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Managing a Decentralized Student Recruitment Initiative in a Higher Education Institution: The Experience of Using a Double-Adoptive Approach

Kendall Jarrett

University of Kent (United Kingdom)

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Background

In 2017 the Higher Education and Research Bill was introduced in the UK to ‘deliver greater competition and choice’ for HE students ‘while safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom’ (Dept. for Business Innovation & Skills, 2016: 2). At an institutional level¹ this meant an increased pressure to maintain and increase the number of undergraduate students recruited for the 2017-18 academic year. Post clearing (a period prior to the start of the academic year whereby students can be accepted on courses that have under-recruited, thus enabling students to change institutions) it became apparent that the institution in question had significant recruitment issues. Lower than expected 2017/18 student admission rates had arrived following: 1) a decrease in student application numbers across the sector; 2) an inconsistent institutional commitment to student recruitment and retention; and 3) a broadly ineffective clearing strategy that could not respond in time to aggressive competitor institution recruitment tactics. Thus, with the encumbrance of unrealistic institutional growth projections of 5% each year (based more on historical growth data rather than a realistic understanding of current environmental pressures), the virility of current strategic recruitment plans became a prioritized staff focus.

The initiative

In the absence of a fit-for-purpose recruitment plan that mapped ‘the route between the perceived present situation and the desired future situation’ (West-Burnham, 1994: 82), the initiation and implementation stages of a new student recruitment plan were enacted (Fullan, 2007). From a decision-making perspective this change in recruitment plan was a top-down initiative devised by the Head of School (HoS) in response to an institutional directive to act based on a decrease in market and market share of new students recruited by the institution. Historically at the institution, when a recruitment response was needed, a centralized recruitment team would coordinate/enact a response in collaboration with the marketing and widening participation teams. Each response would typically see school staff invited to participate at opportune times in a manner more akin to an adaptive approach to improvement e.g. when decision making would fall to the school themselves (Hopkins, 2002). An example

¹ Note: The institution being discussed in this article is not the institution to which the author is affiliated.

of this might be the design of a workshop for visiting school students or the marketing of a unique research event that may have recruitment orientated benefit. However, on this occasion schools were made aware that the central recruitment team had limited capacity/capability to coordinate and resource a response, thus leaving it to each HoS to devise and pursue their own recruitment agenda.

Typically, as mentioned previously, any decentralization of ownership to schools to devise their own recruitment strategy would signify a more adaptive approach to change which advocates for the inclusion of staff within the decision making process as they are supposedly more attuned to the context surrounding the need for improvement (Hopkins, 2002). Such an organically-orientated approach to improvement has the potential to promote a greater likelihood of staff willingness to be involved as well as outcome success (Harris, 2001; Hopkins, 2002). Yet, when the opportunity came about to plan the recruitment initiative during the first post-clearing team meeting, a second top-down directive was offered, this time from the HoS, with little-to-no opportunity for wider staff involvement in decision making. To help explain this new two-step, decidedly 'linear approach to educational change' (Hoban, 2002: 13), the term double-adoptive approach was conceived. This term is an adaptation of Hopkins' (2002) use of the term 'adoptive approach' which he uses to describe a top down process of decision making as a function of educational change management. Thus, in this article, the term double-adoptive approach is used to explain and explore the two distinct top-down stages of instruction used to manage a student recruitment initiative.

Methodology

Researcher-as-participant

The experiential account of the implementation phase of this decentralisation initiative was completed via a researcher-as-participant approach. As Probst (2015: 149) discusses it is unusual for researchers to inhabit both the participant and researcher roles simultaneously as they are in essence 'providing data that they are also analysing'. That said, being part of the response team directed to action the initiative offered a unique perspective as to the everyday decision making, communications and management processes that drove the response. It enabled oneself to be 'affected by the encounter' and then be better positioned to 'continuously refine one's way of observing' the implementation of the initiative and the impact of management decision making (Bastos, Rabinovich & Almeida, 2010: 243).

