

Chapter 10

Managing change in an academic environment: the German programme at the OUUK

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Abstract

*The focus in change management in both commercial organisations and academic environments often takes place at the strategic level. However, change management has an impact at **all** levels of any organisation, including the operational one. This paper uses the German programme at the Open University in the UK (OUUK) as an example of the way in which a language teaching programme has been subjected to constant and continuous change – both from within the institution and from the external environment. This article aims to complement a brief discussion of the implications of strategic level change management with an insight into the impact of a variety of changes at the operational level from a practitioner’s perspective.*

Introduction

This paper begins with a brief discussion of change management in general, then focuses more specifically on changes within the higher education sector in the UK, and the challenges of managing change in this environment. It discusses in more detail the nature of the changes which affected the German programme at the OUUK over the last decade and their implications, and shows how the German team dealt with them and the level of success they achieved.

Five different areas where change occurred are discussed here: the development of certain technologies; internal changes initiated by the institution; external changes, such as overall trends in language teaching in the UK; the requirement for research and human resources issues. It will then discuss the techniques the team used to deal with those changes, some drawn from social practice theory and change management strategies.

Change – faster and more furious

The pace of change in society as a whole has accelerated in recent years.

“The pace of change has increased dramatically; mankind wandered the planet on foot for centuries before the invention of the wheel ... In one short century a man has walked on the moon; satellites orbit the Earth; the combustion engine has dominated transport and some would say society; robots are a reality and state of the art manufacturing facilities resemble scenes from science fiction; your neighbour or competitor, technologically speaking, could be on the other side of the planet; and bio-technology is the science of the future. The world may not be spinning faster but mankind certainly is!”

(Paton & McCalman, 2000, p. 5).

The speed of change has increased particularly in the last two decades in the business world (see Burnes, 2004, p.1). This "whirlwind of change" (ibid.) is associated, among other causes, with the phenomenon of globalisation and rapid technological change which leads to companies facing "a greater number of competitors, each one of which may introduce products and service innovations to the market" (Hammer and Champy, 1995, p. 23, quoted in Randall, 2004, p. 27).

The result of this acceleration of change is that businesses and managers are now being faced with highly dynamic and complex operating environments (see Paton & McCalman, 2000, p. 5). It is becoming more and more important to manage change effectively, since change has become both "pervasive and persistent" (Hammer and Champy, 1995, p. 23, quoted in Randall, 2004, p. 27). Change has become the norm and it has been accepted as the key for organisations to survive and prosper: "Any organisation that ignores change does so at its own peril. One might suggest that for many the peril would come sooner rather than later" (Paton & McCalman, 2000, pp. 6-7).

If one accepts the notion that in general organisations are being forced to deal with more and more rapid changes, how might this apply to higher education environments?

Change in educational institutions

More than twenty years ago, the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1980, p. 9) stated that in the past universities have been "remarkable for their historic continuity, and we may expect the same characteristics in the future. They have experienced wars, revolutions, depressions, and industrial transformations, and have come out less changed than almost any other segment of their societies" (quoted in Latchem & Hanna, 2001b, p. 29). And indeed, it has been said that "the most surprising feature of the British academic profession is the extent to which its structure and many of its assumptions have remained unchanged over a very long period in spite of the growth in the number of institutions" (Shattock, 2001, pp. 27-28). But universities are subject to the same agents of change as the rest of the world. It is apparent that such stability in university structures and unchallenged assumptions no longer survives and the historic continuity of universities is now being challenged. Change is regarded as "a fact of life for the modern university, to a point where a distinct literature has grown up around the nature and crisis of the university" (Duke, 2002, 32).

All over the world, universities have "entered a time of disquieting turmoil that has no end in sight. As the difficulties of universities mounted across the globe during the last quarter of the twentieth century, higher education lost whatever steady state it may have once possessed. Since expanding demands will not relent, conditions of constancy cannot return" (Clark, 1998, xiii). This turmoil has been brought about by the broader social changes that have taken place due to globalization, technology developments and the information explosion (see for example Mason, 2003, p. 3, Duke, 2002, p.25). Universities are under pressure to achieve more without additional funding and "to respond to an ever-widening agenda, most of it driven by a need to compete successfully in a global economy" (Duke, 2002, p.75). As a result of these pressures, the faster pace and the increasingly competitive environment globally,

change is being forced upon universities which, “some believe, [is] threatening our educational institutions” (Latchem & Hanna, 2001a, p. 15) to the extent that the question is raised whether the university has any future as a distinct institutional form (Duke, 2002, p. 32).

