Academic Middle Managers' Perceptions of their Role in the Planning of Curriculum Change in Private Higher Education Institutions in Botswana

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ABSTRACT This study examined how academic middle managers perceived their role in the planning of curriculum change in private higher education institutions. The question the study sought to answer related to whether academic middle managers believed that they were effective in planning curriculum change. This study used a mixed methods approach that employed a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview for data collection. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was analyzed using a thematic approach. Results of the study showed that academic middle managers believed that they were effective in their role in curriculum change especially regarding the use of tasks including articulating to department staff the benefits of curriculum change for students, seeking views of industry about the need to review curriculum, and assessing together with department staff, skills the department wants all learners to develop through curriculum change.

INTRODUCTION

Literature shows that as part of planning, curriculum change should be informed by a needs assessment program, which is an objective and detailed assessment of the current curriculum and its implementation (CUREE 2010; Mafora and Phorabatho 2013; Yeung et al. 2012). The needs assessment analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the current program, the context in which the program evolves, the internal and external forces acting on the program, as well as the opportunities and challenges in the context (Norcross et al. 2010). Literature further shows that there are a number of forces that influence curriculum change in higher education institutions (HEIs) and these include influential individuals in the department, financial pressures at the institution, staffing issues including workload, employer and industry viewpoints, student viewpoints, pedagogical argument (academic merit), government regulation, national accreditation bodies, and academic fashion (Ndou 2008). These forces are seen as influential in private higher education in Botswana (BOTA 2009; Tertiary Education Council 2013).

Influential Individuals in the Department

Literature shows that influential individuals play a significant role in initiating curriculum change in departments. They normally demonstrate strong leadership and capacity to attract other academic staff in the department to rally behind the change (Dan 2008; McCarthy 2009). They also play a crucial role in ensuring that there is sharing and acceptance of the need for curriculum change in the department especially through noticing any discrepancies between current output and what is desired particularly in the world of employment (Hammer et al. 2014; Wiggins and McTighe 2006). Ensuring acceptance of the need for change is a crucial step in initiating successful curriculum change effort as, according to Ndou (2008), curriculum change will only be successful if the identified need for change is shared and accepted by all stakeholders.

The influential people also persuade other members to accept and embrace change and also push the middle manager to initiate the needed change in the department (Dan 2008; Ndou 2008). Such influential people in private higher education institutions in Botswana are normally the staff in departments who have experience in industry demands on higher education and who follow current trends in the labor market. Some members outside departments such as institutional top management like directors can also propose curriculum change in departments based on the information they glean from their interaction with their peers in commerce and industry (Dan 2008; Hammer et al. 2014).

Industry

When developing or reviewing curriculum, literature shows that it is very important to interact and liaise with industry to ensure whatever curriculum comes out from HEIs is aligned with the needs of industry. A number of studies indicate that there is a perception discrepancy between industry and universities with regards to the knowledge and skills industry expects graduates to possess and what higher education (HE) offers (Ndou 2008). The is confirmed by feedback from employers, which indicates that there is a skills gap in what students in universities learn and the specific skills industry demands from the university graduates (Rasiah 2009).

Studies now show that top employers require university graduates to undergo graduate trainee programs before they can trust them with the duties of the organization. They require well-equipped employees and will not settle for anything less in terms of relevant skills (Gomez 2008; Nasser et al. 2011). According to Lee et al. (2011), cooperation between industry and universities on curriculum development and review is therefore crucial for the reduction or even elimination of the industry-university perceptual gap in terms of the skills and knowledge the graduates are expected to acquire in HEIs. Employers therefore exert strong opinions about the curriculum and curriculum change by usually asking for more emphasis on transferrable skills such as communication, social, analytical and critical thinking skills to complement technical skills (Gilbert 2011).

Previous studies on curriculum development and change indicate the need for HEIs to listen more to the voice of industry and to liaise with industry more in curriculum development and reviews in order to be able to produce more of fit-for-purpose graduates (Rasiah 2009). This assertion is also confirmed by Benvenuti (2011) who argued that encouraging interaction between industry and HE during curriculum development and change is an effective way of managing the tension between industry demands and good academic practice. Gomez (2008) also draws attention to the fact that close interaction between universities and industry helps universities ensure that new curriculum prepares graduates from the start, with skills that allow them easier passage and success in the employment world.