Use of a professional diary

The use of diary entries to record personal experiences also provides a 'chronology of emotions linked to events' (Snowden, 2015: 36). Such an undertaking throughout any phase of project implementation offers a writer (and researcher) 'a rich source of data about day-to-day activities' (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005: 991) as each diary entry 'is sedimented into a particular moment in time' (Plummer, 2001: 48). A professional diary, as opposed to a private personal diary, links personal experiences to a professional endeavour with an outcome focused intention; that being the communication of the product of diary entries (e.g. outcomes resulting from the reflection on personal experience). Typically, there is also the acceptance that entries into a professional diary will in some way be accessed by other professionals (e.g. the sharing of thoughts with colleagues to inform professional practice).

Meth (2003: 196) suggests that use of a professional diary can be problematic in certain circumstances as the written text may reflect ‘an awareness of what the researcher wants to read’. For this study, however, the researcher-as-participant methodology helps to negate such an issue. Kenton (2010: 4) discusses the challenges of keeping a diary, specifically the required time commitment and ‘a willingness to regularly complete the diary’, although in this case the keeping of a professional diary was paramount to the management of actions within the recruitment initiative and recording of progress.

Procedure

The planning phase for the recruitment initiative was scheduled post-clearing at the beginning of the academic year and began and concluded in the same meeting. Key elements of this planned approach to recruitment, seen as a double-adoptive approach, began to be actioned immediately (e.g. contact known feeder schools to offer on and off-campus school visits, production of a generic presentation of course offerings to deliver to feeder schools). In essence, this double-adoptive approach meant implementing the same recruitment initiative as adhered to in previous years, but with with a second stage directive from the HoS that meant fewer resources and support were available. The implementation phase was planned for three months and its completion coincided with the deadline for university application submissions. Throughout this three month period, dated written entries into a blank notebook were completed sporadically (e.g. not every day) and ranged from one sentence responses to event experiences to paragraph long, change-orientated suggestions for future practice. Diary entries were used to inform dialogue (i.e. update progress and garner opinion) with other implementers involved with the initiative.

Analysis

Post-implementation phase, an issues-focused lens was applied to the analysis of diary entries. Diary entries were read through in their entirety and key management-related issues (e.g. issues perceived to be significantly impactful on the implementation of the recruitment initiative) were identified. In the context of this study, issues perceived to be ‘significantly impactful’ related to the level of ambiguity associated with an aspect of initiative management.

The issues

Based on the analysis of diary entries, six issues were perceived to be significantly impactful on the implementation of the recruitment initiative. Issues selected were derived from multiple dairy entries. The articulation of each issue below is preceded by a relevant diary entry from which the issue was identified.

Issue 1 – Lack of recruitment strategy

Diary entry 1:

Many of the agenda items were not discussed at the meeting and if they were little to no information/understanding was offered. These items included:

- *Institution's recruitment & retention strategy*
- *Budget availability*
- *Specific outcomes/targets for the initiative*
- *Successes/challenges - What have we learnt up till now?*
- *Understand current program of events*

The one and only meeting had at the beginning/launch of the initiative offered little clarification or insight into an overriding institutional recruitment strategy. Furthermore, the meeting itself offered limited specificity as to the purpose or benefit that initiative implementation might offer. And although such a recruitment initiative could be likened to a more retroactive response to a change in situation as detailed by Levacic et al. (1999), its narrow and short-term focus did not take into account 'a view of the whole organisation, its key purpose, its direction and its place in the environment' (Middlewood & Lumby, 1998: X). Thus, it quickly became apparent that a detailed recruitment strategy able to be used to respond to changes in the number and mobility of new students entering higher education (a trend quite prominent over the past five years in higher education in the UK), was in fact non-existent. As such, with the threat of redundancy hovering over all school staff acting as the ultimate performance sanction, it could be argued that a power-coercive model of change was evoked to drive this school-led recruitment agenda (Chin & Benne, 1969).

