Introducing PDP – Reflections on the Role of a School PDP Co-ordinator

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Abstract

The requirement to provide structured and supported opportunities for students in higher education to engage in personal development planning (PDP), is the first national policy mandate for provision of a form of learning across the sector (Jackson et al 2004) . The approach, at the University of Salford, has been to agree a University wide policy and required outcomes, with Schools being given discretion on how these are achieved. This paper reviews progress in the School of Environment and Life Sciences, drawing on "change management" literature, to analyze and assess the approach adopted and reflect on the role of a School PDP co-ordinator as a "change agent". It concludes that the complex and autonomous academic cultures which characterise higher education institutions necessitate a combination of prescriptive and emergent approaches and a valuing of small scale incremental, and not always linear, progress.

Introduction

The opportunity to write this paper is timely. September 2005 was the deadline agreed by Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals and the QAA for the provision of structured and supported opportunities for all students in higher education to engage in personal development planning (PDP). In the School of Environment and Life Sciences at the University of Salford, steady progress has been made towards meeting the policy requirement of the University and at the end of the first semester of the academic year 2005/06 it is useful to carry out a review . This paper reflects on my role as School PDP co-ordinator and the progress made. It does not necessarily represent the views of colleagues within the School or the wider University.

The goal of University policy is to ensure that provision of PDP opportunities for students becomes an integral part of learning and student support provision and not an optional add on which "withers on the vine" once the policy agenda for Universities moves onto other concerns. "Implementation deficit" is a common fate for many promising education initiatives (Fullan1993,Yorke 2003).By drawing on change management literature to analyze and assess the approach to introducing PDP at School level, the paper will provide insight into the role of a "change agent" working to ensure that the outcomes sought by University policy are achieved. With a growing number of centrally directed enhancement activities (such as PDP, Employability, embedding the use of learning technologies in teaching and learning) issues around introducing change at this level need greater understanding. At present there is limited research into how enhancement activities are introduced at departmental level or "meso level" (Trowler et al 2005). Literature and research, has, as in the case of PDP, tended to concentrate on descriptive accounts of types of provision (Ward et al 2005) or evaluation of impacts of provision on student learning and achievement. It is intended that this paper will contribute to discussion about methods of introducing new initiatives, particularly those which are not perceived as "home grown".

The paper will briefly outline: the wider policy context for the introduction of PDP provision for students; the approach adopted by the University of Salford; and the system for provision of PDP opportunities in the School of Environment and Life Sciences (ELS).A summary of the different implementation techniques and their underpinning objectives, used by the School co-ordinator, will be provided. Reflections on progress so far, from the perspective of the School co-ordinator as "change agent" will be followed by a review of the prescriptive and emergent approaches to managing change in the higher education context. The paper will conclude, by using these theories of managing change, to analyze and assess the approach adopted for introducing structured and supported PDP opportunities for students in the School of Environment and Life Sciences and identify strategies for avoiding the fate of "implementation deficit".

The Wider Context

The process of meta learning which involves gaining greater understanding about one's own knowledge and capabilities to facilitate planning for personal and professional development, is at the heart of the policy to provide structured and supported PDP provision for students. The policy stems from a concern raised in the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) that many students do not gain full benefit from their higher education.In a fast moving knowledge based economy students need to be able to plan to continually enhance their learning and articulate the knowledge, skills and competencies they have gained from their higher education experience to convince future employers of their employability. In a context of widening participation and growing competition for graduate level employment, students need support to engage in this process, whilst employers require universities to make the wider outcomes of learning more explicit. In May 2000 a joint policy statement by Universities UK, Universities Scotland , QAA and the Standing Conference of Principals announced the HE Progress Files policy (QAA 2001). This requires HEIs to provide students with : a formal transcript listing modules studied and grades achieved; structured and supported opportunities for engaging in PDP and a personal development record. This is the first national policy mandate for provision of a form of learning across the sector (Jackson et al 2004).It has been introduced within a context of increased managerialism in the higher education sector, with it's emphasis on a business like approach, more internal accountability and performance management (Trowler et al 2005, Isaac-Henry et al 1993).

