University of Chester

From policy to reality

Addressing barriers to effective university quality management and leadership

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Setting the scene

Some key questions…

…and a note of caution

Key questions

- How do staff respond to quality-related policy and management initiatives?
- How does 'context' influence quality management initiatives?
- What are the barriers to successful engagement with quality?
- How might these be resolved?
- How important is the discretionary behaviour of front-line academics, as 'users' of quality systems?
- Are universities rational, manageable entities?
- Can managers intervene purposefully?
- What conditions facilitate effectiveness in quality management and leadership?

A cautionary note: 'quality management is a messy business' [Newton, 2002a; Newton, forthcoming)

'New realism' in quality-related thinking and practice

• Achieving quality management goals is undertaken in a HE world which is messy and complex

• Acknowledge the ambiguity and unpredictability in academic life

• 'We work at the edge of chaos…things don't work as we intended' (Tosey, 2002)

• What is achievable with quality should not be viewed as a blank sheet

• Complex behaviours of individuals often lead to unanticipated consequences

• Gap between 'policy' and 'reality'

• Requires effective leadership and effective communication

Overview

- Part one: Aspiring to effective quality management in turbulent times
- Part two: The significance of context
- Part three: Policy implementation - the biggest challenge for managers and leaders?
- Part four: The discretionary behaviour of academics as 'users' of quality policy and quality systems
- Part five: Identifying potential barriers to effective engagement with quality assurance and quality management initiatives
- Part six: Creating conditions to facilitate effectiveness in quality initiatives
- Part seven: conclusions and implications

Part one

Aspiring to effective quality management in turbulent times

Developing the university in turbulent times

Higher education organisations are frequently turbulent…

"In the 21st century, the university lives – has its being – in turbulent times" (Barnett, 2011)

"This grotesque turbulence has been the defining characteristic of the management task; indeed it is what has made management necessary and yet virtually impossible (Webb, 1994)

Impact of the quality revolution on management and leadership

- Growth and diversity… changing student profile
- 'Elite' to 'mass' system
- Changes in funding
- More students, declining unit of resource
- Global concern with quality and standards
- Growing state interest: focus on accountability

Impact of the quality revolution on the academic community

- Demands for accountability and rise of managerialism
- Decline of the 'collegium': university experienced as 'organisation' and 'corporation',
- 'Withdrawal of trust' (Trow, 1994)
- Changing conditions of academic work
- 'Quality' often perceived as 'accountability-led'

Part two

The significance of context

The significance of context

(1) Context and organisational development

• Importance of context for leadership and management of policy initiatives and aspirations

• Effective quality management requires understanding of 'context' and the nature of policy implementation

• Internal and external factors impact on organisational development

The significance of context (*cont'd*)

(2) Context and organisational culture

- Notions such as 'cultural change' are frequently factored into discussions of quality assurance and quality management

- 'Culture' should be viewed pluralistically not in unitary terms

- 'Organisational culture' entails competing value systems and competing voices

- It is socially constructed (by managers; academics etc)

The significance of context (*cont'd*)

3) Context and effective management through quality policy - the challenge of unpredictability

• Dangers in viewing organisations as entirely rational and manageable entities

• Avoid uncritical notions of the manager or practitioner as 'change hero' or as the sole determinant of change

• Managers are constrained by factors in external and internal environment

• Policy development and policy implementation are complex…

• Iterative process…unanticipated and unintended outcomes emerge

Part three

Policy implementation
the biggest challenge for managers and leaders?

