UTILISING AN ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING APPROACH TO FACILITATE CHANGE IN A UNIVERSITY AND IMPROVE THE RETENTION OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

Sheryl Ramsay, School of Management
Leonie Elphinstone, Strategic Retention Project
Kitty Vivekananda, Student Services
Griffith University

This paper discusses an ongoing project being implemented at Griffith University, which is designed to develop a strategic approach to improving the retention of first year student and facilitate significant change. An organisational learning model (Dixon, 1999) is used to frame a systematic approach to organisational change. Recognising that change within universities is typically slow, the project aims to impact on the culture in an incremental fashion. A key feature relates to the breaking down of perceived ‘silos’, with the aim of improving information exchange and learning across different areas of the university. In particular, the importance of increasing awareness of, and communication about, good practice approaches already operating in the university is highlighted. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Introduction

In many ways, universities continue to conform to what Mintzberg (1979:355) termed a “professional bureaucracy”, inherent with the advantages of professional freedom and discretion and the disadvantages associated with problems of coordination and quality control (Bolman & Deal, 1997:66). Change, as a consequence, is likely to be incremental in nature (Bhanot, 2001) and the result of a gradual organisational learning process within the university. The challenge for universities in the contemporary environment is to strategically focus on important change priorities and simultaneously engage staff, in a meaningful way, in shaping the future of the university in a timely manner. The present action learning project focuses on a strategic approach to student retention in first year at Griffith University.

The development of such a strategic, university-wide approach has utilised change management, based on the development of a learning organisation approach (Dixon, 1999) and recognition of the essential elements of effective change management strategies (Bhanot, 2001)

First year experience

The whole first year experience has been recognised nationally and internationally by researchers in higher education as a key to many students’ experience of, and success in, higher education (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). According to Tinto (1993:152), first year “represents a strategic leverage point where the investment of scarce resources can yield substantial future benefits in both learning and persistence”. While many Australian universities are actively trialing first year experience projects (Asmar, Brew, McCulloch, Peseta, & Barrie, 2000), the Latrobe University project reported by Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) is one of the rare examples of a more strategic model focussing on a whole university approach. The underlying premise of the approach involves enhancing the learning experience of all first year
students, whereby more students will achieve greater success and retention rates will improve. As argued by Pitkethly & Prosser (2001), having a coordinated, informed, university-wide response to transition issues is likely to improve the learning experiences of all first year students.

**Organisational Learning Model**

The concept of the “learning organisation” is seen as an ideal approach to the initiation, guidance and maintenance of positive organisational change. A learning organisation is one skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993). In essence, this requires systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from experience, history and best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organisation (Dixon, 1999). Knowledge that we create through learning allows us to change our environment; learning and change are potentially co-reinforcing and can lead to continuous transformation of an organisation.

Dixon (1999) proposes a four-stage process or repetitive cycle, which can facilitate change through organisational learning (see figure 1). According to Dixon’s model, stage 1, the widespread generation of knowledge, is followed by stage 2 which involves the integration of the new information into the organisational context and stage 3, during which the information is collectively interpreted and finally stage 4, through which organisational members are authorised to take responsible action, based on the interpreted meanings of the learnings. In terms of the generation of information, the primary concern should be turning knowledge into action by identifying and transferring internal and external best practices throughout the organisation via people-to-people interactions (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998).

Figure 1. Organisational Learning Model (Dixon, 1999)
Organisations in which organisational learning is not promoted tend to feature structures that promote isolated units of "silo" behaviours. This occurs because elements or divisions that are focused primarily on outputs that maximise their own strategic and financial position are rewarded by the wider organisation. As a consequence, the silos consciously or unconsciously promote the hoarding of information and thereby sub-optimise the total organisation’s performance (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998).

By contrast, in organisations in which organisational learning is promoted there is a recognition that internal transfer of information is a critical people-to-people process where relationships seem to precede, and are required for, meaningful sharing and transfer of information (Husted & Michailova, 2002). Efficient knowledge sharing involves direct contact and commitment on both sides of the exchange. Thus, learning and transfer of knowledge is an interactive, ongoing, and dynamic process that cannot rest on a static body of knowledge (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998).

Any change management project needs to pay attention to the numbers of people helping to ‘motor’ the change, as successful change can only be managed if a project has a sufficient number of change agents working for it. The size of the critical mass will depend on the aims and scope of the project (Butler, 1997). In regard to successful change processes in universities, Bhanot (2001) suggests the following as minimum requirements;

- champions at the top of organisations supporting change
- quality evidence to convince others of the need for change.
- a critical mass of change agents to promote innovation and change
- maximum ownership of the change process and
- a clear understanding of the process of change.

Furthermore, students’ needs must be at the heart of the change process in universities and decision making mechanisms and resource allocations must be reviewed for their efficiency, cost effectiveness and relevance to quality teaching and learning outcomes (Bhanot, 2001). Thus, it is essential that staff are genuinely engaged with the issues and the consideration of potential options for action.

