Improving the quality of teaching from the institutional level in a complex, multi faculty university setting

How to increase quality without losing local ownership

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Abstract

University of Copenhagen is a large research intensive institution, well placed on international university ranking lists, but without an equally strong culture regarding quality in teaching. The eight faculties (university schools) – two recently merged - vary in terms of size, subject area, degree of organisational integration and traditions for working with pedagogical issues. In this context of complexity, we enhance the culture of quality by designing and facilitating a number of incremental change processes, rooted in a systemic model of programmes, based on a learning approach, and actively working with creating legitimacy with the academic staff. The approach is demonstrated through a case on developing a university wide procedure for course evaluation. Key issues are how to design processes that create involvement, knowledge sharing and results. The contribution of the paper also includes a list of suggested key factors of success for organisational change projects in a complex university setting.

Context

With over 37,000 students and more than 7,000 employees, the University of Copenhagen is the largest institution of research and education in Denmark. The University was ranked 51 worldwide, no. 15 in Europe and no. 1 in Scandinavia in Times Higher Education Supplement, October 2009. The University consists of eight faculties (university schools) offering around 200 study programmes in health sciences, humanities, law, life sciences, pharmaceutical sciences, science, social sciences and theology. The Faculty of the Humanities is the largest with more than 11,000 students. The Faculty of Theology is the smallest with 900 students. The eight faculties comprise more than 100 departments and research centres. Rector and pro rector head the daily management of the University involving the eight deans. Faculties and departments have their own individual managerial line and administrations and they have a relatively autonomous status within the organisation. Faculties own the programmes. These circumstances form a heterogeneous context for doing change processes involving quality of teaching.

When working with quality of teaching, we take our starting point in a systemic model of programmes (fig. 1). The model distinguishes between programme strategy (the portfolio of programmes), programme design (form and content) and programme delivery (teaching). Since 2007 we have focussed on projects aiming at optimizing programme strategy and programme delivery. Concerning programme strategy we designed university wide guidelines for developing new programmes trying to streamline these processes, which involve ACE Denmark (the national accreditation agency). Changes in programme design are done by the departments following the legislation. With our latest project we work on programme delivery by developing a university wide procedure of course evaluation.

Case: Developing a university wide procedure for course evaluation

Danish legislation requires that the universities publish the results of course evaluations together with other information about quality in education. In November 2007, when this project was initiated, University of Copenhagen did not meet these requirements in a systematic way. During 2007 another project in the same area was put to an end. The plan was to have a consultancy generate one questionnaire usable at all faculties. The questionnaire was to be sent out, incoming data was to be analyzed and published from central hold. The faculties rejected this design and a new project was started in co-operation with the faculties. The purpose was to determine, if the university should have a university wide standard for course evaluation, to produce drafts for this and find out which form of publication was usable. University Education Services was responsible and we had one year to complete it.

We planned a project which involved the faculties in different ways. First we mapped the different procedures of course evaluation at each faculty through interviews with faculty support and faculty members. Second we collected national and international experiences and developed a tool box containing different evaluation methods followed by descriptions of advantages and disadvantages about different models and methods. On this basis we arranged a workshop for faculty members with the purpose of knowledge sharing and together determining what is good practice in course evaluation.

Next step was to facilitate peer reviews of the existing faculty procedures. Each faculty was visited by two peers from another faculty, the project manager and project owner from University Education Services. This review panel had meetings with teachers, faculty management, and students. Afterwards all faculties received a report with the results of the peer review. The peer review provided knowledge sharing between faculties and gave important input to the last step – the design of a university wide procedure. Together with a steering committee of vice deans we designed a university wide procedure, which was usable and acceptable for all faculties.

The university wide procedure for course evaluation can be described as a minimum standard that faculties have to meet when designing their local procedure.[1] The minimum standard consists of:

1) a minimum standard for evaluation frequency that determines that all subject elements (courses) are evaluated every second time they are run, unless major changes have been made. All new courses are evaluated the first time they are run, and they will be evaluated in a form that can be communicated to the programme management.

