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A policy on the shelf or a map for future action?

Perceptions of and reactions to a strategic plan for teaching and learning in higher education

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A policy on the shelf or a map for future action?

Perceptions of and reactions to a strategic plan for teaching and learning in higher education

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Abstract:

Three years after introduction of a strategic plan for teaching and learning within a Norwegian university faculty, ten stakeholders (e.g. heads of departments, administrative leaders) were interviewed about how they understood and endorsed the strategy, aiming to identify and analyse factors that hindered and/or facilitated its successful adoption.

Findings indicate that the strategy had little impact on teaching and learning activities, but it triggered some pedagogical discussion. The study explores the nature of these discussions and considers whether discussion fostered significant networks which have the potential to enhance teaching and learning. Implications for the implementation of teaching and learning policies are discussed.

Keywords: strategic plans for teaching and learning, changing teaching and learning, significant networks

Introduction

Strategic plans for teaching and learning underpin what senior managers and decision makers think should be given priority at an institution, and will often include recommendations for changes in the organisation and practice of teaching. Gibbs, Habeshaw, and York (2000) claim that by developing and implementing a teaching and learning strategy, universities have the ability to steer learning and teaching strategically. However, the danger with this "steering" metaphor is assuming that people who enact the strategy, that is the teachers, their managers and the learners, are passive participants, they are being steered. Though this may work for some people some of the time, change can be achieved more effectively when people are engaged. They need to understand what they are doing, be committed to achieving the stated ends, and gather and use resources actively. Teachers, their managers, and the

students all need to think, plan, decide, reject and "own" what they do (Newton, 2003; Swenk, 1999).

How academics understand a strategy, the degree to which they endorse it and how they actually use it in practice can vary (Gibbs, 2000; Newton, 2003). Newton (2000, 2003) argues that a strategy that clearly relates to practitioners' day-to-day activities, will encourage academics to attach meaning to various aspects of policy as they interact with it. It follows, therefore, that it is useful to focus on the meanings academics attach to policy. How do those who are implementing the policy work with, change, or perhaps "work around" it? Despite the clear utility of asking such questions, Clegg and Smith (2010) claim there has been relatively little written about how teaching and learning strategies are viewed and actively reinterpreted by staff in the decade since Newton's call for investigating staff perceptions (2000, 2003). This paper addresses Newton's concern by concentrating on stakeholders' perceptions of one university' policy.

Strategic plans for teaching and learning in higher education

Trowler defines strategic plans as "the explicit articulation of current actions or preferred actions undertaken in pursuit of a stated objective" (Trowler, 2002, p.2). The general intention of actions in relation to teaching and learning is to develop and change teaching, and thereby to enhance student learning. Teaching and learning strategies often arise from a central initiative, usually modified through consultation and redrafting over time. Once agreed, it is usually up to different groups of people e.g. heads of departments (HoD), administrators and teachers, to implement strategies as they see fit (Gibbs, 2000).

Gibbs (2003) notes an increased emphasis on strategic educational development compared with what was in place in the 1990s. In Norway the emphasis on strategy-work was amplified after the implementation of a national Quality Reform in 2003 (Michelsen & Aamodt, 2007), as part of an expanded focus on decentralisation and autonomy in the sector (Stensaker, 2008). This increased emphasis can be explained as universities' attempts to deal with changes in higher education (Larsen & Langfeldt, 2005; Stensaker 2006), such as massification, a more diverse student cohort and the need to provide support throughout students' studies to give all a fair chance to succeed (Kreber, 2007). A strategic plan can be both desirable and advantageous in that it provides a focal point for teaching and learning

within the institution; it enhance the university's chances for effectively meeting rapid changes (Rowley & Sherman, 2001).

Despite an increased emphasis on strategic plans for teaching and learning, there is little evidence that strategies derived from the best intentions of those who draft them actually are implemented as planned (Gibbs, Habeshaw, & Yorke, 2000; Newton, 2003). Newton (2000, p.162) notes that "policy implementation is complex and uneven", and several factors will have an impact on how a strategy is understood, enacted and endorsed.

