The Role of the Academic Heads of Departments in the Strategic Planning of the University

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study article was to enhance the role of the academic heads of departments to ensure successful implementation of the strategy at Eastern Cape Technikon. Strategy implementation involves a broad range of efforts aimed at transforming strategic planning into action and good results. The study applied both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Questionnaires were used as the main data-gathering instrument because they preserve the anonymity of the respondents, thereby encouraging frankness and honesty. In addition to questionnaires, interviews were used as the second data-gathering instrument because they provide room for probing, whereas questionnaires limit the respondents to the questions asked. The research findings indicated that the senior management of the institution does not support the academic heads of departments in ensuring that strategic planning is successfully implemented. There is also no form of performance evaluation or initiation of corrective adjustments in the strategy. Insufficient resources pose a challenge to all the efforts of successfully implementing the strategy. Recommendations are made that before any strategy can be implemented, it must first be clearly understood by all academic heads of departments as they are the key strategy implementers.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has undergone tremendous changes in the political and socio-economic fields. As part of this the higher education system has been re-examined (Pretorius 2001: 75). The White Paper on Higher Education Transformation and the Higher Education Act, No. 101 of 1997, has set the transformation challenge which includes increasing participation. Successful policy must overcome a historically determined pattern of fragmentation, inequality and efficiency by increasing access for disadvantaged groups, and develop new curricula and flexible models of learning and teaching (including innovative models of delivery).

Promoting co-operation and partnerships in governance become prominent in the transformational challenge. The relationship between higher education and the state, civil society - and among institutions themselves - must be reconceptualized. More importantly, the governance arrangements and practices within institutions must reflect and strengthen the value and principles of our fledging democracy, and also create an environment and culture that affirms diversity, promotes reconciliation and respect for human life, and protects the dignity of individuals from racial and sexual harassment.

According to Ramphele (1996), the challenges facing South Africa, as it enters the 21st century, are primarily centered on the need to produce high levels of skilled human resources to drive a modern competitive economy, which equitably offers opportunities to all citizens to realise their full potential and exercise their citizenship rights. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have a special role to play in meeting these challenges.

The higher education institutions in South African are generally known to be very democratic and slow to change. Between the idea of strategic planning and the reality of successful implementation of the strategy lie many difficulties. It is against this backdrop that the current article intends to look at the mechanisms used to determine the role of the academic heads of departments in the strategic planning in the Eastern Cape Technikon.

Pressure on the Institutions by the Government

The new legislation framework according to South African Higher Education Act (2002: 1) as well as the broader challenges of globalisation has put enormous pressure on institutions to devise new ways of managing what have become

more diverse and very complex institutions. The principals of higher education institutions have been confronted by the Ministry of Education with the need for public higher education institutions to develop three-year rolling plans, with an emphasis on increasing efficiency gains and diversifying sources of income (Higher Education Act 2002: 1)

These changes have contributed to a certain degree of demand overload being experienced by the management of many South African higher education institutions (Cloete et al. 1999: 10-11). For institutional management, demand overload has to do with having to respond to multiple and simultaneous transformation pressure, more participative and transparent governance, new institutional leadership and how to deal with becoming more skilled in a business management sense (Cloete et al. 1999: 10-11). The higher education institutions are required to simultaneously act more democratically and deal with new power relations between constituencies within the institution, and between the institution and the rest of the society.

Assessing the current state of higher education in South Africa against the yardstick of the purpose of education White Paper (1997: 1), the Ministry of Education has found reason for concern and the belief that transformation is imperative. Despite acknowledged achievements and strengths, the present system of higher education is limited in its ability to meet the moral, political, social and economic demands of the new South Africa.

There is a chronic mismatch between the output of higher education and the needs of the country's modernising economy. In particular, there is a shortage of highly trained graduates in fields such as science, engineering, technology and commerce, and this has been detrimental to social and economic development (White Paper 3- 1997: 1). Higher education has an unmatched obligation that has not been adequately fulfilled to help lay the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance that accommodates differences and competing interests. It has more to do both within its own institutions and in its influence on the broader community, to strengthen the democratic ethos and the sense of a common citizenship and common community to work towards a common good (South Africa: Higher Education, White Paper 3- 1997: 1).

