Participative Process Reviews

Literature review

Universities in the United Kingdom are facing bigger strains on their resources in light of changes in the higher education market. As well as the financial pressures, higher education institutions (HEIs) are experiencing change in the way students view academic institutions and scrutiny from funding and regulatory bodies. As a result, universities are reconsidering their direction.

“Until recently, higher education institutions had been relatively free to pursue their own individual strategies, on the assumption that their combined effect would add up to a national strategy for higher education. As long as demand outstripped supply, market failures were not an issue. However, the position is now changing.” [(Cowburn, 2005, p.103)](#h.99gy63udfe4c)

There has been a drive to make universities and their departments more efficient ([Alsford and Rose, 2014](#h.gjo0zc616ldz); [Cowburn, 2005](#h.99gy63udfe4c)). However, there are problems with introducing change by not considering the totality of its effects ([Akkermans, 1993](#h.98h6elts6hz9); [Bordia et al. 2004](#h.9s6rb4lwkamk); [Chapleo and Simms 2010](#h.hr6uly9654zi); [Klev and Levin, 2012](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6)).

This literature review considers participative process reviews (PPRs) as a means to explore, plan and implement change to intra- and inter-departmental processes, with an emphasis on their use in universities.

# What is a Participative Process Review (PPR)?

Since universities are looking at ways of introducing change, the question remains of how best to approach this change. “Lack of ownership of a proposed organisational change can lead to sustained resistance to implementation” [(Gaskell and Dickinson, 2012)](#h.zgd1elw1dtur). A participative process review attempts to resolve the issue of a lack of ownership by allowing a representation of the demographic to discuss, propose and implement change.

“The aim of process change in higher education is to develop effective support and management activities that underpin academic delivery. The aim of participation in process change s to ensure that proposals are realistic and will be implemented, with process review and redesign leading to process improvement and effective process management.” [(SUMS Consulting, 2009, p.1)](#h.oiywkzs1rapc)

[Klev and Levin (2012)](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6) examined the definition of “organisation”. They concluded that it is not so well-defined and interpreted in many ways. The two main presentations of these understandings are:

* a hierarchical structure in which decisions are made at management level to produce an outcome;
* a combined and coordinated effort of individuals to produce an outcome.

What makes a process participative is the extent to which a representation of the members of the organisation are consulted and involved in the changes. [Klev and Levin](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6) explained that the employees of an organisation can provide insights that cannot be obtained from the management:

“In a participatory development process it is… argued that employees who live with the problems on a daily basis should experience the initial analysis and conclusions about problem definitions as grounded also in their reality, and that their everyday work situation are included or addressed.” [(Klev and Levin, 2012, p.65)](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6)

The product of a PPR should be more than simply solving a problem or initiating an improvement. [Klev and Levin](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6) suggested that individuals within an organisation learn from the changes that have been proposed and enacted, and this learning should be shared more widely within the organisation. By allowing for reflection on a PPR -- both individually and collectively -- there is scope to discover new problems and initiate a new PPR.

In order to conduct a process review, there is usually a facilitator that helps to guide the review process (for example, [Akkermans 1993](#h.11lqw79foqjc)). As part of this process review, the group examines current problems and the existing processes that are associated with these problems.

Although a PPR suggests the collation of the views of the employees of a system, other sources are used to identify problems. Other stakeholders that are involved in the processes — particularly consumers — may offer useful feedback and an insight that cannot be obtained from within ([Alsford and Rose, 2014](#h.gjo0zc616ldz); [Bell et al., 2009](#h.nbf2o4ppgl7y)). There may also be metrics that measure performance or resource use [(Bell et al., 2009)](#h.nbf2o4ppgl7y).

[Cowburn (2005)](#h.c9q4yqu6pgmi) noted that it was a common weakness of universities to adopt impossible or immeasurable missions, with which the staff members were not familiar. Therefore, they could not relate their own activity to the common purpose of the university. Without a consensus and dedication from employees, as well as a shared and achievable target, “little progress towards implementation of the institution’s strategic plan will be made” [(Cowburn, 2005, p.106)](#h.99gy63udfe4c).

