

Academic middle manager-driven strategies for managing curriculum change in higher education

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Abstract

This study is an investigation of strategies that can be deployed by academic middle managers (AMMs) to support successful planning, implementation and management of curriculum change in higher education. It has been consistently shown in literature that well above half of curriculum improvements which fail to be successfully implemented are due to failure by the improvement sponsors to effectively plan particularly with regards to the identification and deployment of effective curriculum change strategies. Authorities in the field of curriculum change have identified two broad categories of curriculum change strategies namely the process management and the strategic management strategies. Drawing from the two broad categories of strategies above, this study has identified a number of specific strategies for planning, implementing and managing curriculum change and these include making curriculum change a high priority, providing support to achieve change, planning and resourcing for effective curriculum change, providing effective leadership to drive change, gaining the confidence of department staff, recognising and dealing effectively with staff wants and needs during curriculum change, and dealing with negative perceptions of change as well as ensuring professional development.

Key words: curriculum change, strategies, process management strategies, strategic management strategies, shared approach.

1. Introduction

Literature points to a number of strategies that can be used to support effective planning, implementation and management of curriculum change in higher education (Curee, 2010; Mace, 2001; Jones & Duckett, 2006). These strategies are based on such factors as quality, resources, staff, students as well as funding to mention just but a few. The change strategies which AMMs can deploy for effective and successful curriculum change can be divided into two broad categories namely strategic management strategies and process management strategies (Curee, 2010; Mace, 2001). Also, key processes, activities and resources needed to support the curriculum change process that have been identified in this study include coaching, co-construction, specialist training of team members, networking and collaboration, regulation and monitoring (Cordingley & Bell, 2007; Robinson et al, 2009). The above therefore means that the success of the above change processes and activities in driving curriculum change in higher education depends on three broad conditions namely (Curee, 2010) namely: i) the curriculum change should be underpinned by an explicit set of principles that staff and academic middle managers collectively work towards and this involves both the staff and the AMMs reaching a clear and consistent agreement about what the curriculum change is all about and the reason (s) for pursuing it in the first place; ii) methods and resources used for engaging staff in the design and implementation of curriculum change should model important aspects of the curriculum itself; and iii) AMMs as curriculum leaders, should closely, actively and sometimes informally monitor the curriculum change process to be able to timeously provide the much needed support during the change process. Before concluding, this study ends with an articulation of the role and influence of top management on how academic middle managers actualise of the curriculum change strategies.

2. Strategic management strategies for curriculum change

These are strategies that deal with sustainable management of the implementation of curriculum change in higher education institutions as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Strategic management strategies (Curee, 2010)

The first category of broad curriculum change strategies comprises the strategic management strategies which include the following: planning and resourcing for effective curriculum change, dealing with negative perceptions, recognising and dealing with staff wants and needs, gaining staff confidence, making curriculum change a high priority, providing effective leadership to drive curriculum change, and providing support to achieve success. These strategies are explained below.

2.1. Making curriculum change a high priority

Literature shows that giving high priority to curriculum change is the first step towards creating an environment in which effective curriculum change can take place (Mace, 2001; Curee, 2010). The creation of such an environment is academic middle managers' dedication to curriculum change. It is argued in literature that if department staff sees that their managers are dedicated and enthusiastic about making curriculum change successful, they (staff) will also show the same level of commitment to the change. The following are therefore ways in which academic middle managers can demonstrate their commitment to curriculum change (Huy, 2011; Mace, 2001; Curee, 2010): i) ensuring that any curriculum changes are explicit in strategic, operational and development plans, ii) placing curriculum change at the top of agendas for departmental meetings, and making curriculum change a standing item throughout the development, implementation and evaluation phases of curriculum change, iii) providing a clear picture of how the curriculum changes will affect staff and students, and the department as a whole, iv) allocating responsibilities to department members in order to ensure a collective effort in curriculum change, v) sharing curriculum change information with all department members to ensure change becomes common knowledge to all members; and vi) providing adequate resources based on realistic and achievable targets to make sure that the curriculum change actually happens.

2.2. Providing support to achieve change

Teaching staff are more likely to accept and show commitment to curriculum changes if AMMs in departments ensure that the changes come with additional support during the planning and implementation phases, and, if there is someone available for staff to turn to for support on a day-to-day basis (Curee, 2010; McAuley, 2002a; Clegg & McAuley, 2005). The support therefore that academic middle managers can provide staff during the implementation of curriculum change includes the following (Mace, 2001; Curee, 2010): i) reducing big curriculum changes into small, manageable and more familiar changes to enable implementing staff to be more familiar with the changes one step at a time, ii) providing in-service training as well as hands-on workshops with input from team leaders to enable department staff to implement curriculum more effectively and efficiently, iii) developing one-on-one and group coaching skills of curriculum change team leaders so that they are helped and empowered to successfully drive their teams towards successful curriculum change, iv) being visible so that

when help is needed, they are able to timeously provide it, v) channeling resources where they are most needed; and vi) reinforcing staff performance by giving praise and taking time to listen to the needs and wants of staff.