Rowley and Sherman (2002) claim that the main reason for why a university failure in implementing a strategy is that it miscalculates the willingness at the local level to accept the plan. A strategic plan for teaching and learning has transfer value and a life expectancy directly proportional to its "fit" and/or mismatch with the local culture (Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2008). Culture is here understood to mean "sets of taken-for-granted values, attitudes and ways of behaving, which are articulated through and reinforced by recurrent practices among groups of people in a given context" (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.23). The interaction of strategic steer and local culture can explain why strategic priorities and suggestions for development and change often have limited influence on teachers' classroom practices. Another reason for strategic plans being contested is because different actors and interest groups have different perspectives on what is important for policy making and on the implementation process. Those who dissent often represent competing interests, voices and discourses (Larsen & Langfeldt, 2005; Newton, 2003). Initiatives and suggestions will be filtered and adopted by individual teachers or/and workgroups who follow different rules, conventions and have different discourse preferences (Trowler, Fanghanel, & Wareham, 2005).

Moreover, a strategy will probably have limited impact on teaching practice if sufficient direction, support and resources are not provided for the academics who are implementing the strategy. Finally, there is a strong tradition among academic staff of autonomy and individualism in working practices (Bryman, 2007). This, too, might account for why teachers do not respond well to teaching and learning initiatives perceived as coming from the managers. The practice of teaching and learning remains remarkably traditional.

With all these hindrance for implementation of strategies, it is reasonable to ask whether it is possible to implement a strategy for teaching and learning that will have any positive impact on the development of teaching and learning. There is, of course, no single model for

successful implementation of a strategy. However, leadership seems one critical element. Leaders need to support and value the implementation of changes, and see to it that innovations and developments are sustained (Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2009; Rowley & Sherman, 2002). All levels of leadership seem to be important, from the Vice Chancellor to the heads of departments (HoD) and program co-ordinators. Though, Trowler (2002) is critical of an over-simplistic adoption of management models by academic organisations, because these management models are based on a rational-purposive account of policy-making and implementation. These models presume that to achieve the desired goals, behaviour is purposive and consistent, and that action can be prescribed by managers for those required to act in order to reach the goals. In such systems, where contradictory goals exist, it is assumed that there is enough authority invested in the manager to resolve the contradictions (Swenk, 1999, p.2). Swenk (1999) argues that these assumptions are the underlying conceptual basis for strategic planning, and points out that the assumptions do not match the culture among academics in higher education. One significant characteristic of the culture of universities is that the relationship between policy initiatives at the upper level of the "implementation staircase" seems to be loosely coupled with outcomes achieved by front line academics (Swenk, 1999; Trowler 2002). What topics are focused and discussed in the context of a particular decision depends less on the specific decision than on "the timing of their joint arrivals and the existence of alternative arenas for exercising problems" (Cohen and March, 1986, p. 206). One reason for academic preferences for "loose coupling" is that it gives a flexibility that is congruent with academic autonomy and freedom (Swenk, 1999). Trowler (2002) concludes that this "loose coupling" makes policy processes organic and complex.

Change processes also involve important social interactions at the level of workgroups (Trowler et al., 2005). These workgroups are involved in the social construction of realities related to their areas of common engagement. In this way, they develop a shared discourse and a unique way of using the tools available to them. The result is a context-specific understanding of the particular teaching and learning issues with which they are engaged. The social structure of practice, its power relations, and conditions for legitimacy define the kinds of possibilities that are created for learning in the collegiate network (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The implementation processes need to address the particular circumstances of the specific university/faculty where the strategy is going to be embedded (Rowley and Sherman 2002). If the local culture is not acknowledged, it can be a barrier to change (ibid.).

In sum, in a climate of increased strategic planning in higher education, this article contributes to the research on strategic planning by focusing on how key persons, named as stakeholders in this study, viewed and interpreted a recently approved strategy for teaching and learning in one faculty of a Norwegian university. These stakeholders were involved in the development of the strategy and in its implementation. Two overall research questions are addressed in the study, first: what are the consequences for teaching practice at the local level when an institutional strategic plan for teaching and learning is implemented? Second: what factors facilitate and hinder successful adoption of strategic plans for teaching and learning? Based on stakeholders' perceptions of the strategy, the discussion focuses mainly on hindrances for adoption of the strategy and on what can be done to facilitate implementation in order to develop and change teaching within higher education.

Method

The institutional context of the study

A strategic plan for teaching and learning was approved by the board at the Faculty of Social Science at a Norwegian university for the period from 2006 to 2010. The university was established in 1968 and has a strong regional, innovative and transdiciplinary profile (Stensaker 2006). In 2009, when the interview study was conducted, 7911 students were enrolled at the university and 2389 of these were at the Faculty of Social Science where the study was sited. The number of academic positions at the faculty was 465. The university had previously adopted a strategic plan for research and now, for the first time, was doing so for teaching and learning using a process that required faculties to approve the plan. This strategy for teaching and learning came in the wake of a nation-wide Quality Reform that, amongst other factors, emphasised a student-centered approach. The faculty-level committee of Academic Affairs had the responsibility for developing the strategy, and all departments within the Faculty were invited to contribute to its development. Five of nine departments in the Faculty where the study was conducted contributed to the discussions and development of the faculty strategy.

