Educational changes through policy development, review and implementation – strategies to enhance stakeholder involvement and timely changes

Elizabeth Santhanam and Kevin Ashford Rowe

Australian Catholic University, Australia

Abstract

The paper aims to: describe traditional methods of initiating and sustaining educational change through policy development and review processes; examine some issues in making policy changes; and propose a strategy for stakeholder participation and timely changes. The study uses grounded theory method and Information Communication Technology practices for the new pathway.

Introduction

The discussions related to higher education changes can be from a multitude of perspectives, from the broad-brush overview of changes in the higher education sector to those that delve deeply into a highly specific area within a particular institution, discipline, etc. This paper aims to describe the traditional methods of initiating and sustaining educational change at a university level through the processes of policy development, implementation and review. After examining some common issues in ensuring effectiveness of the traditional approach to educational changes, it proposes a strategy that may aid in changing and managing institutional practices through policies. The qualitative study adopts the classic grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Glaser, 2010) for formulating a pathway for enhancing the effectiveness of educational changes; data sources include relevant literature as well as the experiences and perspectives of the authors who are academic practitioners.

Method

The qualitative study adopts the classic grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Glaser, 2010) for formulating a pathway for enhancing the effectiveness of educational changes; data sources include relevant literature as well as the experiences and perspectives of the authors who are academic practitioners.

Findings

As a starting point to the main discussion of this paper, it is appropriate to gain a view of the interest and influence of policies and related studies. Based on the analysis of all articles published by 15 journals that focus on higher education in a particular year, Tight (2014) concluded that research into higher education is multidisciplinary (i.e., the disciplinary background of authors and their research interests were very varied), and that there is a need for more interdisciplinary studies. Tight identified course design and student engagement as popular themes among researchers in most disciplines, and the relatively few policy studies were from those in business discipline or administrative areas. This finding is not surprising for it is indicative of the academic culture where teaching and research related activities have a higher priority over administrative tasks, and the responsibility for policy development and

implementation is typically associated with the administrative or management areas of an organisation.

The analysis undertaken by Fumasolia and Stensakerb (2013) was based on articles that related to one main area (organisational studies) published by the Higher Education Policy journal over 25 years. While Tight (2014) found the articles he analysed were mainly introspective, Fumasolia and Stensakerb identified very little introspection, for most articles examined the higher education sector (such as, the 'top-down' power relationship between state and higher education sector) and not what happens within an institution. Therefore they argue that "the organization [university or college] should be conceptualized and operationalized as an open system, which interrelates mutually with its environment while a bottom-up perspective should be favoured in order to capture more subtly the dynamics of change" (2013, p. 490). Fumasolia and Stensakerb also found that there is an obvious link between research and policy, but not the impact of research on practice.

Educational development activities at a university level are usually initiated and guided by relevant policies and procedures. If the "interaction between sectors that are built on different principles is a fundamental dynamic of policy change" (Gornitzka, 2013), then the development and/or revision of policies should ideally involve all stakeholders. Stakeholder influence in higher education policy has been widely investigated (Alves, Mainardes & Raposo, 2010; Bjorquist, 2009; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2009). Stakeholder involvement is strategically important to: ensure appropriateness of change, and manage the change process. The expectation is that when a change is introduced, it will be appropriate for all key stakeholders, and it can be sustained through meaningful adoption.

Discussion

Meeting the needs of most stakeholders is a challenge for institutions (Gayle, Tewarie & White, 2003). Academic staff members and their students constitute the biggest stakeholder groups within an educational institution. Yet the interests and/or needs of each of these two groups is typically presented by representatives in a committee which has oversight over the development or review of a policy, and the representatives may or may not indicate the majority view of the respective groups. Both authors of this article have been involved in policy development, review, revision and implementation processes in universities. In every policy development situation, we have encountered the diversity in views presented by the nominated representatives and the feedback collected from the groups they represent.

Another challenge is making timely change. While institutions have mechanisms for policy modification, the process to initiate change in an institution tends to be sequential, and proposed changes are considered at various levels of the organisation's administrative structure, requiring considerable time. It is not unusual that a policy modification may be needed soon after its initial implementation, due to a wholly new circumstance that has arisen during the course of policy consideration. Policies have to be maintained so that they meet the current needs of internal and external stakeholders. Then there are changes that need to be made, not because they were raised by a particular stakeholder, but because the organisation itself has undergone a major change.

Traditional institutional change processes may need to become more dynamic, for maximum benefit to the institution and the wider community. Investigating change processes in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) field may be useful, given that ICT is

evolving at a rapid pace. A change in ICT can be propelled from any direction or level in the wide community, and there may be no pre-determined sequence of events. The adoption of such as model will require significant changes in current higher education management processes.

A major change in any field of education is always complex, requires much patient work and the benefits are not readily identifiable (Gibbs, 2013; Jones, 2013; Schmuck, 1997). Based on the analysis of historical changes in the workforce and the pace of educational transformation, Baker and colleagues conclude that "education reform may be two cycles behind changing social and economic circumstances" and that "all major reformations were preceded by periods of diversity and experimentation" (1992, pp.15-16).

