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## CHAPTER 7

### **Managing at a Distance: Regional Networks and Off-Campus Tutors**

#### **Chapter synopsis**

*There are two particular management dilemmas which most sharply bring into play the difficulties of managing at a distance - the Management and direction of regional offices located some distance from the central facility and the supervision and support of networks of part-time, off-campus tutors. Each of These is examined in turn, notably from the perspective of the political and value-driven forms of leadership described by Badaracco and Ellsworth.*

#### **Managing regional networks: centralization and decentralization**

It is no accident that most of the world's open universities, especially those in the West, have developed major regional networks in support of their academic programmes. A regional network typically involves a series of local or regional offices, sometimes connected by computer systems, which offer a number of the institution's services on a more personal and local basis.

For example, Britain's Open University has 13 regional offices which provide such services as information and counselling, on-site seminars, and extensive local networks of tutors and tutor counsellors for academic support, advice and counselling in almost every region of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Athabasca University has three major regional offices which offer almost all of the university's student services in the local community - information, advising and counselling, on-line admissions and registration, course Materials pickup, examination supervision, seminars and teleconferencing, and financial aid, although most of these are also available by post and Telephone

While they may offer some savings (for example, reduced postal and Telephone charges), regional offices are mainly an 'add-on' expense.

That is, they are not strictly necessary to the functioning of the institution but represent a local presence and a 'human face'. In addition to the obvious and direct costs of Leasing or purchasing facilities, staffing, and capital and operating costs, a regional network increases the complexity of communications and administration.

#### **THE JUSTIFICATION FOR REGIONAL NETWORKS**

What then is the justification for this added cost of course and Programme delivery? Reasons vary with each institution, but the following would usually be cited:

- Whatever the advantages of distance education, service by post or Telephone is seldom as effective or as personal as it is face-to-face. Hence, a major reason for regional offices is to provide local, personalized and more convenient service.
- Following from this, regional offices strengthen the local identity of the institution, especially if they are given some freedom to respond to local needs. However, this is sometimes more theoretical than real as open universities are often reluctant to permit

very much local or regional Variation in the form, content or evaluation of courses. (This issue is discussed in some detail below.)

- It follows that regional offices are an important marketing tool for the institution. In countries like Canada and Australia, where sparse populations are spread over great geographic distances, a regional centre is an important factor in a student's decision to study at and remain with an open university. It may be the only such institution within several hundred miles, and it thus takes on an identity it would never have otherwise. Notable examples are the regional centres of the Open University in Wales and Northern Ireland, and Athabasca's in Fort McMurray, Alberta.
- Local centres can greatly reduce the 'turnaround' time for such key student services as registration and course-materials pick-up, and paper and examination marking, speedier service being an important factor in student persistence and success.
- The institution is able to offer local supplementary services that enhance student support, such as study skills workshops, orientation sessions, and computer laboratories.
- Where courses are institutionally paced, as at Britain's Open University, regional and local operations provide an opportunity for classes to meet together on a regular basis. They can also host summer schools and weekend workshops.
- Regional and local centres can be used as meeting places to instil a stronger sense of identity among tutors and other part-time staff and to bring central staff and governing boards into closer contact with students (most of whom never visit the main offices of an open university).
- While it is seldom cited as a reason for the creation of regional offices, one of their most valuable functions is to provide distance-learning institutions with direct, personal feedback on their performance. Students are usually more assertive about their concerns and rights when talking face-to-face to a university clerk or counsellor than they will be over the phone or by letter. The setting is also more conducive to an in-depth discussion of the particular problem or concern and how it can be resolved. Of course, it is one thing for the regional offices to get strong feedback from the university's customers/clients, and quite another for the intensity of that feedback to reach those in the central offices who are responsible for the various student services. Regional clerical staff can be as frustrated as the students themselves in trying to elicit responses from central authorities. This frustration is often exacerbated by a lack of understanding or disagreement with centrally developed policies on the part of regional staff. With the different view of the institution which isolation from the main institution often develops, regional staff are more apt to see things the way students see them, and hence they are less able or willing to uphold institutional policy when students challenge it. They advance the cause of the institution if they are able to identify and change incomplete or inappropriate policy, but they undermine it if they challenge policies and procedures because they are ignorant of their rationales and wider implications.

### **CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION: A CLASSIC DILEMMA**

Whatever their advantages, regional offices introduce major management problems for the institution. This is not unique to open learning, for centralized/decentralized conflicts are classic in the literature of organizational theory.