The overall aim of the 2006 strategic plan was to increase the quality of teaching and learning. The plan had four priority areas, which were operationalised through concrete subgoals. These priorities and subgoals are presented below with a selection of Faculty-level actions taken. Note that the actions taken at the Faculty level are illustrated with brief but representative examples.

1. Learning activities and assessment.

   Subgoals: all departments should develop students' skills in oral and written communication, from bachelor-level to PhD. The departments should test and evaluate different types of assessments and the use of external examiners.

   Examples of measures taken:

   - All new students were offered a 4-hour seminar about "learning-habits and learning strategies", in order to strengthen their learning. This seminar was organised by the Faculty, and was carried out in the autumn 2007. The experiences from these seminars were used to develop the course "Analysing and writing of academic texts".

   - A first semester course in "Analysing and writing of academic texts" was established in 2009, as part of the first semester studies. A committee prepared the proposal, and the departments were given responsibility for running the course.

2. Develop an ICT infra-structure and its use as a learning tool.

   Subgoals: all departments should use ICT as a way of organising and communicating information and as a learning tool. The departments should also develop students' skills in information literacy.

   Examples of measures taken:

   - A survey was initiated in 2006 across the Faculty to assess the use of portfolio assessment among teachers, linked to digital learning platforms. The survey concluded that the teachers had different understandings and practices related to academic portfolios, and few used digital learning platforms as support. After this survey, all departments were invited to participate in a project for developing digital competence related to use of electronic portfolio for learning and assessment. Academics from 5 different modules at 3 different departments participated. The experiences from the project were summarized in a report.

   - Information literacy was included as a topic in the course "Analysing and writing of academic texts", autumn 2009.

3. Develop academic pedagogical competence.

   Subgoals: the Faculty will clarify requirements for formalised pedagogical competence for all teachers at the university. The Faulty should initiate peer review of teaching among academics.

   Examples of measures taken:

- With external funding, a project regarding peer review of teaching among colleagues was initiated by the Faculty in 2008. Six teachers participated giving and receiving feedback on each other's teaching. The conclusion from this project was that teachers found peer review very useful for developing their teaching, and it was recommended as part of the courses offered in teaching and learning at the whole university.

4. Evaluation of teaching.

   Subgoals: all departments should develop better ways to evaluate student learning outcomes. It was emphasised that the evaluation of teaching needed to include students own achievements in the studies, and midterm evaluation was underscored as important. All departments should evaluate alignment between learning outcomes and course content and learning activities.

   Examples of measures taken:

   - The departments revised their program and module descriptions (curricula / and syllabi) in 2007, based on a template the Faculty had developed as part of implementing the qualification framework.

Within this context of strategic goals, specified subgoals, departmental initiatives and local interpretations of top-down requirements, an interview study was conducted in 2009.

Data collection and informants of the study

A total of ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviewees were chosen because they held positions that had been involved in the development of the strategy, and/or those who had strategic positions related to the implementation process and/or had been a part of influencing Faculty teaching activity. Interviewees had the following Faculty roles:

- Faculty administrative leaders (2)
- Heads of department (HoD) and members of the Faculty Board (the Faculty Board consisted of all heads of departments for the faculty, all of whom were also teachers) (6)
- Members of the Committee of Academic Affairs (both were also teachers) (2)

The interviews were conducted by a researcher who had also been the Vice-dean for education from 2005-2009; interviews did not involve the author. The interviewer had been involved in the development of the strategy, and she focused interviews on identifying how

stakeholders constructed their own understanding of the strategic plan. Interview questions were derived from research questions that were elaborated in an interview guide. She asked questions designed to discover what respondents regarded as the opportunities and challenges in implementing the plan. Due to other demands the interviewer could not work with the data and was not involved in the drafting of this article.

For this study, the focus of the analysis will be based on three of the seven interview questions from that the interviewer's guide: (1) How do you perceive the approved strategic plan for teaching and learning?, (2) What do you regard as the primary opportunities and challenges of this strategy?, and (3) How was this plan enacted in the departments?