One of the observations made in the peer review of the existing evaluation procedures was that some faculties had an overproduction of evaluation data. Data were not used. Therefore one of the intentions with a new procedure was to encourage these faculties to limit the production of data and in stead give more attention to follow up. Another observation was that some faculties experienced very low answering rates from the students. Students were simply tired of doing course evaluations. Students explained that they found it difficult to see any effects of the time spent with filling in questionnaires. Limiting the number and targeting the use of course evaluation better was therefore also seen as one of the ways (not the only one) to increase the answering rate.

2) a checklist stipulating the faculties' evaluation procedures
The new evaluation procedure also consists of a checklist for how to devise the evaluation procedure at faculty level. The procedure must describe a coherent system taking into consideration the following issues: the purpose of doing evaluations at the faculty or department and the choice of form of evaluation. There has to be consistency between purpose of the evaluation, perceptions of teaching quality and evaluation practice. The procedure must also describe how students and

[1] The university wide evaluation procedure is available at: http://ku.dk/sa/KUUR/Procedure_for_Evaluation.pdf.

teachers are involved in and responsible for follow up activities. The local procedure also has to describe how faculty and departments work with developing teacher qualifications.

The checklist is designed to remind the faculties to involve all stakeholders (students, teachers and relevant managers at the faculty and department level) in the local procedure. This also makes it clear that having a well functioning evaluation procedure is a responsibility of the management. The checklist at the same time underlines that discussing professional development is an important part of the follow-up activities.

3) a checklist for drawing up specific evaluation plans for each level of education
Once a year the faculty draws up the evaluation plan, which stipulates which subject elements will be evaluated, and by which methods, at what point during the semester the subject element will be evaluated, and which stakeholders will help to draw up the evaluation plan. The plan is published in a form that is accessible to all teachers and students.

4) a procedure for the publication of summarised evaluation reports.
Finally the university wide procedure of course evaluation requires that faculties publish a qualitative, descriptive summary of course evaluations at least once a year. The relevant manager (head of department, head of studies or head of study board) will summarise the results of the annual evaluations. In order to summarise the evaluation material will be divided up into three categories: A, B and C. A consists of evaluations which shows that the teaching functions particularly well and serves as an inspiration to others; B consists of evaluations which shows that the teaching/course functions satisfactorily: and C consists of evaluations which shows that the teaching/course requires multiple changes. The individual faculties are responsible for the definition, development and application of these categories. The definition must relate to the purpose of the evaluation, the perception of teaching quality and the actual evaluation practice, c.f. the checklist for faculty evaluation procedures. And the definition must be included in the report.

The summarised evaluation report begins by outlining the number of evaluations in each category, complete with reflections upon the spread between the categories. Each category will then be discussed as follows. For category A, the focus will be on particularly positive experiences. Category B will be commented on only in brief. For category C, a description will identify where attention needs to be paid, where changes and other follow-up initiatives are already in place or will be implemented in the future. The evaluation report will also take stock of follow-up initiatives from the previous study year. Initiatives concerning professional development will be mentioned in conjunction with the follow-up work.

As mentioned before it is a legislative requirement in Denmark that evaluation reports are published. With the described procedure for publication we tried to turn this requirement into a useful, positive and learning oriented process at the department and faculty. The summarised evaluation reports give the teachers anonymity (which is also required by law) and at the same time provide the possibility to share good practices and have an open discussion about quality of teaching in the department. At its best in can work as a medium for inspiring information about good cases in the teaching of colleges. Another important advantage of the procedure is that it becomes visible for the students that their evaluations are valuable and useful. Now students can also see that follow-up initiatives are taken and follow the effect. Hopefully this transparency will have a positive effect on answering rates in course evaluations.