2.3. Planning and resourcing for effective curriculum change

Curriculum change is most effective if it is adequately and effectively planned (Curee, 2010). Such planning includes costing the process in terms of resources and time, and as part of the planning process, Mace (2001) and Curee (2010) suggest that academic middle managers manage the implementation of the change process by performing the following functions: i) being realistic about timelines and resources needed for effective curriculum change, taking into consideration staff's readiness and capacity to implement the change, ii) identifying and nominating change leaders from within the department who can motivate others during the change, iii) allowing for collaborative participation right from the planning stage to ensure buy-in and ownership of the change effort by team members, iv) defining what is negotiable and not so that energies are maximised, conflict is reduced and the direction of implementing curriculum change is clear, v) encouraging more efficient working by setting deadlines by which certain curriculum change tasks would have been completed; and vi) ensuring two-way communication right from the curriculum change planning to the implementation phases to promote openness.

2.4. Providing effective leadership to drive change

Mace (2001) argues that effective leadership is crucial for creating a culture of change in institutions and departments and above all, Curee (2010) posits that leaders who lead by example of hard work, flexibility, responsiveness and commitment are a catalyst to successful curriculum change. Academic middle managers who are the curriculum leaders in departments can therefore demonstrate effective curriculum leadership through the following actions (Blandford, 2006; Thrash, 2012; Wood, 2004; Northouse, 2007): i) providing a clearly articulated change vision and communicating it in an inspiring manner, ii) having a rationale for change that is grounded on research and facts, iii) recognising and valuing the contributions made by team members, iv) creating opportunities to interact with individuals, teams and the whole department about curriculum change, and v) Adopting a blend of top-down and bottom-up approaches.

2.5. Gaining the confidence of department staff

Literature shows that academic middle managers can significantly gain the confidence of their department staff if they are appropriately qualified and experienced, have a working knowledge of curriculum that is current and demonstrate an active involvement in professional development activities linked to curriculum change and quality initiatives (Curee, 2010). Academic middle managers can therefore gain the confidence of their staff during curriculum change by playing the following roles: i) having a clearly articulated communication plan that is applied consistently in the department, ii) ensuring that both staff and department management maintain an updated working knowledge and understanding of curriculum and curriculum change, and iii) organising curriculum development and implementation workshops and training sessions to capacitate department members (Hartmann, 2011).

2.6. Recognising and dealing effectively with staff wants and needs

A number of authorities in curriculum change attest to the fact that during periods of change such as curriculum change, staff always want and need support, effective leadership, open communication lines, and positive relations between themselves and their managers if curriculum change is to be effective. To therefore ensure maximum participation in the planning and implementation of curriculum change by department staff, academic middle managers need to provide the need to deal with staff wants and needs by playing the following roles (Mace, 2001; Curee, 2010): i) providing strong and effective leadership, open lines of communication and promote positive relations between teaching staff and themselves, and ii) consulting department staff and making them feel that their opinions are also valued.

2.7. Dealing with negative perceptions of change and professional development

By sticking to the action plans, academic middle managers can create working environments that ensure that staff are able to see and be convinced that department managers are committed to the curriculum change process (Mace, 2001). Failure to adhere or stick to the agreed action plans by academic middle managers has the negative consequence of discouraging staff members from improving the quality of their work during curriculum

change and breeds negative perceptions towards the change (Curee, 2010; Mace, 2001). To effectively deal with such negative perceptions, middle managers need to perform the following roles according to Mace, 2001): i) showing that they are committed to the change by meeting deadlines, ii) adhering to action plans and recommendations of inspecting teams, iii) providing staff with appropriate information to keep them fully informed about curriculum changes, and iv) ensuring staff have the necessary professional development to meet the changing needs of the curriculum.

3. Process management strategies

These strategies relate to issues that deal with the day to day operations of middle managers during curriculum change and are represented diagrammatically in figure 2 below.