The interviews lasted about 60 minutes, were audio taped and later transcribed. Quotations used in this article have been translated from Norwegian.

Analyses

A content analysis method derived from Flick (2002) was applied for analysing the interviews. Analysis alternated between reading the transcripts, categorizing, reading relevant literature, returning back to the transcript, and so on, in an interactive process that allowed issues and experiences to be identified and categorised.

In the first phase of the analysis the responses for each question were categorised under headings as follows: the way the stakeholders' talked about how the plan was enacted, their perceptions of whether the strategic plan had any implications on teaching practice, and the types of opportunities and challenges they identified with the strategic plan of teaching and learning. The second phase in data analysis involved a specific focus on the statements to decide whether or not stakeholders referred to factors that facilitated or hindered the implementation process. It turned out that they were mostly concerned about factors that hindered the implementation of the strategy, so the analysis, too, concentrated on hindering factors. Statements were classified as hindrances when the comments referred to struggles to embed the strategy in the different departments. The third phase involved looking for similarities and consistencies with previously published and relevant research. Through iteration between the transcript, prior research and theories, findings became evident. The analysis can be seen as a dynamic process because it remained open towards incorporating data- and theory driven modification throughout the process.

To validate the findings, the analysis was discussed with and verified by the researcher who had conducted the interviews.

Ethical considerations

The participants in the study were informed in the same way and all were informed that they could withdraw at any time. When the decision was made to use interview data for a purpose other than that described at the time of data collection, that is to use data for this study, participants were contacted and asked whether they accepted alternative use of their responses. One participant did not want her interview used because she had, as already mentioned, changed her mind. This interview was not included.

The interviewer's close involvement with the strategy can be considered both as an advantage and a challenge for validity of the interview data. One strong advantage is her "insider" knowledge of the process of the development of the plan and its content. One possible challenge is that such closeness can function as a hindrance to exploring all facets of the plan. Additionally, the interviewees might have found it challenging to be direct and honest since the interviewer was known to be strongly involved in its development. On the other hand, the author who was analysing and reporting the results was not involved in the development of the strategic plan for teaching and learning.

Findings

The main questions addressed in the study are: what are the consequences for teaching practice at the local level when an institutional strategic plan for teaching and learning is implemented, and what factors can facilitate and hinder successful adoption of the strategy of teaching and learning. The findings revealed diversity and complexities in the perceptions of the strategic plan among stakeholders. However, three areas of discussion were identified and serve as section headings in the presentation below. The areas of discussion are: the consequences of the strategic plan for teaching practice, factors that facilitated and factors that hindered successful adoption of the strategic plan.

Consequences of the strategic plan

When describing their reactions and ideas related to the new strategic plan, 8 of 10 interviewees were mainly positive. They saw the plan as usefully shaping and influencing their actions. One HoD said:

When different issues get formalised in a plan, your awareness increases, you get to know what you have to focus on. This plan has contributed to an increased awareness of teaching. It has affected what steps we have taken in our teaching, the way we have been thinking, and it has affected what we have initiated. It has been a steering tool for the department.

Another HoD emphasised the positive aspects and concurred that the policy worked well at guiding decisions:

It's about having a bigger picture of what we do, and a long term perspective. You need a strategy that tells you where to go, why you should "go there" and how to do it. Having a strategy is important.

A faculty administrator claimed the plan made her work more meaningful:

The work suddenly became totally different. We got a new focus when the heads of the Faculty became so clear about what to prioritise. And we could also require what needed to be followed up on. Before the strategy was approved, I felt lonely in my work. The administration that I dealt with did not have any agenda. They said that the agenda should be up to the academic leadership take care of. But the agenda came with the plan.

The above quotes show that the plan was for some an effective trigger for setting priorities, giving action a shape and focus, and making clear how one's own work fit into the "bigger picture".

Two of ten interviewees, both HoDs, ignored the plan completely. One said:

I have not had any relation to this plan as HoD, because nobody has communicated with me about it, not even at the Faculty HoD-meetings. I feel that it has not been requested that there are some main challenges that we as HoDs should pay attention to. But, well this is maybe just because of my bad memory.

The other commented:

I think I'm fairly indifferent to it, simply because it is an obligation that just got forced upon us. So there is no need to either accept or fight against it. To ask about this plan, well the Faculty leadership didn't even manage to help us with the overload of work

we have at our department. They didn't even dare to lift a finger to help us figure stuff out, so for us, we're all about just doing the teaching we have to do. We have our own plan, and we teach according to that. It's business as usual.

