Butterflies in the Garbage Can: How decision making in UK Higher Education can produce ripples throughout the sector

Sarah Penney

Peter Wolstencroft

Manchester Metropolitan University

"So, what's our plan of action?"

We have all been there, the Chair looks round expectantly as they complete their outline of a problem facing the university, participants in the meeting either avoid eye contact, feign ignorance or cast their minds around for a solution. There is an inculcated view of universities that they are bureaucratic monoliths where the decision-making wheels turn slowly and decisions need to pass through numerous committees; however, there is mounting evidence that this view is outdated, and the modern landscape of the sector requires a far more agile approach to solutions.

Universities are currently facing numerous challenges and any discussion around decision-making needs to be framed around these points. Foremost among them are the significant policy churn, the ongoing financial crisis that universities face, the sectors emergence from the pandemic, a neoliberal market that ensures that competition between providers is inbuilt and the datafication of the sector (Stevenson 2017) that stresses the primacy of metrics. These challenges reinforce that decisions need be made in a timely manner and delays can lead to missed opportunities and the organisation stagnating whilst more agile competitors take advantage of opportunities.

So, when the Chair's call for a solution is made, time is not always a commodity that is in plentiful supply. Instead, solutions are often suggested using approaches that are less systematic than the ideal, an approach that is reminiscent of a model known as 'garbage can decision making' (Cohen *et al* 1972). This approach characterises organisations as what the authors describe as 'organised anarchy', the key characteristics being fluent participation of people in decision making, problematic preferences for objectives and unclear technology. Although this theory was first expounded fifty years ago, when we look at modern universities, we can see the characteristics Cohen *et al* outlined are often present.

Given modern universities are large entities with a significant number of people at the top of the organisation (the authors' own organisation has over 40,000 students as an example), are in the centre of significant policy churn from successive governments and are wrestling with systems that are not always designed for the purpose they are used

for, all three of the characteristics described are likely to be present. This means that the garbage can approach to decision making can be applied. This suggests that decisions are attached to problems in a non-systematic manner rather than the organisation going through complex and lengthy processes to get to the decision. This usually has primarily occurred due to a lack of time making the more sophisticated approaches are not possible, although sometimes it can also be attributed to the people present at the meeting wanting to make quick impact on metrics they are measured against.

There is an additional element to consider. In UK Higher Education the sector tends to be comparatively transparent when compared to other sectors, with providers freely able to see what other institutions are doing to solve a problem. This is linked to the fact that it is public funds that are being used and the need to ensure value for money is obtained and it leads to a situation whereby providers tend to look to see what others are doing and often adopt similar solutions, safe in the knowledge that they have worked elsewhere.

Whilst there is logic to this approach in that you are taking a tried and tested solution, it is important to be mindful of the implications. If we accept the premise that garbage can decision making is used in universities then the decision is likely to have come from a less than rigorous evidence base. The fact that a decision has been made in haste at one university often has consequences far beyond the initial meeting where a question is posed. This brings to mind the butterfly effect and how small decisions have an effect far beyond their initial impact. The butterfly effect (Lorenz 1963) is long established in many areas but within the university sector it might be used to explain how decisions made in one organisation, fundamentally change the sector as a whole.

The culture of learning from each other is engrained in the sector and hence, decisions made by successful providers tend to be replicated when made. When the call for a decision to be made from the Chair participants are likely to make use of sector knowledge, a range of websites that keep people up to date with current practice and even a network of informal WhatsApp groups. Decisions are then based on this knowledge and the universities decision is cast in stone, depending on its status and the network of participants in the meeting, to potentially influence others.

So, the next time a decision is called for and then made, think about the process. A similar request was probably made at the organisation you are using as your model. They might have followed a similar process and used the decision from a different provider but even if they haven't, the decision making that lead them to their conclusion is likely to have followed the same trajectory as yours. The difference is that because that decision making is hidden from your view, the provider has credibility and it has already been made, it is given status that elevates it from the garbage can to a credible alternative. The butterfly has flapped its wings and effected the sector a little more.

References

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