

15.2.2026**Author**

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Title

Barriers to effective quality management and leadership : case study of two academic departments

Publication year

2002

Inventory number

14757

Keywords

Qualitätssicherung ; Ausland : Großbritannien : einzelne Hochschulen

Abstract

This paper reports results of "insider research" at a UK college of higher education (NewColl). In drawing on a "ground-level" approach, and building on earlier work (Newton 1999a,b), it provides insights into "front-line" academics' views and perspectives on organisational change and the implementation of quality policy, and points to challenges for institutional leadership. The paper begins by considering the impact of the quality revolution on the academic community and its relationships, and then looks at how policy implementation, leadership, and the management of change can be conceptualised. The case study element consists of profiles of two academic departments which, in the main body of the research, displayed markedly more negative responses to organisational change and the implementation of revised quality assurance arrangements than other academic units. Drawing on interview data which provide "thick description" (Geertz 1973), a set of explanatory concepts is presented which help to explain why the two schools show themselves to be divergent in comparison with others. These concepts centre on issues around "psychological contracts" (Handy 1984, 1993); leadership, communication and the management of change; collegialism and professional accountability; and reciprocal accountability and mutual trust. The paper goes on to consider the importance of "the discretion debate" (Lipsky 1976, 1980; Prottas 1978) and proposes that, by stressing "ownership", "professional autonomy", and "self-assessment", quality

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assurance systems and quality management in higher education run the risk of exposing or exacerbating the "problem" of discretion for institutional managers and leaders. The paper concludes by identifying a number of lessons which can be drawn from the case study for quality managers and academic administrators. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Newton, Jethro, E-mail: j.newton@newi.ac.uk