Practical implications

It is within this context that the authors offer a model of policy development that sees policy not in terms of a fixed and constant but more as a dynamic, agile and highly responsive mechanism that both informs and is informed by, the bottom up experiences of those challenged with applying it as well as, the top down perspective of those tasked with ensuring that the institution operates within the appropriate legal and socio-cultural boundaries.

Thus is proposed a policy design, development and implementation framework that is based upon the information architecture of a wiki as a means of assimilating, curating and managing information in such a dynamic manner. It is proposed that instead of a policy document being developed at a 'top level' and implemented in a 'top down' cascade, that the policy document itself should sit in the middle of a 'design, develop and implement' process and be the central mechanism by which institutional frameworks become aligned to operational realities, in the hope of ensuring a much more rapid implementation of the traditional, 'implement, review and improve' phases of the so called PIRI (plan, implement, review, improve) cycle.

As described by Wikipedia, perhaps the best known use of a wiki for the maintenance, management and curation of knowledge and information: 'a wiki is usually a web application which allows people to add, modify, or delete content in collaboration with others.' Within this context, it is acknowledged that whilst wikis may often operate within an environment where there is no, 'defined owner or leader', they can equally be utilised in a much more managed and curated context within a framework of established rules and guidelines and an agreed and supported curated-publication regime. It is thus suggested that they could provide an ideal platform for a far more, engaged, embedded and contextualized approach to the authoring, management and maintenance of policy at all levels of the institution, with a far quicker doctrine to practice application feedback loop.

The Policy Wiki 'Catherine Wheel'

Policy
Wiki
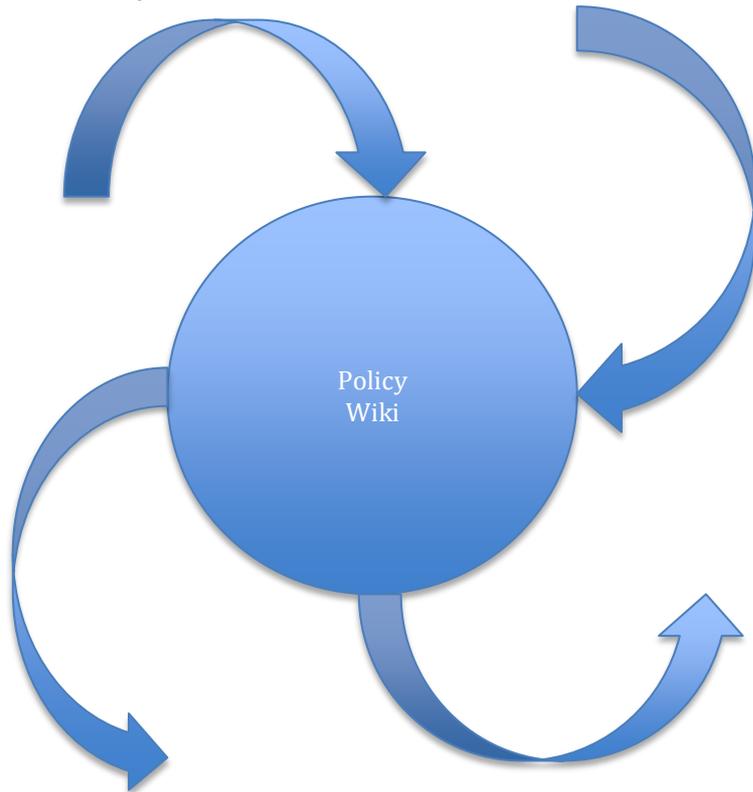
"wiki", Encyclopædia Britannica (London: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.) 1, 2007, retrieved April 10, 2008

References

Alves, H., Mainardes, E., & Raposo, M. (2010). A Relationship approach to higher education institution stakeholder management. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 16(3), 159-181.

Baker, G., Boser, R., & Householder, D. (1992). Coping at the crossroads: Societal and educational transformation in the United States. *Journal of Technology Education*, 4 (1), 5-17.

Benneworth, P. & Jongbloed, B. (2009). Who matters to universities? A stakeholder perspective on humanities, arts and social sciences valorization. *Higher Education*, 59, 567–588.

Bjorquist, C. (2009). Stakeholder influence in higher education – Old ideas in new bottles? Dissertation Karlstat University Studies, Faculty of Social and Life Sciences. Retrieved from http://kau.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:241378/FULLTEXT02

Gayle, D.J., Tewarie, B., & White, A.Q. (2003). *Governance in the twenty-first-century university: Approaches to effective leadership and strategic management*

(ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report). Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education series.

Gibbs, G. (2013). Reflections on the changing nature of educational development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18 (1), 4–14.

Glaser, B.G. (2010). The future of grounded theory. *The Grounded Theory Review*, 9(2), 1-14.

Glaser, B.G., Strauss, A.G. (1999). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Piscataway, NJ, USA: Aldine Transaction. Retrieved from http://site.ebrary.com/lib/australiancathu/Doc?id=10363289&ppg=236

Gornitzka, A. (2013). The interface between research and policy – a note with potential relevance for higher education. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 3(3), 255-264.

Jones, A. (2013). Perspectives on change: a study of the multiple dimensions of changing teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2013.836088

Schmuck, R. (1997). The changing landscape of educational change. *The Review of Education*, 3(3), 216-225.