Neither of the last two HoDs described impacts on teaching and learning in their departments, characterising the policy as a "policy on the shelf".

In all interviews, few remarks were about the content of the strategy, but those who did mention it were mainly positive, noting opportunities that the strategy had created and pointing to how the strategy increased people's awareness of different teaching and learning issues. In the view of 8/10 interviewees, it gave the development of teaching a push in a positive direction.

Facilitators for implementing the strategy
Several cited instances where the strategy had led to a concrete change in practice. One example was the establishment of a course in academic writing for first semester students, with the intention of increasing students' skills in academic writing and reading. This goal addressed a main area in the strategy. Comments provide evidence that several stakeholders agreed with the underpinning goals and values of the strategy, exemplified by a member of the Committee of Academic Affairs:

> I really supported the plan. There is too much traditional teaching being used in the various departments, so a new plan was necessary. This plan helped people to rethink; it helped people to be aware of what kinds of possibilities there are. Not to just focus on all the work that must be done.

As already mentioned, change processes in teaching and learning involve social interactions within workgroups. The interviewees were not directly asked to describe the social interactions in different workgroups, but while talking about the strategy, they all brought up different facets of how the strategy affected interactions among teachers. Based on these statements, it was possible to draw a picture of their local culture(s).

One HoD, saw the strategic plan as a steering tool at "his" department and described the way teachers at "his" department dealt with teaching:

> In a way there is a good climate in the department; people try out different things in their teaching. I mean it is important to do something basic with the pedagogical

foundation. Not least of all because we have different types of students now than before. These students need more structure in the teaching, not because they are lazy and do not want to work, but because they are studying wrong.

This head emphasised that it is important to have a structure within the department that provides a space for discussing and developing teaching. There seemed to be a network among "his" teachers that enhanced teaching and learning in that department. Another head also claimed that they spent time discussing different issues about teaching at a formal meeting in "his" department that took place once or twice a semester. However, this head seemed not to connect these discussions to the approved strategic plan. He said: "but how much we connected these discussions to the strategy? I really don't remember".

Within these two departments there seemed to be a local culture that emphasised teaching and learning.

Hindrances for implementing the strategy

Even though the majority the stakeholders were mainly positive towards the strategic plan for teaching and learning, they underscored that it had been challenging to get the strategy accepted among the teachers. Several reasons were mentioned, presented below.

The main challenge for getting the strategy implemented and accepted was explained by the status which research activities have over teaching. Research is typically defined as the main activity among academics. One faculty administrator said:

> My experience was that the plan competed with the strategic plan for research. When we started to work with the different departments, it was a bit difficult to get it accepted.

Others stressed the imbalance between teaching and research, exemplified by a member of the Committee of Academic Affairs:

> It's about status. The university is mainly about research and then teaching. The strategic plan for teaching suffers under that regime. I think that's very clear. Those who really want to work with teaching do not get much support. It is not linked to any status or money. There is pressure from the administration in the organisation to publish in important journals. Everything else falls outside as not important.

While a HoD emphasised:

> Teaching is often invisible, aside from those who are involved. If something new is implemented, it needs to be communicated. My experiences from my own field, is that we do not discuss teaching, it's more like, - well, not a private duty, but a task every employee does and then in a manner that is not as communal as research. So there is a need to go public about what is going on. We have research seminars, but we do not have seminars where teaching and learning activities are discussed, you know. This is a missing link in the organisation.

Another hindrance for implementing the strategy was that there had been many reforms at the university: a comprehensive structural reform that caused changes in the organisation structure, an educational reform that entailed major shifts in teaching priorities, and a budget reform that among other things caused changes in funding structures. A member of the Committee of Academic Affairs said:

> This strategic plan for teaching and learning came on top of several other changes and reforms. In a way it almost drowned in these other massive reform-movements that just took over. The big reform (the educational reform) that came before this strategy, we did a lot of work related to that big reform. We are a new and young community at my department. I just felt that I got so tired of everything. There were so many, also in my department, who just closed their eyes and said: "we never do this anyway. And why should we keep changing the wrapping when we already have the content?" This was the atmosphere at my department, a general tiredness of reforms. This had impact on how this strategic plan got implemented. It was put in the background and got little attention.

While a HoD stated:

> We have had several reforms. […]People are very tired of changes.

