

# Organisational Change and Development in Higher Education

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## 1. Higher education in change, a perspective

Most people think of universities as particularly stable organisations that have changed little over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, in the last decades of the twentieth century, universities went through extraordinary rapid and fundamental changes. The notion of *organisational change*, once applied exclusively to business organisations, has expanded its reach to include higher education.

### *Universities as changing organisations*

People tasked with analysing universities would agree that they are organisations which for various reasons are particularly resistant to change: they have unique specificities related to their history, to their social and cultural mission and to the people who work in them that make them different from other organisations. The literature about organisational change is full of sometimes acid references to the particular difficulties of initiating and implementing changes in academic organisations.<sup>2</sup> Although in the past decade or so many universities shifted toward a corporate management model, they are traditionally described as organisations guided by the principle of collegiality, with goals and policies often remaining vague and ambiguous and their implementation not strongly controlled.<sup>3</sup>

Higher education institutions can be described as *complex adaptive systems* that are permanently interacting with their environment and changing their behaviour as needed in order to survive, to thrive or to avoid deterioration. Both *external* and *internal* factors play an important role in determining their capacity and willingness to change.<sup>4</sup> A university operating in an open, highly internationalised context and producing graduates who are experts for sectors characterised by rapidly developing technologies, finds itself in a complex and dynamic environment almost by default. As a consequence, it is likely to be much more open to change than one which serves mainly national or smaller regional constituencies and trains qualified professionals for the relatively stable public services sector. More complex and more dynamic environments in turn may lead to the emergence of new internal organisational arrangements that will test the institution's capacity and willingness to change.

### *Forms of change – paradigms of change*

Although this chapter has taken the micro (institutional or organisational) level as its focus, it is important not to lose sight of the macro (system) level, i.e., what happens in the broader system in which higher education institutions are operating. For most universities, the specificities of the higher education system of their home country are the most important external factor influencing their environment. Institutional changes often reflect changes at

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<sup>1</sup> Kerr 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Ashby 1963, Allen and Fifield 1999, Boyce 2003, Elton 1999, Morris 2007, Thackwray 2007.

<sup>3</sup> McNay 1995, Land 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Mintzberg 1979, Santos et al. 1998.

the national system level, thus a clear line of demarcation cannot always be drawn between implementing change in one institution and implementing change in a national higher education system.<sup>5</sup> For more on this topic, the reader is referred to the extensive research literature dealing with system level changes and with the problems of implementing higher education reforms.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most important distinctions proposed by organisational change theorists is between the *top-down (planned changes)* and the *bottom-up (incremental or emergent changes)* paradigms.<sup>7</sup> If we want to understand the nature of change in organisations, and particularly in academic organisations, we need a refined and thorough understanding of what these terms mean. Although the terms “top-down” and “bottom-up” are topographical metaphors, the most significant difference between them is not the *source* or the *direction* of change but the *nature* of it. The top-down pattern of change is characterised by deliberate planning while the bottom-up pattern is rooted in spontaneity, improvisation and subsequent sense-making. In the top-down model changes are *made*; in the bottom-up model they are *emerging*. Both planned and incremental/emergent changes may be driven by either internal or external factors (see Table 1). The nature of change at a university is fundamentally different whether executing the measures of an amendment of a new national higher education law or whether implementing curriculum reform emerging from department level innovations. These forms may also be combined.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1: Different forms of change in universities

		Source of change	
		Externally driven	Internally driven
Type of the change	Planned	e.g. changes generated by policy mandates or new government regulations	e.g. changes initiated through institutional level strategic planning
	Emerging	e.g. changes generated by broad social and cultural trends in society	e.g. changes generated by grassroots initiatives

Source: Bess & Dee, 2008

Sometimes the top-down model is identified with strong and the bottom-up with weak leadership but this is misleading. Leaders applying the bottom-up model may be very strong but they use *time* and *organisational energy* in a different way than leaders following the top-down paradigm. It is important to stress that these two paradigms complement rather than mutually exclude each other. Effective leaders use both of them according to the specific tasks they have to achieve, to the external and internal pressure they have to contend with, and particularly to the specific conditions of their organisations. They may combine them or they may prefer one to the other at different phases of the development of an organisation.

<sup>5</sup> See the case presented in Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Particularly Gornitzka et al. 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See the cases presented in Evans et al. (2008) and in Bess and Dee (2008).

<sup>8</sup> We can see a mixture of internal and external influences in the case presented later in section 3, but also in those presented in Evans & Henrichsen (2008) and Bess & Dee (2008), and particularly in the one presented in Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt (2005). For a deeper analysis of the latter see also the context presented in European Commission (2007).

## ***What is changing?***

Although in practice we do not always find clear boundaries between them, the list in the box below shows some examples of organisational areas and processes that might be the object of organisational change or development:<sup>9</sup>

### **Areas of possible change in higher education institutions**

- *strategic goals, mission* (e.g. creating a new institutional strategy or modifying the existing one)
- *curriculum and teaching methods* (e.g. introducing a new teaching program, modifying or abolishing an existing one or promoting the use of ICT and e-learning in teaching)
- *human resources* (e.g. introducing salary differentiation based on performance indicators or changing the rules of getting permanent work contracts)
- *research, development and innovation* (e.g. enhancing university-industry cooperation or creating new mechanisms of knowledge transfer)
- *internal organisational and management structure* (e.g. integrating a decentralised university through shifting some jurisdictions from faculties to the rector's office or merging smaller disciplinary chairs into larger interdisciplinary departments)
- *quality and evaluation* (e.g. introducing a new standard form of course description or a new system of evaluation of teachers by students)
- *student services and welfare* (e.g. establishing a new career advisory service)
- *resource allocation mechanisms within the institution* (e.g. allowing faculties or smaller units to raise revenues or introducing a reallocation mechanism that shift resources from "richer" to "poorer" faculties)
- *relationships with the environment* (e.g. involving external partners into governing boards or trying to reach new partners by improving communication)
- *the culture of the organisation* (e.g. the emergence of an outward-looking culture that fosters risk-taking or the transformation of a bureaucratic organisation into a learning organisation)

As most of the areas and processes mentioned above are strongly interlinked (they together make what we call an "organisation" and what we may also call a "system"), changing one of them may have implications for the others. For example, creating a new student service is typically accompanied by a change in the internal organisational and management structure and it might require changes in the culture of the organisation. A curricular change may lead to a need for changes in the organisational structure, as well as in the management of human resources, the management of quality, the relationships with the environment or the culture of the organisation. The introduction of a new vocationally oriented course that is meant to produce extra revenues for the institution because of its high market value may trigger lots of parallel changes: it may create a need to involve the representatives of the relevant vocational field into curriculum development, it can make it inevitable the involvement of new external teaching staff, it may force the institution to apply new quality assurance methods and a condition of all this to happen may be a fundamental change in the whole culture of the organisation.

While the lack of clear-cut boundaries between these areas and processes presents a challenge for managing changes, this complexity of inter-linkages may be turned into an opportunity as changes in one area may facilitate changes in the other. In addition to this so-called ripple effect, there might be *synergies* that can be leveraged between all these areas and processes, and the recognition and the use of these synergies can reduce redundancy and duplication and make the whole change process easier. For example, bringing in external representatives into the curriculum development process may change the balance of forces between various disciplinary areas and may facilitate the change of the curriculum or that of the customary teaching methods.

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<sup>9</sup> For another classification see, for example, Eckel et al. (2001).

## ***Linking change management with other management areas***

Organisational change and development has strong linkages to other management areas that we must study in order to better understand our own area.<sup>10</sup> For example, everything said so far about organisational change is strongly connected with *strategic management*. Changes are typically initiated by those who create the strategy or they take place within a framework set by the strategy. The goals of change are normally the goals of the strategy and the most important factor to be taken into account when the achieved changes are assessed is how far they contributed to the realisation of strategic goals. The way changes are implemented – whether planned and top-down or incremental and bottom up – depends on the strategy of the organisation.

Another important linkage with far-reaching implications is the connection between managing change and managing *quality*. Those quality assurance approaches which stress standardisation and rigorous procedural regulation may create a less favourable environment for change than those that stress continuous quality improvement through human commitment and organisational culture. The EFQM model, for example, with its strong focus on innovation, learning and relevant outcomes<sup>11</sup> not only creates favourable organisational environment for change but its application might be a key source of organisational change and development. In fact, the intention to improve and sustain quality is one of the most important reasons for changing the organisation (see our short case study in the next section of this chapter).

Because change is an inevitable by-product of innovation, change can also be seen in an *innovation management* perspective. Introducing innovations aimed at improving organisational performance (for example, creating new e-learning platforms or new forms for practical training) always requires some level of organisational change and development; often with the realisation of some kind of further innovation as a side benefit.<sup>12</sup> In other words, innovation begets change begets innovation. An innovative university that is constantly on the lookout for new or original solutions to improve its activities in research, teaching and community services is a university where the notion of change has a positive meaning and where the culture of the organisation encourages innovation.<sup>13</sup>

*Marketing management* is also highly relevant for the management of change. Marketing is outwardly focused, meaning that we are looking at the outside world and we see clients, consumers, competitors, market rules and market forces there. We see students choosing institutions and study programs, employers expressing preferences for our graduates or for those coming from elsewhere and we compare ourselves to other universities offering similar courses and compete for the same people. The goal of improving market position of the university often serves as a trigger for initiating change. The opening of the Croatian national university system to the European space of higher education and the growing awareness of international competition seemed to be particularly strong forces of change in our case study presented below.

Finally, the management area that is perhaps the most intimately linked with organisational change and development is the *management of human resources*. Organisational changes are made by and through people. Managing change in universities

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<sup>10</sup> Most chapters about different management areas in this volume can also be read from an organisational change and development perspective; similarly, the cases recommended for study in this chapter can also be read from the perspective of other management areas.

<sup>11</sup> Sheffield Hallam University 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See the curriculum innovation case presented in Bess and Dee (2008).

<sup>13</sup> The experiences of innovation management in the knowledge intensive service sector (see, for example, Miles 2005) are particularly valuable for those managing change in universities.

means managing people: academics, experts or professionals, that is, individuals who possess high level of authority and socially recognised specialised knowledge, who might have outstanding public influence in various social and economic fields and whose task is often to give meaning to things, to determine what is good and what is bad. Leading change in organisations consisting of such people is particularly challenging; valuable models can be found in the human resource management experiences of leading economic organisations operating in highly knowledge-intensive areas.

## 2. Managing change in higher education institutions

### *The nature of change and change strategies*

One of the most frequently used terms in the organisational change literature is “*resistance*”. We have to understand that organisations, or rather people in organisations, often “resist” change and may use quite sophisticated avoidance techniques.<sup>14</sup> Several theorists have proposed that organisations exist in state of equilibrium that must be maintained or (if it is lost) restored as soon as possible. Most experts who deal with organisational change or development believe that organisations, by nature, “do not like” change; these experts describe change as a process of “unfreezing, changing, and refreezing” (to simplify the model of the famous social psychologist Kurt Lewin). Our case study below illustrates the first two phases and partly also the third one, as well as the inextricable mixture of internal and external influences.<sup>15</sup>

#### *The establishment of a quality management system – a case study*

In June 2000 the expert team of the European University Association (EUA), having completed its institutional evaluation of the University of Zagreb, put the following statement into its report: “*The University of Zagreb does not have a system of internal quality assurance. The University should not depend on an external body (...) for its quality assurance, but should urgently develop its own internal system of maintaining and improving quality.*” The rector elaborated on this conclusion at a 2002 workshop: *The more we knew about the world current trends in developed countries, the less satisfied we were with our system, our education, and our functioning*”.<sup>16</sup> The involvement of the country (Croatia) in the Bologna process led to concerns about the quality of higher education, thus the establishment of a new and effective national system of quality assurance became a national priority.

Although there were obstacles such as the lack of information and data, there were positive forces that could be leveraged such as a core group of 50 teachers who had participated actively in the drawing up of a strategic concept titled “*Breakthrough 2001*”. The reform initiatives were supported by the National Council for Higher Education and those committed to the reforms at national level were aware of the fact that quality management initiatives can be effective only if the organisation as a whole develops a new “quality culture”.

Simultaneously with the internal reform efforts, the national authorities, using European funds, organised several workshops to enhance knowledge sharing and to develop know-how among the relevant partners. Attended by several senior managers from different universities, including those from the University of Zagreb, the workshops led to the establishment of special institutional boards in each Croatian university.

As a result, in 2005 the University of Zagreb established a new University Statute which was strongly influenced by the innovative projects taking place in specific areas at each university, including those aimed at developing quality management and quality culture in the organisation. The professor who was responsible for the TEMPUS

<sup>14</sup> See particularly the case presented in Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005) but also the cases presented in Evans and Henrichsen (2008) and Bess and Dee (2008).

<sup>15</sup> It is strongly recommended that students read the further cases already referred to, namely (1) in Evans and Henrichsen (2008), (2) in Bess and Dee (2008) and (3) in Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005).

<sup>16</sup> The very personal account of the rector Professor Helena Jasna Mencer; University of Zagreb (2002) is available online: <http://www.uga.edu/ihe/tuheljske/Mencer.htm>.

quality project became rector of the University which created a particularly favourable condition for change. In the framework of the TEMPUS project a Quality Assurance Office was set up in several universities, including the University of Zagreb. One of the first major activities of the new office was the launching of a student feedback program in 2005, which was followed up by further surveys in the successive years. The first survey had very little impact. As both students and the academic staff became more familiar with it, the impact started to grow. A few years later there were still some concerns, e.g. regarding data collection, but an internal quality management system has been established.

The sources of this case are the following publications: European University Association (2000), University of Zagreb (2002), Vidovic and Aleksa (2006), University of Zagreb (2009). For the broader context see OECD (2008) and Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Republic of Croatia (2007).

Let us change our perspective and think about organisations as permanently changing entities in which the equilibrium is not static but dynamic<sup>17</sup>, i.e., that what looks like equilibrium actually is the sum of energies and dynamic forces that neutralise each other. If organisations are viewed as complex adaptive systems, change can no longer be described as a linear process. Thus, skilful change managers or organisational developers often do not come to organisations with a fixed plan in their mind of what they want to implement exactly but first analyse the dynamics of forces within the organisation and then build upon those forces and movements that may bring about the desired changes rather than trying to “break” the resistance.<sup>18</sup>

Given the characteristics of higher education institutions, it is extremely rare that resolute use of a pure top-down change model will be effective. As evidenced by many cases of successful change in universities, the most effective way to implement changes in academic organisation is the application of what some authors call *strategic incrementalism*<sup>19</sup>, a bottom-up approach in combination with a *particularly strong and lasting commitment* to the goals of change coupled with sufficient *flexibility* in the implementation and with a capacity to make *meaningful compromises* that do not endanger the strategic goals. In addition to the cases presented in Bess and Dee (2008) and in Evans and Henrichsen (2008), we can easily identify this change model in the five cases of successful universities described by Burton R. Clark in his influential book on entrepreneurial universities.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to mention that incrementalism, if it is not accompanied by strong, stable and long-term strategy, may not result in improvement but lead instead to organisational dysfunction (for example, to the multiplication of small tasks at the decentral levels, leading to loss of efficiency or to an uncontrollable increase of workload, etc.). The high level of complexity of the long-term strategic incrementalism approach makes change management a particularly difficult task. Some of the models referenced earlier (e.g., by organisational theorists and developers Evans and Henrichsen) present long-term strategic incrementalism as requiring managerial thinking in four parallel dimensions: depth, breadth, level and time. *Depth* and *breadth* refer to the scope of the changes: they show how fundamental or radical the change is and how much units, areas and processes of the organisation are affected (for example, a reform of teaching programs may be limited to just a few departments or it might alter fundamentally the classroom level behaviour of the majority of teachers). *Level* refers to the organisational hierarchy: whether changes may remain at departmental level, go up to faculty level or extend to the level of the whole university. Finally, *time* plays an extremely important role. To continue with the curriculum change

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<sup>17</sup> Bess and Dee 2008, Lewin 2009.

<sup>18</sup> See the case presented in Bess and Dee (2008) where the provost of the university makes the chairs of departments, who first resist his proposals for change, discover that what their staff is already doing is not very different from the changes he wished to promote.

<sup>19</sup> Evans and Henrichsen 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Clark 1988.

example: research on the impact of a new teaching program may fundamentally alter the attitude of staff and create more favourable conditions for change over the course of time.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Forces of change and techniques: looking at learning, action and complexity***

Organisational change and development is typically preceded by an analysis of internal and external conditions though some kind of SWOT analysis to help identify 1) factors that may make change inevitable vs. preventable and 2) energies that could serve to enhance or hinder change. *Learning* is one of the factors that has been shown to be an essential ingredient for change. If an organisation is capable of learning, it is capable of change. While the notion of a higher education institution not at the same time being a learning organisation might seem disconcerting, such may indeed be the case; and the application of the planned (top-down) approach as is typical at institutions with lower level learning capabilities may fall far short of the desired or stated goals. However, if we accept this linkage between learning and change, then our change strategy can be fundamentally determined by what we know about *single-loop* and *double-loop learning*, i.e., learning that only changes the behaviour of organisational actors and learning that changes the deeper beliefs and mindsets governing their behaviour, respectively.<sup>22</sup>

Many references have already been made to the *complexity* of change. This appears particularly strongly in the incremental and bottom-up paradigm where changes are not just “done” but “happening”. In the case of the planned (top-down) paradigm, the real complexity of the change may be disguised by the simplicity of the plan, but even in this case changes never happen in full harmony with the plan. For example, the introduction of a new quality management system in a university through an organisational development intervention may trigger unexpected organisational processes. Although the original goal might have been nothing more than compliance with national standards for quality assurance, the process may lead to the emergence of a new client-oriented organisational culture which may incite some departments or faculties to improve their communication with those employers who employ their graduates. This interaction in turn may lead to a new paradigm of curriculum planning and delivery focused on a participatory definition of learning outcomes and which brings forth new assessment methods for measuring the acquisition of complex competences.

Although most management models propose rather basic pictures to visualise the management of changes, even the simplest contain some elements of learning and feedback (see for example, the well known PDSA model which connects planning, doing, studying and acting). If there is learning and feedback, the processes cannot be linear as there are always ramifications, possible alternative scenarios, probabilities, contingencies and dynamic interactions.<sup>23</sup> For those who are tasked with managing change in organisations, it is essential to come to terms with knowledge on complex adaptive systems, systems thinking, complexity science and chaos theory. Contingency is another fundamental characteristic of change. For example, our choice between using a top-down or bottom-up approach or some combination depends on several factors. In their book, Bess and Dee (2008) mention the following five key factors that determine this choice:

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<sup>21</sup> See the cases in Evans and Henrichsen 2008.

<sup>22</sup> For a comprehensive review of the literature on organisational change and organisational learning in universities see Boyce 2003.

<sup>23</sup> The first case presented in Evans and Henrichsen 2008 illustrates the non-linear and contingent nature of change: reforming graduate programs became possible by the appearance of an external influence that incited a reform of undergraduate programs. This might also be seen as an interesting case of double-loop learning: working on an externally driven reform of undergraduate curricula probably changed the way teachers were thinking about teaching and this made it possible to change the graduate programmes as well.

- (1) *the structure of action* (the planned way is more effective if activities affected by the change follow each other in a linear way but less effective if they are mutually dependent on each other)
- (2) *leadership capacities at various levels* (the incremental/emergence way has more chance to produce good results if good leadership capacities are present not only at the level of the rector's office but also at departmental and faculty level)
- (3) *the culture of trust* (it is improbable that the incremental/emergence way could produce good results if trust is lacking in the organisation)
- (4) *financial conditions* (it is not wise to start a planned top-down change process if no resources are available for supporting the change)
- (5) *external constraints/opportunities* (when a government regulation has to be enforced, there is no time to wait for emerging changes, but a favourable legal environment can also support emerging changes).

We have already mentioned many of the potential forces and sources of energy for change but there are still two that need to be mentioned here. The first is *information and communication technology* (ICT). The questions of ICT are highly relevant for a change perspective not only because the introduction of new ICT solutions (e.g., e-learning techniques in teaching programs or new computerised learning management systems) was one of the most frequent and most challenging forms of change in higher education institutions in the last decade but also because ICT can be used as a carrier of organisational change and development (the “Trojan Horse of change”). For example, a new centrally managed information system is often used as an instrument of organisational integration. The second important force of change is related with *markets and competition*. Universities looking at themselves as organisations competing with others on markets of training, research and services are often more open to change. Market forces may generate significant changes in the way they work, as they might be incited to compare themselves with others, to learn from their rivals and to promote innovation and quality improvement for improving their market position.

### ***Organisational change and development in practice***

In their analysis of why some higher education institutions are more successful in changing than others, Eckel et al. (2001) identified some key factors determining success. Beyond a favourable external environment and internal conditions, they pointed to three factors related to the qualities of leaders:

- 1) their attitudes and approaches facilitating change,
- 2) their capacity to help people to develop new ways of thinking and
- 3) their capacity to learn during the change process and to adjust their behaviour to what they learn as they are listening to the various stakeholders involved.

But it seems however important to add another factor: to have access to and utilize the appropriate *instruments* for the process of managing change.

Since the planning or implementing change is typically not separated from planning or implementing strategy, many of the instruments that are used to plan and manage the change process are very similar to what leaders or organisational developers use when developing strategy. In some countries, specialised agencies are charged with supporting higher education institutions in implementing organisational changes and development<sup>24</sup>. There are also change-specific instruments and the box below provides a number of guiding questions that prompt a further search for specific instruments.

**Questions to be answered before the change process starts**  
(requisites for change in universities)

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the Leadership Foundation in the UK (<http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/>).

- Does your institution have an effective mission statement, one that is consistent with its institutional values, guides work throughout the institution, and addresses the needs of a changing society?
- Are there gaps between the mission statement, institutional practices, and the needs of the publics you serve?
- Are decision makers knowledgeable about research on teaching, learning, and student development?
- Does the institution consistently encourage and support the use of best practices in curriculum development, instructional design, and academic advising?
- Is the institution committed to the systematic and continuous collection of data about its stakeholders and units, about academic processes and outcomes, and does it use these data to improve programs?
- Does the institution encourage and support the appropriate use of technology to achieve learning goals?
- Are the institution's decision makers able to use their interpersonal skills effectively in interactions with others?
- Are decision makers committed to supporting both formal and informal leadership and to the critical role each plays in effecting change?
- Do decision makers have the support and collaborative leadership of key members of the administration, faculty, and staff?
- Do administrators, staff and faculty members have appropriate and on-going opportunities for professional development?
- Is the institution's financial and academic planning integrated to achieve the educational mission?
- Does the institution's reward system for faculty, staff, and academic units enable achievement of the educational mission and priorities?
- Does the institution have an effective, shared governance system consistent with its mission and culture?

Source: The National Academy for Academic Leadership (2009)

Initiating and implementing organisational change and development is particularly difficult without resorting to external advice. The case presented by Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005) is a good illustration of a case where no external change facilitators were involved. Instead, the government financing the university and exercising legal supervision was expected to be the facilitator. When higher education leaders think about initiating major changes in their organisation, they always have to consider the involvement of independent organisational development experts.

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