The University Context

The University of Salford, at strategic level , has embraced the Progress Files policy. It fits with key organisational goals : widening participation; enhancing employability; supporting lifelong learning and enhancing the student experience (UoS 2005). There is also a need to demonstrate that the organisation is meeting QAA expectations. In 2003 an Institutional Implementation Strategy was produced (UoS 2003) with the aim of embedding " processes of PDP within all schools at the University in line with the 2005/06 deadline identified by the QAA ,and to develop systems of PDP that will support academic progression, enhance employability and support the personal development of all students at the University" (para 20). The strategy specifies a number of outcomes which all schools are expected to achieve. These include: making opportunities for PDP, and it's rationale, clear within programme documentation and

ensuring that students will have access to processes of PDP at each stage of their programme (UoS 2003 para 23).

The approach at the University of Salford is described in the implementation strategy as "partially devolved". Discretion on how to achieve the required outcomes has been delegated to Schools to enable approaches to be responsive to academic practices and cultures in different subject discipline areas. The rationale is that this approach will "balance development and ownership at a school level with the need to ensure that the University provides a PDP programme that has common features" (UoS 2003 para 24). Faculty and School Co-ordinators have been appointed, with a remit to ensure that within schools, provision is in place which meets the outcomes sought (UoS 2003 para 35) . The Progress Files Steering Group, chaired by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, monitors progress.

The School of ELS Context

The School is responsible for delivering a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, full time, part time and vocational and non- vocational,to roughly 900 students. In September 2003, co-inciding with the appointment of a new Head, the School merged onto one site. There has been a strong drive to develop a more collegiate approach bringing together approximately 48 academic tutors in a range of Discipline groupings (Biosciences, Geography, Environmental Health/Management and Housing Studies).Within the increasingly managerialised approach to University management, there is also growing pressure to demonstrate accountability and the meeting of performance management objectives (Trowler and Knight 2000). It was in this context that the requirement to provide PDP opportunities for students was placed upon the School and as required in the University's implementation strategy, a School PDP co-ordinator was appointed.

PDP Provision in the School of ELS

The approach to the provision of PDP opportunities for students has been to agree a School wide policy framework. The expectation is that this framework, which sets out a minimum entitlement, will be adopted by all programme teams in the school,thus ensuring that all students have the same opportunity to engage in PDP with support from a personal and academic tutor (PAT). The main features of the policy are :

- Support for PDP to be part of the personal tutor role, in addition to the traditional pastoral role. This shifts the focus of the role from one of solving problems to one of supporting students to reflect on and plan for their personal and academic progress.

- Students are provided with a student progress diary, the PADD (Professional and Academic Development Diary), customised for each level of study .This provides students with prompts to review their progress and a format in which to record achievements (academic and extra curricular) and action plans.

- An intensive extended induction for level 1 students , via group tutorials in semester 1 and 2,using the topics and prompts in the level 1 PADD as a basis.

- Level 2 and 3 and postgraduate students are given the opportunity of a review meeting with their PAT once each semester. A record of meetings plus a copy of the student's cv, is to be kept on the student's file.