Academics and change

But universities are made up not just of buildings, but of people - the academics who work there. How are they facing up to change? The assertion that we live in fast-moving times in which change is considered both a virtue and a necessity (Duke, 2002, 36) contrasts sharply with the perception of academia, or rather academics, as being particularly resistant to change, as the then Chancellor of California State University, Munitz remarked : “Faculty by and large are brilliant and creative people who are dramatically liberal about everything but their own work, in which case they become almost instant reactionaries ... They are very happy travelling around the world committing everyone else to change and extra resistant to anyone who suggests they might also be changing” (Munitz, 1997, quoted in Latchem & Hanna, 2001c, p. 47). And, generally, the academic environment is regarded to have a “poor record of change and innovation. Academics by and large do not see the need for monitoring their work. They are also intelligent and articulate, and marshal a whole array of arguments, albeit not all as rigorous as the ones they expect from those they teach, to avoid, forestall and delay monitoring their activities” (Chandra, 1997, quoted in Latchem & Hanna, 2001c, p. 47).

So how might they react when faced with what they might see as an attack on their personal liberties? Initiatives for change, whether in universities or other organisations, are by and large driven from the top, with senior management identifying the need for them. The top-down approach of change management appears to be favoured by universities (see Trowler, 1998, pp. 96-99), assuming that “a hard managerial approach to strategic change was more effective than traditional models of collegial debate and decision-making used in universities” (Allen, 2003, p. 62). This approach to the management of change relies on a technical-rational understanding of change (Trowler & Knight, 2002). It assumes “that if sufficient energy can be elicited from those involved by enthusiastic leaders with a clear vision of change then large scale transformation can be accomplished relatively quickly and economically. Good planning, clarity of goals, clear direction of energies and careful monitoring of outcomes can lead to a realization of intended outcomes (Cerych and Sabtier, 1986). Failures are attributed to ill-will, indolence, ineptitude or indiscipline.” (Trowler & Knight, 2002, p. 144). So there is a potential clash between the traditional way of doing things and the absolute necessity for change.

How can the position of the OUUK in this clash between traditional ways of academic management and the need to initiate change be described? In common with other institutions of higher education, the university put a strong emphasis on collegial management: all academic members of staff were member of Senate, Deans, Head of Departments and other managerial roles are appointed for a period of office. However, the increasingly volatile external environment has necessitated changes to the governance structure and the introduction of a more managerial approach. Thus, change management initiatives are by and large initiated from the top in the OUUK.

The development of languages at the OUUK

The Open University, UK (OUUK) is now in its fourth decade of existence and has developed many new curriculum areas over this period. Modern foreign languages was one of them. The Centre for Modern at the OUUK Languages (Centre and Department are used interchangeably in this article) was founded in 1992 with the remit of developing a suite of courses in French, German and Spanish to lead to the award of an Open University Diploma in each language. The development started with French (the first course was launched in 1995, the second in 1996, and the third in 1997), followed by the development of German with its first course in 1997 (with the second and third course following in 1998 and 1999 respectively). At the time of writing, the Department of Languages, as it is now called, offers courses in French, German and Spanish from beginners' to degree level, undergraduate certificates and diplomas in the respective languages as well as named degrees in Modern Languages and languages as part of other named degrees at the OUUK. Thus, the original remit of the department has undergone quite substantial modification since it started.

Internal organisational changes for languages at the OUUK

Since its inception the German programme faced numerous internal changes which have impacted on it. In 1997 the Diploma structure at the OUUK was changed to bring it in line with other British HE providers. This necessitated a change in the structure of the German courses which meant that two of the existing higher level courses had to be rewritten to fit into the new Diploma regulations. In 1998 there was a change in the management of the department with a new interim Acting Head. Furthermore, an institutional review into the OUUK's faculty structure was undertaken which led to merger talks between the then School of Education and the department. In 1999, a new faculty was created (Faculty of Education and Language Studies) and a new Head of Department was appointed. At the same time, the OUUK introduced Named Degrees which created the opportunity for the Department of Languages to offer Named Degrees in Modern Languages and other Named Degrees which had a substantial component of language studies in them, such as Humanities with languages and later on Business Studies with languages. All these changes were initiated by the OUUK's senior management and, by and large, the individuals working at the operational level had very little or no input into these changes, with two exceptions: in line with the more collegial model of decision-making, elected representatives were involved in the discussions about the merger into a new faculty and the appointment process of the Head of Department.

External changes

During the last decade, the external environment of the HE sector in the UK underwent many changes. Education and knowledge have begun to be treated like commodities (Mason, 2003. p. 6), online learning has become more widespread and the use of technology in Higher Education is now obligatory. The status and the working practices of academics have changed: "There has, in short, been work intensification and degradation of academic work" (Trowler & Knight, 2002, p. 32). Universities were forced to become more business-oriented and to assess the financial impact of curriculum decisions. They were asked to become more responsive to market demands and generally shift their focus towards a more customer- (or student) oriented curriculum - this is demonstrated by the OUUK's introduction of Named Degrees.