Issues 2 – Approach to decision making

Diary entry 2:

Post meeting I feel quite isolated in terms of being able to action what has been requested of me. I have planned to meet up with [name withheld] to discuss how we move forward with developing the [in-college and on-site 'course promotion'] presentation, but our initial exchange detailed how limited time and expertise we have in matters of student recruitment and making an impact.

Another issue to immediately arise related to decision making coordination. The communication of an institutional directive supports a hierarchal chain of authority 'by which superiors pass on orders to subordinates and grant subordinates the resources to implement the orders' (Levacic, 2002: 193). Yet no additional resources (e.g. time allocation, administrators) were offered to each school to drive required change. Thus, there is sole reliance on networking and informal information exchanges to gain any momentum as opposed to (what outwardly appeared to be the more beneficial coordination mechanism in this instance) market-based decision making. As Joyce (1991) discusses, the collegiality of staff can be a pivotal factor in the promotion of school improvement, yet with only one initial meeting planned and limited engagement with the School's social network, the HoS's reluctance to engage staff and remain in close contact made the process of effective decision making even more challenging.

Similarly, when taking into account Hallinger and Kantamara's (2008) research into the role that school leaders play in developing collegiality and making use of social networks when driving successful improvement initiatives, the HoS's approach to decision making is questionable.

Issue 3 – Limited understanding of the bigger picture

Diary entry 5:

How recruitment can be viewed in isolation from retention is baffling. Having been informed that another student has left the course today I am told our attrition rates are the worst in the University, but still we are tasked with pumping time and effort into attracting more students.

Two months into the initiative, resource allocation (with respect to coordination and knowledge sharing) was already an issue. Treating the issue of recruitment in isolation from the issue of retention is also problematic and relates to Lockheed and Verspoor's (1991: 1) view that 'it is meaningless to improve enrolment and attendance without considering the organizational structure of the school and teaching and learning processes'. Failure to look at the bigger picture of recruitment, retention, education development practices and institutional decision making and structure through the same lens appeared to be jeopardizing the desired/required improvement of the institution. Yet, it appeared on the surface that the idea of improvement, described by Hopkins (1994: 75) as an 'approach to educational change that is concerned with process as well as outcomes' was not front-and-center of institutional thinking in the lead up to initiative implementation as evidenced by the dramatic nature of intervention prescribed to schools and the reluctance to let change initiatives develop organically.

Issue 4 – Staff reluctance

Diary entry 7:

'Student recruitment isn't in my job spec' I was told by a colleague today.

The introduction of cross-institutional redundancies offered to staff mid-way through initiative implementation only served to heighten staff anxiety levels and the level of micro-politicking that accompanies such a conflict laden work environment (Bush, 2003). The initial presentation to staff of said redundancy proposals led to a series of staff meetings and consequently a greater staff awareness of the lack of a university-wide recruitment vision. As such there developed a growing reluctance from school staff to adapt their understanding of academia to devote more time to developing and implementing school-focused student recruitment strategies.

Issue 5 – Loss of recruitment expertise

Diary entry 8:

Being relatively new to the institution, the exercising of authority and influence (at the school level) in response to this institutional directive has been interesting. But why? Where is our team of recruitment specialists? I went to see someone in recruitment and their response to my questions about

accessing the University's recruitment strategy was 'I'm new here too and I don't think we have one'.

With the passing of recruitment responsibilities to schools, sources of power relating to recruitment expertise have been lost (Hoyle, 1986). Instead, sources of power are very much structural (e.g. HoS) with the exercise of power at a school level very much reflecting a more formal, bureaucratic approach (Bush, 2003). Thinking longer term, with each school becoming more and more responsible for their own student recruitment the rise in conflict between schools competing for the same resource (e.g. students) may exacerbate any micro-political tensions both formally and informally (Bush, 2003).

Issue 6 – Capacity and resource

Diary entry 10:

Today I asked about knowledge legacy and getting access to information learned from previous recruitment drives. I was told 'don't contact the central recruitment team now. He is frantically trying to write the [recruitment] strategy'.

