



ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: TOOLS OF THE TRADE

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INTRODUCTION

The UK Organisational Development (OD) Group is a long-standing community of practice currently supported by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Its members are Higher Education (HE) professionals engaged in organisational

change and development. In this IN PRACTICE we reflect on what is meant by organisational development, particularly in the HE context and outline some of the tools and approaches to organisational change and development in use or under consideration by ODHE group members.

WHAT IS ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

An organisation can be defined as a formal group of two or more people brought together by one or more shared goals (Wikipedia, 2005). The field of organisational development focuses on how an organisation currently functions and may be helped to function (more) effectively. An initial approach often involves organisational audits of some kind that aim to capture and diagnose the organisational culture(s), processes and practice. Analysis of outcomes compared to objectives is followed by design, development, delivery and evaluation of change programmes and related learning and development actions with the aim of enhancing capacity and capability at the individual, team/unit and institutional levels. In the abstract all this sounds neat and tidy, even naïve, but in practice, and over time, it can result in a rich and complex set of activities that in the multi-faceted university helps to prompt a fuller understanding of the organisational context(s) and the management of successful change.

This immediately raises the question of whether universities are actually organisations, are likely to behave like organisations or will be helped by aspiring to do so! Many are hybrid "institutions" which contain diverse communities. However, even across the most disparate of communities within a university it is possible to argue that there will be shared objectives derived from an overall focus on learning and teaching, research and, for many, enterprise activity. These communities may not always operate smoothly and cohesively like a well-oiled machine, but they do usually have some sense of shared purpose and common interest. Indeed the extent

to which the members of a particular university do, or do not, see themselves as belonging to an organisation has itself been the starting point for organisational development activity.

The ODHE group was established some 10 years ago, but like HE is still a relative latecomer to the OD field, with most activity focusing initially on the use of external frameworks such as the Investors in People (IIP) Standard and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model. The growing number of practitioners experienced in the use of such approaches has fostered a move in the last five years or so to internally-developed approaches applying some of the core principles of external frameworks tailored to sectoral and other contexts. Rather than a reliance on interventions devised and managed by external consultants, increasing capacity, capability and expertise amongst HE OD practitioners is leading to interest in and some adoption of approaches such as Appreciative Enquiry and to imaginative home grown 'portfolios' of approaches. The following section provides thumbnail sketches of the more common approaches, with mini-case study examples drawn from their application within ODHE group institutions.

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

"Does this mean the gardener has to read the strategic plan?" So said one vice chancellor at the launch of Investors in People in his University almost ten years ago. In conversation with the project manager of a HEFCE Good Management Practice project (GMP309) in 2004, another confirmed that "...Investors in People was, and will

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remain, a central part of what we intend to do in relation to people management ... Our commitment to the underlying principles remains – and if anything will grow.”

IiP is by far the most established OD tool in UK higher education, although uptake – like the perceptions above – is variable. In some institutions a small number of relatively autonomous support units have achieved the Standard with little impact elsewhere, whereas in others there has been considerable activity throughout and institutional recognition has been achieved or is being sought. There are some 35 whole higher education institutions currently recognised as Investors in People with as many again following the more flexible building block approach. In addition there are several hundred departments or units that have achieved recognition in their own right.

As government-initiated frameworks go, IiP has been remarkably resilient. One of its strengths has been its simplicity; another its flexibility. It is built on a conceptual framework which has its origins in Kurt Lewin’s notion of action research, in which the first step is to define intentions and shape them into outcomes developed through a sequence:

‘...composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan.’

The IiP Standard has been revised several times in the past ten years but essentially remains as a set of principles with a number of associated indicators against which organisations are measured. Assessment is now via largely qualitative means and, in particular, through interviews with a sample of staff. Qualified IiP assessors with experience of the HE sector were initially rare. Hence the more recent option of internal review, in which a trained internal team conducts much of the interviewing process working with an external assessor, has been taken up by a number of HEIs. Whilst not an easy option, it has been used with some success due to a greater integration with existing internal arrangements and because it leads to a richer involvement with the process. A perceived benefit is in developing a greater understanding and knowledge of the organisation amongst a cross-section of staff.

INTERNAL REVIEW IN PRACTICE

At the University of Bradford, academic schools and administrative departments have been encouraged to take ownership of their own people management and development as part of an overarching institutional approach. Internal reviewers were drawn from department/school-based committees; once trained, each reviewer worked with a team from an area other than their own to

scope interview schedules, undertake the interviews and develop an action plan that would inform both local and organisational change and development.

This process was not all plain sailing by any means, with a significant investment in time and money and the usual logistical complexities of scheduling the training and interviews associated with busy academics and administrators. The whole process took some six months to complete, but Pete Sayers, Investors in People champion at Bradford, considers it to have been very worthwhile: “Benefits include the teamwork involving a large number of people across the institution, and the way it has clearly highlighted the difficulties in achieving consistent standards in the implementation of policies. We have never had a problem with commitment to good practice, but achieving it consistently, and being seen to achieve it by staff and students, is the hard part.” Most interesting, perhaps, is that the external managing assessor was encouraged to reach a final judgement using the positive response of the senior management, the deans and departmental directors to the data collected by the internal team.