Several of the stakeholders mentioned that after the strategy was approved, teachers resisted it. This resistance was not directed towards the content in the plan, but it was a more general scepticism of having a plan for teaching at all. Two HoDs underlined that:

> When strategic plans like this plan are going to be implemented, there is sabotage and a new round of discussions. When it came to the department level, the strategy was

counteracted. We need to be better at identifying the arenas of dissent towards new strategies. And we need to be tougher. At my department, the strategy has had no impact. Pedagogy in general is met with contempt.

Many on the academic staff regard a decision from the Faculty board as an invitation to a rematch. They start to haggle again. It is obvious that several of the academics have trouble accepting these decisions.

This resistance was described as a consequence of the private character that teaching has in higher education. One HoD stated:

There is always somebody who sabotages plans like this. They think that the department has no business meddling with what they are into or how they do things in their teaching.

Discussing and developing teaching seemed not common, as exemplified by a quotation from a HoD:

Generally, I think we do not discuss teaching enough. But I believe this is the standard, my department is not different. We have this annual evaluation from the students, but it is the administration and the department board who look at these reports. There is not a systematic discussion of these reports. Maybe some small changes are done based on these evaluations, but not much.

While a member of the Committee of Academic Affairs said:

We don't have discussions about teaching, only about research in the different research groups.

Changes and development seemed often to depend on enthusiastic individuals. A member of the Committee of Academic Affairs expressed it like this:

At our department, we have the head of the department, and we have a vice-chair who has the main responsibility for research and a vice-chair for teaching. Well, this vice-chair for teaching is not included in the conversations about teaching. She felt ignored, and like she had responsibility for something she was not allowed to take responsibility for. So the dialogue and discussions, which should have happened about teaching and learning, did not happen. Nevertheless, several things related to teaching

are happening in our department, for example formative assessment. However, it was not the leaders of the department who initiated. These are more individual projects. That doesn't help us to build a good community around teaching.

Several of the stakeholders reinforced that the institution needed to develop and change teaching practice, as exemplified by one HoD:

We need to do something; it is not enough to just say that teaching is second priority. It needs to be valued in the organisation. It needs to be visible.

The local culture within the departments seemed mainly to regard teaching as a private and personal domain. Some instruments, for example student evaluations, that are designed to trigger reflection and discussion in teaching and learning were reported to be ineffective. However, several of the stakeholders underscored that there is a need to strengthen the workgroups in order to enhance development and change in teaching and student learning.

Discussion

The research questions asked in this study are: what consequences can a strategic plan for teaching and learning have on teaching practice, and what factors facilitate and hinder successful implementation of the strategy? The above findings provide insight into how this strategic plan for teaching and learning was understood, endorsed and enacted by interviewees as representative voices of the many stakeholders affected by the policy. Factors that hindered and facilitated adaption of the strategy also became evident. However, the findings need to be viewed with some caution as the sample of ten respondents limits any ability to broadly generalise. It does, however offer a fine-grained, close-up analysis of these particular respondents' perceptions of the strategy.

A review of factors and measures which might have had (and might have in future) an impact on the implementation of the strategic plan is discussed below. The stakeholders were mostly concerned about factors that hindered the implementation of the strategy, so the discussion will mainly concentrate on these factors. What facilitated the implementation will be discussed together with what was seen as important to emphasise for successful implementation of the strategy.

Consequences of the strategic plan

By exploring the issues and experiences presented and discussed by these stakeholders, it became apparent that they were mainly positive regarding the aims and subgoals in the approved strategy. Accepting the values in the strategy can, according to Gibbs et al. (2008), have impact on the implementation of the strategy. The stakeholders emphasised that the strategy increased the focus on teaching and learning in their departments, and had been an effective trigger for setting the priorities in some of the departments. At the same time they admitted that the strategy had less impact on practice of teaching than likely intended. As several researchers (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Olsson, 2011; Rowley & Sherman, 2001; Swenk, 1999) have identified: teaching continues in much of the same way as it always has in spite of new strategic plans emphasising development and changes. The loose coupling between the decisions made according to the strategy for teaching and learning, - the political initiatives and the outcome of the strategy, became evident.

