



Do universities work?

Daniel Neyland



Claire Surridge



The University of Reading

Presentation Aims

- to look at ways universities make decisions
- discuss successes and failures
- consider your role(s) in these processes

For more of the EVINCE decision-making work, including updates, see the website www.reading.ac.uk/EVINCE/output/dm.htm

This presentation has been developed following an initial workshop: D. Neyland and C. Surridge (April 2003) 'Do universities work?' (AUA Annual Conference, Derby)

The abstract of this workshop was devised well ahead of the AUA Conference 2003, at the University of Derby. Consequently, the title can be considered something of a misnomer, since the content is mostly concerned with university decision-making.

Nonetheless, decision-making in all its guises does constitute an element contributing to the way universities work (or not), and so the title remains.

We anticipate subsequent work (during the Summer 2003), within the context of "Connections" will develop questions concerning the way universities work, alongside issues to do with what and why universities are, and the ways they are measured up as successes (or not).

What decisions...

has your institution made during the last year?

How do you know?

How does anyone/everyone else know?

The idea is to consider how inclusive decision making is, can and should be....

What is a decision? When is a decision made?

- pre-meeting talk
- at committee ratification
- when "everyone" gets to hear about it
- when (if?) consequences are in effect.....

Why decision-making?

"Universities are large and complex organisations... If their decision-making is to be effective...they need accurate & timely information" HEFCE 1998

"..key issues of content and structure can easily become marginalised in decision-making processes" JISC 2002

Decision making is not just an EVINCE concern.

23 ways of making a decision...

1. Committees making decisions
2. Committees rubber-stamping decisions
3. Responsibility taken by a group
4. Responsibility given to a group
5. Deciding on a working party
6. Fait accompli
7. Re-performing previous decisions and accountability trails
8. Audit and avoiding responsibility
9. Decisions made through demonstrable ignorance
10. Uncertainty in accounts
11. Deferral tactics and strategies
12. Senior manoeuvres
13. Championing change/policy
14. Strategy implications/implementation
15. Policy decisions
16. The deployment of rhetoric
17. Unknown and ambiguous decisions
18. Multi-stage decision making
19. Uncertainty over number of processes
20. Accumulating sufficient resources to a proposal
21. Shifting responsibility externally
22. Gather momentum together in centre
23. Go mobile and gain a distributed momentum

From EVINCE ethnographic observations, we identified 23 different ways decisions were made (or not made, unmade or deferred). None of the 23 should be considered as models or ideal types of decision making but are activities observed in the EVINCE ethnography

The management literature on decision making does not provide a great deal of focus either. On J-Stor, a search of business journals revealed 2007 articles on decision making written between 1995 and 2002. The top 200 of these articles, ranked by Highest Score, revealed an enormous variety of subjects for analysis. A selection of 20 of the articles from the top 200 centred around or referred to 56 ways of approaching decision making.

This mass of approaches toward the notion of decision making is not greatly helpful. Indeed such is the messiness of decision making that the business literature has moved away from the area in recent years. Only 56 of the 2007 articles were written between 2000 and 2002, the other 1951 were from 1995-1999. Leadership, strategy and accountability have become far more popular subjects and have subsumed some of the themes the 2007 decision making articles touch upon. Also, there is little agreement in the literature on which of these particular approaches holds the upper hand in terms of effectiveness or reliability. Indeed it is not clear that any of these models contains sufficient diversity to allow it to be applicable beyond the examples highlighted in each particular analysis.

56 more ways...

1. Participative decision making (McCaffrey 1995) 2. Co-operation (Axelrod 1984) 3. Collaboration (Trist 1983) 4. Hierarchical systems (McCaffrey 1995) 5. Adversarial systems (McCaffrey 1995) 6. Centralised systems (Manz 1986) 7. Alternative dispute resolution (Harter 1982) 8. Organisational decision making (Simon 1957) 9. Decision making as social representation (Laroche 1995) 10. Realism (Janis 1972) 11. Rational (Bower 1970) 12. Inclusive (Crozier and Friedburg 1977) 13. Action perspective (Starbuck 1983) 14. Process typology (Allison 1971) 15. Strategic agenda (Kigdon 1984) 16. Managers as decision makers (Allison 1971) 17. Bureaucratic theory (Gerth and Mills 1946) 18. Behavioural theory (Carter 1971) 19. Critical theory of decision making (March and Simon 1958) 20. Integrative decision making (Mintzberg et al 1976)...