It is also worth noting other methods are used for examining possible change in higher education institutions in the literature. One example is scenario planning [(Sayers, 2011)](#h.jht4khucw7z). In this method, participants are invited to construct several detailed possible future scenarios for the institution. As part of this process, decision-making within the institution is “strengthened by adopting a more open-ended and flexible approach to the future”, since “scenario planning assumes that the future is unpredictable” ([Sayers, 2011, p.14](#h.jht4khucw7z)).

## Problems in initiating a PPR in an organisation

While [Cowburn (2005)](#h.c9q4yqu6pgmi) argued that higher education institutions have been able to be relatively static and free in terms of their strategic direction, change has been far more readily applied in industry:

“… the rate of change in contemporary working life is high. It has been suggested that changes in work organization have arisen from new technologies, management trends, and the competitive, globalized landscape. Apart from being rapid, it has also been proposed that the transformation of working life has changed the fundamental principles that have long characterized the labour market.” [(Härenstam et al., 2004, p.307)](#h.rppkv57ke3jc)

In their multi-level analysis of working conditions, [Härenstam et al. (2004)](#h.rppkv57ke3jc) concluded that change had a negative effect on working conditions and that relatively stable organisations had the best working conditions. They noted, however, that “the consequences of implemented organizational changes may have been ‘coloured’ by the worry about anticipated changes, of employees in changing organizations, when assessing their working conditions” [(Härenstam et al., 2004, p.331)](#h.rppkv57ke3jc). Therefore, it is necessary to consider how change can impact on the employees of an organisation.

[Klev and Levin](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6) pointed out that many organisations have not experienced a PPR before; therefore the concept is likely to be considered unusual for many individuals within these organisations. Therefore, employees that are not used to making decisions may have to be encouraged and coached towards thinking more critically towards their working practices; leaders that are used to making decisions may have to develop trust in their employees to make competent and insightful suggestions. They suggested that seeking to solve small problems at first would be helpful in addressing these problems and developing trust in PPRs.

They argued that these mistrust issues propagate from being in a mindset of formulating one’s own goals and pursuing them devotedly, rather than being open to others’ suggestions for goals. The problem of the ownership of goals has an effect on engagement; [Klev and Levin](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6) believed that such a defensive position undermined the ability for learning and development to take place and that the management has the power to address defensiveness by encouraging openness:

“Is it assumed, when employees are invited to discuss future opportunities to discuss future opportunities and needs for change, that they really are adversaries? … Leaders play a very important role in setting the standards of communication and for deciding whether defence or openness is the dominant approach to challenges that may arise.” [(Klev and Levin, 2012, p.88)](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6)

It is also an issue that methods can be firmly established within a workplace. It may be so to such an extent that when an issue arises, the institution employs the established method more rigorously in order to achieve the desired results. [Klev and Levin](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6) refer to this as “single-loop learning”. Double-loop learning introduces a more critical approach to solving such arising problems: rather than employing existing practices to address a problem — which might not be successful — the focus is upon discussing new strategies to overcome a problem.

“While single-loop responses stress the need to do things right, double-loop also questions where the right things are done.” [(Klev and Levin, 2012, p.90)](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6)

Therefore, just as individuals may need to adjust their own expectations in a successful PPR, organisations must also be prepared to challenge established practices.

[Klev and Levin](#h.x2v5s5ivrqi6) wrote a section on resistance to change and attributed such a position to three perspectives on change:

1. There is a perception that there are people that are resilient or hostile towards change and do not wish to be involved in such processes.
2. Individuals may perceive impending or suggested changes to be a threat to their employment, salary, or some other benefit.
3. There may be resistance towards change from individuals that believe that the proposed solution is not suitable.