The universities of Hertfordshire and Winchester, amongst others, have also taken an internal review approach to IiP as part of strategic organisational development and change programmes. LSE is also embarked on this process. The University of Cardiff includes IiP as one of its approaches to leadership and management development, and people development more broadly. The GMP309 project’s review of the use of IiP in UK HE two years ago, and more recent reports to the ODHE group, suggest that HEIs are becoming confident and sophisticated users of the IiP OD framework, adapting and integrating it, and extracting from it what is of most benefit to them. In November 2004, Investors in People UK approached the ODHE group with a view to developing a sector-wide strategic partnership. This is currently in development and is intended to address what still remains as a major concern – that local support for IiP does not always sit comfortably with the sector.

THE EFQM EXCELLENCE MODEL

The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model has its roots in the USA’s Malcolm Baldrige Model. The underpinning principles of Baldrige ‘crossed the Atlantic...to help form the EFQM’ (Sullivan 2002) and largely revolve around those areas common to all or most organisations – managing and developing staff, organisation of work, clarity of policy and practice, effective communication, efficient management of financial and non financial resources. In essence, it suggests that if core aspects of the organisation are efficient and effective there is a significant knock-on effect, releasing resources to focus on main aspects of the ‘business’ (see figure 1 below):

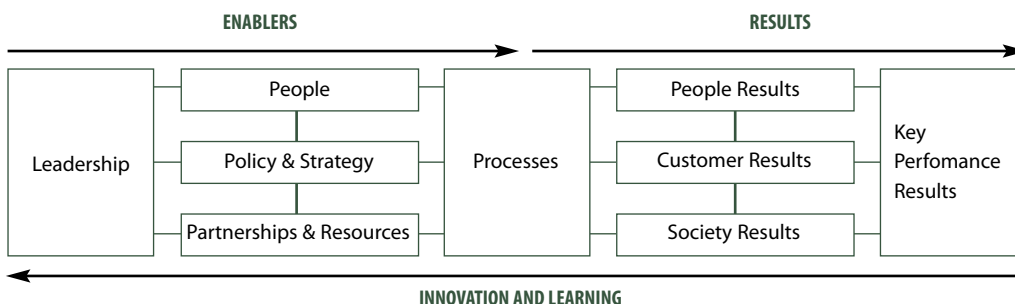


Figure 1
© 1999 EFQM.
The Model is a registered trademark of the EFQM

Several HEIs, including De Montfort, HEFCE, Sheffield Hallam, Durham, Salford and University of Central Lancashire have adopted or are trialling various EFQM approaches to understanding and monitoring the effectiveness of parts of their 'businesses'. Liverpool John Moores has deployed the approach across the whole institution, which prompted supportive comments in the Lambert Report. The Centre for Integral Excellence at Sheffield Hallam University has produced an HE version of the model, endorsed by the EFQM. A word of caution, however, from one OD practitioner:

"We have been piloting the use of EFQM in one service area and hope to do more, but the existing internal and external QA processes make more of this sort of 'additional' activity hard to sell, especially as the current culture is to paint as good a picture as possible for both internal and external audiences. EFQM tells it like it is and whilst this is great for a culture that embraces continuous improvement, it is hard for a prevalent culture in HE that assumes excellence as a starting point!"

Again, use of the model is in practice only part of HEIs' approaches to OD. In pursuit of its own organisational development HEFCE combines the organisational overview offered by EFQM with specific approaches to personal development, including emotional intelligence questionnaires, Ken Wilber's Four Quadrants of Organisational Life, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Margerison McCann team management system.

THE BALANCED SCORECARD

This approach was developed by Kaplan and Norton in the early 1990s. The element of 'balance' is in seeking to encourage a wider view of an organisation's progress than that derived solely from financial measures and indicators. The model suggests taking an organisational view from four perspectives: learning and growth, business process, customer and financial and to develop metrics, collect data and analyze it relative to each.

THE BALANCED SCORECARD IN PRACTICE

As part of Robert Gordon University's approach to strategic planning, a balanced scorecard approach was adopted in 2003. The scorecard balances overall RGU-wide measures of progress in four areas:

- Customer/stakeholder perspective
- Process perspective
- People perspective
- Financial perspective

For each area critical success factors and performance indicators are set and monitored. These are reviewed as part of the overall process of moving the university forward to meet its strategic goals. The scorecard approach is used to measure strategic level progress and other OD approaches are integral to it, such as, for example, a leadership development programme, and an employee survey conducted every eighteen months.

Neville Browne, Organisational Development Manager, Robert Gordon University explains the thinking behind the RGU approach. "As a post-92 university we seem to have a culture that is relatively happy with this approach. The balanced scorecard and its contents

should be known to all employees; they can view it on the website at any time – it is a tool that is 'open' in that sense. We know, from our employee survey, how staff feel about key issues and, as a consequence, we feel we know how our approach will 'fit'. We are a university that has some clear focus areas, so having a way of 'starting at the top' with strategic direction and measurement of progress and with enough appropriate staff engagement and involvement in the process, seems to work for us."