21. Causal maps (Hall 1984) 22. Paradigms (Johnson 1987) 23. Belief systems (Donaldson and Lorsch 1983) 24. Dominant logic (Prahalad and Bettis 1986) 25. Organisational culture (Larson and Reitter 1979) 26. Decisions as self-fulfilling prophecies (Sims 1987) 27. Decisions as useful illusions (Feldman 1989) 28. Decisions as rationalisations (Matheu 1986) 29. Decision making networks (Langley, Mintzberg, et al 1995) 30. Executive function (Barnard 1938) 31. Sequential (Dewey 1910) 32. Anarchical (Schwenk 1985) 33. Iterative (Mintzberg 1976) 34. Convergent (Hage 1980) 35. Insightful (Nicolaidis 1960) 36. Interwoven (Dutton 1988) 37. Garbage can model (Cohen et al 1972) 38. Constricted, sporadic and fluid (Mazzolini 1979) 39. Organisational memory (Walsh and Ungson 1991) 40. Incrementalism (Quinn 1980)

41. Regret model (Tsiros and Mittal 2000) 42. Heterogeneous information (Binder and Persaran 1997) 43. Workplace democracy (Collins 1995) 44. Gainsharing (Hammer 1988) 45. Marketing decision support systems (MDSS) (van Bruggen et al 1988) 46. Causal ambiguity model (Mosakowski 1997) 47. Discrete alternative multiple criteria decision making with monotone utility functions (Koksalan and Sagala 1995) 48. Information exchange groups (Dennis 1996) 49. Game Theory (Cohen 1988) 50. NLRB decision making (Cooke et al 1995) 51. Adaptive decision making (Gregan-Paxton and John 1997) 52. Strategic choice model (Dean and Sharfman 1996) 53. Commitment, attachment and trust building (Korsgaard, Schweiger and Sapienza 1995) 54. Procedural justice model (Kim and Mauborgne 1995) 55. Organisational and ethical sub-climates (Weber 1995) 56. Strategic framing (Nutt 1998)

Common Themes

- Incorporation
- Leadership
- Pragmatism
- Context
- Accountability, Responsibility, Transparency

From the mass of literature surveyed, it was possible to produce some generalised themes which are frequently considered to be good management practice in relation to decision-making:

- Incorporating many people for a more democratic process
- Leadership both in choosing a course of action and seeing it through
- Pragmatism being flexible in the implementation of decisions according to events which arise
- Context taking into account particular current pertinent features of organisations and not trying to change the world
- Accountability, Responsibility, Transparency, and making people aware of these

...and their down side

- Incorporation
- Leadership
- Pragmatism
- Context
- Accountability, Responsibility, Transparency

•Incorporating many people's ideas can lead to endless drift and deferral (although these are also occasionally highlighted as beneficial)

•Leadership can be misplaced or misdirected if the wrong course of action is driven through and this can contradict incorporation. Which is preferred - democracy or dictatorship?

•Pragmatism may lead to constant change without an overall idea of likely future destination

•Context should be brought into decisions or decisions should improve context - this is a difficult decision in itself

•Responsibility, accountability and transparency can be draconian and don't necessarily do what they claim

Reflections on decisions...

Looking at the decisions noted earlier, discuss:

- which of the themes fit?
- in a positive or negative way?

So far we have:

- looked at messiness of decision-making - all unique, too many ways and forms...,
- identified some themes, which you might recognise when thinking about decisions in your own HEI.

The aim is to think about how we and our own institution makes decisions.