[Akkermans (1993)](#h.11lqw79foqjc) also noted that while there are operational models for dealing with some processes, it is not always straightforward to apply them in a real organisation, especially in a complex system. Thus while there are theoretical solutions, it may not be apparent how they might be applied in a particular setting. In his paper, he noted outlined the experience of a magazine distributor’s expansion of the business to include newspapers. Computer-modelling had highlighted a period of inactivity among the workforce due to a lack of newspapers to sort. Although the workers on the floor knew about this problem, the management were not:

“Between half past twelve and half past one, no newspapers arrive. This means that for a certain period of time there was insufficient workload for the night crew… The occurrence of this ‘early dip’ was known at the work floor, but management attention to this phenomenon was not very high.” [(Akkermans, 1993, p.39)](#h.11lqw79foqjc)

Once this issue had been highlighted, the number of working hours were reduced. This solved many of the problems that the company had been experiencing — time delays and lost human hours, for example — but it came to the cost of employees, whose hours working at the company changed. Other changes in the packing process led to a reduction in the workforce by 25%: “Understandably this pleased the management greatly” [(Akkermans, 1993, p.41)](#h.11lqw79foqjc).

[Chapleo and Simms (2010)](#h.th2w2717vy8) conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen people covering a wide range of roles within a higher education institution to identify thirty different stakeholders for universities. After the interviews, students were identified most often (13), followed by university staff (10) and local businesses (10). Others included the local community, local schools, qualifications awarding bodies and professional bodies. It is also clear from this article that there are many stakeholders that few of those interviewed had considered: local charities, trustees, local police and trade unions were identified by only one participant each. This suggests that there is a necessity to consult many individuals within an organisation, representing different aspects of the business; the participative nature of a PPR meets this need.

By consulting with many different stakeholders for input into change, [Sarchet and Kenward (2006)](#h.o0s22njpq22x) warned that this might create an expectation that there will be change and that such expectation must be managed carefully.

“At the same time as it creates support for change, participative process review creates expectations of change. These expectations need to be acknowledged, and properly managed, particularly in terms of setting realistic timescales for any large-scale changes involving significant investment.” [(Sarchet and Kenward, 2012, p.78)](#h.o0s22njpq22x)

Universities are complex systems, and the processes that occur within them may run between or affect many different departments. This is sometimes not readily acknowledged by policymakers: “in autonomous institutions such as HEIs there is a real danger that individuals focus their strategic thinking solely on their own areas and are either unconcerned with (or perhaps just unaware of) [sic] the overall institutional vision and priorities” [(Cowburn, 2005, p.106)](#h.99gy63udfe4c). Careful consideration must be given when individuals or a group are expected to make decisions that affect other stakeholders.

Finally, [Kenward (2008)](#h.a3t7ytj6n8ws) warned that there may not be a single best way of structuring the administration of a non-academic department. Although, he suggested, this may be an excuse to not welcome or initiate change, he felt that “there are probably structures that better suit particular institutional missions and academic structures, or at least useful techniques that can be applied to improve the structure and performance of the administration” [(Kenward, 2008, p.109)](#h.a3t7ytj6n8ws). This suggests that there ought to be some way of measuring improvement when initiating change at an institution in order to be confident that there has, indeed, been an improvement.

## Managing problems in executing change in PPRs

“One of the most difficult aspects of the organizational change experience for employees is the uncertainty associated with the process and outcomes of the change” [(Bordia et al., 2004, p.345)](#h.k1gcsyyw2i7r). Bordia et al. found a significant negative correlation between the quality of change communication and the amount of uncertainty that staff members were facing: that is, individuals with adequate communication about organisational changes are less affected by “the aim, process, and expected outcomes of the change and its implications for an individual’s job security, future prospects, or changes to the organizational structure and culture” [(Bordia et al., 2004, p.348)](#h.k1gcsyyw2i7r). Furthermore, they found that “uncertainty would [was] positively related to psychological strain and negatively related to control” [(Bordia et al., 2004, p.359)](#h.k1gcsyyw2i7r).

Their findings suggest that giving individuals a sense of control and understanding over the process change will reduce the uncertainty and psychological strain. This is in accordance with the participative nature of a PPR. Thus ensuring that the staff members that wish to be engaged in the process are consulted minimises the risk of alienation and uncertainty among workers.