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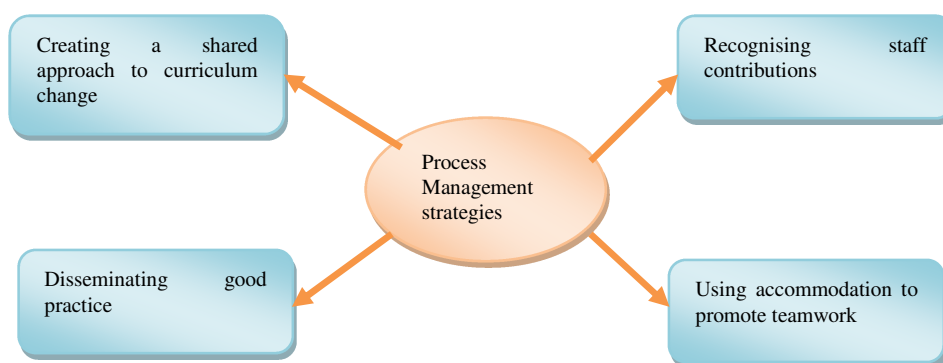


Figure 2: Process Management strategies (Curee, 2010)

The category of process management strategies consists of four strategies for effective planning, implementation and management of curriculum change. The four strategies which fall under this category include creating of a shared approach to curriculum change, disseminating good practice, using accommodation to promote teamwork, and recognising staff contributions (Curee, 2010). An explanation of the role each of the four strategies plays in curriculum change is given below.

3.1. Creating a shared approach as a vehicle for effective implementation of curriculum change

Literature shows that for a curriculum change effort to be successful, it must be owned by the implementing staff and this is further confirmed in more readings that show that change initiatives work best when introduced bottom-up and owned by the implementing staff (Jones & Duckett, 2006). To ensure buy-in and ownership of the curriculum change effort (Curee, 2010; Jones & Duckett, 2006), academic middle managers need to perform the following roles: i) use focus groups to get close to the perceptions and feelings of the implementing staff towards the change, and this could be a good indicator of how best to move forward, and ii) create working teams in the department that have clear lines of authority and reporting on their tasks on curriculum change.

3.2. Recognising and utilising staff contributions

Literature shows that every person in life needs their contributions to be recognized if they are to produce motivated performance in their work area. Academic middle managers can therefore improve the commitment of department staff to implementing curriculum change by recognising and using their contributions as frequently as possible. Literature shows that acknowledging and utilising the expertise of staff has a cascading effect on instigating change and can also improve staff morale in the process (Curee, 2010). Academic middle managers can therefore encourage motivated performance by department staff during the curriculum change process by performing the following: i) creating a data base of experience and expertise so as to be able to tap into it where and when need, ii) using past history successes in curriculum change in the department to motivate current change effort, iii) reinforcing performance as often as possible to enable staff to feel that their efforts are recognised and appreciated, and iv) hosting interactive sessions about curriculum change that encourage whole team participation.

3.3. Using accommodation to promote team work.

It is important for middle managers to understand that small staffrooms isolate staff and make it difficult to promote team ethos required to effectively manage curriculum change (Spillane, 2006; Curee, 2010). Literature further confirms that physically isolated staff can develop a psychological detachment from what is going on and may respond less well than others to curriculum change (Spillane, 2006; Bolden, 2007). To ensure that there is team spirit among department staff during curriculum change, academic middle managers can playing the following roles: i) providing staff rooms in which members can meet regularly as teams to discuss and share ideas on curriculum change, and using accommodation available to promote team ethos.

3.4. Disseminating good practice during curriculum change

Having an effective mechanism to disseminate good practice across the department so other can learn from it is very important for the success of a change effort (Curee, 2010). Literature shows that staff can immensely benefit from such an approach. Academic middle managers can disseminate good practice in the following ways: i) organising team teaching sessions, ii) using teaching mentors to disseminate, and iii) providing in-service training days where staff share experiences in a structured manner.

4. Influence of top management on academic middle manager role

Literature shows that change such as curriculum change is only successful if implemented effectively (Wooldridge, Schmidt, & Floyd, 2008; Briggs, 2002) hence the acknowledged key role of AMMs as change advocates and implementers of curriculum change (Currie & Proctor, 2005). On the other hand it is also shown that the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of AMMs in their planning and implementation of curriculum change can also be traced to their interaction with top management in their organisations (Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio, 2008). Ford et al (2008) argue that there are three behavioural patterns of top management that may be detrimental to the effective implementation of change by AMMs. Such behaviours include: i) broken agreements and violation of AMM trust by top management, ii) communication breakdowns such as the failure to legitimise change, the misrepresentation of change motives, or simple no call for action, and iii) ignoring counter-reasons, i.e., top management being unwilling to incorporate or legitimate critical feedback from AMMs on issues related to curriculum change.

Literature further shows that AMMs are more likely able to mobilise extra support from their staff when top management also truly believes in the inherent benefits of the change than when top management feels not obliged to support the change (Conway & Monks, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The above discussion shows that curriculum change, while a complex process, can be successfully planned, implemented and managed if the right mix of curriculum change strategies is deployed. By creating a supporting curriculum change environment through especially the provision of relevant training in curriculum change, ensuring a spirit of collaboration in the departments as well as provision of adequate resources, AMMs can successfully plan, implement and manage curriculum change in their organisations.

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