Staffing Issues

Staffing is viewed as one of the critical issues driving curriculum change in higher education in general and in private higher education in particular. Literature shows that even if institutions have adequate financial muscle to fund staff recruitment, finding suitably qualified staff in higher education institutions is a difficult task. This is also true for HEIs in Botswana (Tertiary Education Council 2013). According to Curee (2010), staff shortages mean that AMMs in the departments are forced to change their curriculum so that staff members are able to teach what they can in line with their staffing positions, workloads and staff competencies, and this means narrowing the range of subjects they can offer in their curricula.

Students' Views

A large body of literature indicates that curriculum is developed with the central focus being the student (Jagersma and Parsons 2011), hence the need to listen to the student voice to ensure that students feel involved and by being involved, have ownership of the curriculum. Tyler (1975) in Jagersma (2010) argues that students will energetically participate in a curriculum they believe is relevant to their needs and also will in the same vein, energetically resist and agitate for improvement to a curriculum they feel does not meet their needs hence the importance of their voice during curriculum change. Students may demand certain mainstream subjects in their course, or may also demand more learning time or even less class sizes (Ndou 2008; Tshiredo 2013). All these demands will lead to changes in the curriculum.

Pedagogical Argument

Literature shows that many curriculum changes are proposed because they are an indisputably good thing (Curee 2010; Tshiredo 2013). The above means that curriculum changes are introduced in higher education institutions because they make pedagogical sense. Issues such as the choice of teaching methods as well as whether a subject should be core or elective are all pedagogical issues, which as a matter of principle, departments are always quick to look at for change.

Government Regulations

The politics of the country through government regulations and policy changes are also a significant influence on curriculum change (Kurasha and Chabaya 2013; Morgan and Xu 2011). As an example, the government may decide to fund certain programs or subjects at the expense of others. In the context of Botswana, the government is now actively funding changes in curriculum that include the introduction of programs such as hospitality, diamond cutting, engineering, entrepreneurship and others, as they are programs viewed by the political leadership as being able to take the country forward.

National Accreditation Bodies

National higher education regulatory agencies scrutinize academic programs in terms of their relevance to meet national human resources needs, and hence serve as a force that influences curriculum change in certain directions (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi 2010). Literature shows that if curriculum change fails to conform to the requirements of these bodies, the program is not accredited since accreditation is crucial for the teaching of a program in institutions (Kurasha and Chabaya 2013). The need to keep pace with shifts in legislation and regulation of HE coupled with the ever-changing expectations of the regulators and participants in HE (students, academics, government, parents, and accrediting bodies), are some of the important drivers of curriculum change in HE (Mata 2012).

Overall, literature shows that for AMMs to be able to effectively play their role in curriculum change and also ensure that the curriculum they produce is relevant for the needs of students, they need to take account of the following: knowledge and skills of staff and themselves with regards to issues of curriculum change, availability of relevant materials, collaboration with department members, issues of in-service training, as well as interaction with both industry and academics from comparable institutions during the planning stage (BOTA 2009; Soares 2010; van Deuren 2013).

Furthermore, studies have highlighted the importance of communication, use of clearly articulated policies to guide the curriculum change effort, as well as collaboration as important drivers of curriculum change, which AMMs should

take note of. The above is confirmed in the model of Victor and Franckeiss (2002) in Mumm (2015) where it was shown that clarifying department curriculum change processes, policies and procedures ensured that change was effectively implemented and the change goals were achieved in a consistent manner. According to Victor and Franckeiss (2002) in Qamar and Ali (2012), communicating the appropriate approaches and demonstrating the desired behaviors to department members during the curriculum change process, should never be underestimated in terms of importance.

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to examine academic middle managers' perceptions of their role in the planning of curriculum change in private higher education institutions. The question the study sought answer related to whether academic middle managers were aware of what their role entailed in curriculum change as well as challenges they faced during the planning of curriculum change.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed methods approach that employed a concurrent triangulation design. A structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide were used for data collection from a sample of 162 AMMs out of a total of 280 AMMs in five Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) with the aim of establishing AMMs' perceptions of their role in the planning of curriculum change. Academic middle managers who participated in the interviews were coded using the following codes: L1, BU2, G1, AB1, and BA1, where letters of alphabet represented institutions from where the AMMs came. There are five PHEIs in Botswana and all of them were selected as research sites for the study. Data collection instruments were pilot tested. The questionnaire was tested for internal consistency and content validity. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach alpha coefficient (α) and results showed that $\alpha = 0.81$, which showed high internal consistency reliability, hence the instrument was considered reliable enough to be used in the study. In terms of content validity, the questionnaire was subjected to expert opinion and their recommendations incorporat-