SUMS Consulting suggested that team members require a combination of skills to be effective in a PPR:

* understanding the process perspective and the specific approach being used;
* modelling and analysing processes;
* challenging received practices and generating new ideas;
* representing alternative view-points;
* communicating and championing proposals;
* planning and implementing change.

[(SUMS Consulting, 2009, p.4)](#h.oiywkzs1rapc)

It is also worth noting that resistance to change is not always negative. [Pardo-del-Val et al. (2012)](#h.fhh4d87fs7ua) noted a positive correlation between participative management styles and resistance to process change. There was also a weak positive correlation between participative management and the time taken to complete tasks. Nonetheless, they concluded, “this investigation shows a positive albeit weak relationship between participative management and the process of change”, also noting:

“The positive correlation between participation and resistance to change does not necessarily mean that participative management will cause more obstacles, but that it might be bringing to light areas or subjects that should be kept in mind and because of this could improve the final result. Participative management acts as a knowledge broker, highlighting those sources of resistance to change that could improve change outcomes.” [(Pardo-del-Val et al., 2012, p.1856)](#h.fhh4d87fs7ua)

[Pardo-del-Val et al.](#h.fhh4d87fs7ua) were keen to emphasise that while there may be costs associated with a participative management style, this “should be compensated by the benefits received thanks to its utilisation, so that these costs do not become added difficulties and therefore a resistance to the change process” [(Pardo-del-Val et al., 2012, p.1857)](#h.fhh4d87fs7ua).

# What methodologies are used to evaluate PPRs?

The Good Practice Guide produced by SUMS Consulting (2009) suggested that teams carrying out a PPR should incorporate performance indicators to evaluate current and future performance. Doing so would provide evidence for the case for change, as well as making it possible to compare processes with other organisations. However, the wider literature has a lack of specific examples and outcomes from PPRs.

[Alsford and Rose (2014)](#h.jlioakbt1470) first reviewed existing practices by approaching the students with questionnaires, focus groups and shadowing. They believed that an evaluation with respect to the stakeholders, as well as the insights afforded by the staff, would offer a deeper perspective of existing problems.

The article noted that retention rates had improved in that time, and the annual survey sent to new students showed an improvement in the meeting of students’ expectations “from 53.9% in 2009 to 83.35% in 2013” [(Alsford and Rose, 2014, p.56)](#h.jlioakbt1470).

It is not clear from the article whether the student survey elicited any further information about how the students viewed the changes: indeed, the students taking part in the survey change every year, so no direct comparison can be made. There has also not been any follow-up focus groups with students to identify their views of the process changes. Nonetheless, the article noted the importance of the student voice:

“Student voice continues to be a driver. The action of funded projects and innovations has been complemented throughout by research into students’ experience, feeding into evaluation and policy development. There is increasingly wide ownership and dissemination of our annual survey, informing reporting and planning, and we continue to work with students and the Students’ Union to enhance our provision.” [(Alsford and Rose, 2014, p.56)](#h.jlioakbt1470)

## What variables are observed in these evaluations?

While the [Härenstam et al. (2004)](#h.rppkv57ke3jc) study was not an analysis of a participative process review, it is important to note the impact that organisational changes have on organisations and individuals. They measured the impact of change on organisations by performing qualitative, then quantitative, analyses on interviews conducted with managers responsible for the changes. Variables for change observed in organisations included the number of aspects being changed, the structure of power and responsibility, and the extent of the changes. In terms of the impact on individuals, the researchers measured the demands, control, obstacles, postures, heart rate, exertion, influence and worry that individuals experience in their roles through interviews and questionnaires.

They reached six conclusions from the hypotheses they stated, including:

* Organizational changes have substantial separate impact on working conditions at the individual level.
* Organizational changes have more negative consequences for the employees in public sector vs. private.

## What outcomes have been obtained in other PPRs?

There are few examples in academic literature where the outcomes of a PPR have been measured in a quantitative manner. Rather, following a process review, the trend among this kind of change implementation has been in the form of a narrative that describes the decision process for making those changes and a factual account of the changes that have happened as a result.

