

“An effective approach to implementing reforms: management and assessment”, by Bernard Dumont, France

Summary

The effects of reform do not necessarily match expectations. Reformers must ensure that public money is spent both effectively and efficiently.

Since various reforms to improve existing education systems are at present under way, I shall put forward some ideas on methods, and also some examples of tools which may make it easier to manage and assess reforms, as part of an approach geared to quality and ongoing improvement, and so make them more effective. Among other things, I shall be looking at the special features of teacher training reforms, and especially those associated with incorporation of ICTs¹ into European education systems.

Biographical note

Bernard Dumont is an independent consultant, specialising in the use of ICTs for training, distant training and the promotion of quality in training. He is a Council of Europe consultant and an expert evaluator for the European Commission's Directorate General on the Information Society. He has worked successively as guest professor and programme director for Quebec's open university (Télé-Université), as director of the “New Technologies and Education” programme at the French National Educational Research Institute (Paris) and as Professor of Educational Science at the University of Paris 7.

1. Why manage and assess reforms?

Reforms have several features which make management and assessment desirable. Above all:

- most of them make heavy demands on public funds and personnel;
- some of them are actually launched before previous reforms have been completed and evaluated.

This means that the successes and failures of past reforms are generally little used to consolidate future ones. It also means that direct and indirect costs cannot be calculated, or potential returns on investment estimated.

A state which wants to use public funds and personnel properly should therefore manage and assess its reforms.

¹ Information and communication technologies.

2. How should reforms be managed?

Figure 1 below shows the distinction we propose to make between management and assessment.



Fig. 1. Respective place of management and assessment

Management is an internal part of the reform process, while assessment – which may continue beyond the period covered by the reform – is carried out by an external observer.²

However, both are far more effective if included from the outset in the reform budget, and especially if the tools they require are designed and produced as early as possible.

We shall examine them separately, concentrating on management, which is generally practised less explicitly than assessment.

3. Managing change

We shall start by looking at the methods used to manage change within organisations.³

To make changes, one must have a vision of the future and decide how to realise it – and both that vision and those decisions must be defensible. Change (especially organisational or strategic change) always encounters resistance, and its proponents must anticipate and allow for that resistance in arguing their case and attempting to win over all those affected. The aim, utopian though it may seem, is to rally as many people as possible behind the projected change. In education, this does not apply simply to teachers, pupils and students. The net must be spread wider, both within the system (head teachers, librarians, technical and administrative staff, research laboratories) and outside (parents, local authorities, the business sector, etc.). A necessary part of managing change is thus having an internal and external communication plan, covering all those whom change will affect.

² A university research department, for example.

³ Works in French on this topic: David Autissier, Jean-Michel Moutot, *Pratiques de la conduite du changement*, Ed. Dunod, 2003; Christophe Faurie, *Conduite et mise en œuvre du changement: l'effet de levier*, Ed. Maxima, 2003.

Works in English: John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Press, 1996; Jeffrey M. Hiatt, Timothy J. Creasey, *Change Management*, Prosci Research, 2003; John P. Kotter, Dan S. Cohen, *The heart of change: real-life stories of how people change their organisations*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

Change requires back-up measures for staff, and these usually include training.

Lastly, managing change is a long-term business and must take account of long-term effects.

The three main stages in change are shown schematically in Figure 2 below. This schema makes it possible to identify the processes affected by change, and allow for resistance from the various parties affected. In addition to effects on the organisation itself, planning should cover training and communication, the importance of which has already been stressed.

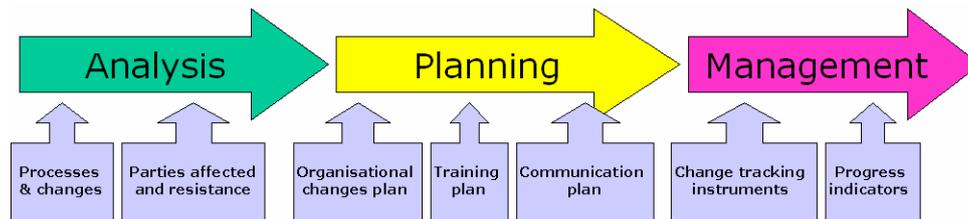


Fig. 2. The 3 stages in the management of change⁴

4. Applying the quality approach

The second methodological framework is the quality approach.⁵ The communiqué issued by the European Ministers of Higher Education⁶ in Bergen (May 2005) institutionalises quality assurance, and provides a basis for it in a set of “directives”,⁷ drawn up by the ENQA.⁸ This means that quality is now part of the Bologna Process, and the things asked of higher education today certainly prefigure new demands on education systems as a whole.