This cluster of checklists and minimum standards that make up the university wide procedure was approved by rector and deans in December 2009 and implemented at the faculties during the spring. The faculties had two months to design and describe their local procedures according to the principles of the university wide procedure. The first publication of evaluation reports will be in October 2009. During the summer we received copies of the local procedures. All faculties followed the guidelines. We have seen the first summarized evaluation reports and we observe that the learning oriented perspective is very visible in the actual reports.

Lessons learned about fostering change in the institution regarding quality teaching
Types of interventions
After doing this project together with the vice deans we tried to analyze what we actually did and what we learned. As we discussed our experiences we saw that theory of change management offers a theoretic frame for understanding some of the mechanisms at work.

John Hayes[2] suggests a three-dimensional model to aid choice of interventions in change processes. The nature of the problem or opportunity that the intervention has to address (diagnosed issue) can be in the area of human processes, of a techno-structural nature, in the area of human resource or of strategic kind. As the second dimension interventions can target different levels: the individual, the group, the intergroup or the organisation. As the third dimension the depth in interventions can be described on a continuum from shallow to deep. Depending on which area you want to change, you select different types of intervention.

According to this model (fig. 2) we aimed at changing human processes (evaluations processes). We worked together with a group of academic managers but with the aim to send an effect though the system and make changes in the practices of the individual teacher. The aim was to inspire the teachers to work in a more learning oriented way with course evaluations. We wanted the teachers to perceive evaluations as a meaning full way of working with developing quality of his or her teaching - instead of seeing course evaluations as the evil of the system.

Going for this aim we used interventions which involved the faculty members and management (vice deans) in describing the actual status concerning evaluation practices at the faculties. In that way we made the diagnosis together with faculty members. In that way we created awareness about insufficiencies in the existing processes and at the same time created ownership to the change process.

The change management concept “intervention” gives some connotations of power which are not appropriate in this context as what is aimed at is actually a strong cooperation with faculty members and faculty management. Still we find the concept very useful because it underlines that it is possible - based on reflection - to design and deliberately chose different modes of activities or forms of cooperation in order to create change.

With the workshop we tried to determine what is good practice concerning course evaluation, thereby also involving faculty management in describing and discussing what is good quality concerning evaluation practices. This intervention aimed at knowledge sharing between faculties and establishing a kind of consensus about what is good quality in course evaluation.

[2] John Hayes: *The Theory and Practice of Change Management*, 2002, chapter 17.

And with the peer review of the existing evaluation procedures we engaged the vice deans in evaluating the evaluation system of their peers. Of course this intervention also provided knowledge sharing. But with this type of intervention we tried to use a well known and within academia respected way of working with quality. Choosing this way of working we talked the same language about quality.

By choosing a model of evaluation where faculties have the freedom to develop their own tailored evaluation procedure, we make it possible for faculties to work with and have internal discussions about the changes - again creating ownership – and starting chain reactions in the local organisations.

Looking back we also understand that interventions must be balanced in depth. Citing John Hayes: ”intervene at a level no deeper than that at which the energy and resources of the client can be committed to problem-solving and change” (190). We do not have an ambition of changing the whole system of quality at once. Instead we do incremental change processes. Starting in smaller areas and trying to secure that minor changes create changes in related areas and so forth. We anticipate that the feed back loops put into the evaluation procedure will make the demand for professional development more outspoken at the faculties. And our next project is then to help create better quality in this area. Or put in another way: In our understanding of quality culture we do not use *internal incentives* as much as we try to create *needs* for further development.