**Student Retention Project at Griffith University**

Griffith has five campuses and its organisational structure shows 13 Faculties and 40 Schools. The university, historically, has allocated significant autonomy to Schools, which has many advantages, including the impetus for the development of student-centred, high quality local initiatives. However, disadvantages can occur, including situations where initiatives run in parallel, making the development of systematic, coordinated approaches more difficult.

With a change in key leadership positions, Griffith recently entered an important phase of refocusing its strategic initiatives. These broader strategic initiatives are aimed at sustaining a community that creates and communicates knowledge (Griffith University Strategic Plan 2003-2007). Against this background, the Student Retention Project was funded through a Quality Grant in 2002 with the express aim of developing a strategic retention policy for the university to improve retention of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Given the strategic priorities of Griffith and the longer-term focus of this project, the organisational learning model was used to guide the processes
considered relevant in developing more systematic, coordinated approaches (Dixon, 1999; Husted & Michailova, 2002; O’Dell & Grayson, 1998).

The Project team is comprised of staff from the academic, support, and administrative areas, and essentially models the advantages of closer communication across university Elements. This collaborative approach has been a strength of the project, allowing a more seamless interface with the various Elements of the university.

**Utilising the learning organisation principles to develop a strategic approach**

In the case of student retention at Griffith, the learning organisation approach suggested a process involving gathering, synthesising and distributing information on best practice approaches internally (already implemented, or being experimented with, at the university) and externally (from other universities in Australia and overseas). Internal benchmarking is vital as external benchmarking, in isolation, can unfortunately overlook the vast amount of untapped knowledge and best practices already residing inside organisations (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998).

Although various surveys, studies, and statistical analyses relating to retention had been conducted, there was a perception that the resultant information had been under-utilised. Further, while quality research and retention initiatives were being undertaken in Faculties, Schools and Service areas, it appeared that the learnings could, ideally, be made more broadly available within the university. Such information could better inform policy development if synthesised and made more widely available across the university community.

Thus, in line with a student-centred approach, the university needed a more focused student retention policy and accompanying strategies. However, the fundamentals of change management also needed attention including, for example, the need to engage the maximum number of people in shaping the future, the need for consistently explicit leadership in relation to retention by all senior staff, and coherently presented quality evidence to support the need for change (Bhanot, 2001).

**Applying the Organisational Learning Model**

Widespread generation of information and the commencement of the integration of new/local knowledge into the organisational context (Dixon, 1999) included the identification of good practice retention projects in the university and culminated in a university-wide Symposium in 2002: “Developing a Strategic Framework for Student Retention at Griffith University: What have we learned? Where to from here?” Essentially, the Symposium provided a forum for interchange of ideas and the development of future directions.

Calls for presentations of retention initiatives at the Symposium lead to a surprisingly large response, which indicated the energy and enthusiasm for the area, and included twenty-five projects overall. Eight of the projects involved partnerships of support services and academic elements. More than a hundred academic, administrative, and support staff attended, and the Symposium proceedings have since been made available across the university community to further promote information exchange. The Symposium met the objectives of sharing good practices, promoting open discussion,
and mobilising enthusiasm about the relevant issues. In addition, a list of possible recommendations for future directions for the university was developed.

In order to develop champions at the top of the organisation to support change, the Vice-Chancellor, the Dean of Postgraduate Students, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Teaching and Learning, the Academic Registrar and other senior university staff were invited to give strategic leadership for the project by giving keynote papers at the Symposium. This set the agenda for a more strategic approach to policy in this area. At the Symposium, available university retention data was presented providing evidence to convince others of the need for change.

Publicity and information arising from the Symposium has lead to an increase in the critical mass to ‘motor’ the change process (Bhanot, 2001; Butler, 1997). Symposium participants contributed directly to the proceedings and to the recommendations of the project, which were included in the report of the 2002 project, made available to all University staff. As well as strengths, this process highlighted areas for improvement. An example of one such area was a recognised gap in statistical data, which generated demand from staff for more specific used friendly data to be made available. As a direct consequence of this and the support of the Senior Executive team, a user-friendly retention /attrition statistics website has been developed with program specific information and made available to all staff. Members of the retention project team have in subsequent meetings with staff across the university worked to increase awareness and utilisation of this facility, which works to increase knowledge of program specific issues and convince staff in specific faculty groups of the need for change and to maximise ownership of the change process (Bhanot, 2001).

Thus, in terms of Dixon’s model (1999), Symposium participants and interested parties in the university experienced widespread generation of information (1st stage), integration of new and local knowledge into the organisational context (2nd stage), and embarked upon the collective interpretation of the information (3rd stage). The follow-on project, the Griffith University Student Retention Project 2003-2004 now funded under the Vice-Chancellor’s Strategic Fund has clearly gained champions at the top of the organisation to support the change process and has aimed this year to move on to the fourth stage, which involves actions based upon the interpreted meanings (Dixon, 1999).