Brooke<sup>1</sup> likens centralized and decentralized approaches to management to the efficiency and size of supermarkets as compared to the friendliness of the corner shop. Centralization is intended to facilitate goal-setting and the consequent allocation of resources for the whole organization, encouraging clear direction, coherent goals and economies of scale. Decentralization adds the critical components of staff personal responsibility and ownership,

quicker response to local demands, and a stronger loyalty to the organization. Presumably, the goal of any service organization, including an open university, is to find an appropriate balance between the two and the advantages of both.

This is easier said than done. Brooke writes of the endless cycles of organizational tinkering associated with trying to get the mixture right. The first of his four propositions about this issue is

that organizations waste resources (human and material) by adopting a cycle of change between centralization and autonomy; good reasons are given for the changes when they occur, but the effect of the cycle is to cause a fatalistic attitude that the swings backwards and forwards are part of the natural order and cannot be broken.<sup>2</sup>

My own experiences in both the Quebec junior-college (CEGEP) system and at Athabasca University reinforce the perception that the regular and natural tendency to reorganize and to reallocate power and authority between central and regional entities often fails to achieve its real objectives (such as economies of scale, local responsiveness and better levels of service). Whether acknowledged or not, its primary function usually has far more to do with internal power politics than it does with direct benefits to the organization.

The regional 'model' at Athabasca, for example, has been altered four or five times in the past ten years, although most of the changes have been transparent to the student. They have principally involved reporting procedures (should there be a separate tutorial services unit, for example, and should it report to the faculties, to a separate director of regional and tutorial services, or to a vice-president?).

Every time regional reorganization is contemplated, it is contentious and takes on a high profile within the institution. This should not be surprising in a case where the local office offers a broad range of services because it thus raises power and control issues which affect most of the departments in the university. At Athabasca, for example, changes in jurisdiction or reporting procedures may affect the managers of the following departments whose services are offered directly via regional offices - registrar, finance, computing, faculties, tutorial services, course materials, plant and facilities, and public relations.

The primary issue of contention within the institution is power and control. To be effective, a regional office must offer coordinated and responsive services to the local community. It should take on its own identity, one that closely mirrors and responds to the local constituency. It follows that the local manager requires considerable power and autonomy over the range of services offered if this is to be achieved.

On the other hand, there are strong and legitimate requirements for central and professional control over such issues as academic standards (faculties), university regulations (registrar) and the costs of various services (all managers). In other words, there is a good case for both central and local authority, and the challenge is to get the mixture right. This is difficult enough in itself, but it is complicated by the natural tendency for both regional and central managers to control all aspects of operations within their purview and to protect their own interests in all cross-unit conflicts. While much interunit conflict can be avoided by spelling out jurisdictions and policies clearly and in writing, there will always be exceptions and grey areas not covered by previous experience which will require compromise or the seemingly inevitable involvement of top Management.

That an effective regional organization is difficult to achieve should not be surprising. In the community-college system, the management of the direction and coordination of branch campuses in large institutions in Quebec and Ontario faces all of the same issues, and they are just as contentious and frustrating. Should each campus be given a large degree of autonomy under a powerful director or should their respective services be organized and directed by a team of central managers? Whether the answer is strong centralized control,

highly autonomous satellites or a mishmash of compromises and committees, the problems of coordination and control persist, and attention soon focuses on the need for reform (echoing Brooke's earlier cited observation about the seeming inevitability of more tinkering).

This dilemma is not limited to educational institutions, but is a phenomenon common to all organizations where local agencies are dispensing services coordinated from a centralized core (as opposed to franchising or other forms of organization where the prevailing model is clearly a decentralized one).

## **DIFFERING REGIONAL AND CENTRAL VIEWPOINTS**

The problems are best approached by examining them from the perspective of the regional and central managers, respectively. Unless the regional office is so large as to accommodate a number of staff in each of the service areas, it is usually the case that a few people represent the entire range of services to the general public. Hence, for our example, let's assume a regional office several hundred miles from the central facility, offering the following range of services to students information, orientation, registration, admissions, course-materials pick-up, academic advising and counselling, seminars and classes, examination invigilation, computer labs, and library catalogue and circulation services.

*The regional perspective.* From the perspective of the regional office manager, it is critical that he or she have full authority for this range of services. As far as students are concerned, the regional office *is* the university, and they do not want to hear that the course materials are not available because of a foul-up in the central facility, or that the office staff do not have the authority to amend or break a rule or procedure in the student's interest - students just want the problem resolved, and they want it resolved immediately. If they are dissatisfied, it is the local staff and the local manager who will bear the brunt of the complaining, not the central-department staff who have almost no face-to-face contact with the student-customers, although they may have regular interaction by correspondence and Telephone.