Suggested key factors of success for organisational change projects in a complex university setting

We suggest these key factors of success for organisational change projects in a complex university setting:

- Choosing interventions that involve the academic staff in describing the need for change, designing the processes to achieve change and also designing the solutions
- Obtaining legitimacy with the academic staff
- Create ownership to change and engagement in forming change
- Goals must be designed to create internal learning processes while faculty is adjusting to meet the joint standards
- It has to be possible to work towards individual goals in each faculty corresponding to the starting position
- Goals must be changeable over time. Goals can become more ambitious over time.
- In university wide procedures there must be room for differences between faculties
- Having top-management support from rector, pro rector and the deans
- Having a systemic model for programmes which offers a frame for working with different projects
- The legislative requirements about publication of evaluations of course also aided the project.

It is our impression that if there is some innovation in our way of working with quality culture, it is the way we try to engage the faculty members in our change processes. In the future we will plan projects taking our starting point in change management concepts. We will design change processes fitted to the actual challenge, instead of following a standard way of doing university politics.

The change management theory and the use of the concept of "intervention" underlines how important it is that we develop activities and settings for collaboration according to the actual challenges we meet. We will work in order to extend our palette of possible types of interventions, being prepared to redesign, being flexible and sensitive to the actual challenges.

Next step

In our next quality development project we address the professional development of the academic staff. Now we use the experiences from the project of course evaluations. Instead of beginning with writing a strategy, we choose to start up two relatively small and well-defined projects: developing university wide guidelines for pedagogical training of assistant professors and implementing teaching portfolio in the recruitment process of academic staff. According to the systemic model of programmes (fig. 1) we continue the work to strengthen program delivery now by focusing on teachers qualifications.

Again we engage academic staff and local academic management in designing the guidelines and policies. It is our idea that in the slipstream from these two projects we can facilitate a network coordinating some pedagogical activities across the faculties.[3]

But in this project we meet new challenges. How to create impact in an area, which has lacked managerial focus and back up? We need to raise more enthusiasm for pedagogical questions among the faculty members and we are trying to develop new activities which are engaging and useful in their context.

[3] Some of the faculties have didactic centres doing research and offering professional development for faculty members, but the university has no central learning and teaching centre.

Figure 1. Systemic model of programmes. University of Copenhagen

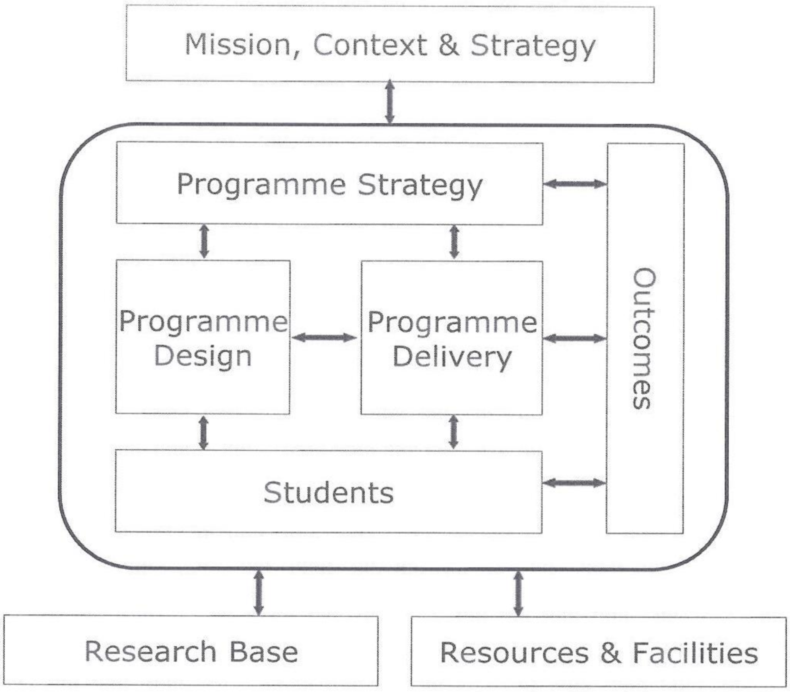

Figure 2. A three-dimensional model to aid choice of intervention. From John Hayes: *The Theory and Practice of Change Management*, 2002, chapter 17.