- Each Discipline area/programme team to provide additional PDP opportunities such as career development/cv writing workshops.
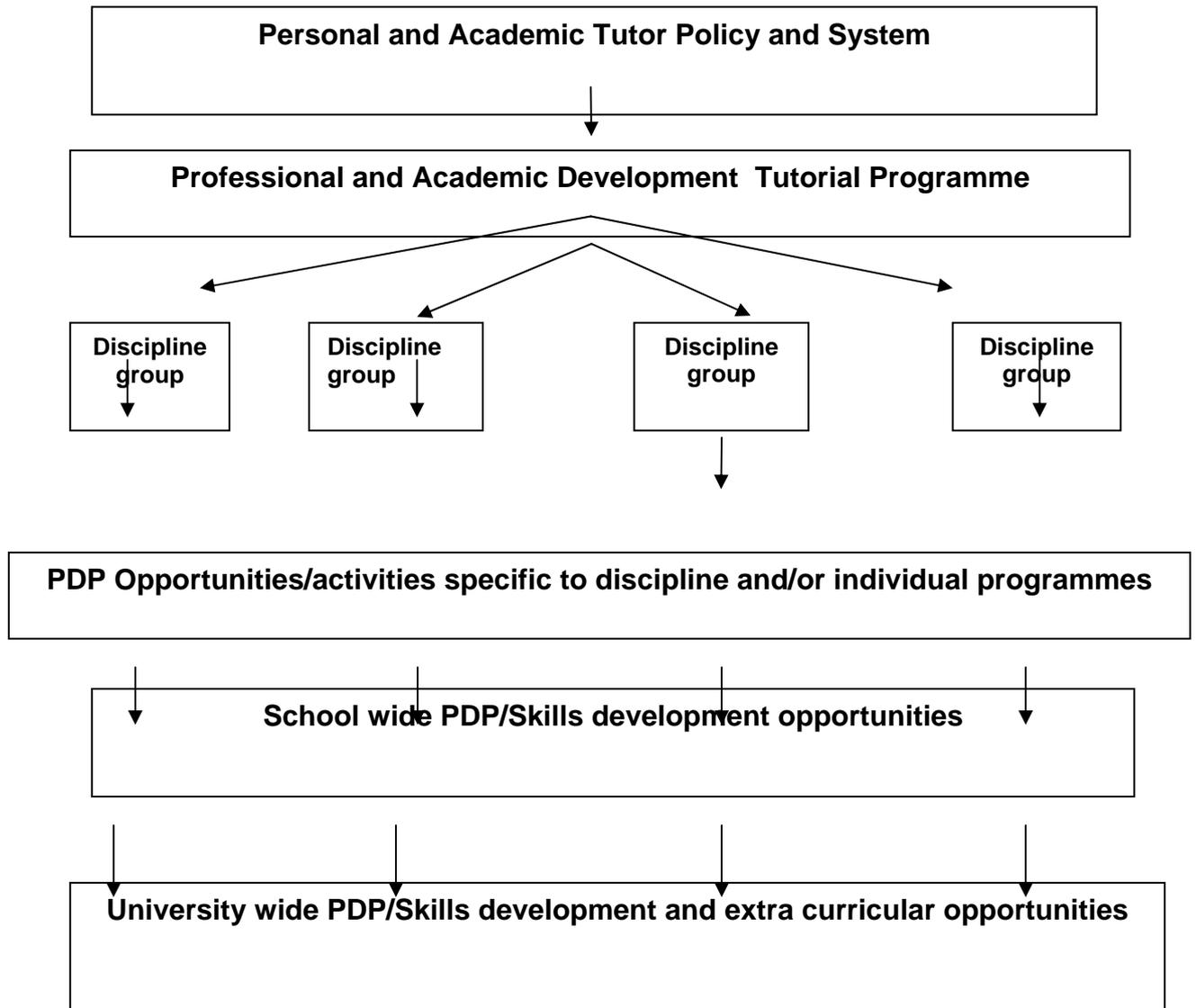
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│         Personal and Academic Tutor Policy and System             │
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│      Professional and Academic Development  Tutorial Programme     │
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│ PDP Opportunities/activities specific to discipline and/or        │
│ individual programmes                                             │
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│         School wide PDP/Skills development opportunities           │
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│ University wide PDP/Skills development and extra curricular        │
│ opportunities                                                     │
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Figure 1: School of ELS PDP Framework

Introducing PDP – The Methods Used

This section outlines the range of methods, and their underlying premise, used to introduce PDP provision for students between November 2003 and December 2005. The approach adopted was influenced by the need to get provision into place to meet the QAA and University deadline and an assumption that a School wide policy and procedure framework would be uniformly adopted and subject to adjustment and review after initial implementation.

Table 1: Methods for introducing PDP

Implementation Premise	Methods Used
Important to generate awareness of the new policy requirement amongst academic tutors at an early stage	Newsletters Presentation to Discipline groups
Accountability – it was felt important that progress in meeting policy requirement and deadline could be demonstrated to the Progress Files Steering Group.	Development of PDP support materials for students (the PADD) and a tutor guide to policy and procedure. Reports on progress to School Teaching and Learning Committee Level 1 student PDP pilot (2004/05)
Diverse School, therefore important to ensure consistent and equitable PDP support for all students.	Development of vision and overarching policy framework for the School setting out minimum provision. Development of generic PDP support tool (the PADD).
Pressure on academic tutor time necessitated providing "off the shelf" tools to support PAT role	Development of the PADD PAT and personal tutor policy and procedure guide
Ownership of the proposed change to provision more likely if seen to build on existing practice.	Programme leaders asked to carry out initial PDP mapping exercise.
Need for senior level endorsement of School PDP policy and procedure	Framework and revised PAT system presented and agreed at School Teaching and Learning Committee and ratified at School Board. Memo to all tutors from the Head of School confirming expectation that new PDP and personal tutor system would be introduced across all programmes
Input from different Discipline groups in development of the policy and support materials necessary to gain commitment to their use.	PDP working group established with representatives from different discipline groups. Tutor interim evaluation event half way through the 2004/05 level 1 student pilot.
Ensure all tutors clear about requirements placed on them by School policy	Written guidance for tutors, Briefing sessions for tutors Emails to all tutors at key points in academic year for PDP tutorials
Important to embed into School systems for review of teaching and learning provision and support for students.	Development of standard statement for programme specifications and programme handbooks PDP to be a standing item on School Teaching and Learning Committee Feedback on PDP support to be included on staff/student committee agenda. PDP introduction as part of Level 1 student induction.