The general trend in Great Britain as far as languages were concerned was a decreasing interest in foreign languages in general, and in German in particular, both at secondary and tertiary levels. In 2002, the British government changed its education policy with regard to foreign languages. Previously, all students in secondary education had to study at least one foreign language until the age of sixteen. This policy was abolished and foreign languages are now no longer compulsory after the age of fourteen in British schools. Although the government developed a strategy for languages in England which emphasised the need for foreign languages and their importance, overall the interest among secondary education students in taking a foreign language has decreased. The number of students who study a foreign language for their GCSE (school leaver certificate) has gone down over the last few years by as much as thirty per cent (The Guardian, 5 October 2004) and German lost proportionally more students than French, with Spanish the only language to buck the trend, although from a low base (The Guardian, 22 August 2002). As is inevitably the case, those working in the German programme at the OUUK had no influence on these major trends in British society.

Technology

The advent of technology, and especially online learning opportunities, is regarded as one of the major changes in academia: "Technology is becoming even more central to teaching, providing access, administering programmes and opening up horizons of possibility across institutional, sectoral and international boundaries" (Latchem & Hanna, 2001a, p. 23). The use of technology had an impact on the German programme and the individuals working in the team as well. The traditional model of course delivery at the OUUK which combined especially designed distance learning materials with optional face-to-face tutorials underwent a shift: websites complementing the course materials had to be developed, conferencing opportunities for students were created and some materials became available in electronic format. The most significant change for the German programme was the introduction of an in-house designed software programme, called Lyceum, which allowed for real time communication of students via networked computers. The German team had begun to experiment with this software in 1997; by 2004, all courses in the German programme were offered with online tuition as an alternative to the more traditional face-to-face tutorial provision. Latchem & Hanna advocate caution against over-emphasising the importance of ICT and technology: "Although it is all too easy to link the new millennium with ICT, hail the new platforms, portals and technology, take the Web as a metaphor for the long-heralded global village and make heady predictions of seismic change in education" (Latchem & Hanna, 2001a, p. 22). Nevertheless, the advent of technology at the OUUK meant changes for the people working in the German programme. The technology caused not only an increase in workload which, among others, Mason (2003, p. 11) identifies as an important issue but also a change in working practices and the learning of new skills (such as designing online tutorials and offering training sessions for tutors who teach online). Though the technical side of the development of websites and conferencing facilities is handled by the institution's own Information and Communication Technology specialists, staff also had to accommodate the fact that in online environments "students dominate the interaction and the tutor becomes a guide and facilitator" (Mason, 2003, p. 9).

Research

Research was not a priority in the early days of the German programme and the department overall, with the balance of the two core activities for an academic department – teaching and research – very much biased towards the former. There was only a very limited research culture and the research infrastructure (funding, strategies etc.) was inadequate. This resulted in limited research output, with few language academics being entered into the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Since 2000, this emphasis has changed substantially. In the new faculty there is a strong emphasis on research with the aim of enhancing the faculty's Research Assessment Exercise rating by 2008. A research infrastructure was put in place which included the appointment of a Professor for Language Learning in the department, regular research fora, research training for staff and the creation of a research centre with budgetary control. All these measures led to the emergence of a research culture within the department. As a result of this shift in emphasis, the research output of the department has increased, as has that of the German team. All academics in the German team engage in research and the dissemination of research findings through conference attendance and publications. Academics from the German team will be able to participate in the next RAE for the first time. The introduction of new technology has offered opportunities for the German academics to undertake and publish the results of research in the area of technology use and language learning. In addition, it has offered the opportunity to “embrace and connect research and practice” in open and distance learning (Latchem & Hanna, 2001c, p. 50).

People

Human resources make up a very substantial proportion of university budgets: “around 50 per cent of the average university's expenditure is made on academic salaries” (Shattock, 2003, p. 139). Academics and support staff form the central core of programme and course development, since they are the people charged with the development and delivery of a new and coherent academic programme. For the sake of brevity and clarity, this article concentrates on academic personnel only, though this is not to deny the crucial and important role of all the other members of staff who work with, or on course teams in the development and maintenance phase of such a programme.

To illustrate the changes that occurred since it was first set up, and to provide the background for the following discussion, this article will outline briefly the changes in staffing over this period. When the German programme was set up, there were initially three academics who worked on it, one of whom was appointed as Head of the programme. Over the next ten years the staffing of the programme underwent significant and almost constant changes. There have been six different Heads of programme between 1994 and 2005 (with relative stability from 1999 to 2004), the number of academics working in the programme increased to eight full-time equivalents in 2002, largely due to the development of the programme and the decision to offer a comprehensive suite of courses from beginners' to graduate level. However, not only did new academics join the team, but others left or went on extended maternity leave. Some changes in staffing over this period of time might be considered as normal, especially in an academic subject area that is under development, but nevertheless the human resource base in the German programme has undergone significant changes since the programme was established.