The nature of policy implementation: pointers for effective leadership and management

1: Conceptualising policy implementation: the policy implementation gap

• Acknowledge the precepts of contextualist analysis (Pettigrew, 1985)

• Take account of the range and complexity of situations found in everyday organisational life (Burnes,1996)

• Organisational policy is best understood in terms of both 'emergent' as well as planned, 'intended' or designed features (Burnes, 1996)

1: Conceptualising policy implementation: the policy implementation gap (cont'd)

- Policy changes [is changed] in the process of implementation
- There is a policy implementation gap…between what is designed into a policy and what emerges
- The 'emergent' approach highlights the developing and unpredictable nature of change (Burnes, 1996 p. 187)
- Universities are characterised by tensions which need to be understood in order to be managed

2: Quality policy as 'used' and 'interpreted'

- Quality assurance model or system always ffected by 'situational factors' and by 'context' (Newton, 1999)

- Effectiveness of a system depends less on rigour of application and implementation, than on its use by system users

- This places emphasis not on the documented procedures, regulations, or quality manual, but on what emerges during use and implementation

- It highlights the importance of how academics view, interpret, and respond to quality

Part four

The discretionary behaviour of academics
as 'users' of quality policy and quality systems

The problem of discretion

- Protass (1978) and Lipsky (1976): research on front-line workers
- The problem of discretion and autonomy of professionals
- Discretion debate centres on the importance of discretionary behaviour and the need for 'professionals' to make judgements and to exercise discretion
- The exercise of discretion by academics as 'users' of a quality system is a significant variable in the implementation of quality policy

The problem of discretion (cont'd)

But there are contradictory arguments…

- One the one hand, for front-line professionals (e.g. academics) there may be insufficient discretion, due to management interference or bureaucratic constraint

- On the other hand, from the point of view of management, discretion may be exercised inappropriately, with a consequent distortion of official policy goals or intentions

The problem of discretion (cont'd)

- Front-line workers are the real makers of policy, and management loses control to them (Protass, 1978)
- The organisation cannot enforce control because it can't specify the rules and responsibilities precisely enough
- This model is easily applied to quality management…
- Front-line academic staff may distance themselves from the requirements and responsibilities placed upon them by their university's quality assurance system, which seeks 'ownership' (Newton, 2002c)

Part five

Identifying potential barriers to effective engagement with quality assurance and quality management initiatives

Identifying barriers…

1: Typical features of academics' responses to QA systems and quality management (Newton, 2002b)

- Danger of ritualism and tokenism
- Perception of quality as a 'burden'
- Quality as 'impression management'
- Failure to 'close the loop'
- Better quality or better systems?

Identifying barriers…

2: Tension between 'managers' and 'managed'
(Newton, 1999)

- Leaders and led; management and academic: two cultures? (Ramsden, 1998)
- "Academic culture presents many opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict between leaders and academics" (Ramsden, 1998)
- Ramsden reported a "lack of shared discourse about quality" between academics and managers
- Suspicion of management motives?
- Lack of reciprocal accountability and mutual trust?

Identifying barriers…

2: Tension between 'managers' and 'managed'   (cont'd)

• Level of trust is an important indicator of whether the management executive "has a primary concern for the quality of working life" (senior manager, quoted in Newton, 2002c)

• "Are the Executive concerned with building people up, creating an environment which is supportive and enabling, or are they preoccupied with calling people to account for their failures in performance"? (senior manager, quoted in, Newton, 2002c, p. 201)

Part six

Creating conditions to facilitate effectiveness in quality initiatives

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Creating conditions…

1: Addressing the tension between 'managers' and 'managed'

The psychological contract

• Leadership and management in higher education requires that we understand the importance of 'psychological contracts' (Handy, 1984, 1993)

The psychological contract (cont'd)

"Just as in most work situations there is a legal contract between the organisation and the individual so there is an implied, usually unstated, psychological contract between the individual and the organisation.

We [academics] have a set of results that we expect from the organisation, results that will satisfy certain of our needs and in return for which we will expend some of our energies and talents" (Handy, 1993, p. 45).

1: Addressing the tension between 'managers' and 'managed' (*cont'd*)

The psychological contract (cont'd)

Applicability of the concept of 'psychological contract' to this discussion of effectiveness in quality management?