While the final report of the 2002 project made a number of important recommendations, the resultant priorities, based on research internal and external to the university, focussed on first year retention efforts, which aim to maximise academic potential and success through student centred approaches. The focus is now on enhancing student engagement in the transition and first year phases, with student-centred approaches that work in a more coordinated and systematic way across academic, administrative, and support areas of the university.

In terms of mobilising authority to take responsible action based on interpreted meanings (Dixon, 1999), the new Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) has provided strong promotion of the project to senior staff and the encouragement of all staff across the university to engage with the processes involved. In order to promote a strategic university–wide approach members of the project team have attended all senior meetings of staff across the university to present recommendations.
and encourage school and faculty level initiatives which not only fit within the strategic recommendations but also utilise cross-element partnerships for maximum usage of resources. The DVC (Teaching & Learning) has further supported the process by providing funding to Pro-Vice Chancellors for collaborative initiatives at the school and faculty level to enhance the engagement of first year students and thus improve the first year experience.

**Further involvement of staff**
In order to engage staff at all levels and refine directions and actions going forward, the Retention Project Team recently conducted workshops on three of the campuses for academic, administrative and support staff to explore partnerships and develop actions plans, which could be utilised to apply for funding made available in the area. This is part of the ongoing process designed to integrate new/local knowledge into the organisational context and to generate grass roots action and ownership of the change process (Bhanot, 2001).

One important outcome of the workshops is a renewed focus on orientation and transition processes. Academic and support staff showed enthusiasm for further enhancing this process, and members of the Retention Project Team have since developed a paper on desired outcomes and processes for orientation, with examples of good practice approaches to orientation from across the university. This document has been accepted by the University wide Orientation Committee as a charter for orientation in 2004 and will now be disseminated to the Senior Reference group of the Retention project team, which includes Senior Deans from each academic group. Staff from across the university will also be invited to comment. This is an example of what O’Dell et al (1998) term sharing of internal benchmarking and Husted et al (2002) term meaningful sharing and transfer of information to promote change. In further support of this initiative, a member of the Retention Project Team has been seconded to the University–wide orientation committee to provide assistance with coordinating a modified orientation process and to develop supporting resources and training for staff involved in the orientation process. It is recognised that changes to orientation in 2004 will largely be experimental and perhaps piecemeal however the progress towards an overall strategic policy on orientation is encouraging in the light of the overall goal to achieve a strategic, university–wide, consistent approach to frontloading retention efforts.

**Moving Forward**

The Griffith University Student Retention Project for 2003-2004 will continuing to focus on further facilitating the change process by;
- Providing information and policy recommendations to Senior Staff at the university for broad implementation focussing on student centred approaches to first year.
- Continuing to increase the critical mass of support for innovation and change by providing clearly presented evidence of the need for change through meetings with senior staff of the university and grassroots level, academic, administrative and support staff.
- Maximising ownership of the change process by facilitating focus groups with program and first year coordinators to discuss suitable and viable options available and to provide support for the implementation of these options.
Identifying and facilitating partnerships across the academic, administrative, and support areas to further facilitate coordinated approaches and promote more effective utilisation of resources.

- Focusing on the priorities suggested by the change processes to date, including an orientation process which provides a more integrated approach to academic and social experiences in this important part of the transition phase; focus on good teaching and learning processes in first year.

- Ongoing review of the project and evaluation of the outcomes through University-wide retention data and regular student satisfaction surveys.

Conclusions

This strategic change initiative focussing on improving the experience of and thus retention of first year students has as Bhanot (2001) suggested reflected the fact that the change process in universities can be gradual and incremental and certainly aided by the number of people involved and the consequent "motoring" of the change process (Butler, 1997). The commitment of the university leadership to new strategic initiatives has vital to the success of the project.

Using an overarching theoretical framework, such as Dixon’s (1998) model of organisational learning, allowed the project team to organise its ideas, take a strategic focus, and share these coherently with others in the university. This model has been supplemented with the concept of internal benchmarking and the continuing exchange of information. Because there has been a wide consultation process, the project team feels confident that the strategic approach to retention will build upon the initiatives, good practices, and cross-Element work already established, and further the opportunities for staff to learn from creative approaches to student retention, in line with ideals of a learning organisation (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998).

REFERENCES


Bhanot, R 2001, Managing Change, Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), Coventry University, http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk/wshop_30_1_01e.html


McInnis, C, James, R, & Hartley, R 2000,rends in the First Year Experience in Australian Universities, Department of Education training and Youth Affairs, AGPS, Canberra.


Tinto, V 1993 Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and Cures of Student Attrition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago