

Institutional reform and change management: The conversion of polytechnics to technical universities

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ABSTRACT

This research paper sought to review the way and manner the conversion of polytechnics in Ghana to technical universities were done to ascertain whether the process conformed to standard best practice. The inequality in terms of placement of polytechnic graduates in the public sector as compared to the traditional university graduates, lack of direct academic progression for polytechnic graduates with Higher National Diploma, low enrollment and the departure of experienced staff from the polytechnics to the traditional universities due to poor conditions of service leaving the polytechnics with less staff compelled the government to initiate the reform. Institutional reform has been a long-standing practice in the educational sector; however, the implementation of new policies remains a challenge to many public institutions in Ghana. The one-size-fits-all approach to managing change must give way to a multi-faceted approach that takes into consideration the diversity of the various stakeholders affected by the change. The adoption of an appropriate change model and proper engagement of stakeholders as well as handling the transition as a project rather than treating it like the usual work of the ministry of education would have eased the tension and agitations which characterized the conversion process. Despite the conversion period spanning almost four years, the stakeholders are yet to reap the full benefits of the reform.

Keywords: Managing change, conversion, resistance, process, transition.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the Government of Ghana announced a new policy to convert all ten polytechnics in the country to technical universities in order to deal with persistent challenges facing technical education in the country. Consequently, a technical committee was constituted to assess the readiness of the polytechnics in the country for conversion to technical universities as against a sixteen point criteria and recommend the polytechnics that met the criteria for immediate conversion; while those that fail to meet the criteria are assisted to meet the requirements for conversion at a later date. The committee diligently carried out its work and recommended initially, six polytechnics for conversion, but another two were added by executive approval (Adumado Report, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the conversion of polytechnics to technical universities appears to be a blueprint to

addressing the challenges facing technical education in the country. The issues of placement in the public or civil service and academic progression were paramount. Most graduates of polytechnics after their Higher National Diploma would have to go back to the traditional universities to pursue top-up programs in order to obtain bachelor degrees before they can be put on their rightful places in the public sector or the civil service. Earlier reforms in the educational sector did not lead to a corresponding revision in the public service regulations in order to address this problem. Besides, the Higher National Diploma is not accepted as an entry requirement for a direct masters' program. Applicants with the Higher National diploma must first complete a top-up bachelor's degree or bridging program before admitted to a masters' degree program. Furthermore, the polytechnics were seen as second options to the traditional universities

leading to low enrollment and low internally generated funds which affected the ability of polytechnics to undertake certain activities including research. Above all, the traditional universities were poaching qualified and experienced staff in the polytechnics due to their improved and enhanced conditions of service making the polytechnics constantly in shortage of experienced and qualified staff which seriously undermined quality. The morale of the remaining staff of the polytechnics dwindled as they saw their conditions of service as unsatisfactory.

However, the unplanned manner in which the change was implemented generated anxiety and dissatisfaction with fears that the conversion of polytechnics to technical universities may not yield the desired outcome. The criteria for assessment and the recommendations for conversion appeared to be discretionary as some institutions that were initially adjudged as not qualified for immediate conversion were converted by executive approval. The change of government further aggravated the situation as the new government sought to amend the Technical Universities Act, Act 922 with Act 987 to bring in more reforms which delayed the conversion process and led to several agitations on the part of the staff. This article seeks to examine how the conversion process could have been managed differently to avoid the anxiety and frustrations that characterized it.

THE CONCEPT OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Studies have shown that the environment in which organizations operate experiences constant turbulence and the only way they can survive is by embracing change management (Burnes, 2004). Hashim (2013) stated that advancement in technology, changing consumer behaviour, changes in government policies, economic instability and competition from business rivals may require changes in organizations. According to Fleming and Millar (2019), change in an organization means changes in organizational structure, replacement of a chief executive officer, change of staff, change in management strategy, technological change, changes in shared values, product or services and changing from one system to another. Change management is defined as “making changes in a planned or systematic fashion” (UNDP, 2006:5). Understanding change is very important in order to overcome the attendant concomitant resistance due to anxiety, mistrust and insecurity (Fleming and Millar, 2019). Millar et al. (2018) suggested that to overcome resistance to change, organizations must use communication to appeal to the various stakeholders affected by the change, allow people who are affected by the change directly or indirectly to participate in the process, and negotiate with those adversely affected by the change and provide support to persuade them.