Reflections on Progress so Far

There is good awareness amongst academic tutors of the PDP requirement and the personal and academic tutor system, supported by the PADD, for level 1 students and links with the careers service have been strengthened. However, there is less awareness of the need , and possibly less motivation, to extend provision to level 2 and 3. This may stem from links to key concerns for the School. The level 1 PDP pilot, with it's focus on supporting students to adjust to studying at university, was enthusiastically supported by the Head of School as an additional tool which might assist retention and progression at level 1. Level 2 and 3 provision takes a more holistic approach , encouraging students to reflect and monitor their own academic progress and plan for enhancing their employability. Lack of progression is seen as less of a risk after level 1 and there is ambiguity, and perhaps some ambivalence, about the role of academic tutors in enhancing student employability.

Implementation of the official School wide policy and procedures has varied. At level 1,all programmes have provided students with the PADD but the process of PDP is supported in different ways, for example: voluntary non - timetabled tutorial system; PDP tutorials included within credited modules with a skills or a Discipline bias; timetabled voluntary tutorial programme.

The development of clear policies and procedures together with support materials provides evidence that the School is meeting the University's policy requirement. These developments have certainly stimulated PDP support activity in the School. However, uncertainties remain. Provision of PDP support for students is developing in slightly different ways to that planned and there are differing degrees of provision, and interpretation of the PDP concept, between Discipline groups and between tutors. That some programme teams are taking ownership of PDP provision is a source of optimism, however this makes establishing whether the School is meeting the outcomes sought by the University for all students more complex . There are also difficulties in establishing to what extent provision is "real" and not just a "paper" commitment.

Engaging the commitment of tutors who may subscribe to what Trowler (2006) described as the traditionalist understanding of the purpose of higher education is challenging. This approach views the role of higher education to be one of induction into a discipline. This contrasts with the enterprise, progressive and social re-constructionist ideologies which respectively emphasise: preparation for work, development of the individual and empowering students to change society (Trowler 2006). The national policy to provide PDP support for students could superficially be seen as challenging the traditionalist perspective, unless there is recognition that the iterative process of PDP (review, plan, take action, review) also underpins effective discipline focused academic practice. The writer's own leanings towards a "progressive" understanding of the role of higher education which has influenced the form of PDP provision developed may be dissonant with some tutors understanding of their role and priorities. The implications of this for the way forward will be explored in a later section of this paper.

Another concern as PDP co-ordinator has been the danger of being a "lone ranger", with responsibility for PDP being marginalised. For long term sustainability of the policy, PDP support for students will need to be integral to every academic's role as a tutor.

Reflecting on the role of a PDP co-ordinator and the effectiveness of the approach adopted to introducing PDP within the School, led to an interest in theories of managing change in order to gain insight into how to progress beyond the initial implementation stage. The following section of the paper summarises two approaches which will then be used to analyze progress so far.

Theories of "Managing Change"

There are a range of change management theories. Many of these have developed to analyze change management approaches in the business sector but can also be used to help understand approaches to managing change within universities. This paper reviews the "prescriptive" and "emergent" approaches to managing change which are outlined by Doherty and Horne (2002) in a text which considers approaches to managing and implementing change in the public services. The concepts of "prescriptive" and "emergent" change are very similar to the "techno – rational" and "complexity" theories of managing change referred to by Trowler,Sanders and Knight (2003) in a guide aimed at individuals in HE who are responsible for changing practices in their institution. This guide recognises that such practices are often not about wholescale organisational change but measures at programme team, discipline unit and school level to improve learning, curriculum and student support. The following tables, adapted from Doherty and Horne (2002) and Trowler,Saunders,Knight (2003),summarise and compare the prescriptive and emergent approaches to managing change and their underpinning assumptions.