Workshop participants included a wide range of people - working at a variety of levels and roles: running institutions, senior and more junior managers & planners, doers and supporters. All make decisions in the course of "doing their job" - some almost unnoticed ("post the letter"), some sought from elsewhere (managers, committees etc).

This exercise attempts to give space for individuals to think through the range of decisions affecting them.

We then move on to look at an EVINCE case study, using the 5 themes we have identified. This provides a range of anecdotes arising from project work, surrounding decisions made or needed throughout the project (rather than a chronological story), to illustrate how the themes might be used to think about decision-making, in a variety of contexts including projects, operations, strategising...

Eg: University committee papers

University 1

- senior committee's searchable archive
- committees putting papers on-line
- working party doing e-business

University 2

- senate papers distribution
- committees putting papers on-line

So, first to introduce the case study - university committee papers, on-line. The project bid simply included a brief outline of each case study, in this instance: "handling of committee papers and information".

Part of the initial project activity involved scoping the case study for both institutions, and setting out a detailed plan. This quickly identified the different aims and approaches of the two institutions, and raised a number of the issues (and associated decisions) we would need to consolidate as the work progressed. As noted earlier, the sites had very different aims, very differently expressed:

University 1:

- had a senior committee, closely linked with resourcing decisions and handling a lot of sensitive information, for which a searchable archive was considered key. It also provided an initial working group from the lead site - a PVC, deputy registrar and academic secretary. This set the tone for the University's scope - to provide committee archiving and (some) dissemination.
- invited other committees to take part in the case study, and put their papers on-line, via the web
- included a working party with a specific time-limited project, which wanted to carry out some business electronically, in part to enable involvement from remote members, external to the university

University 2:

- was initially and primarily concerned with hard-copy distribution costs for senate, which had a large membership and volume of paperwork, of which individual members were mostly concerned with small subsets. The aim was to distribute the paperwork (and printing costs), not to develop an archive.
- had undertaken some work with putting committee papers on-line, but this had been deferred amidst various difficulties, for example agreeing access policies. It has more recently re-started, but within a different context.

Committee papers - context

Committee

- what papers, when; How submitted...
- between meeting business

University

- which committees, when, for whom
- a means of changing business processes

HE

- transparency, privacy, accountability

Context affects the type of decisions and decision-making. It can also provide impetus (or brakes) to on-going (or stalled) activities.

For the EVINCE committee papers, there are 3 main contextual levels:

Committee - even set overall aims (searchable archive/e-distribution) and given specific tools (web, pdf-format...), there are specific detailed issues for committees, their chairs and secretaries to consider:

- who has access to papers, when - minutes before or after approval; past minutes for new members; internal/external
- is access to be promoted; to what end... - one committee sees the primary role of e-papers a promotion of the committee's activities and policy
- how are papers to be received, in what format, when (in relation to meetings) - do secretaries format and process papers, to what extent?
- does paper distribution continue - one committee depends entirely on e-distribution; another decided paper distribution was both more efficient and aided discipline re paper submission
- can some of the business be carried out between meetings - this was the aim of the short-term working party which, at the end of their project, agreed e-working had made their activities and meetings more productive.
- University - needs to set overall guidelines. Issues include:
 - access - internal and external; level of promotion. Concerns were sufficient to temporarily halt progress
 - extent, route and rate of rollout - which committees should be included, when and how, to what extent would takeup be mandatory (eg within academic units)
 - is this simply "papers storage" or are there (explicit) aims to change the way committees do and/or record business. Eg General search facilities may result in demand for different styles of recording; e-communication may engender faster progress between meetings..
- HE/Govt - the national agendas can also play a part. Currently hot topics include:
 - transparency, Freedom of Information Act
 - privacy, Data Protection Act
 - accountability, audit and quality

Committee papers - leadership

- stating decisions
- obtaining resource
- de-limiting progress (rollout, development)
- stating evaluation (operational, central/local gains/losses)

Leadership issues can be illustrated in a number of different ways:

Distribution of Senate papers was a clearly delineated project - in terms of timing and aims, with clear leadership/ownership and resources: Mechanisms were developed, building on known, in-house technologies; Means were piloted, and approval motions drafted as part of the routine senate management/co-ordination; Objections and variations sought were swiftly agreed/rejected, and adjustments made; System "in place"; agreement to continue was assumed and obtained.