ed in the instrument. The interview guide was tested for content validity by experts. The expert views were also incorporated into the final interview guide. AMMs who were included in the study were the Deans of Faculty, Assistant Deans of Faculty, Heads of Department, Assistant Heads of Department and Module Leaders. These were selected using stratified random sampling for the questionnaire part and using purposive sampling for the interview part. Since all the PHEIs have head offices located in Gaborone, this is where around ninety percent of the AMMs are located. The other ten percent of AMMs are located in the satellite campuses of these institutions in smaller towns in Botswana. The SPSS version 21 was used for quantitative data analysis while thematic analysis was done for qualitative data.

RESULTS

It can be seen from Table 1 that out of the 13 attributes of effective curriculum planning, AMMs believed that they were able to effectively plan curriculum change in only three attributes. These three attributes have mean scores of above 4 and included articulating to the department staff the benefits of curriculum change for students (M = 4.09, SD = 1.06), seeking the views of industry about the need to review the department (M = 4.03, SD = 1.17), and assessing together with department staff, skills the department wants all learners to develop and whether these skills can be developed adequately through the current or a revised curriculum (M = 4.01, SD = 1.03). In the eight attributes on the effective planning of curriculum change, which have mean scores above 3 but less than 4, AMMs indicated that they were fairly able to perform these curriculum change planning tasks. The tasks included evaluating together with department staff, the current curriculum to identify its strengths and weaknesses so as to note which curricula component(s) require(s) change (M = 3.89, SD = 1.13), setting up clear and effective communication procedures to ensure smooth flow of information during curriculum change (M = 3.84, SD = 1.23), seeking the views of staff about the impact curriculum changes will have on them in terms of the expertise needed of them to plan and implement the curriculum changes effectively (M = 2.75, SD = 1.1), evaluating whether additional resources might be needed to support curriculum changes (M = 3.66, SD = 1.0), appointing a department team to take responsibility for coordinating the planning of curriculum change (M = 3.63, SD = 1.2), ensuring that all department staff are always involved in decisions about curriculum change (M = 3.62, SD = 1.2), seeking the views of academics from

Table 1: Planning curriculum change

Planning curriculum change statements (Ranked mean scores)	Mean	Std. Dev.
Articulate to department staff the benefits of curriculum change for students	4.09	1.058
Seek the views of industry about the need to review the curriculum	4.03	1.170
Assess together with department staff, skills the department wants all learners to develop	4.01	1.029
Evaluate together with department staff, the current curriculum to identify its strengths and weaknesses so as to note which curricula component(s) require (s) change	3.89	1.131
Set up clear and effective communication procedures to ensure smooth flow of information during curriculum change	3.84	1.231
Seek the views of staff about the impact curriculum changes will have on them in terms of the expertise needed of them to plan and implement the curriculum changes effectively	3.75	1.1
Evaluate whether additional resources might be needed to support curriculum changes and whether meeting these resource needs will not negatively impact other key department areas and if so how this will be managed	3.66	1.0
Appoint a department team to take responsibility for coordinating the planning of curriculum change	3.63	1.2
Ensure that all department staff are always involved in decisions about curriculum change	3.62	1.2
Seek the views of academics from comparable institutions about the need to review the department curriculum	3.38	1.4
Set realistic deadlines for the planning of curriculum change	3.33	1.2
Inform learners about the curriculum changes by explaining the rationale for any changes, and also reporting progress and successes to them once the changes begin	2.51	1.4
Cost the demands on resources realistically	2.43	1.2
Come up with a budget dedicated to staff development on curriculum change issues	2.22	1.2

comparable institutions about the need to review the department curriculum (M = 3.38, SD = 1.4), and setting realistic deadlines for the planning of curriculum change (M = 3.33, SD = 1.2).

The AMMs also believed that they were not effective in the planning of curriculum change in the 3 tasks that have mean scores of less than 3. These tasks included the following: informing learners about the curriculum changes by explaining the rationale for any changes, and also reporting progress and successes to them once the planning of the changes begin (M = 2.51, SD = 1.4), costing the curriculum change demands on resources realistically (M = 2.43, SD = 1.2), and coming up with a curriculum change budget dedicated to staff development (M = 2.22, SD = 1.2).