Burnes (2004) identified two approaches to change

management; the planned and emergent. The planned approach to change management was developed by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. Lewin (1951) saw change as a deliberate conscious effort usually initiated by managers and leaders to adopt alternative actions in order to achieve organizational goals. Dawson (2003) viewed planned change management as prescriptive in the sense that the nature of the change is often defined. For many years, the planned approach to change management prevailed in theory and practice until researchers began to doubt its ability to manage change in unstable conditions (Burnes, 2004). The emergent approach to change management emphasizes the unpredictable nature of change by claiming that change is dependent on the interplay of variables such as politics, economics, sociology and technology (Burnes, 2004). The emergent approach to change management sees change management as less prescriptive and more analytical (Burnes, 2004). Nevertheless, the planned approach to change management is more appropriate for a stable environment as compared to a dynamic and unpredictable environment.

Theoretical framework

Change management is a complex process and must be guided by scientific methods to give recognition to the practice (McEwen and Wills, 2007). Burnes (2004) identified three theories of change management; the Individual Perspective Theory, the Group Dynamics Theory and the Open System Theory.

The Individual Perspective Theory has two views; namely the Behaviourists and the Gestalt-Field Psychologists (Burnes, 2004). Behaviourists posit that behaviour is not innate but learnt through individual interactions with the environment (Burns, 2004). The fundamental principle of the Behaviourists Theory is that the attitudes of individuals are based on expected outcomes in the sense that attitudes that are appreciated become dominant while those that are not encouraged are abandoned (Burnes, 2006). Skinner (1974) succinctly put it that to change behaviour, it is necessary to change the factors that occasion it. Some managers in Ghana align themselves to this principle by rewarding loyalty at the expense of compliance with rules and regulations. On the other hand, the Gestalt-Field Theorists perceive behaviour as a trait that may have positive or negative consequences (French and Bell, 1984). They rejected the view that individual attitudes are the result of external influences but are rather based on traits. Both Behaviourists and Gestalt-Field views of the Individual Perspective of Change Management reflect the intrinsic and extrinsic factors of motivation put forward by Abraham Maslow in 1943 which are all still relevant today (Burnes, 2004).

The Group Dynamics Theory capitalized on the original

work of Kurt Lewin who stated that organizational change is dependent on groups rather than individuals (Schein, 1969). He claimed that individual behaviour is a result of interactions between members of a group. According to Cummings and Huse (1989), the Group Dynamics Theory posits that to effect change, managers and leaders must focus on changing the values, norms and roles of the group. Mullins (1989) corroborated this view by pointing to the fact that organizations now prefer to be seen as consisting of groups and teams as opposed to a collection of individuals.'

The Open System Theory of Change Management perceives organizations as a complex whole with interconnected separate units (Burnes, 2004). Any change in one unit will invariably affect the other units and eventually the whole organization (Scott, 1987). An open system receives inputs from the environment, processes them, and gives outputs to the environment (Skinner, 1974). By so doing they are influenced by the environment and can also be influenced by the environment. The Open System Theory of Change Management advocates that managers should focus on the various units of an organization to decide on how to vary them to bring about the desired change in an organization (Burnes, 2004). The theory seeks to determine how the various units of an organization should be integrated while pursuing a common goal through synergy rather than departmental gains at the detriment of the entire organization (Mullins, 1989).

The ADKAR model of change management

An institutional reform requires a change model to guide the transformation process to a successful end (Burnes, 2004). The ADKAR Model of Change Management developed by Prosci is multifaceted and seems to be best suited for institutional reform. The model identified five building blocks for effective change management.

Awareness of the need for change: This is what stimulates the change, the kind of change required and the likely consequences for the organization if change does not take place. All these need to be communicated to stakeholders to create awareness of the need for change.

Desire to support and participate in the change process: This factor talks about creating the impetus, drive and urgency for change and getting stakeholders to buy in (Campbell, 2008). This phase generates the energy needed to overcome any likely resistance to change by seeking the unflinching support of stakeholders through consultations.