Prescriptive/Technical –rational approach	Emergent/complexity approach
Planning by "experts" who set out aims, objectives, structure	Negotiations between members of an organisation about understandings of issues and what is required
Implementation by a series of logical sequenced steps, faithful to original plan	Change occurs in uncertain, uneven, unpredictable ways

Table 2: Prescriptive and Emergent approaches to managing change

Prescriptive	Emergent
Strong initial vision and strategic plan	Initial vision which acts as catalyst may be moderated in response to emerging patterns
Good planning and design the key to straight forward change.	Change must be facilitated rather than planned
Central directive results in uniform response as planned.	Accepts differing interpretations and that outcome or approaches to achieving outcome may be different from what was originally planned.
Uni - directional. Suggests one big change	Multiple small changes will gradually merge into more fundamental change
Culture and attitudes change will follow structural/procedural change	Culture change cannot be mandated

Table 3: A comparison of the assumptions underpinning prescriptive and emergent approaches

The paper will now provide some assessment of the relevance of the two different approaches to managing/introducing change in higher education institutions, particularly for 'change agents' working at school level, with little formal power to mandate change.

The Prescriptive Approach

The prescriptive approach stems from the early organisational development work of Kurt Lewin (1946) which assumes that it is possible to unfreeze the current equilibrium "so that we can change it while it is unstable and then let it settle into a new equilibrium state closer to our ideal" (Seel 2000) .There is an assumption that the organisation is a 'thing' which can be operated upon (Seel 2002).This approach is often favoured by chief executives and those who need to provide evidence that changes are being made to ensure a centrally imposed policy directive is being complied with. Policy statements/procedure guides / new supporting materials can provide evidence that new systems are being put in place. Accountability mechanisms, such as reporting systems provide evidence that changes at procedural level are being implemented.

However, this approach to change management requires a "tightly coupled" organisation where there is a strong corporate culture and the chief executive wields extensive power. Higher education institutions, in contrast are "loosely coupled" (Hopkins 1984) where, as Weil (1994 p24) stated, "the plurality of professional loyalties and interests" and "multiple agendas" can seem "to defy any possibility of winning allegiance to institutional core purposes and values". Loyalty is often to what Trowler (2006) referred to as "the invisible college".This means the approach to understanding knowledge characteristic of an academic discipline and networks within and external to the University associated with the discipline rather than wider institutional goals and a notion of being a higher education professional. There is an inherent tension with the growing managerialism of the sector.This approach also

underplays the ability of individuals to interpret policy differently and informal power structures which may influence how and to what extent a policy change is implemented (Seel 2000,Trowler at al 2005).

Trowler,Saunders and Knight (2003) suggest that the prescriptive techno- rational approach can have value in initiating and promoting an innovation but that it will not be sufficient on it's own to generate ownership and the capacity to introduce the change.The approach may have some effect with those who are receptive to the proposed changes but will not tackle the passive resistance of those who feel the proposed change has little relevance to them, resulting in compliance on paper rather than ownership in day to day practice.

The Emergent Approach

This approach places more emphasis on social and organisational processes, recognising their complexity. It acknowledges that because of this complexity, the pattern of change will not be straightforward. Petticrew et al (1991), in a study of change in the UK National Health Service, described a process of fermentation, whilst a new policy or innovation is thought about and experimented with, as something to be welcomed. The change agent's role is seen as one of facilitating or nurturing the capacity of those who will have to implement the change, rather than someone who mandates that change must take place. This seems particularly applicable to the role of an academic tutor 'change agent', working at School level within a higher education institution with little formal power to impose changes. The loosely coupled structure of universities makes it necessary to work "middle out", mediating the introduction of a top down policy and development of a bottom up response. (Trowler, Saunders and Knight 2003).

This theory of managing change recognises "change as a process whereby individuals need to alter their ways of thinking and doing" (Hopkins 2002 p6), rather than a one off structural or procedural product. It accepts that, as Jackson (2004 p11) argues , "It is necessary for individuals and teams to invent their own wheels in order to understand and take ownership of change to gain improvement". This approach also recognizes that, as Fullan (1993 p22) states in his first lesson for successful change ,"you can't mandate what matters". This is particularly relevant in the higher education environment with it's academic culture of autonomy and resistance to new policies/practices which are not felt to have originated from within the Discipline area (Trowler et al 2003).