The overall impression from the above results is that the AMMs were fairly able to plan curriculum change but there was need for them to improve. Also, results in Table 1 show that the deviation from the mean scores of all the items is very small as standard deviation for all items is slightly above 1. This shows that there was general agreement among AMMs on how they viewed their role in the planning of curriculum change in PHEIs.

The above results of the study's quantitative phase agree with the qualitative results from interviews with 10 AMMs. As part of planning for curriculum change, most of the AMMs indicated that they perform a needs analysis to identify gaps in the present curriculum. After the needs analysis the AMMs indicated that the set up curriculum committees responsible for curriculum development and change led by the AMMs. Most of the interviewed AMM felt that it was not necessary to inform students about curriculum changes during planning as they felt there is nothing to be gained from the exercise and student disputes would delay the curriculum change process. According to AMMs' interview responses clear structures and communication procedures were set up by the committee to ensure that the whole process of curriculum change moved smoothly. Some of the comments given by AMMs to show how they conduct the planning of curriculum change were as follows:

"At my institution, the starting point of curriculum change is always a needs analysis to locate any gaps in the current curriculum with regards to how the curriculum answers to the prevailing needs of society. Once gaps are identified and a curriculum committee is established, we begin the process of interacting with industry, benchmarking comparable institutions and research to ensure that we come up with the right curriculum changes." (L1)

"We have been engaged in curriculum change for the past 5 years at my institution. The most important step we take to ensure the effectiveness of curriculum change is to consult with industry to ensure that curriculum changes we come up with enable our graduates to be employable." (AB1)

"Communication is an important aspect of the planning of curriculum change. I feel that every AMM should set up clear communication strategies to ensure smooth information flow to all people involved in the planning of curriculum change as well as to top management so that they are kept in the loop so that they support AMM initiated curriculum change efforts." (G1)

"One major challenge that affects our efforts to effectively plan curriculum change at our institution is that we are not assured of adequacy of resources as issues of budgets and costing of curriculum change requirements is the preserve of top management. We are just informed that our department budget for a particular year is this or that without any consultation and we have to work within that budget for all anticipated curriculum changes." (BU2)

"When planning curriculum change, there are factors which I consider of primary importance, and which AMMs should take into consideration when planning curriculum change. These factors include the issue of capacity, that is, checking whether the department has capacity in terms of human and material resources to be able to implement the planned changes, the issue of benchmarking with a comparable institution to ensure standards of the program are comparable and maintained, interacting with industry to ensure that curriculum changes meet the needs of industry, and finally the issue of ensuring effective communication during both the planning and implementation of curriculum changes. I feel if AMMs take note of these issues curriculum planning will not only be successful but its implementation too." (BA1)

DISCUSSION

AMMs indicated that they were not very effective in the planning of curriculum change in PHEIs yet the planning of curriculum change is perhaps the most important stage of the curriculum change process since poor planning leads to implementation challenges such as shortage of human and material resources, facilities, time and many other enablers of effective curriculum change. Such a situation could be attributed among other things to inadequate experience by most of the AMMs, as interviews showed that most of the AMMs possessed around 5 years of experience in curriculum change despite many of them having up to 20 years of experience as AMMs. Failing to effectively plan curriculum changes is certainly a stumbling block on the efforts of AMMs to effect curriculum changes in their institutions.

Another reason for failure by AMMs to effectively plan curriculum change could be lack of formal training, as most AMMs indicated during interviews that they lacked formal training in curriculum development in general and in curriculum change in particular. Literature showed that to ensure effective planning of curriculum change AMMs as curriculum leaders needed to take account of the following requirements: knowledge and skills of staff and themselves with regards to issues of curriculum change, availability of relevant materials, collaboration with department members, issues of in-service training, as well as interaction with both industry and academics from comparable institutions during the planning stage (BOTA 2009; Soares 2010; van Deuren 2013).

While overall AMMs indicated that they were not very effective in the planning of curriculum change, results of this study also showed that AMMs were also of the view that they were on the other hand, effective in the following three curriculum planning activities: articulating to department staff the benefits of curriculum change for students in order to gain the support of the staff, assessing together with department members which components of the curriculum required review as well as consulting with industry on issues of curriculum change. Literature also showed that by clearly articulating the benefits of curriculum change, AMMs set a positive platform for successful change in departments. Drawing from the five dimensions model developed by Victor and Franckeiss (2002) in Mumm (2015), it was shown that clarifying department curriculum change processes, policies and procedures ensured that change was effectively implemented and the change goals were achieved in a consistent manner. According to Victor and Franckeiss (2002) in Qamar and Ali (2012), communicating the appropriate approaches and demonstrating the desired behaviors to department members during the curriculum change process, should never be underestimated in terms of importance.