Knowledge on how to change: For effective change management, managers and leaders must have a road

map of how to go about the change. As the saying goes 'if you do not know where you are going, all roads lead you there.' This phase requires equipping participants with the necessary skills through training to increase awareness and desire to minimise resistance. It will be an exercise in futility to want to effect change without knowing the kind of change required.

Ability to implement the change: Ability here implies having the requisite skills and attitude to participate in the change management process. Apart from training participants to equip them with skills, engaging change agents with practical experience is a precursor to successful change management. Pascale (1999) claimed that most change programs do not yield the desired outcomes partly because managers and leaders lack the skills and experience required to manage change.

Reinforcement to maintain change: Reinforcing a successful change is necessary to consolidate the gains. Rewarding people who support the change by adopting the right attitudes and behaviour; while persuading those with difficulties in understanding and adapting to the change is necessary to overcome resistance and go a long way to cement the gains. The investment in the change management process can only yield dividends if the gains made in the change are permanent.

DISCUSSION

Institutions of higher education operate as open systems in the sense that they interact with the environment in which they exist and are also influenced by the environment (Scott, 1987). The conversion of polytechnics to technical universities was necessitated by external factors such as low enrollment, lack of academic progression for graduates from polytechnics, unfair placement of Higher National Diploma graduates in the public sector and the drifting of staff from the polytechnics to the traditional universities. Judging from the challenges that the polytechnics were facing in Ghana, there was no doubt that institutional reform was the panacea to solving them. Even though the various stakeholders were interested in the reform, there was not much in terms of engagement with stakeholders and support for the various institutions by the National Council for Tertiary Education as an implementing agency. The National Council for Tertiary Education now referred to as the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission simply adopted a top-down approach which assumes that once senior management or policymakers formulate a policy, everything automatically falls in place, but this seldomly happens (UNDP, 2006). The National Council for Tertiary Education and other supporting teams appeared not to have actively engaged the institutions in such a way that they could own the change after the conversion

processes were over (Kotter, 1996). This became evident when at a point some heads of the institution did not know the title to use for themselves when asked to introduce themselves during meetings and this created anxiety and frustrations which could have been avoided if proper stakeholder engagement was done (Clark, 2010).

Although the various stakeholders of the polytechnics were aware of the factors necessitating the change which prevented resistance to the conversion, they did not quite understand the reforms. Kotter (1996:3) stated that "whenever you cannot describe the vision driving a change initiative in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you are in for trouble". Knowing the desired change is key to a successful change. Rogers (1983) claimed that knowledge is when stakeholders gain an understanding of what the change is about. One other thing that was taken for granted in the conversion was the ability of the technical team. It was taken for granted that no special skill or experience was required to implement the change. This created a deficit in the conversion process such that disagreements between stakeholders and the implementers had to be referred to the courts for adjudication since no provision was made for mediation in case of disputes. This resulted in avoidable disruptions to academic work and mistrust of the true intentions of the government. Many people usually expect to see the rewards of change within six to eighteen months (Kotter, 1996). Stakeholders normally expect returns for their forbearance in accepting the change which usually sustains the change (UNDP, 2006). However, how the conversion of polytechnics to technical universities was done robbed the stakeholders of the expected rewards. Considering the fact that there was no resistance to the conversion, one would have thought that the benefits would come in devoid of rancour.

CONCLUSION

Change management in the public sector in most countries is hardly conceptualized (UNDP, 2006). It appears policymakers and implementers of change sometimes engage in adventure, experimentation and expedition without having a road map to guide them through the process (Senge, 1999). The conversion of Polytechnics to Technical Universities was not an exception as it seemed to have been done haphazardly. Keeping track of the process was difficult because there was no clear road map to guide the entire process which generated anxiety and frustration among stakeholders with attendant labour unrest. The tension which characterized the transition could have been avoided if a planned approach to change management was adopted. Perhaps Prosci's ADKAR Model of Change Management would have been a useful guide to managing the reform. If the whole exercise were to be handled like a project

there would have been proper stakeholder engagement and participation thereby ensuring that all legitimate interests are catered for. Nevertheless, since change management is a process and not an event, it is expected that the process will continue until all the bottlenecks are identified and eliminated to ensure full implantation of the conversion.

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