


2007

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### Recommended Citation

Lillis, Deirdre: Engaging the academic heartland:a key factor in the effectiveness of strategic planning and self study programs. 2nd. European Quality Assurance Forum:Implementing and using quality assurance, strategy and practice, University La Sapienza, Rome, Italy, 15-17 November, 2007.

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2ND EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE FORUM  
IMPLEMENTING AND USING QUALITY ASSURANCE : STRATEGY AND PRACTICE

**ENGAGING THE ACADEMIC HEARTLAND :  
A KEY FACTOR IN THE EFFECTIVENESS OF  
STRATEGIC PLANNING AND SELF STUDY PROGRAMS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Conventional wisdom in the literature attests to the importance of involving academic staff in strategic planning and self study programs but there is a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate this argument. This paper reports on the findings of an empirical investigation of the effectiveness of three strategic planning and three self study programs, undertaken in one Higher Education Institute (HEI), between 1997 and 2006. It was found that the level of engagement of academic staff was a key factor in the effectiveness of the programs – the more engagement the more effective the programs were. The research methodology was based on six systematic program evaluations (Rossi *et al.* 2003) and the main data sources used were documents (*e.g.* Proceedings of the Governing Body, Academic Council, senior management team, *etc.*) and interviews with n=17 members of the management team.

**INTRODUCTION - THE NOTION OF ENGAGEMENT**

Trow and Clark contend that everything in HEIs depends on the inner motivations of academic staff (Trow and Clark 1994). Clark contends that stimulating the academic heartland is a key component in a move toward an entrepreneurial university and therefore the necessary cultural change is from collegial to entrepreneurial (Clark 1998). In this paper the academic heartland refers to activity that can only be undertaken by academic staff. Academic staff can have considerable autonomy in their work when protected by academic freedom and when they set their own trajectories in research. The HEI has been likened to an *'inverted pyramid'* where academics have loyalty first to their discipline, then to their department and finally to their Institute. This unique organisational culture presents significant challenges for strategic change initiatives and quality assurance processes.

Senge notes that *"It may simply not be possible to convince human beings rationally to take a long term view – people do not focus on the long term because they have to but because they want to"* (Senge 1990). Senge makes important distinctions between various levels of individual commitment to change (Table 1). The relative autonomy of the individual academic and the various strategies available to him/her for avoidance of change makes this continuum a critical component of change strategies. An individual can be at one of a number of stages, from apathy/non-compliance at one end of the scale to enrolment/true commitment at the other. Formal compliance is where an individual does everything that is expected of them but no more. True commitment is where an individual wants it and will do whatever is necessary to make it happen. From a management perspective there is often no way of telling from a person's outward behaviour where his/her attitude lies but it makes a significant difference in the success or failure of a change initiative.

## CONTEXT

Ireland has a binary system of higher education with a traditional university sector and an Institute of Technology (IOT) sector. The 14 IOTs have an applied, professional teaching focus primarily, providing programmes from craft to PhD level. Dispersed as they are throughout Ireland, the IOTs have a key role to play as the engines of growth in their regions. IT Tralee is one of 14 IOTs and has approximately 3,500 students and 300 staff. This paper considers the implementation of two institutional strategic plans (2000 and 2004) and a School-level strategic plan and its implementation in four academic departments (from 2001). Three self study programs are considered including a major institutional review for the purposes of gaining Delegated Authority to make awards within the National Qualifications Framework of Ireland (2003/04). 'Programmatic Reviews' at School/Department level were undertaken in 2001 and 2005. The timeline for the programs is illustrated in Figure 1.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed mode approach was used by using hypo-deductive reasoning with primarily qualitative methods of inquiry. The main data sources used were documents (*e.g.* Institute publications, proceedings of main decision making for a *etc.*), interviews with key informants (n=17). Triangulation of data sources and methods were used wherever possible to minimise potential bias and substantiate results. Rossi *et al's* methodology for systematic evaluation of social programs was used to evaluate the strategic planning and self study programs in terms of the underlying need they addressed, the appropriateness of their design, the degree to which they were implemented '*as-intended*' (Rossi 2003). The impact assessment was based on three perspectives (i) the degree to which the programs met their stated goals and objectives (ii) the impact of the recommendations of the external peer review panels where relevant and (ii) other improvements accruing. An attempt was made to separate net from gross outcomes of the programs *i.e.* to determine '*what would have happened without the programs?*' and whether other events and factors in the Institute during the same time period positively or negatively skewed their impact.