With regards to assessing together with department members, as part of the curriculum planning process, the curriculum components requiring review, AMMs believed that they were successfully carrying these curriculum change planning tasks. The importance of working together with department members is confirmed by Wiggins and McTighe (2010) who asserted that ensuring that curriculum change planning activities are carried out through teamwork ensures and enhances acceptance of the need for curriculum change by all department members and guarantees the success of the curriculum change effort. The above was also further confirmed by Ndou (2008) who argued that curriculum change would only be successful if the identified need for change was shared and accepted by all stakeholders.

It emerged in the study that AMMs performed fairly well on the task of interacting with industry during the process of the planning of curriculum change. Seeking views of industry during the planning of curriculum change is viewed as very critical in ensuring that curriculum changes are relevant to the needs of industry. The role of industry is viewed as very critical for the successful planning of curriculum change in HEIs in general and in PHEIs in particular. Literature showed that universities and industry needed to collaborate more on issues of curriculum development and change to avoid a skills gap when graduates complete their education and seek employment in industry. This was confirmed by Rasiah (2009) and also by Lee et al. (2011) who argued that cooperation between HEIs and industry was important in reducing and even eliminating the industry-university perceptual gap with regards to what skills and knowledge industry wanted from graduates and what HEIs offered. Benvenuti (2011) also argued that encouraging interaction between industry

and HEIs during curriculum development and curriculum change is an effective way of managing the tension between industry demands and good academic practice in terms of the quality and relevance of curriculum in HEIs. The study established that AMMs believed that they demonstrated average performance on a number of other key curriculum change planning activities, which included evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum, setting up clear communication procedures in their departments, establishing the impact of curriculum change on department staff and on resource requirements, benchmarking curriculum changes as well as setting realistic deadlines for the curriculum change process. The lukewarm performance of AMMs on the planning of curriculum change could also be attributed to the fact that AMMs operated in a highly controlled environment and had very little control of events and activities in the departments. This was confirmed from the interviews with the AMMs, which indicated that PHEIs were highly controlled and restrictive and that most major decisions in these institutions relating to curriculum reviews were made by the owner-managers of the institutions yet studies indicate that effective curriculum planning thrives in supportive and collaborative environments (Edwards 2012; Hammer et al. 2014; McCarthy 2009). Blackmore and Kandiko (2012) also argue for a collaborative environment as an important driver of strategic curriculum change in universities.

It also emerged in the study that AMMs believed that they were unable to perform the following curriculum change planning activities, which included resource costing and coming up with a budget for curriculum change because issues of finances were a closely guarded secret in the PHEIs. Institutional finances and financial decisions were a preserve of top managers who are the owner-managers of the institutions. Best practice however indicates that it should be AMMs as the planners and implementers of curriculum change, who have knowledge of the resource requirements of the change process, who should come up with the budget estimates. Unfortunately in the owner-managed PHEIs in Botswana, this was not the case and the situation where curriculum change budgets were designed by the top management disregarding views of the curriculum change implementers was seriously affecting the efforts of AMMs to effectively implement their curriculum change plans.

CONCLUSION

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the study. First, AMMs showed effectiveness in communicating during the curriculum change planning process. This is important in ensuring buy-in of the change. Second, AMMs demonstrated effectiveness in assessing together with department staff and students, the skills that the curriculum changes will address during the planning of curriculum change so as to ensure further relevance of the curriculum changes. It can also be concluded that AMMs do not communicate with important stakeholders, the students during the planning process of curriculum change. This is a big letdown as students can also contribute their needs and fears with regards to the proposed changes thereby enriching the process. It is also concluded that AMMs do not make budgets for staff development in their institutions. This also is a problem for AMMs who are the planners and implementers of curriculum change and hence, know what should be required in terms of budgetary concerns on issues of curriculum change. Results indicate that the budget in PHEIs is made by other people who are not AMMs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above results a number of recommendations can be made. First, AMMs need to improve their communication with students on curriculum change issues as lack of involvement by students may lead to resisting the change. Second, AMMs need to agitate for authority to come up with curriculum change budgets, as they are the ones who know the resource needs that the curriculum changes will come with.

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