (describing requirements for three grades of staff) and covers roughly 100 points that could be considered for references to change and innovation. However, only 14 of the items can really qualify as being direct descriptions of change and innovation. A few extreme examples include "Demonstrate introducing an *innovative* strategy", "Demonstrate *innovation* and/or leadership in developing

or maintaining effective styles and methods of teaching and learning...”, “... *renews* programmes and courses”, “Leads curriculum *design and development*” and “Demonstrates a commitment to *continuous learning*”.

Some of the other statements that appear to maintain the current order, could, in fact, imply some changes and innovations occurring. Examples include references to “Maintains currency...”, “...leadership in...planning”, “leads...in assessment and moderation processes” and “Significant enhancement of the Polytechnic’s reputation”. It could be accepted that some change and innovation might be implied from these statements.

In summary very little reference is made to change and innovation. Whatever the outcome, it is still interesting that no special effort was made to emphasize change and innovation. Despite this many staff members do demonstrate these skills as is reflected in the contributions they make to their particular discipline at national level.

One academic discipline of the ITP sector: High change and innovation

An assessment of actual change and innovation by teaching staff would need to be very broad and comprehensive to cover the full spectrum of academic disciplines. For the purpose of this paper we will consider the ICT discipline of the ITP sector in New Zealand by Potgieter (2004). His study analyzed papers published at the 2003 conference of the National Advisory Committee on Computing Qualifications (NACCQ) of the ITP sector. The research outputs of the ICT department at the institution being studied are included in the total for the ITP sector over several years and staff have been major contributors in this regard during the past decade.

A simple analysis showed that about 40% of the papers focused primarily on teaching, up to 45% on improved understanding of ICT (mostly for the purposes of teaching) and the remaining approximately 15% on practicing research and management. This is a rough breakdown and estimate, but it does indicate that teaching staff members spend ample time working on the complexities of ICT itself. These members of staff are challenged by many matters to practice change and innovation when teaching. Examples include new technologies to be covered in courses, new technologies to be used for teaching, increasing proficiency of a group of students at entry levels, changes to accommodate different learning styles, managing increasing numbers of non-English speaking students and teaching adult learners.

Pressures requiring change and innovation surprisingly include many non-teaching duties, for example increased class sizes for institutional profitability (TAMU, 2002), doing research while having high class contact hours for teaching at ITP’s (e.g., Bruce-Ferguson, 1999 and 2003) and increased competition for research money via the new Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF)). The embedment of high-level industry qualifications requires change and innovation, Private Training Establishments using different qualification structures than ITP’s, and there are high laboratory times for students at ITPs. Increased administrative demands from Ministry of Education and additional contributions for social responsibilities and more flexible teaching arrangements also put pressure on ITP staff to change and innovate.

From this list, it appears that ICT teaching staff at ITPs *are* generally involved in much more change and innovation than appears from the performance criteria – they are doing work for which they are not being formally recognized. In addition, the indicators of change and

innovation we extracted from the performance criteria documentation, were in fact only focusing on the most senior staff (PASMs). Change and innovation is happening at *all* levels. If this is the case, the performance criteria might not give credit to the true demands placed on teaching staff at ITPs. In such an environment, then, what is the role of the Head of Department? And is the failure in the academic staff performance criteria to stress the need for change and innovation replicated in their managers' performance criteria?

Leadership by the head of department, and staff perceptions

We have indicated that change and innovation happens in the ICT teaching environment. This requires appropriate leadership and clear understanding by staff about the role of leadership in such matters. This is especially true in the academic environment where most change and innovation is actually performed by the academic staff themselves, and not the leadership. For this purpose, we report observations at one institution in the ITP sector in New Zealand.

The "Primary Objectives" of the particular position of Head of Department (HOD) do not specifically refer to the need for change in any regard. They refer to leadership functioning to ensure that the needs of students and industry are met; that strategic and business plans, as well as teamwork and a culture of excellence, are developed; and that fiscal responsibility is maintained. Fortunately, reference is made to "continuous improvement" as part of a team culture and support for the government's plans for the tertiary sector. Unfortunately, no reference is made to the requisite ongoing need for flexibility and innovative capabilities to ensure long-term survival and growth.

A comprehensive analysis of the lack of emphasis on change and innovation in the HODs' performance criteria has been undertaken but space constraints in this paper preclude its presentation here (see however, Potgieter & Bruce-Ferguson, 2003). In summary, the Job Description, Performance Indicators and Behavioral Indicators contain very little reference to change and innovation management. This might be the result of a deliberate decision made by the institution based on the traditional uses of these instruments to define roles and responsibilities for staff. It is, however, very unlikely that an institution would appreciate the importance of change and innovation management but then not emphasize it in the documentation. It appears more likely that increasing pressures on the institution are causing senior management to focus on traditional management skills rather than on more innovative skills for their heads of department.

This apparent lack of demonstration of appreciation of the importance of the role of heads of department in change and innovation management may result in institutional ignorance of the complexities of managing change and innovation. The result could encourage practices whereby major change initiatives are generally still dealt with as typical industrial change management initiatives instead of action learning initiatives, as advocated by Kenny (2003) and Van Schoor (2003).