The quality approach includes a number of practices which are relevant to management and assessment, e.g.:

- the process approach (cf. Fig. 3): change can be seen as an organised system of activities, which uses resources (personnel, equipment, methods, funding, etc.) to convert input into output (usually products, but sometimes services),⁹ by adding value. This approach makes it possible to focus on expectations and not – separately – on the parties involved;
- management of risk and malfunction, and taking of corrective action. This is closely linked with the need for the managing entity to react rapidly, and is associated with the fundamental concept of continuous improvement. Managing can thus be seen as a matter of picking up and responding to danger signals;

⁴ After David Autissier *cf.* above.

⁵ One of the benchmarks most widely used is ISO 9001:2000 (<http://www.iso.org/>). One example is CNAM-Languedoc Roussillon (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers), in Montpellier (France), which was granted certification according to this standard in December 2004 <http://www.cnam.agropolis.fr/>.

⁶ http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf

⁷ “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” <http://www.enqa.net/files/ENQA%20Bergen%20Report.pdf>.

⁸ ENQA : European Network for Quality Assurance. <http://www.enqa.net/>.

⁹ After ISO 8402.

- a vision of the institution’s future, driven by management and accepted by all those affected;
- management’s declared determination to adopt a quality approach;
- internal and external communication, covering the vision, implementation of the quality approach, successes and difficulties;
- involvement of all those concerned, including managers;
- back-up training for the above;
- individual rewards for collective success.

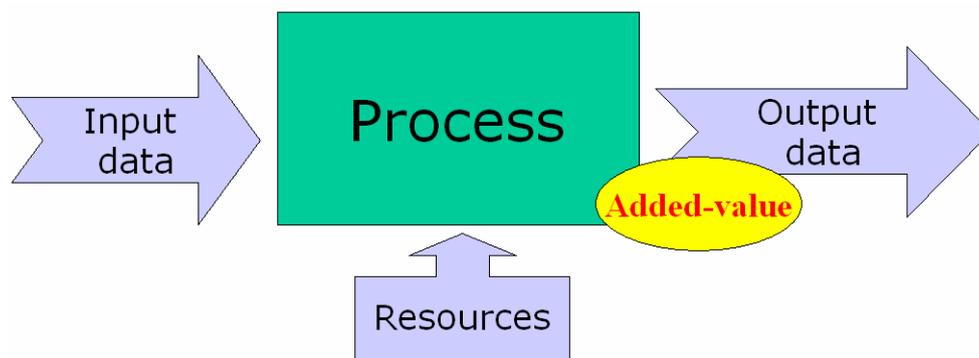


Fig. 3. Schematic representation of a process

5. Criteria and indicators

The quality approach needs measuring, just as the management of change needs monitoring via suitable instruments. Quality is measured, not in absolute terms, but based on certain criteria, which must be clearly stated and relate to the improvement expected.

One or more measurable indicators are associated with each criterion. For example, bringing ICTs into certain subject areas may be a quality criterion for a given reform, but it is not a quantity that can be measured absolutely. It may, however, be possible to link it with indicators which can be measured, for example the number of subject areas in which over 30% of teachers use ICTs at least once a week.

It is possible to set minimum thresholds, below which quality is considered inadequate (showing that the change has yet to take effect) and corrective action is required, and also success thresholds, above which the change counts as successful.

Indicators must be checked at regular intervals, and there must be alarm thresholds, triggering corrective action within a time acceptable in terms of risk management.

6. Assessment

Assessment is more objective when carried out by an agency outside the organisation which is introducing the reforms or changes. Its aim is to examine the effectiveness of those reforms or changes, that is, to gauge the extent to which they have achieved their aims.

A more demanding yardstick may also be applied: efficiency. The issue here is not just effectiveness, but also cost-effectiveness. To illustrate the difference, let us take the case of a school principal who sets out to cut the drop-out rate for children from a nearby deprived area from 30% to 10% in two years. If the rate falls to 9.5% in that time, the action taken has certainly been effective. If, however, it has meant tripling the number of teachers, it has not been efficient, since it costs too much to be made permanent or to be applied throughout a region. Simply put, efficiency is a matter of “quality/price” ratios.