At the other end of the spectrum, archiving committee papers, beginning with a pilot committee proved difficult to progress even at the level of access to the material and meetings: Access to the pilot committee was sought and apparently given, but then rescinded meeting by meeting; some paperwork was provided without question, other was "unavailable"; the initial plan was to build a prototype with existing technologies so as to provide a case for resourcing more appropriate means - access barriers made promotion of tools in place difficult. Alternative pilots were then selected according to existing access, on an ad hoc basis, via agreement of committee chairs - differential commitment of chairs led to differential commitment to the project by both chairs and committees. Running "piecemeal" with a variety of committees made integrated progress (including direction and resourcing) difficult to obtain.

The project reported to a key committee, beginning February 2001. From June 2001, the reports sought direction for specific case studies, and in regard of more general strategic aims. Every report has been "accepted" by the committee, once including a specific note of thanks for the EVINCE contribution to the University, but no response on requests for direction have been recorded. This has been especially difficult for the case study concerned with research information, which has consequently been associated with:

- Managing university publications
- Collating research profiles
- RAe data collection
- Enabling targeting of funding opportunities data
- Collection of school/faculty research activities and plans, for planning purposes

While there may need to be a balance between dictatorship and democracy, lack of leadership/direction can make it difficult to progress in any direction.

Committee papers - incorporation

- identifying stakeholders - individual and group
- mapping their interests
- information owners, custodians and effectiveness
- potential change - for individuals, groups & University

The need to involve stakeholders in projects and decision-making has been well-documented. In terms of decision-making, there are two sides to the coin - what does incorporation mean for the decision-making process, and how does it affect decisions made. For example, with committee papers, we can identify extremes in terms of approaches to technology. On the one hand, we have a group of relative newcomers, who are keen to extend their IT skills and get involved in development projects. On the other we have established staff, who have worked with sometimes quite old technology, developing sophisticated ways of exploiting these tools which they are unwilling to lose. Both have a lot to offer developments, and so need to be accommodated within decisions regarding technology application.

This has had various consequences for decisions:

- use of familiar, current tools as far as possible (eg MS Word, Acrobat/pdfs)
- means of backward conversion, where possible
- reluctance to progress promotion of prototype by most senior pilot committee

Involvement of committee members has also varied, and so produced varied experiences:

- One committee moved from e-mail exchange of papers to web distribution, almost without comment. Here there has been some debate as to discipline re submission of papers (following some very late submissions), but no debate as to means of distribution.
- One committee took serious note of operating as a pilot and discussed ways of using the technology, resulting in explicit decisions re hard-copy distribution, e-archiving and promotion of committee activities.
- One committee was given e-distribution of papers, and discussion was limited to possible enhancements - enabling e-download as an alternative to printing papers. This project was rapidly concluded, within set and clearly de-limited boundaries.
- At one site, the initial demonstration of a prototype website was given to committee secretaries, who were asked both to suggest likely problems/potential enhancements, and to comment on its likely usefulness (to them).

We have tended to see the most rapid progress where clear leadership/ownership is operating, irrespective of the level of incorporation.

Committee papers - flexibility

- enacting decisions (installing, implementing)
- continuing progress (rollout, maintenance, development)
- maintaining involvement/enrolment

This is closely related to incorporation.

In managing the needs of both continuity and development of new skills, a degree of flexibility was required.

Flexibility can also be required of participants/decision enactors - there may be a need to amend working practice, re-direct effort, adapt style. This can lead to a proactive approach from participants - interpreting and developing decisions perhaps beyond initial intentions, or to conservative moves to limit, delay or prevent enactment of decisions. We have seen this in efforts to expand the number of pilots beyond our ability to support them, using prototype technologies, and in efforts to discourage promotion of the technology to committee members.