## **DID THE ACADEMIC HEARTLAND ENGAGE WITH THE STRATEGIC PLANNING AND SELF STUDY PROGRAMS?**

The level of engagement of the academic heartland in the strategic planning and self study programs was established through reviewing attendance lists of meetings *etc.*. The level of engagement was then compared with the overall effectiveness of the programs.

### **Process design**

A key contribution of this study is that it allows us to compare strategic planning which is a top-down process with self-study which is a bottom up process. The extent of a consultation process is a major factor in process design as the greater the consultative process the greater the associated overhead. The question of benefits outweighing the cost is therefore important. The mechanisms by which the academic heartland could engage with the programs is therefore an important factor.

The process models used for all of the programs at least facilitated the involvement of the academic heartland to varying degrees. The academic heartland was encouraged to engage with all stages of the self study programs with the exception of the production of the self-evaluation report. With the possible exception of the second strategic plan, the academic heartland was encouraged to engage with the strategic planning programs at the planning and implementation phases, but not the review phase.

Establishing the degree to which the academic heartland availed of the opportunity to become involved was the next step. Engagement was estimated on the basis of evidence of "formal compliance" at a minimum (*i.e.* where staff did what was expected of them and no more). The level of engagement<sup>1</sup> in the programs based on conservative estimates from an analysis of the records of attendance at meetings associated with the programs<sup>2</sup> (*e.g.* strategic planning workshops, departmental self studies, project team meetings *etc.*). Membership of the Academic Council was also included as it was the main decision making forum for academic issues.

Both institutional strategic plans were developed using a top-down model and had levels of involvement ranging from between 25% to 10%. The process model imposed inherent limits on involvement however it remains to be seen whether more academics would have engaged with it given the opportunity. The self study programs have a much higher percentage of academic heartland involvement throughout (80% approximately) due partly to the bottom-up process model used. It should be noted that it was not expected of academic staff to participate in the institutional strategic planning programs whereas it was expected that they participate in departmental self studies.

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*1 Appendix A5.2 - Institute staffing levels as of December 2005 on which these estimates are based*

*2 Estimates were required to allow for incomplete records of proceedings of meetings (particularly for project team meetings in the implementation phase).*

## HOW DOES THE LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT RELATE TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAMS?

The findings show a direct correlation between engagement and effectiveness – the greater the engagement of the academic heartland the more effective the program (Table 4).

It is clear that informants valued the opportunity to engage in a consultative process for strategic planning but recognised that there had been difficulties with this. Approximately half of the informants (n=8) cited the opportunity to *'build commitment'* as a positive impact of strategic planning which includes ideas around gaining staff buy-in, internal communication and aligning departments to institutional strategic goals. One informant noted

*"I think people are seeing that they can have some impact and influence upon the way that the Institute is going and the way that it achieves its goals, that their opinion, their input matters...that has been a very positive aspect"*

Informants had mixed views in relation to whether strategic planning encouraged involvement however – one noted that *"half the staff of the college would probably say strategic planning means nothing to me, it has nothing to do with my work"*. It is clear also that to informants building commitment meant aligning departments with institutional goals, cascading objectives down through the organisation and garnering staff buy-in to a pre-determined strategy *i.e.* that a top down mentality prevailed. Building commitment was also valued by informants in relation to the self study programs with n=8 citing it as a positive impact. One noted

*"The self study arena ... allows you to sit down and have a dialog across grades of staff and to break down barriers and agree on common areas. I think the self study process is massively important..."*

When informants were asked what changes they would make to improve the programs more than half (n=9) cited building commitment in relation to strategic planning whereas this was not mentioned at all in relation to self study. It may be that informants felt that building commitment was an intrinsic part of the self study programs and did not need to be improved. Some of the issues cited as mitigating against building commitment included (i) the overhead involved in a consultation process (ii) the fear that interest groups would hi-jack the process (iii) overcoming a latent cynicism (iv) making the process relevant for those that did get involved.

## WHY WAS THE LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT A KEY FACTOR IN EFFECTIVENESS?

There is consensus in the literature that strategic planning in higher education has to engage with the academic heartland (Birnbaum 1992; Valimaa 1994; Bayenet *et al.* 2000; Shattock 2002; Allen 2003; Davies 2004; Henkel 2004; Tabatoni *et al.* 2004). In this study some of the reasons postulated as to why the level of engagement with the programs was a key factor in effectiveness are that they militated against some of the negative characteristics of the organisational culture of higher education including the lack of team working and the lack of accountability.