Hindrances and facilitators for implementing the strategy

One of the hindrances to getting the strategy embedded in the organisation seemed to be a general reform fatigue at the university. Several reforms in recent years had engendered feelings of confusion and resignation. Considerable demands had been placed on teachers by shifting policies and strategies regarding teaching, assessment, quality assurance, funding and organisational structures. In a study of policy reception and implementation among different groups of academics, Newton (2003) also found this feeling of reform and strategy overload to be common among academics. A consequence of this complex and overlapping reform experience might be a feeling of loss of autonomy in front-line academic work. In addition, the increased focus on strategic plans for teaching and learning can be seen as a policy shift towards defining teaching as a legitimate object of scrutiny and improvement (Clegg and Smith 2010). Newton (2003) characterises it as evidence of a rise of an 'audit' culture which those being 'audited' perceive as leading to their deprofessionalisation as academics. Teachers who are engaged in day in, day out teaching and learning activities might experience strategic plans as increased bureaucratisation of higher education which only adds demands on their time (Smith, 2006; Stensaker, 2008).

The stakeholders in this study did support the need of a strategy for teaching and learning, but discussions and reflection about the strategy among those who must put the ideas into practice, the teachers, seemed to be resisted. Teacher resistance may not primarily be due to what is suggested, but can be seen as an automatic, knee-jerk reaction to the process itself,

perceived as managerialism and imposed requirements. As Swenk (1999, p.1) puts it, this resistance can be understood as a "culture clash" between the underlying conceptual basis of the strategic planning and the culture among teachers in higher education. In addition, somewhat pejoratively, Welch (1995, p. 12) refers to academics as, to some degree "lethargic, undynamic, resistant to change". A more positive explanation would be that teachers' values are deeply held and their values are linked to their research, their discipline and on preserving their classroom privacy and autonomy. These are long-standing habits and reactions, and might lead to workgroups not being receptive to new ideas and instead adopting conservative stances to maintain well-established practice and remaining insular. A strategic plan for teaching and learning must take into consideration the local culture within the organisation. If these terms are not met, it can be a barrier to change (Rowley and Sherman, 2002).

The primary explanation for why the policy was considered to have less impact on teaching and learning activities than desired is linked to the status accorded to research activities. One of the two HoDs who openly sabotaged the strategy, said that research was more important than teaching and that he did not prioritize teaching reforms in "his" department. The perceived worthiness of the strategy itself may, according to Rowley and Sherman (2002), affect its implementation. In this study, some stakeholders saw the imbalance as more problematic and reflected on the status of research in relation to development and changes of teaching and learning. These stakeholders described the local culture of their departments as places wherein academics engaged in both research and teaching, although research activity remained the main priority. Research was regarded as a collegial and shared domain that operates within a framework that involves shared ideas, information, norms, documents and tools. All were specific to research activities. In some departments, the prioritisation and value of research was exemplified by research seminars that fostered research-related interactions and relationships, and offered opportunities for sharing ideas, for helping each other, and for getting involved in each other's research-related work. It was also reflected in the existence of a strategic plan for research that was in active use, several of the stakeholders said they actively used it for planning research activity. This, in turn affected the discussion of how departmental priorities were determined. In relation to research, one could perceive workgroups operating as true communities (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991) and their work in communities was effective in enhancing research. Impact was, to a certain extent, reinforced by the fact that awards and promotions for academics depend largely on research activities. With demanding workload pressures, research often gets first priority in any "spare" time.

Anything that is not explicitly specified in one's responsibilities seems to be squeezed out. Gibbs (2005) claims that while teaching at the university is touted as an integral part of one's duties, teachers do not feel responsible for developing teaching.

The majority of the interviewees stressed that there were few possibilities to share ideas, ask questions and develop knowledge and skills around teaching and learning. The practice of teaching was viewed as a private duty. Organisational structures and culture in higher education create a situation where teachers often become isolated and are unaware of the practices of others. There is a lack of formal opportunities to discuss and share teaching and learning experiences. This is confirmed in a study of Roxå and Mårtensson (2009), who conclude that individual teachers rarely talk about teaching in larger and more public settings. However, they act in accordance to small "significant networks" where they have private and sincere conversations about teaching. Mårtensson et al. (2011) claim that these networks are mainly based on personal experience and therefore often run out of ideas and new perspectives. Since these conversations mainly take place backstage without any documentation, they often have little impact on the overt and "public" local culture at the departments. Talking about teaching and learning in these small networks might raise awareness of teaching and learning, but does not automatically lead to action and change. It might just confirm and maintain established practice.