Physical distance adds to the problem. If local staff have no ability to interpret and apply policy to the specific case immediately before them, the quality of service to students usually suffers as the local staff try to contact central authorities for permission or decision. Even if the individual is immediately available or if systems have been established to cope with such requirements (such as a hot-line or establishment of regional concerns as priority issues), cases requiring a central ruling may be complex and contentious, and they may require the concurrence of more than one manager. This is more difficult to achieve without the personal presence of the key players. Although teleconferencing and other technologies can facilitate the process, central staff are less apt to be as responsive to inquiries from several hundred miles away as they would be under a system which resulted in their having to deal with someone standing in their own offices.

Another concern for the local regional manager is that such offices typically have a small number of staff, and it is imperative that each is flexible enough to do a wide variety of roles on a given day, especially when someone is absent because of illness or holiday. The manager is thus less concerned about specialized professional expertise and more concerned to hire staff who are flexible, adaptable and strongly serviceorientated. This requirement for flexibility sometimes conflicts with central personnel policies and collective agreements, adding further stress to local office Management.

*The central perspective.* From the perspective of a senior manager in the central facility, there are considerable concerns about quality and control of the given service. For example, the course-materials manager may be very concerned about the way the regions are handling distribution of materials, or the registrar might be more than a little concerned about reports

that regional staff are bending the rules and regulations of the university, purportedly to provide better service to their local clientele. All central managers may be concerned about the lack of resident expertise within the regions to deal with major issues, particularly in professional areas where local staff training may be sufficient to guarantee the quality of service desired. This concern is exacerbated when regional offices are small and staffed primarily by clerical and administrative staff who may lack the education or training appropriate to dealing with the matter at hand. The larger central offices are more apt to have specialists with detailed knowledge and experience of their particular areas of responsibility which cannot be matched by more generalist staff in small regional offices.

There are also issues of the equitable distribution of resources and consistency in the application of policies. While a particular quality or method of service may seem absolutely necessary on a local level by a regional manager, the central manager of that service has a broader view of it across the institution and may have a legitimate concern that the university not offer wildly disparate levels of services in different communities. This has resource implications as well, so that a manager of computing services or plant and facilities may be opposed to a regional office's acquisition of computers or office furniture which costs more than is available to another office.

As has already been seen in Chapter 2, equitability (under the rubric of 'impersonality') is a principle central to a bureaucratic organization. Particularly in a university, where the 'core business' is handled almost exclusively by academic professionals, the underlying tension between equitability of service and a strong individual client orientation permeates the institution and is a major challenge for institutional managers.

### **POLITICAL AND VALUE-DRIVEN APPROACHES TO THREE CASE STUDIES**

Thus, disputes tend to represent more than the usual conflicts over jurisdictions and authority, and it is because both the regional and central managers' concerns are legitimate that this is such a difficult area to administer. In pursuing the best way to manage regional networks, it is useful to look first at three typical issues of potential conflict between central and regional offices and to explore various responses to them, using Badaracco and Ellsworth's styles of leadership as guides. In each case, our sample student, the redoubtable Joe Trennis, is making a forceful request of his regional office counsellor, and the questions are what response is appropriate and who should make it in each case.

*Case 1: Prerequisites.* Joe needs one more course to graduate and wants to take an industrial psychology course which he feels very appropriate to his intention to take an MBA after his bachelor's degree. However, the psychology department has established Introductory Psychology as a prerequisite to these courses. While Joe has no formal credentials in psychology, he has read widely in the field and feels he already knows the material in the introductory course (which he has reviewed). If he is to graduate at the next convocation and hence not lose a year on his MBA, he doesn't have time to take both courses. The counsellor agrees with Joe's assessment of his knowledge and abilities and feels he would be wasting his time taking the introductory course. Should Joe be exempted from this requirement? Who should make the decision?

*Case 2: Course materials.* Joe is on a tight schedule and has now registered for his course. However, the university has a centralized course materials inventory, and the counsellor informs Joe that he will have to wait for up to two weeks for his materials to be shipped to the regional office. Joe is upset because he had counted on working on the course immediately, especially because his job will take him out of the country next month, and he will have less time to focus on the course. The counsellor is sympathetic, having long

lobbied for a regional distribution system so that students can benefit from 'one-stop shopping' and pick up their materials at the time of registration. This argument has recently been bolstered by a study from the university's institutional research department which has found a correlation between student success in completing courses and the speed of the university's response to his or her request for service. The manager of course materials has been resistant to this request because of the higher costs and administrative complexity of trying to manage several regional inventories. Should the university decentralize its course-materials distribution? Who should make the decision?

*Case 3: Course suspension.* Because Joe got a late start on the course, he is now concerned that he cannot finish its requirements within the designated six-month period. He would like to be able to suspend his study, without charge, for one month while he is away on business and to resume his studies upon his return - in other words, to be permitted to take seven months instead of six. The regional counsellor believes that this is a reasonable request, given that it was partly the university's fault in the first place for Joe's slow start, and given Joe's success in other courses. However, the registrar is the only official permitted to make exceptions to university regulations. Suspensions are not normally permitted because they tie up course tutors and thus deny places to other students. Given a long waiting list for the psychology course in question, and because institutional research has shown that the overwhelming majority of students who suspended study under a previous, more liberal policy, never actually completed the course, the registrar is apt to resist such an exception. Should Joe be granted a suspension? Who should make the decision?

It should be noted that a very similar case could be drawn up involving the conditions whereby a British Open University student is excused from attending its obligatory summer school.

### **RESPONSE 1: THE POLITICAL APPROACH**

As Baldrige<sup>3</sup> has documented, such decisions are frequently made on a 'political' basis in universities. Hence, the decision will tend to follow the institutional power base, which is normally in the central offices and concentrated in the academic sectors (where, reason suggests, it should be in a university). It is likely that the cases would be handled as follows:

*Case 1: Prerequisites.* Prerequisite courses are the exclusive domain of the appropriate faculty who are in the best position to know whether or not a given course requires specific prior knowledge. It is unlikely that Joe would receive permission to be exempted from the introductory course, and under no circumstances would the decision be made by anyone other than a faculty member, let alone a regional manager or counsellor.

*Case 2: Course materials.* The question of establishing a more decentralized distribution system for course Materials would become a power (and a fiscal) issue in the institution, with the regional and central players vying for support among their colleagues. The regional manager would cite the institutional research and service to students as justification, while the course-materials manager would appeal to universal concerns about finances and build the central-system case on cost efficiency. The decision could go either way and would depend mainly on the credibility of the two key managers and on who lined up on either side of the issue. The 'political' leader would seek a compromise which would meet the major objections and objectives of both sides. Some probable outcomes would include a partial inventory of the most popular courses in local offices, or a very much more responsive and speedy distribution service from the central office, perhaps directly to the student's home.

*Case 3: Course suspension.* A strong case may be advanced both for making reasonable exceptions on a local level and for upholding registrarial control over any exceptions to established university policy. Under a political style of leadership, the appropriate executive officer would uphold the registrar's authority but urge considerably more responsiveness to regional and student concerns. A framework would be developed to encourage a close working relationship between the registrar and regional offices, within which it would be up to each regional counsellor to develop the best possible relationship with the registrar and to tailor arguments to his or her way of looking at things. This would probably mean fewer exceptions than the counsellor would make, and it would be very important to the registrar for it to be made clear that it was his or her decision in any case. A key factor in the registrar's decision would be the amount of pressure emanating from the faculties, especially if waiting-list students were putting a lot of pressure on them to provide course places.

## **RESPONSE 2: A VALUE-DRIVEN APPROACH**

Things might look a little different under a 'value-driven' model of leadership. In the extreme case, if the single value of 'quality of service to students' was pre-eminent, the responses would be quite different, with the local counsellor or manager being given broad authority to make exceptions. The anticipated outcomes would be that the counsellor would be able to waive the prerequisite for Joe Trennis and approve a one-month suspension, and that the regional office would be able to hand out all course materials at the time of registration. Despite promoting themselves as student-orientated institutions, very few open universities would go this far, at least in part because of the difficulties of managing such a decentralized system.

More commonly, there would be at least two major values at the top of the university's priority list - quality of service to students (immediate decisions and services, no 'run around' in trying to find the appropriate authority) and the maintenance of the quality and integrity of its academic programme (decisions consistent with academic policy across regions). Consideration of this situation is a little more complex.

*Case 1: Prerequisites.* The decision about prerequisites would still be made by the appropriate faculty member or dean, but under somewhat different conditions. Given its strong commitment to service to students, the university would want to minimize the number of prerequisite courses and to ensure that a decision to establish a prerequisite was based on overwhelming evidence that students could not otherwise handle a particular course. It is likely that every prerequisite decision would have to be ratified by the senate or academic council and that a process would be established whereby a counsellor could get an immediate response from the faculty on a particular case (within a preestablished process and set of criteria permitting the counsellor to make such a request).

*Case 2: Course materials.* The governing value would be the quality of service to students, given that the location of the service would not be a factor in academic integrity. Hence, the Manager of course Materials would be instructed to find the Most cost-effective way (such as through 'just-in-time' inventory systems, for example) to provide a full inventory to each of the regional offices. Hence, in Most cases, students would be able to pick up their Materials at the time of registration.

*Case 3: Course suspension.* This situation brings into conflict the two Most important values of the institution. Unlike the political response, however, in this case, both the regional Manager and the registrar would be put under strong pressure by the executive officer in charge to find a way through the two sets of values. Hence, rather than compromise or have

a stand-off resolved (probably in the registrar's favour in the political scenario), the two Managers would be expected to develop a cooperative system which takes the student's best interests into account within existing university regulations. The expected outcome would be a process whereby the on-the-spot counsellor would have authority to make exceptions under very specific conditions and/or a quick-response, hot-line service which would allow the counsellor to take cases not anticipated by prior policy to the registrar and get an immediate response so that there is no unnecessary waiting on the student's part. The point would not be so much 'who' made the decision as that every effort was being made to accommodate the student without violating the integrity of the university's policies. The latter would be monitored regularly and changed if necessary to satisfy these two objectives. The registrar's focus would shift from ruling on individual cases to ensuring that counsellors are knowledgeable about university policy and the rationale behind it, and to monitoring the application of policy through close liaison with regional offices.

### **ESTABLISHING REGIONAL OFFICES**

The above analysis assumes conflict, ambiguity and competition between central and regional offices and looks at alternative ways of dealing with the resulting problems from several leadership perspectives. Regardless of style, however, the number, complexity and intensity of conflicts and problems can be reduced by the way in which regional networks are established in the first place. The following steps constitute a reasonable starting point in this direction:

- Jurisdictions and responsibilities must be very clearly defined between central and regional authorities, and reviewed regularly by both parties on the basis of their effectiveness in carrying out established policies and procedures.
- Regional staff must be subject to overall policy and it should be clear where and when they have to get official permission to deviate from it in the interests of a client.
- Within the reasonable limitations of the centralization - vs - decentralization dilemma, regional staff must have some leeway to respond to local needs without having to get central permission for every deviation from strict policy. If regional staff have to contact headquarters for every small decision, they become mere surrogate students. The students are not much better off than they would be making their own inquiries of headquarters, and the whole rationale for a regional office is undermined. At the same time, there are fundamental standards and principles of fairness which must be upheld, and it is not unreasonable to require official permission from central authorities if these are to be upheld. In an effective regional model, these fundamental standards are clear and understood by all, and there is considerable leeway on the details to allow local staff to give personal and prompt service.
- It is easier to say 'no' to a student by post or over the Telephone. It is much more difficult to deny a student's request when he or she is ensconced in one's office and won't leave until it is granted. This goes beyond the notion that staff are more apt to bend rules in the physical presence of the student in that it recognizes that face-to-face encounters are more apt to result in the staff member's really listening and trying to understand the student's perspective than they are when reading a letter or talking on the phone. Staff are also more apt to question the university's policies and procedures if their interaction with students is more personal and intense, and hence regional staff have an important perspective on institutional policy which should not be ignored. The value of this direct feedback function of regional offices should be officially recognized and encouraged by the institution. At the same time, if regional staff understand central policies well, they may be better able to explain and get students to accept them because of the face-to-face relationship.



- Following from the previous point, an institutional value which encourages criticism and complaints from students is vital to any commitment to quality of service to students. It is not enough to provide for this through regional offices; systems must be put in place which ensure that complaints reach the appropriate authorities and that they are dealt with. This is particularly critical in open learning, given the already mentioned tendency for adult students to blame themselves rather than the institution when things go wrong (see discussion on pp 85-6 of Chapter 6). For many students, the most frustrating aspect of dealing with educational institutions is not that something goes wrong (it always will) but that the institution is unresponsive when it does, or that no one seems to know who is the appropriate authority in a given instance.
- No set of rules and regulations can ever cover every eventuality. There are two extremes of response which are both unacceptable the 'virtuoso bureaucrat'<sup>4</sup> who rigidly applies every rule in every case without exception, often to the point of stupidity (as when a clerk refuses to hand over course materials to a student because the latter forgot to bring the pink form that the clerk knows he or she has), and the employee who is incapable (or unwilling) to stand up to the student over the counter and bends the rules at will, with the consequence that students are treated unevenly and unfairly. It is important for the institution to recognize this and develop appropriate styles and skills in its front-line staff - those who deal directly with students on a regular basis.
- An additional component of central/regional differences is a function of what is usually a considerable dichotomy in their respective sizes. Large central offices evolve to deal with all of the problems faced by the institution, while regional offices are usually much smaller, staffed to the minimum required to offer all of the services. Consequently, there is a tendency for central offices to develop specialists and for regional staff to become generalists used to performing almost every function handled by their office. This specialist/ generalist dichotomy further contributes to differing perspectives and misunderstandings between central and regional staff.
- A crucial response to the central/regional dilemma lies in staff development and training. Regional staff must understand why the rules are there, which ones are most important and how much leeway they have in applying them. Central staff need to develop a sensitivity to the sorts of concerns and pressures faced by regional staff and to be as adaptive and responsive as they can within the usual resource constraints. These objectives can be achieved in several ways:
  - internal exchanges, whereby regional staff work in the central offices and central staff in the regions. Hickman and Silva<sup>5</sup> quote the old adage, 'Don't judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes' to emphasize the value of such exchanges in sensitizing staff to each other's problems, concerns and perspectives;
  - promotion of central staff to regions and vice-versa;
  - staff development - this includes joint training sessions involving both regional and central staff, trainers from headquarters conducting workshops in regions (and vice versa), and regional staff visiting the central offices for orientation and discussion of common problems.

Some will object to these ideas on the grounds that they are too expensive, especially in terms of travel. I believe that this is one of the biggest mistakes typically made by an organization - when times get tough, the first budgets to be cut are the 'softer' ones like staff development and training. Given that any university's biggest investment by far is its existing staff, most of whom are tenured and will be around for some time to come, it follows that the continuing development of their skills and outlooks is critical to the success of the organization, and thus that this is one of the very last things that should be cut in tough times. This issue is taken up

again in Chapter 10. . One additional concern common to most institutions with extensive regional operations is the challenge of implementing institutional change in such a decentralized system. This is especially difficult in institutions which are evolving quickly, where new policies, programmes and procedures are constantly being introduced, and where student enrolments and regional operations are growing quickly.

All of these factors characterize most new open universities as they grow in popularity and try to respond to more and more educational and social needs in their respective milieux. Special efforts will be required to ensure that regional as well as central staff understand the reasons for new staff and student policies, new fees, tighter fiscal controls, and changes in computer and other support systems. If institutional leaders do not make the effort to communicate personally with regional office staff , apparently successful institutional changes may be undermined by well-meaning but poorly informed staff in the regions who find it difficult to adjust to changes they do not understand in the first place.

It is not just regional offices which pose these difficulties, for there are many similar difficulties in the common practice of employing part-time, off-campus Telephone and seminar tutors, the subject of the next section of this chapter on managing at a distance.

### **Managing off-campus tutors: dilemmas and contradictions**

A second complex and contentious issue in a university dedicated to distance education is the management of off-campus tutors. While models vary from institution to institution, such staff are typically part-time, may live miles from the nearest campus or regional office, and are involved in any number of course-delivery activities, including Telephone tutoring, classroom or teleconferencing seminars, classroom teaching at remote sites, and computer conferencing from home.

Given British organizational theorist Charles Handy's prognostication that organizations will increasingly hire staff part-time, and that a significant proportion of these will be working from their own homes,<sup>6</sup> the experience of open universities with part-time off-campus tutors is of interest well beyond the bounds of distance education.

### **THE ISOLATION OF OFF-CAMPUS STAFF**

The following factors are central to the difficulties faced in managing such tutors:

- They are part-time, and their full-time commitment may be to another institution;
- They are usually on short-term or annual contracts, and their overall commitment to the institution may not be as strong as that of full-time permanent staff , especially if they have another full-time job;
- They do not have regular face-to-face contact with either their colleagues or their superiors, but tend to work in isolation from their homes;
- Their roles are frequently diffuse and not very well defined. As frontline staff , they usually represent the students' closest contact with the institution, but they lack the usual authority of the academic in the classroom because they are bound by courses designed by other staff and under the jurisdiction of a central academic. They may not even have any say in the design or content of the course, or in the marking of papers and examinations.

## MANAGING AT A DISTANCE: TWO CASE STUDIES

Again, it would be useful to explore mini-case studies in confronting the problems of managing tutors at-a-distance. Our representative tutor in this case is Janet Trennis, a distant relative of the already mentioned Joe.

*Case 1: Control of knowledge.* Janet has been asked to return for her second consecutive year as on-site tutor for a sociology course offered in a remote northern community.

In this intensive course, 'tutoring' means 'teaching', in that Janet must reside in the community and meet the students every day. Given that most of her students are Native Canadians, many of whom are unmarried mothers, Janet feels strongly that an important component of her role is to adapt the course materials (examples, case studies) to the local environment and to the situations faced by single parents in today's society. However, she was frustrated last year when the academic in charge of the course refused to change the examination to reflect the supplementary materials she had introduced, and several of her students were very upset because they had failed the course even though getting good marks on the term papers (because the centrally set and marked final examination reflected neither the content nor the style of their local instructor). Hence, before accepting the course again this year, Janet has demanded that she alone be the marker for all papers and exams in the course, and that she be permitted to set the final examination. The course coordinator is very concerned about the implications of this for the course design, and especially for the overall standards, suspecting that Janet is 'soft' on the Native Canadian students and will mark them too easily. Should Janet's demands be granted? Who should make the decision?

*Case 2: Breaking the rules.* Janet is in trouble with her course coordinator. She has frequently in the past broken university rules in order to accommodate her students and, most recently, has given a student permission to take his examination three weeks after his deadline without consulting the course coordinator or registrar. Under university policy, only the latter has the authority to grant a course extension, and there is a small charge for the administrative inconvenience as well. Janet is unrepentant, although she admits that she should have consulted higher authority first. The student in question had been ill for some time and could not finish the course in time. However, in negotiation with Janet, he agreed that he could complete the course with a three-week extension. His past academic performance has been very good. Should the student be granted the extension? What should be done about Janet?

### RESPONSE 1: THE POLITICAL APPROACH

*Case 1: Control of knowledge.* With most of the power vested in the faculties, it is highly unlikely that a political approach to this question would yield anything other than a reaffirmation of the status quo. That is, the concern for academic credibility would uphold the faculty's jurisdiction over course design, course delivery and student evaluation. If Janet were to be given any leeway at all, it would be with the permission of the course coordinator. Janet's best approach, then, would be to lobby him or her or the dean, and perhaps to work with other tutors to convince the academic vice-president and, ultimately, the senate of the wisdom of making better Provision for students with special needs. The same arguments could apply to students in penitentiaries, in companies or other specialized groups.

*Case 2: Breaking the rules.* Given that a university spokesperson, the tutor, had already told the student that he had the extension, the registrar or course coordinator would have no choice but to uphold the decision. The coordinator or dean would tread very warily before

taking any formal action against Janet, fearing that the case could become a *cause célèbre* in the institution. He or she would carefully test the waters first to see which argument, service to existing students or maintaining places for those on the waiting lists, would gain the most political support. The issue would probably be resolved by giving informal support to Janet's concerns but asking her to 'go through the proper channels' in the future rather than making such decisions herself. Whether or not it subsequently became an issue would depend mainly on Janet - she might be content with this solution if it 'worked' for her in the next few cases. On the other hand, she might want to raise the issue more broadly in the institution, soliciting the support of tutors and faculty for more flexible services. In this case, it would become a major issue of values priorities in the institution and would ultimately be resolved by the responsible executive officer and/or the senate or academic council through policy change.

## **RESPONSE 2: THE VALUE-DRIVEN APPROACH**

*Case 1: Control of knowledge.* Control of knowledge lies at the heart of an institution's educational philosophy. There are strong arguments for supporting Janet's position. No matter how well designed, no single set of course materials will be ideally suited to all student groups, and the ability to adapt materials and to bring them closer to the students' own experience is presumably one of the reasons for engaging a locally based tutor in the first place. It also follows that final examinations should reflect the actual course and that it is unfair to students if a major segment of what was discussed in class is not examined, or if they are examined on materials never covered. On the other side of the ledger, there are legitimate concerns about control of academic standards, about universal criteria and standards of student evaluation, and about the integrity of a course credit across all students. Under a value-driven leader, the issue would be taken well beyond Janet's particular case and addressed at the highest policy level in the institution first. Since both service to the student and overall academic credibility are fundamental values in the institution, it is to be expected that some changes will be made, but not at the expense of the central control mechanisms already in place. Possible responses would be:

- Permitting the tutor to set and mark a certain portion of the final examination;
- Much broader participation of tutors in the setting and marking of all examinations and in the design of courses;
- Special provisions for on-site tutoring for specific 'special needs' groups;
- An overall policy change which permits a 'local' component for all courses with the permission of the dean or vice-president academic.