Given this concern, and the issues raised earlier about failure to include managing change and innovation in job descriptions, how do staff members themselves perceive HODs' responsibilities in the area? The organization previously referred to has recently been looking at its internal functioning, commencing with an overall review and changing of organizational hierarchies during 2003. The institution is being challenged by lower student numbers, challenges by Private Training Enterprises (PTEs), pockets of concerns about academic outcomes and general staff morale. Staff members were surveyed using questionnaires and

focus groups. Space does not permit a comprehensive explanation of the process – rather we will look at the issues directly relating to the role of the HOD in managing change and innovation. From the staff feedback, the HOD is seen as the person who manages the competing demands from executive/Deans and staff and who manages change, innovation and improvement required for the institutions to be successful.

When the focus groups were requested to identify three key roles of Deans, HOD's and Programme Leaders, they were undivided in their views with clear separations for each level of management. Deans were expected to do "resources and strategy alignment" (vision, coordination, and integrity of specialist areas and representing academic perspective on executive strategic level). HOD's were expected to manage "staffing welfare" (Staff management, budget/ financial viability and strategy/ department overview. Programme managers should manage "student welfare" (programme student administration, timetabling of courses, programme quality management. It is clear that all three levels of management must work together to achieve changes in Academic or Financial outcomes. But it is also clear that the HOD's is the point in the hierarchy where the Academic and Financial perspective become integrated – *the point of fusion*. It is here that there is a strong need for change and innovation management.

In the above perspective, the Deans don't manage change initiatives – their role is more transactional in nature as spokespeople. Instead, HODs will have to oversee projects for change, innovation and improvements. Some will be led by the HOD, others by Programme Managers and some by members of department staff. The HOD is responsible for the outcomes regarding Academic and Financial Performance. Initiatives must be undertaken for change, innovation and improvement until both outcomes are achieved. Deans will ensure that change, innovation and improvement are underway in the departments, and staff expect the Dean to ensure there are enough resources for these initiatives. But the HOD is responsible for the outcome of these initiatives and will have to maintain initiatives and manage staff until success is achieved in the Finance and Academic outcomes.

While Bates (2000) proposes that teachers themselves examine their own activities and critically reflect upon their own practices, constraints and consequences, it is up to the HOD to create the environment for them. And when Kenny (2002, 2003) advises that teaching staff be organized in self-managed project teams for action learning environments with formal, iterative development cycles, then again the HOD can not be far away. This is because the HOD must manage the staff according to job descriptions, other formal documentation and the perception and expectation of staff. The Dean plays no role whatsoever in the departmental activities regarding change and innovation, even in cross-departmental initiatives. It is the perception of staff in this institution that the Dean is far removed from the operational environment where change and innovation takes place. Overall leadership is expected of the HOD.

Inside the institutions, HODs should direct staff members towards research activities that would achieve the above outcomes. It could be emphasized that these initiatives can help to improve staff's own working environment. Special emphasis is required on the need for staff to be involved in the whole process of change "experiments", for staff to examine their own activities and then critically reflect on their own practices, environment constraints and overall consequences (Bates, 2000). A brief summary of the "experiment" should afterwards be documented to plan the next intervention and to present a paper at the national conference or in a journal. This approach would indicate that staff members are involved in self-directed

organizational learning and development, as recommended by Bates (2000) and Kenny (2002, 2003).

Reward systems for promotions and salary movements should also be reviewed. In extreme cases such as some of the highly unionized institutions in New Zealand, this will be critically important. Much more emphasis is required on staff contribution to change and innovation in order to reduce workloads and time commitments of teaching staff. Research publications on the topic are required, but implementation is much more important - the actual achievement of free time from teaching while still maintaining academic standards. Rewards need not only be the promotion to higher levels, but could include financial payments or other non-financial benefits such as free time. HODs and management of institutions must also create the best environment for staff to participate in change, innovation and improvement. Finally the communication flow must be open inside and across departments while an atmosphere of risk-reward is promoted by management.

The duties and activities of HODs themselves should be reviewed. HODs face a range of challenges related to change and innovation (e.g., Huntley-Moore & Panter (2003); Potgieter and Bruce-Ferguson (2003); Ramsden (1998), but the administrative load of HODs is very heavy. This leaves little time for the HOD to lead change and innovation initiatives, although research shows that close involvement of senior management typically leads to more success in education environments (Ramsden, 1998). Some operational matters and administration could be removed temporarily or shared by senior staff in the department. The situation at each institution might be different.

In conclusion, policy changes are required to ensure good resource allocation at national and institutional level. But while this is under way, we recommended that institutions (especially ITPs) undertake more directed and coordinated intervention in order to change, innovate and improve where possible. Focus and action on both levels is necessary to improve the efficiency of the sector and enable more change and innovation in future.

Further research should be done to empirically study the organization (administrative and work assignments) for change and innovation activities. Of particular interest would be the study of the causal relationship of organization and project outcomes. These studies might have to be case-based and “after-the-fact”, but there is currently too little study done about this important matter in any way. Even the publication of staff perspectives about successful change and innovation might be of considerable use for heads of departments in the higher education sector. After all, if change and innovation in higher education relies so heavily on creating the empowered environment for teaching staff, then both management and staff should know more about it!

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