Discussion

This description of the different changes which took place in the German programme since it began demonstrate that, by and large, the actual team of practitioners working on the programme had only limited influence on most of these changes. However, they had to accept these changes and deal with them. How did this particular academic programme succeed in the two core business activities of universities, teaching and research, and manage the changes successfully? The discussion will address these questions with reference to change management and especially the management of change in academic environments, arguing that some of the principles of change management that are discussed in the literature referring to the strategic level apply to the practitioner level as well. In particular, it will refer to the concept of a community of practice, the importance of group work and the question of academic professional identity.

As Paton & McCalman (2000) have emphasized: “Possibly one of the most fundamental steps in achieving the successful implementation of change is that of obtaining a shared perception amongst those affected, concerning their viewpoint regarding the issues and implications associated with the change.” (p 28), even if the practitioner has only limited influence on the strategic level of change. Shared perceptions of the necessity of change can be achieved through a process of discussion and negotiation, for which regular programme group meetings provided the forum for the German team.

Additionally, practitioners need to demonstrate as much as leaders “broad contextual understanding; flexibility; comfort with risk-taking; [and] a capacity to work in teams” (Bradley, 2001, p. 68). As almost all the teaching at the OUUK is done in teams, it has been vital for the academics in the German programme to demonstrate their ability to work in teams on a day-to-day basis. However, this ability to work in a group cannot be taken for granted in an academic environment where academics are, traditionally, more used to work on their own. Colleagues who joined the OUUK from other institutions where they might be accustomed to more autonomy in their work, needed to learn the skills of working in a team. New academic staff in the German team were normally offered some training in how to operate as a distance educator and work in groups as part of their induction, additional training needs were identified through regular appraisals and acted upon. As a complement to these activities “learning in practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 95) played an important role. Colleagues had to undertake collaborative course team work as soon as they began work in the department – thereby forming a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) which is “a closely interacting group of practitioners within which contextualised, situated learning is always happening” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, quoted in Knight & Trowler, 2001, p. 49). Communities of practice are further defined *inter alia* by sustained mutual relationships, which can be harmonious or conflictual, shared ways of engaging in doing things together, the rapid flow of information and a very quick setup to discuss problems (Wenger, 1998, p.125). As they worked on the production of new courses, the German team demonstrated these principles: doing things together collaboratively (and not always without conflicts) and finding solutions for problems. Another important factor in enabling the team to operate successfully lay in the professional identity of its members. Identity in terms of social practice theory is

regarded here as a “relational process” which is dynamic and situationally contingent (Pritchard, 1999, quoted in Knight & Trowler, 2001, p. 50) and which is constructed within a "given" framework (Knight & Trowler, 2001, p. 49). The individuals in the team shared experiences which shaped their identities as members of the German programme, such as developing a new academic subject area from scratch and working in a department defined by the variety of cultural and national backgrounds of its employees.

Similarly, developing a new programme will by definition require a certain level of risk-taking and flexibility from those involved. If indeed "almost everything in a HEI [Higher Education Institution] depends on the inner motivations of teachers – their sense of pride, their intellectual involvement with their subjects, their professional commitment to the role of teacher, their love of students, or of learning" (Trow, 1993, p. 11, quoted in Allen, 2003, p. 85), how was this inner motivation sustained in the German programme? The German team managed to create a micro organisational climate in which mutual respect and trust dominated; this made them feel "valued and secure in their position as members of an academic community" (Allen, 2003, p. 74). This also encouraged a "sense of common purpose, welcome[d] the need for rigorous and disinterested debate and accept[ed] that decisions [had] to be taken and implemented within an appropriate time scale" (Shattock, 2003, p.40). Overall, within the limitations put upon the team, decisions were taken in a participative style (Allen, 2003, p. 73) so that team members felt that they owned the decisions; the climate of communication was open and staff training and development as well as mentoring was provided on a regular basis (see Latchem & Hanna, 2001c, p. 49).

Conclusions

This article aimed to offer an opportunity to hear a ‘voice’ from the operational level of managing change in a higher education environment and to show how practitioners dealt with the considerable changes that happened over the last decade, due to the external changes in the environment (both business and academic) and the internal changes at the OUUK. The paper shows that to regard change management as solely based at the strategic level is a view that is over-simplistic and inadequate for the complex and multi-faceted organisation of a university. An over-reliance on top-down approaches ignores the importance of the organisational core, the academic members of staff.

Although the members of the German programme had virtually no influence on these changes, they were successful in responding to, and accommodating those that affected their work directly.

They were successful in managing those aspects by forming a community of practice and following, to some extent, the collegial tradition of higher education establishments by developing shared professional identity, learning how to work as a team and generating decision-making based on shared perceptions and mutual acceptance of the need to work towards the solution of problems and challenges.

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