*Case 2: Breaking the rules.* The decision in the particular case would be upheld for the same reason as stated for case one. A value-driven approach which placed the highest priority on service to students and academic credibility would be much more supportive of Janet's position than would a more political response. Within specified bounds, governed primarily by fiscal factors, tutors would be given a lot more leeway to treat students personally and individually, the emphasis being on the processes required to ensure that those affected by such decisions, notably the registrar, were kept informed about them. There would also be recognition within the institution that no rules or policies can cover all instances, and tutors might even be encouraged to bend the rules, provided they were fully aware of the consequences of their actions, and that they were operating within the specified limitations. The latter would be clearly determined by the fundamental values underpinning the institution's mission statement, and properly orientated tutors would not usually challenge them.

This approach would undoubtedly cause more problems for the central bureaucracy, but it would maintain the appropriate emphasis on the institution's espoused values of service to students and academic credibility rather than on administrative convenience. It would have to be monitored carefully, however, to ensure that one critical value, responsiveness to student needs, was balanced by another, equitable treatment of all, the professional-bureaucratic conflict which has formed the theoretical basis for this approach to university management.

### **Cost implications of regional networks and tutors**

It would be misleading to suggest that all of the above issues are simply philosophical ones which can be resolved by reasonable debate among reasonable people. This is to ignore the cost of such services.

There is a presumption, not always proven, that the more services one offers, the greater the chances of student success. Hence, in addition to a basic home-study (correspondence) package, the university can offer all sorts of support - Telephone tutors, teleconferencing, in-class seminars and lectures, library services, cassettes and videotapes, Telephone and in-person counselling and advising, study-skills workshops, and others. Taken to an extreme, one alternative to distance education is to fly every student into posh facilities in a city centre, and another is to install a facsimile machine and personal computer in every student's home. These are interesting measures of the upper limit of an institution's costs per student.

Measures of cost effectiveness are essential to any decision-making in this area. For example, if 'course completion' or 'graduation rate' are the measures of success, the logical indices are 'cost per completion' or 'cost per graduate'. It is critical that institutions develop strong institutional research components, and that all policies about levels of service are constantly monitored and evaluated in terms of both cost and effectiveness. This is usually easier said than done, as it is notoriously difficult to isolate the variables and to standardize the timelines, especially if students are on individual timetables and have a lot of flexibility about when they finish courses and programmes.

This issue is examined in more depth in Chapter 6 in the discussion about developing learner independence.

### **Summary: combating institutional hypocrisy**

The above case studies from two contentious areas, the management of regional networks and off-campus tutors, force the reader to challenge the basic value-systems which drive an open-learning institution.

Judging from its mission statements, its promotional information, and the speeches of its senior administrators, no educational institution has values higher than its academic integrity and a strong student orientation. In practice, every institution should be judged by the way it carries out these pious intentions. Does decision-making reflect the stated central values or are they too frequently undermined by power politics and administrative convenience?

Before elaborating on this point, I should make it clear that rules, procedures and systems are essential to the good management of any complex process. Administrative convenience is important if it results in better and more consistent overall service to all students. If every single case were considered in depth by every staff member, service to students would be slow and probably inconsistent, and therefore it would be unfair to some. So the point is not to abolish systems, rules and procedures, but to ensure that every rule and procedure has an important purpose, that the rationale for each is well and widely understood, and that there are clear and simple mechanisms for exceptions and appeals.

It is naive to think that organizational politics and convenience will not play central roles in decision-making, but these natural tendencies should be modified by the central values which

are purported to drive the institution. No one knows better than its immediate clients, the students, how much institutional practice reflects these values, and hence they should be consulted and listened to on an ongoing basis (through such mechanisms as students' associations; student representation on various bodies; open seminars for staff which feature student panelists; focus groups with past and current students, both successful and unsuccessful; and mechanisms for exceptions and complaints which are effective and well understood by students and staff alike).

Even these measures can appear to be tokenism, however, especially in an institution where students are scattered over wide geographic areas and working at their own pace. It becomes very difficult to generalize about student needs or to find people willing to serve as student representatives, especially given expectations that they will truly represent others whom they do not know or have much capacity to consult. This means that open-learning institutions need to do even more than other educational agencies to ensure that staff know, support and demonstrate the central values on a daily basis.

Given the mini-case studies offered in this chapter, it is likely that decision-making in most open-learning institutions most of the time will resemble the political approach more than the value-driven one. The challenge is to not to eschew organizational politics and overtly wear one's heart on one's sleeve, but to provide leadership that will gradually reduce the gap between the two approaches; between the institution's promises and its actions. Before very long, the students will know the difference and, in the long run, so will everyone else connected with the institution.

## Notes

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5. Hickman, C R and Silva, M A (1984), *Creating Excellence: Managing Corporate Culture, Strategy and Change in the New Age*, New York: New American Library, p 128.
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