There is little doubt that highly motivated employees can significantly increase the likelihood that organisational strategies will be successfully implemented. In most cases, the reward system is one of the most effective motivational tools available to organisations (Byars and Rue 1996: 217). The design and use of the organisational reward system reflect senior management's attitude about performance and significantly influences the entire organisational climate. Few things in an organisation evoke as much emotions as the organisational reward systems.

It is then incumbent upon the Principal or senior management to articulate something inspirational and, as a result, the constraints of reality are easily forgotten. If the strategy is not properly grounded in an understanding of the organisation position, constraints and deficiencies, as well as the positive issues and opportunities, it is worthless (Cloete et al. 1999: 51).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The choice of data collection methods for the researcher working form a quantitative approach can be categorised into questionnaires, checklists, index and scales. The surveys designs are classified together because, logically, they belong together. They are often of a more quantitative nature, requiring questionnaire as a data collection method. Questionnaires are probably the most generally used instruments of all (De Vos et al. 2002: 142). In addition to the questionnaires, the researcher used interview as a second data - gathering instruments.

Participants: A population is the total set from which the individuals or units of study are chosen. In this study the academic staff members of Walter Sisulu University (Former Eastern Cape Technikon) were considered as the population of the study and the academic heads of departments and deans of faculties as the sample.

The institution had a total of sixteen academic heads of departments serving under three Deans assigned to the faculties, namely the Faculty of Applied Technology and Education, the Faculty of Business Sciences and the Faculty of Engineering. The researcher sought to obtain a sample of sixteen academic heads of department and the three deans of faculties. Questionnaires were sent to all academic heads of departments. Deans of the faculties were selected on the basis

of their expertise and experience in managing their faculties, and their involvement in the strategic planning at the Technikon.

RESULTS

As the study has outlined, sixteen questionnaires were sent to the academic heads of departments. From a total of sixteen questionnaires, twelve were returned by the respondents, giving a response rate of 75%. A response rate of 50% is considered to be adequate, 60% is viewed as good and 70% as excellent (De Vos et al. 2002: 172). In addition to the questionnaire, the researcher also collected data by means of interviews. The researcher interviewed 3 deans of faculties to establish their views on the role of the academic Head of Department (HODs role in the strategic planning of the Institution.

The Views of the Academic Heads of Departments

Questions in the second section of the questionnaire sought the HODs' views on:
  ⬥ Strategic planning implementation.
Response will be outlined by means of following the above mentioned The researcher chose the above mentioned sub - headings as the main area of focus in the data collection method because in order to implement the strategy successfully, a full range of managerial activities are involved in putting the chosen strategy into action, supervising its pursuit, and achieving the targeted results (David 1999: 223).

The respondents indicated that 75% (9) agreed that all academic HODs do participate in the strategic planning, 8% (1) neither agreed nor disagreed and 17% (2) disagreed. In the literature review, Hill and Jones (1998: 23-24) argue that another mistake made by some institutions in their initial enthusiasm for planning has been to treat strategic planning exclusively as a senior management function. Based on the results, the researcher commends the senior management of the institution for making academic heads of departments' part of the strategic planning.

Figure 1 clearly emphasizes that the respondents, 42% (5) disagreed that all staff members were committed to strategic planning implementation, 33% (4) agreed, whereas 25% (3) neither agreed nor disagreed. This leaves much to be desired as all staff members should be committed to successful implementation of strategy.
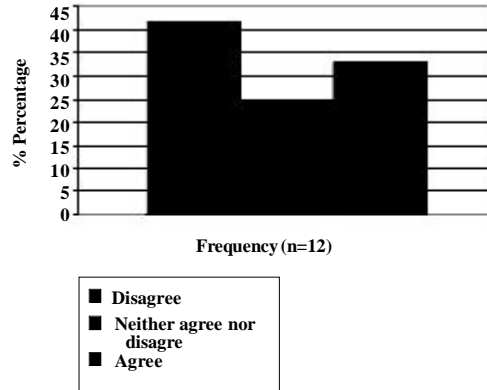