We also had to learn to be flexible in coping with staff changes, and a range of consequences resulting from those. For example:

- At one site, the secretary of a key committee moved. The new secretary had different priorities, and sought to play a different role for the committee. In time, this meant that the key stakeholder was provided via a different route, as well as by a new staff member.
- Within our research information work, we have had staff changes within two key offices, where the staff change has also involved a review of roles played and priorities. This has entailed starting again with scoping decisions and priorities, albeit the operational model has remained similar.

For different committees, different emphasis can be placed on various functions (eg distribution, archiving, promotion) to suit the needs and remit of each. However, this needs to be kept within the broader scope of university requirements for transparency and privacy, information management and exploitation.

Committee papers - accountability

- who decided
- what
- when
- how does anyone know
- what has anyone done

In many ways this comes back to questions we were addressing earlier: Accountability is a complex issue in its own right. Eg, within an EVINCE case study there are a number of accountability relationships, including:

- EVINCE and the funders, HEFCE
- Partner institutions
- Partner institutions and EVINCE (and HEFCE)
- Case study participants and institutions
- Case study participants and EVINCE

For the EVINCE project, decisions to participate are clearly articulated and documented between funders, partner institutions and project members. However, even with contractual relationships, the meaning and enactment of participation is not always clear. It is perhaps easier to look at the level of pilot committees and the decisions surrounding their participation.

- Becoming a participant
 - some committees were identified or nominated; some were invited
 - for some the outcome was set; for others there was negotiation
 - or a reciprocal arrangement of project support in return for project input
- Participating
 - for some access was given; for one access was a moving target
 - for some involvement was taken for granted; for others debate as to the experience and provision of on-line papers and e-communication became a part of the committee agenda, even beyond the EVINCE requirement for feedback
- Evaluating participation
 - for some, participation was essentially unnoticed; for others value (for the committee and for EVINCE) was a matter for discussion and report

Accountability is also part of on-going decision-making:

- In the case of the committee seeking to distribute printing costs, achieving reduction of central costs (in staff time and money) was a good indicator of success, providing impetus to the process of deciding and affirming continuation.
 - Where another committee discussed the merits of distributing papers electronically, decisions were made to:
 - continue hard-copy distribution alongside development of a committee website
 - use the website to promote activities and policy
- It was also noted that members need not keep their hard copies of papers, although no clear decision re destruction of paperwork was recorded.

Exercise - Themes in practice

To use the themes to think about and exchange experiences of decision-making in your own institutions

Choose an example activity to help:

Planning for UG admissions 2004-5

Moving the UG prospectus on-line

This exercise was used to think about a project, and use the decision-making themes to help identify what decisions might be needed, who might be needed to make them etc, etc.

For this to help you, you will need to think about the sort of role you play, and the situations you need decisions, and how you might approach making them, getting them made etc... Depending on your role, you may have a large or small circle of influence - you may be in a position to set up expectations re reciprocal responsibility, transparent decision-making processes... you may have to look more at managing your boss to elicit decisions or to support your decisions when required.

Conclusions

- appropriate leadership (local, central)
- context-sensitive
- appropriate, communication and participation opportunities (for all?)
- flexibility within defined limits
- accountable reciprocal responsibilities

Hopefully you can use your experience of the themes exercise to think through the way decisions are handled in your own institution, and within your office/job, and how they might be handled...

The slide attempts to summarise the key ideas to consider in this process.

Conclusions for you

- how do you connect with your institution's networks?
- what influence do you have over decision-making? (Formally, informally)
- what use do you make of information sources?
- what responsibility do you take regarding decision-making?

For this to help you, you will need to think about the sort of role you play, and the situations you need decisions, and how you might approach making them, getting them made etc...

Depending on your role, this may have a large or small circle of influence - you may be in a position to set up expectations re reciprocal responsibility, transparent decision-making processes... you may have to look more at managing your boss to elicit decisions when required.