### From inverted pyramids to shared vision

In higher education it is often said that the loyalty of academics is first to their discipline, then to their department and finally to their Institute – the '*inverted pyramid*'. Välimaa notes the importance of disciplinary background in an academic's sense of identity (Valimaa 1994). The various layers on the inverted pyramid and the connections assumed by strategic planning and self study are illustrated in Figure 2. Strategic planning does not take explicit cognisance of the strongest link of affinity in the inverted pyramid (the individual to his/her discipline/peers). Self study acknowledges this link implicitly through discipline-based reviews, review of curricula and the use of peers in the process.

The institutional strategic planning programs required the individual academic to make the connection between his/her own work and broad institutional goals. This was a bridge too far for the majority of staff. The self study programs by contrast asked the individual academic to make a connection to his/her departmental (or discipline area) goals. While an institutional goal may state that flexible modes of delivery are a priority a departmental objective might be to develop a number of blended learning modules which is a much more relevant objective which the individual can relate to.

Mintzberg notes that in professional organisations '*change seeps in, not sweeps in*' and that although major shifts in overall strategy are difficult to achieve, change is ubiquitous and constantly being made (Mintzberg 1996). If one accepts this premise in higher education then the changes required to meet institutional goals need to be broken down into smaller steps and translated into incremental changes. The relevance of institutional goals increases as they are mapped from the Institute to the department to the individual.

The relative autonomy of academics and the nature of their work means that academics are likely to have strong personal visions of the future in their own right. The translation process should focus on aligning the personal vision of individual academic to the goals for his/her department or discipline area (at the very least). A two-way process is required whereby the relevance of the departmental goals must become obvious to the academic in his/her work and the academic must make the connection between his/her personal vision to departmental goals. A key competency for academic leaders is their ability to recognise and align diverse personal visions with departmental shared vision. Finding and nurturing links, however tenuous, between the autonomous individual and the department's goals is the starting point.

The difference between the effectiveness of the strategic planning and self study programs can be explained in part by the question of relevance and the fact that the strongest link of the inverted pyramid (the individual to his/her discipline/peers) is respected in the self study programs.

### **From functional silos to synergistic teams**

Senge contends that teams are the unit of learning in an organisation (Senge 1990) and have a key role to play in aligning personal visions to institutional shared vision. In general should an academic choose not to work in a team there is little that can be done to prevent this, a process Mintzberg calls '*pigeonholing*' (Mintzberg 1996). The higher education culture presents many challenges to team working and a number of informants noted the propensity to compartmentalise within the Institute.

*"Some call it parochialism or compartmentalisation...certainly there is an aspect of that ...unless it happens in your department and your school you are not going to get credit"*

*"We are very very departmentalised as an Institute... because of the cultures and personalities..."*

Notwithstanding this most informants placed considerable value on the opportunity to work in teams. They associated cross-functional team-working with the strategic planning programs and departmental team-working with the self study programs. The most effective programs (self study) had the academic department as their base unit and the least effective programs (institutional strategic planning) used cross-functional teams. Capitalising on the link between the individual academic and his/her discipline through using the department as the base unit for process design appears to be an important factor in effectiveness.

### **Increasing individual accountability**

A key theme identified in the literature is the reliance on self-regulation in professional bureaucracies and HEIs for measuring performance. The capacity of the programs to increase individual accountability for performance was a key factor in effectiveness.

Self study capitalises on the strongest link in the inverted pyramid by incorporating peer review, a powerful lever for change within the academic heartland, whereas strategic planning does not. While academics have considerable operating autonomy within their own domain of expertise acceptance by their peers remains a strong moderating force. Välimaa found that peer review was seen as a '*useful threat*' to get things done (Valimaa 1994) and Thorn concluded that external peer review was necessary in another Irish Institute's experience of self study (Thorn 2003).

There is a strong correlation between the use of peer review and the effectiveness of the programs. Peer review recommendations were generally implemented in full. The institutional strategic planning programs on the other hand tried to incorporate performance measurement by setting measurable objectives and identifying key performance indicators but there were difficulties with both of these approaches.

In summary therefore it appears that the inclusion of a peer review component to increase individual accountability was an important factor in program effectiveness. The most effective programs (self study) incorporated peer review as an integral part of the program whereas the strategic planning programs did not.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was established that the self study programs facilitated academic heartland involvement more than the strategic planning programs and that there was significantly more academic heartland engagement with the self study programs. There is a strong correlation between academic heartland engagement and the effectiveness of the programs – the more engagement the more effective the programs were.

The reasons why the level of engagement was an important factor was the 'bottom up' process design and the fact that the self study programs respected the link in the inverted pyramid between the individual and his/her discipline and peers. By and large the strategic planning programs ignored this link. In the self study programs the changes involved were of a more incremental nature and there was a greater chance of alignment between personal and institutional visions. The self study programs facilitated departmental team working more than the strategic planning programs by design which was a factor in their effectiveness. Self study also capitalises on the strongest link in the inverted pyramid by incorporating a peer review process whereas strategic planning does not. There is a need to reconsider the nature of strategic planning in higher education by incorporating more features of the self study process model (Lillis 2007).