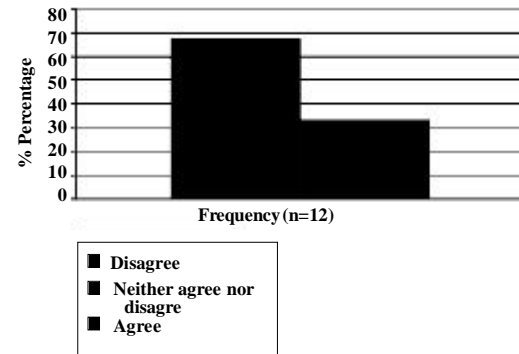Fig. 1. All staff members are committed to strategic planning implementation

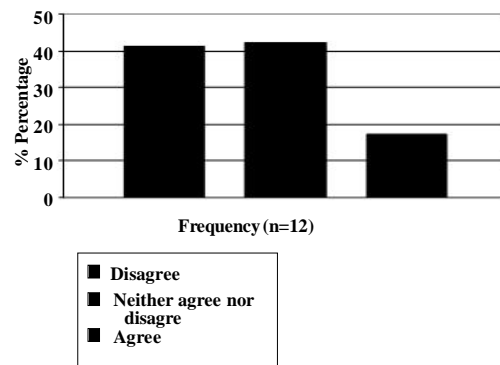Fig. 2. There is a form of performance evaluation in the strategy implementation process

Fig. 3. The institution is responding positively to the national imperatives

From Figure 2, 67% (8) respondents indicated that they disagreed that there was a form of

evaluating performance in the strategy implementation process. The other respondents, 33% (4) indicated that neither they agreed nor disagreed. There were no respondents that indicated that they agreed. With these results, the researcher notes that there was no performance evaluation in the strategy implementation process.
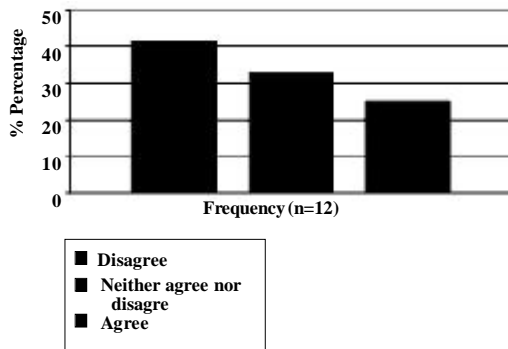

Fig. 4. The institution's senior management is proactive in the successful implementation of the strategic planning

Figure 3 puts the respondents view in perspective. Of the respondents, 42% (5) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that the institution was responding positively to the national imperatives stipulated in the White Paper 3 on Education (1997), whereas 42% (5) disagree and 17% (2) agreed. To have the majority of respondents indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed leaves much to desire. 42% of the respondents that disagreed prove that the institution was not responding positively to the national imperatives.

The results from Figure 4 indicate that 42% (5) of the respondents indicated that they disagreed that the institution's senior management was proactive in the successful implementation of the strategic plan, and 33% (4) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed, whereas 25% (3) agreed. The discrepancy of only 25% being positive that the senior management was proactive in the successful implementation of the strategic planning, while 42% were negative, is cause for concern. Of the respondents, 33% were not sure which also raises some concerns. The results should have been positive if the senior management were proactive.

The Research Findings from the Open-ended Questions and Interviews

The results of the study indicate that some of the academic HODs are still trying to achieve understanding of the strategy through continuous discussions with their colleagues. Some of the respondents indicated that, they are planning a presentation to the department. Matters are discussed in the departmental board where all stakeholders of the department are participants. The department structure has an open line of communication. The strategy is placed before staff for discussion and they make contributions to action plans for implementation. Staff members have been given copies of the strategy with the view of meeting. One of the respondents indicated that as a head of department he/she cannot be expected to convince his/her subordinates about the strategic plan. The strategic objectives are not driven from the very

Principal, it is left to one person (Strategic Planner) to drive this with inadequate resources as a result, no action.