Two propositions:

• First, the quality of the work situation of academic and administrative staff will affect their commitment to the organisation, particularly where quality management initiatives require their approval

• Second, quality assurance and quality management systems are in danger of becoming self-serving unless they are perceived as being associated with genuine attempts to seek improvements for staff and students

1:   Addressing the tension between 'managers' and 'managed' (*cont'd*)

The psychological contract (cont'd)

- In progressing any change management initiative it is essential to take full account of the expectations and values of staff

- But the leadership challenges involved in developing systems which are effective, and which have rigour and integrity, are formidable

1: Addressing the tension between 'managers' and 'managed' (*cont'd*)

Leadership and communication

•The notion of 'psychological contract' highlights the leadership challenges facing managers and quality practitioners in the modern university

•Despite the existence of "an extensive array of formal communication systems", two of the major barriers to quality advancement were: "lack of leadership skills and ineffectual communication" (Meade,1997, pp. 129-30)

1: Addressing the tension between 'managers' and 'managed' (*cont'd*)

Leadership and communication

Partington and Brodie (1992, p. 6) describe a university which has strong leadership:

• …all staff are well treated; their competence is respected; initiative is recognised and rewarded; staff support each other; and high corporate values are developed.

A proposition…

• Where there is resistance to change in a university, or resistance to quality management initiatives, such ingredients would go a long way towards repairing the situation.

Creating conditions…

2: Assessing the climate of operation

- Important for senior managers to assess the current and emerging climate of operation
- The notion of 'climate of operation' points to the important precept of 'alignment', a key concept for contingency theory (Child, 1984)
- Requires that attention is paid to the expectations of staff, and preoccupations of external stakeholders and regulatory bodies
- This notion also reveals that the need to manage tensions is a key element of the change manager's ability to intervene, with any degree of success, in a developing organisational situation

Creating conditions…

3: Achieving alignment

'The purposes of quality enhancement and institutional development…are considered achievable if an appropriate <u>alignment</u> can be found between philosophy, technology and context' (Williams, 1996, p. 55; *my emphasis*)

•Philosophy: the shared values and ideals which inform the approach to quality' (…quality culture)

•Technology: 'the range of instruments, techniques, and operating procedures which promote and support quality assurance and enhancement' (…quality system)

•Context: 'distinctiveness of mission' and circumstances of an institution ('the realities of context')

•Alignment: between quality culture, quality system, regulatory context, and climate of operation

Creating conditions…

4:   Performance and integrity of quality assurance systems

•Alignment is a necessary but not sufficient basis for effectiveness in quality management

•How quality assurance is viewed is important, as are the expectations of staff

•Also important is the texture of relations between managers and those whom they manage

•If conditions for effective quality management and leadership are to be achievable, attention must be paid to the performance and integrity of a quality system

•From the viewpoint of 'the psychological contract', quality assurance must be perceived to be making a difference, and contributing to organisational learning and development

Part seven

From policy to reality

Conclusions and implications
(for managing quality policy, for understanding academics'
responses, and for facilitating effectiveness in quality
management and leadership)

Implications for managing quality policy

- Turbulence, change and uncertainty prevail
- Constraints of context mean that there is no quality management 'blueprint'
- There is a difference between the planned outcomes of policy and those which emerge through implementation
- There is an implementation gap – academics are 'makers' and 'shapers' of quality policy

Implications for understanding academics' responses to quality assurance and quality management

- Situational and contextual factors influence academics' views of quality

- Exercise of discretion by front-line academics may create barriers to effective management of quality and successful policy implementation

- Academics do not silently accept the requirements or demands of quality assurance policy or quality management systems

- Academics are not passive recipients of management objectives

Implications for facilitating effectiveness in quality management and leadership

- Institutional managers should take account of the values and expectations of staff
- Pay attention to the performance and integrity of your quality assurance or quality management system
- Quality management is 'a messy business'; it involves managing tensions
- Acknowledge the role of discretionary behaviour in the policy implementation process
- Learn to deal with ambiguity, uncertainty and turbulence
- Managers are not 'change heroes' or 'passive victims'

Implications for facilitating effectiveness in quality management and leadership (*cont'd*)

And finally…

To manage quality effectively institutional leaders and quality managers must assess the realities of policy implementation, and respond purposefully on the basis of such an assessment.

Thank you!

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