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## APPENDIX ONE TABLES

Level	Sees benefits?	Does what is expected?	Description
True Commitment	Yes	Yes	Wants it, will make it happen. Creates what ever structures are needed
Enrolment	Yes	Yes	Wants it, will make it happen. works within existing structures
Genuine Compliance	Yes	Yes	Does everything that is expected and more – ‘good soldier’
Formal Compliance	Yes	Yes	Does everything that is expected and no more
Grudging Compliance	No	Yes	Does what is expected and no more but obvious that not on board
Non-compliance	No	No	Will not do what is expected
Apathy			Neither for against vision – no interest, no energy

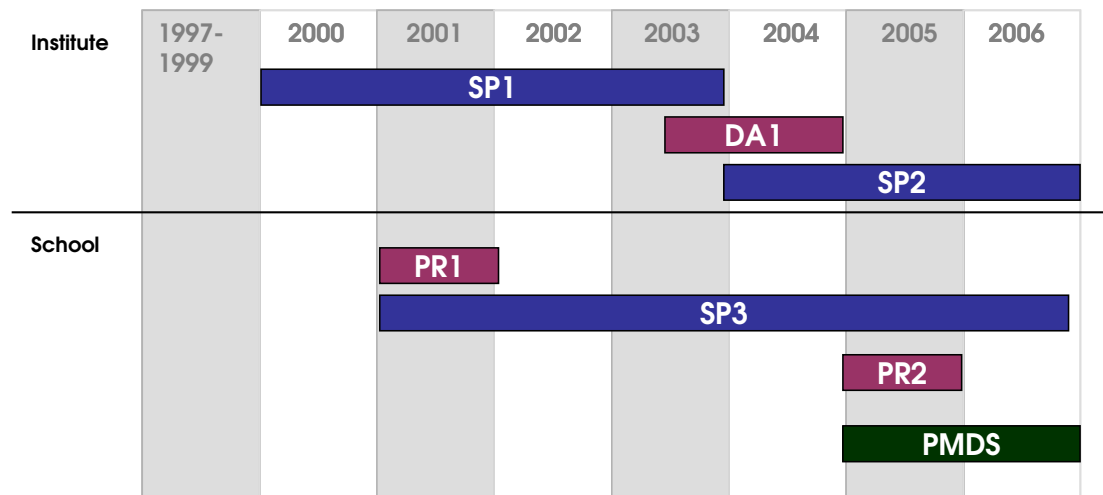
Process Phase	SP1	SP2	SP3
Mission and Goals	■ YES : Plan management group	■ NO : Invited to submit feedback by email	■ YES : Courseboards
SWOT Analysis	■ YES : Plan management group	■ NO : Invited to submit feedback by email	■ YES : Courseboards
Developing Objectives and Strategies	■ YES : Plan management group	■ NO : Invited to submit feedback by email	■ YES : Courseboards
Implementing Objectives and Strategies	* ■ YES : Project managers & team members. Not involved in review	* ■ YES : development of supporting departmental plans. Not involved in review	* ■ YES : Courseboard, project teams.

Process Phase	DA1	PR1	PR2
Self Study	■ YES : department teams, steering group	■ YES : department teams, curriculum review	■ YES : department teams
Self Study report	■ NO	■ NO	■ NO
Peer review process and report	■ YES : Panel met with staff representatives	■ YES : School teams for panel review	■ YES : School teams for panel review
Implementation of recommendations	■ NO : Summative evaluation	■ YES : Curriculum review, courseboards	■ YES : Courseboards

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Academic engagement</b>	<b>Minimum level of engagement</b>	<b>Affinity</b>	<b>Performance measurement</b>
<b>Most effective</b>	Institutional self study 1	90%	Genuine compliance	Department	Peer Review
	School self study 1	88%	Formal compliance	Department	Peer Review
<b>↓</b>	School self study 2	81%	Formal compliance	Department	Peer Review
	School strategic plan	88%	Formal compliance	Department	Peer Review/ Indicators
	Institutional strategic plan 1	25%	Genuine compliance	Institute (Cross functional team)	Indicators
<b>Least effective</b>	Institutional strategic plan 2	10%	Unknown	None	Indicators

**APPENDIX 2 FIGURES**

**Figure 1 Timeline for strategic planning and self study programs**



**Figure 2 The inverted pyramid**