Like internal management, assessment can contribute to continuous improvement of the changes introduced. It is enough to link the two processes and ensure that assessment triggers warning signals on the management side.

It is strongly recommended that assessment include a “duty to remember”, that is, that policy makers be required to take account of past assessment findings in launching new changes and reforms.

7. Reform of education systems

Reform in education has certain special features which affect management and assessment. The following may be mentioned.

- Since everyone spends several years at school, everyone feels concerned by any changes in the school system, and has his/her own ideas on the question – which further complicates the following.
- The parties involved form a highly complex group: besides parents (present, past and future), there are teachers (in large numbers, differing in their status and generally conservative, who have usually spent most of their lives within the system and have no experience of the private sector), trade unions (which may tend to defend their own interests), administrators and inspectors (whose cumbersome separate hierarchies and patterns of staff management, recruitment and promotion may affect or even impede reform), local authorities (which may have responsibilities in the education field and be subject to certain constraints in terms of employment and migration, for instance the need to combat depopulation of rural or mountain areas, and facilities), and businesses (management of human resources in terms of employment and in-service training). In the spirit of the Bologna Process, the international context (twinned schools, European project partners, etc.) might be added.
- The impact of reform is necessarily medium or long term, and so the public find it hard to envisage the benefits and see why certain decisions have been taken. Moreover, when reforms simply tagged with some minister’s name arrive in quick succession, the public do not always see them implemented.
- Reforms do not always seem to target pupils and students, but rather the teachers and staff of educational establishments.
- Quality itself remains a vague concept, even though the basic aim of all educational reform is to improve the quality of teaching.

8. Reform, teachers and ICTs

Among the reforms referred to above, the introduction of ICTs deserves to be looked at more closely, since it has a number of special features which must be allowed for to reduce the risk of failure.

Teachers are particularly sensitive to the potential “dangers” of ICTs:

- since the 1970s, the idea that technological tools (“machines”) may replace teachers has been common;
- unmonitored content can be accessed by pupils, especially via blogs¹⁰ and wikis;¹¹
- the Web can pose a threat to children (paedophilia, pornography, etc.).

Change is often trumpeted as “ground-breaking”, but teachers wonder whether it is genuinely valid, or just a passing fad.

Reforms are not necessarily backed by an effort to motivate teachers, although most of them require teachers to adapt and make changes in their working methods. Training must be provided to help them understand the aims of reform, and acquire any new skills they may need.

Lastly, incentives are needed to maximise teacher support. Whenever ICT-based changes are made, teachers have to spend time familiarising themselves with the new technology, adapting their classroom approach and coping with the new system’s vagaries (breakdowns, hardware availability, etc.). Teachers¹² who do this successfully must be rewarded, particularly in terms of assessment and promotion.

9. Conclusion

The use of methods which have proved themselves in developing both public and private organisations will give educational reformers tools they can easily adapt to their own situation and aims.

By winning teachers’ support, involving all those affected – both internal and external – and ensuring that collective improvements benefit individuals, policy makers give their reforms a better chance of being motivating, effective, efficient and of use to young people and the whole community.

10. References

Two Council of Europe documents may be mentioned:

- on the development of education systems in the communication society, see the recent publication, *Learning and teaching in the communication society* (available in English and French);

¹⁰ Abbreviation of weblog (from a ship’s or aircraft “log”), personal diary published via the Internet using simplified publishing tools.

¹¹ From the Hawaiian “wikiwiki” meaning “quick”: used of websites which allow users to edit their pages quickly and easily, in a spirit of collaboration and co-publishing. Ward Cunningham, who invented the system in 1995, applied this term to the first such site, the WikiWikiWeb (for more details see: <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>).

¹² Pupils’ ICT skills should also be acknowledged, cf. the resolution referred to in the next paragraph.

- on the introduction of ICTs in education systems, see the “Resolution to foster the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in educational systems in Europe”, Standing Conference of Ministers of Education, “Intercultural education: managing diversity, strengthening democracy”, 21st session, Athens, Greece, 10-12 November 2003.