Are the Academic Heads of Departments Playing an Effective Role to ensure that the Strategic Planning is Successfully Implemented?

The results of the empirical survey showed that strategic objectives were not driven by the Principal of the institution; it was left to one person (the Institutional Planner) to drive the process, with inadequate resources and, as a result, no action was taking place. There was no support from the senior management, therefore nothing was happening. The academic heads of departments could not play an effective role in the absence of leadership empowerment and resources. There were no training plans and academic heads of departments were left to resolve confusion without being empowered to make decisions. The purpose of the strategy was not explained and staff members were not encouraged to accept the strategy. Of the respondents, 75% indicated, that all academic heads of departments participated in the strategic planning. This was commendable but there was no form of evaluating performance in the implementation process, and consequently no corrective adjustments to be made. This was in line with what was discussed in the literature

review in Chapter II - that the announcement of a strategy gives all organisational stakeholders a means of evaluating operations and performance. It also raises and defines expectations about the future of an organisation, which may prove embarrassing to management if unforeseen circumstances arise that diminish performance.

Of the respondents, 87% indicated, that there was no incentive plan for academic heads of departments to implement the strategic planning effectively. Most resources needed for the implementation of strategic planning required money, which was a scarce resource at the institution at that time; a fact which hampered the implementation of strategic plans. Financial constraints posed a challenge to all the efforts.

Are the Academic Heads of Departments Receptive to Change?

Academic heads of departments perceived strategic planning as something that did not motivate the workforce into a collective effort to win. This statement was supported by 88% of the respondents who indicated that they (academic heads of departments) were not receptive to change and, in fact, felt threatened by change. This is in line with what was discussed in the literature review in Chapter II, that there is a tendency for some people to find a sense of security in the status quo. In terms of frustration or difficulty, or when faced with new or unfamiliar ideas or methods, people may reflect on the past as there is a wish to retain old and comfortable ways. The senior management was not able to convince the entire institution that the new changes were for the good of the institution. Academic heads of departments perceived the senior management as untrustworthy in relation to the manner in which they managed change.

DISCUSSION

It is clear from the empirical analysis that successful strategy formulation does not guarantee successful strategy implementation, this was observable from the way questions and principles were put in practice. Although inextricably independent, strategy formulation and strategy implementation are characteristically different. In a single word, strategy implementation means change. It is widely agreed, "the real work begins after strategies are formulated." Successful strategy implementation requires the support of, as well as the discipline and hard work of motivated HODs and staff members. Macmillan and Tampoe (2000:197) argue that there is nothing more difficult to arrange, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating changes in a government's constitution. The innovator makes enemies of all who prospered under the old order, and lukewarm support is forthcoming from those who will prosper under the new. In supporting this study Thompson and Strickland (2001:275) assert that if someone talks about change but do not change the reward and recognition system, nothing changes.

It is sometimes frightening to think that a single individual can sabotage strategy implementation efforts irreparably. Formulating the right strategies is not enough. Academic HODs and all the staff members must be motivated to implement those strategies. Management issues considered central to strategy implementation include linking performance, and incentive pay plans to strategies, creating an organisational climate conducive to change, creating a strategy-supportive culture, and allocating resources. These are a means of achievement common to all organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are presented in five sections, namely: conditions for successful change, strategic change management, strategy and motivational systems, resource allocation and communicating strategy. Making the right changes that will benefit the institution while bringing along the academic heads of departments within it does not just happen by chance. Foundations and structures need to be created and developed. Effective change in an organisation is fostered by visible senior management support. If the academic heads of departments see the senior management giving their time, emphasizing and enthusing about certain changes, then the message will soon get around that they are not just paying lip service to those changes. They will see that senior management is committed to change and willing to lead by example in order to bring academic heads of departments along to facilitate change.

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