With reference to the Improving the Quality for Education for All (IQEA), a school improvement model that promotes 'building confidence and capacity within the school, rather than relying on externally produced packages' (Ainscow & Hopkins, 1992: 79), it is important to recognize the limited emphasis at any stage of initiative implementation on the development of organization capacity. This was particularly concerning when taking into account the number of change process issues apparent within the initiation and implementation stages of the initiative. Utilizing what Stoll and Fink (1996) suggest as to what may constitute a change process issue, the following two concerns were apparent: 1) there was not one version of what the recruitment response should be; and 2) that without access to an overriding recruitment strategy or an understanding of previous recruitment lessons learned, the credibility and validity of the initiative was called into question from the start. Furthermore, with a specific focus on student recruitment the initiative offered little emphasis on educational effectiveness and the achievement of educative goals. Conversely, effectiveness for this initiative relates more to the non-educative goal of an increase in student population. As Dempster (2000: 56) states aspects of school management related to planning and communication 'shape some of the conditions which indirectly influence classroom practice'. This statement highlights the potential for concern surrounding this initiative based on the allocation of resources away from teaching and learning.

Impact and recommendations

From an action perspective, the decrease in market share (e.g. a decrease in student numbers) incentivized some school staff to volunteer their time to help with the delivery of specific aspects of the school improvement initiative (e.g. to be involved in targeted high school recruitment visits). Yet, a meaningful understanding of the impact of their involvement and the impact of the improvement initiative as a whole in the months post-implementation was

difficult to ascertain due to issues with initiative evaluation. Robson (1993: 185) suggests that 'a thorough knowledge of the programme being evaluated' as well as rigorous and 'systematic data collection' are important when completing an effective evaluation. Based on the under-resourced and time-pressured nature of the improvement initiative implemented (i.e. the limited level of detail included in the initial planning phase and the lack of definition as to what constituted intervention success), a reliable and valid evaluation of the impact of the intervention was unattainable. There are, however, a number of recommendations that can be made to inform the future design and management of a student recruitment initiative:

1. A better university-wide and individual school recruitment vision, which includes improved definition and monitoring of recruitment figures and a more collegial management style (Harris et al. 1995).
2. The development of an improvement strategy that has at its core specific links to improved educational effectiveness e.g. that an initiative details how students' academic achievement and other areas of development such as citizenship, social utility and employability will be developed. Fidler (1997) offers a range of ideas concerning strategic change and development planning that could be used as a framework for improvement with an emphasis on whole school, long term, sustainable development that recognizes current and future environmental pressures.
3. The application of Hopkins' (2002) school improvement framework could help to define a more detailed and contextual development plan and take advantage of school improvement groups formed from a cross section of staff. This also support Earley's (1998: 150) view that 'it has become increasingly apparent that for organizations to survive in an increasingly turbulent and changing environment, issues of strategy can no longer simply be seen as the exclusive preserve of senior staff.'
4. To help avoid a double-adoptive approach to student recruitment the availability of appropriate resources (e.g. time allocation, administrators, and funds) should be prioritized to help drive required change.

With staff members being directly affected by the overall effectiveness of student recruitment initiatives, the final point raised above is the most important of all concerning the initiative discussed in this article. With the institutional directive given to empower schools to make their own decisions about recruitment, it is important that stages following this involve staff in an ongoing manner so as to support the collaborative nature/requirement of the intervention. In this example, it could be argued that the lack of staff involvement appeared detrimental to the achievement of desired recruitment goals (e.g. 5% growth in student numbers).

Conclusion

The focus of discussion throughout this article related to the ongoing process of change surrounding the implementation of a recruitment initiative. A double-adoptive approach, an adaptation taken from Hopkin's (2002) discussion of 'adoptive' and 'adaptive' approaches to change and school improvement, was used to frame the analysis of a student recruitment initiative that was perceived to have a number of limitations. Issues relating to the implementation of the initiative were presented with discussion focusing on the lack of collegial

engagement in the design of the initiative. Overall, the implementation of a double-adoptive student recruitment initiative appeared to contribute to the perpetuation of the same student recruitment challenges experienced prior to initiative implementation.

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