In this study, the local culture fostered little interactions connected to teaching. Lack of engagement and interaction at the grass roots level makes it challenging if not impossible, to get a strategic plan for teaching and learning approved and enacted among academics. Universities, as examples of loosely coupled organisations, have a strong hierarchy of teachers operating in the ethos of academic freedom, with little effective leadership (Swenk 1999). The leaders do not supervise, control or award teachers for being willing to align their teaching to a strategy; instead, it is up to the individual teacher to decide whether or not to engage with the approved strategy. However, by putting an issue on the agenda and focusing on it, Laksov, Mann and Dahlgren (2008) claim that lack of interest or motivation can shift – teachers can become interested. By developing and implementing a strategy, teaching and learning issues might be put on the formal and the informal agenda of a workgroup or department. Policy implementation can then become a trigger for interaction and discussion which, in turn, can lead to academics negotiating meaning and becoming aware of their own and others' understanding of teaching and learning.

In some cases, the introduction of the strategy at the Faculty of Social Science did increase the focus on teaching and learning. It generated debate and engagement around different topics in the strategy, and the strategy led to action, one example being the course in analysing and writing academic texts for all first-semester students. Additionally, the approved strategy was used by one of the HoDs as an opportunity to initiate development of a specific strategic plan for teaching and learning within "his" department. This particular HoD claimed that departmental strategy gave priority to changes and developments which academics themselves had determined to be important. This exemplifies Gibbs' (2003) point that successful implementation of a strategy requires that departments develop a local version of the central strategy that takes the institutional priorities as a starting point, and customizes them so that they make sense within their discipline and environment.

At best, strategies for teaching and learning can generate a defined "space" for teachers to share and develop practice and to build personal and professional knowledge and expertise. Once established, knowledge and expertise can enable them to address practical problems (Gibbs et al., 2009; Wenger 1998). The goal is not engendering conformity, but rather, participating in a process that emphasises reflection, discussions and sharing different teaching and learning issues for the purpose of enhancing students learning in specific ways. This might be a step in the direction of building workgroups that continue to strengthen and clarify shared values placed on teaching and students learning.

There is a need to nurture and strengthen networks / workgroups of teachers in order to structure spaces for teachers to debate and discuss teaching and learning. Bryman (2007, p.27) calls it the "significance of collegiality". By not taking an active step in this direction, communities are unlikely to achieve their full potential (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). However, relying too heavily on locally developed activities may result in reproduction of "dysfunctional local traditions that needs to be confronted" (Boud, 2000, p. 9). In line with the scholarship of teaching and learning approaches (Boyer, 1990; Kreber, 2002) development and change of teaching practices should draw actively from pedagogical literature and theory in order to deepen and broaden teacher's understanding (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009).

Conclusion

This small scale study gave a fine-grained picture of stakeholders' perceptions of a faculty-wide strategic plan for teaching and learning. Only two of the interviewees ignored the plan, while the other stakeholders emphasised that the strategy was important. It is, however, impossible to say, based on this small survey, which reaction is the more "typical". Nevertheless, all respondents admitted that the strategy had less impact on teaching practice than likely intended, yet where it was more successful, there was more work done to integrate the ideas of the strategies into the priorities of the local departmental culture. The dominant and shared values for all interviewees nonetheless seemed to emphasise research activities over teaching activities.

The study confirms the characteristics of strategy implementations as a complex, non-linear process where the local culture has the power to define the effect of the strategy. The study also confirms the importance of nurturing networks that encourage sharing, reflection and risk-taking, all of which are necessary to change teaching and learning. As Bryman (2007) asserts; it is critical to foster a collegial climate of mutual supportiveness in order to develop and change teaching. However, without intentional structuring and cultivation of spaces for that kind of work, the networks that do develop will be dependent upon people's goodwill and use of their spare time. Participation in such unstructured settings is more likely to be partial (Wenger et al., 2002). Developing these kinds of spaces is not done easily and quickly, and there is a need for long-term planning when implementing a strategy designed to (Rowley and Sherman, 2002). As Knight and Trowler (2000) remind their readers, it is one thing to *say* that departments need to develop communities that enhance teaching and learning, but another to actually *make it happen*. In future studies, it would be interesting to explore effective ways to reinforce and nurture networks that rally around shared values related to teaching.

Even though the strategic plan for teaching and learning in this study had less impact on teaching practice than intended, it seems to have contributed to increased focus on teaching and learning in other ways. That can be seen as an important trigger for fruitful pedagogical discourse, which remains a key ingredient for nurturing a community's commitment to enhancing teaching and learning for all.

discussions on previous drafts. Marit Allern was decisive in creating this paper, conducting interviews and generously sharing her data for this work.

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