The disadvantages of this approach are that evidence of responding to the policy requirement may be slow to emerge and uneven responses make it harder to demonstrate accountability. A key issue that remains is how to balance the tension between being able to demonstrate that the required outcomes are being achieved and the uncertainty and volatility of the fermentation process which the emergent approach suggests is necessary for long term ownership and culture change.

An Assessment of the Approach Adopted and Thoughts on the Way Forward

The relevance of the different approaches depends to some extent on whether the PDP role at school level, is one of a co-ordinator or change agent. The title co-ordinator implies introducing already agreed policies, procedures and materials. To some extent

the role has involved co-ordinating the introduction of a University wide policy, but in addition it has involved: introducing tutors to the concept of PDP; convincing them of it's value; developing procedures and materials and agreeing the School level policy within the 'partially devolved' approach of the Institution wide implementation strategy. It is also worth considering whether introducing PDP involves co-ordinating a policy/procedural change or introducing a change in perspective amongst academic tutors about their role in the provision of higher education. It could be argued that supporting students in their personal and academic development has always been part of the personal tutor role. However in the move to a mass higher education system, the personal tutor system has often become diluted and seen primarily as a "deficit" model, in which the student would only see the tutor if there was a problem to resolve. The introduction of a requirement to provide structured and supported ways for students to engage in PDP may require changing the personal tutor paradigm to a positive developmental role.

The approach adopted in the School has been mainly prescriptive and top down with a focus on briefing tutors on a new policy and the requirements this placed on them. This has been useful in getting the process of providing PDP opportunities for students started. The School's introduction of the PADD and revised personal and academic tutor system, was well received, providing a "quick win" for the School in terms of being seen to be actively meeting the University policy requirement. This approach has also been relatively successful where tutors and programme teams were receptive to the ethos of PDP. However it is unclear to what extent the approach has resulted in widespread ownership amongst tutors in the School of their role in providing structured and supported PDP opportunities for students. Attempts to adopt a more emergent approach were limited by time constraints and the difficulty of engaging in discussion with those tutors for whom PDP was not a priority. The demanding workloads of academics has also meant a willingness to adopt a ready made package rather than having to spend time reinventing the wheel.

Conclusion

So what can be learnt from a review of change management theories for progressing the implementation of PDP at School level and more generally for the role of academic tutors acting as change agents at School level within a higher education institution?

- A judicious combination of prescriptive and emergent approaches is needed. Prescriptive measures, introduced in a culturally sensitive manner, can initiate the process but long term implementation will need internalisation and adaptation by those responsible for delivery so that the policy requirement is no longer seen as "not home grown".

- Policy change needs to be supported by a process of continuous improvement such as by the annual programme review and pro-active dissemination of good practice in the hope of positive cross fertilisation.

- To use Heifetz and Linsky's (2002 p73) metaphor, it is necessary to learn on the dance floor as well as keeping the bigger picture in mind. To be able to accept the uncertainties of incremental and experimental introduction whilst, at the same time, recognising the overall outcomes sought as the perimeter of the ballroom.

- Change agents in HE need to be supported in gaining an understanding of the complexity of the academic culture, "an anthropological understanding of cultures and practices" (spoken and unspoken) (Trowler 2006). They also need empathy with the other constraints and pressures which colleagues may be facing, such as the Research Assessment Exercise and an ability to "think politically" (Fullan 2003 p101). Skills in "reconciling competing views while progressively building up a momentum of support for change" are needed (Pennington,G 2003 p23).

- In introducing PDP, co-ordinators may need to build up links with the Discipline Centres within the Learning Teaching Support Networks (LTSN) , to tap into the prevailing discourse on the role of higher education provision within different disciplines and to overcome the barrier of academic tutors perceiving PDP as a top down requirement by the QAA.

- To quote Doherty and Horne (2002) a conversational approach to introducing changes may need to be nurtured. As Trowler,Saunders and Knight (2003 p19) point out, cultural change takes time , subtle persistence and a mind set that thinks "small scale and incremental". This involves spending time talking to individual tutors and programme teams about their understandings of PDP, how it fits with their discipline ethos and how best to introduce for their students and, using the fermentation analogy, allowing sufficient leeway for programme owned models of provision to bubble up. PDP support materials, such as the PADD should be promoted as support tools which can be adapted in content or in the way they are used, provided the broad outcomes sought by the University are achieved. This approach may result in longer term ownership but acceptance of a slower and more uncertain journey will be needed.

Acknowledgements

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