One such example is the restructuring of some support departments in a university, as described by [Gaskell and Dickinson (2012)](#h.zgd1elw1dtur). There was a questionnaire preceding the process review to establish the participants’ attitudes towards their team and their roles; however, these did not form a significant part of the analysis and the results were not discussed. A descriptive account followed of the discussion of the current process and the issues of workload imbalance, and illustrative representations of the current support systems in place. In the analysis of the changes, it was noted there were some savings in terms of staffing costs and some changes in terms of staff specialisms and grading. They also noted that the support staff were now more efficient and flexible; however, these improvements were not quantified. While the researchers observed the demeanour and engagement of the individuals involved — and commented on how invested individuals were in the changes — there was not a follow-up survey to establish the extent to which the staff were engaged.

[Sarchet and Kenward (2006)](#h.o0s22njpq22x) produced a similar narrative in which thirty-two recommendations were drawn from a process review and, at the time of publication, nine had been implemented, nineteen were in progress, one had been rejected and three had not yet been acted upon.

# Conclusions

Participative process reviews are a means of incorporating the views from individuals at all levels of an organisation in order to change and improve a process. The existing literature gives several narratives of the design and implementation of PPRs across institutions within and outside higher education.

These narratives tended to lack a critique of the process reviews that were conducted in the each of the studies. Many of these narratives culminated at the point of implementing the process, and there was a dearth of convincing evidence that improvements had been made.

Nonetheless, the [SUMS Consulting (2009)](#h.oiywkzs1rapc) Good Practice Guide and [Klev and Levin (2012)](#h.ksdj18lfcn47) gave a detailed and structured account of the PPR process and placed emphasis on the need to incorporate opportunities for performance indicators. This would be vital for measuring impact and for defending the use of participative process reviews to enact change.

# References

###### Akkermans, H. 1993. Participative business modelling to support strategic decision making in operations — a case study. *International Journal of Operations & Productions Management,* 13(10): pp.34—48.

###### Alsford, S., and Rose, C. 2014. Practice and policy to enhance student induction and transition: a case study of institution-wide change. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 18(2): pp.51—61.

###### Bell, G., Warwick, J., and Kennedy, M. 2009. Enabling process improvement and control in higher education management. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 13(4): pp.104—117.

###### Bordia, P., Hunt, E., Paulsen, N., Tourish, D., and DiFonzo, N. 2004. Uncertainty during organizational change: Is it all about control? *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 13(3): pp.345—365.

###### Chapleo, C., and Simms, C. 2010. Stakeholder analysis in higher education: A case study of the University of Portsmouth. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 14(1): pp.12—20.

###### Cowburn, S. 2005. Strategic planning in higher education: fact or fiction? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 9(4): pp.103—109.

###### Gaskell, C., and Dickinson, K. 2012. Engaging change. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 16(3): pp.90—97.

###### Härenstam, A., Bejerot, E., Leijon, O., Schéele, P., Waldenström, K., and The MOA Research Group. 2004. Multilevel analyses of organizational change and working conditions in public and private sector. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Policy*, 13(3): pp.305—343.

###### Kenward, J. 2008. Is there a best way to structure the administration? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 12(4): pp.103—109.

###### Klev, R., and Levin, M. 2012. *Participative transformation: learning and development in practising change*. Gower Publishing Limited: Farnham, Surrey.

###### Pardo-del-Val, M., Martínez-Fuentes, C., and Roig-Dobón, S. 2012. Participative management and its influence on organizational change. *Management Decision*, 50(10): pp.1873—1860.

###### Sarchet, C., and Kenward, J. 2006. Participative process review in higher education: an approach and a case study. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 10(3): pp.74—78.

###### Sayers, N. 2011. Maximising the effectiveness of a scenario planning process. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 15(1): pp.14—18.

###### SUMS Consulting. 2009. *Participative Process Change: Good Practice Guide*. SUMS Consulting: Reading.