RGU has been an IIP accredited institution since 1995 and is to be assessed against the revised standard later this year. The university's OD approach is subsequently shaped, to some degree, by the IIP standard and its OD strategy, developed in late 2004 and updated in early 2005, encapsulates how the organization intends to develop in terms of people development, team development and leadership development.

APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY (AE)

The basic premise of Appreciative Enquiry is that it is better to build organisations around what works, rather than focus on what doesn't work. The concept originated in David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva's Appreciative Inquiry (sic) Into Organizational Life (1987), as further described by Cooperrider and Whitney at the Appreciative Inquiry Commons site:

"Appreciative Inquiry is about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them ... It involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential."

The AE approach, therefore, comprises questions – dialogue – 'stories' of peak experiences – which are used to support the development of a shared 'vision' – linked with detailed planning for the realisation of that vision. Use of the approach in UK HEIs is so far limited compared to others mentioned here. A Leadership Foundation Small Development Project Innovative Leadership Development Programme led by the University of Essex is exploring "the opportunities for leadership development afforded by melding the collaborative and creative approaches integral to an Innovation Lab (iLab) based leadership development experience, with approaches derived from appreciative enquiry and action learning" (Engage 3, Q2 2005, p8). Explorations of AE in the evaluation of development activity will be the subject of a future IN PRACTICE.

OTHER EMERGENT APPROACHES

Unexplored in much detail in HE (unless you know different!) are:

■ **Six Sigma**, a heavily finance oriented model that aims to provide businesses with the tools to improve the capability of their business processes (increasing performance with a concomitant reduction in process variation and defects).

■ Spiral Dynamics

Largely built around the work of psychology lecturer Dr Clare W Graves and developed by Chris Cowan, Don Beck and others, the underlying idea of Spiral Dynamics is that human nature is not fixed: humans are able, when forced by circumstances, to adapt to their environment by constructing new, more complex,

conceptual models of the world that allow them to handle new problems. These conceptual models are organized around Memes, systems of core values or collective intelligences, applicable to both individuals and entire cultures. The model appears to offer an approach to understanding the state and nature of value systems and cultures through a range of levels that are colour-coded. Its application in 'how do we go from here ...' is less clear.

FINAL REFLECTIONS: ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The usefulness of most OD approaches lies in the differing perspectives they offer on how an organisation operates, leading to the engagement of a wider group of people in focused conversations, questioning how the organisation might move forwards. A portfolio approach to organisational development is common in the sector, with a number of methods being used flexibly, and in tailored form, to suit the many and varied contexts in universities. Many are also making use of staff survey tools such as those made possible by Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) to support information gathering at institutional, team and even individual levels (where it is used for 360 degree feedback). Key to the appropriate selection and use of any of the approaches to OD is an understanding of the organisational context (sounds obvious, but how many attempts simply to import an approach from the corporate world have failed?) and of the aims of any OD activity. As one experienced OD practitioner says: "Don't knit socks when you want a jumper"; another had a similar message: "We want to play jazz; we need to be able to play jazz. We don't want to be stuck just testing our scales."

In essence, organisational development in higher education is about helping the HEI to harness more of its collective talents – whether people are directly involved in teaching and research or seemingly far removed from it in catering, maintenance, security or, indeed, leadership and management – in order to succeed in its various joint endeavours: enhancing the quality of the student experience, supporting and directing the expansion and extension of the field of human knowledge and understanding, establishing thriving enterprise ventures.

The benefits from organisational development actions can be described in terms of an organisation's capacity to learn and change. Various recent OD projects in HE (HESDA and SSDA 2004) revealed themes that appear to be underpinning a general move towards greater integration of fragmented people processes and greater involvement of OD practitioners in strategic management. It is clear that OD should not be in any way separate from the business of leading and managing – indeed knowing the climate of an organisation and selecting the most appropriate ways in which to apply that knowledge is at the core of sensitive and effective leadership.

HOW THE LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION SUPPORTS THE UK OD GROUP

As part of its Membership Services, the Leadership Foundation supports a growing number of networks working in higher education in a wide variety of ways. It supports the UK OD group via a mix of direct funding and the provision of advice and expertise. For instance guidance to members is offered either directly or through the OD group on all aspects of the process involved in gaining and retaining recognition as an Investor in People. This includes:

- General advice and consultancy
- Structured development packages
- In house work such as 'diagnostics' for EFQM and Investors in People
- Information and support material, either on line or via our publications

We shall be expanding the information available about OD tools and practice in HE through the Leadership Foundation's website over the coming months with a view to building an even wider community of practice and resource bank. We are also working towards building a directory of who is using which OD approaches in HE to complement the new Membership Directory. For further information, to contribute views, further tools, case studies or other materials, please contact Dr Lesly Huxley
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FURTHER INFORMATION

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