

## ***Effective change in higher education: exploration through a practice lens at the meso level***

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### **Abstract**

Organisational change in Higher Education Institutions occurs in a variety of contexts and may be initiated by diverse sources, by government, the institution or locally from within departments. In her Think Piece, Hlengwa (Hlengwa, 2019) focuses on a change initiative originating at national level and explores the effectiveness of that change at the level of the individual, with mentoring of new appointments as a delivery mechanism. She highlights some of the multifaceted issues which may act to inhibit change and refers to a 'glacial' rate of progress. This paper suggests an alternative option for evaluating change taking the department as the basic institutional organisational unit and outlines options for studying the effectiveness of change at this 'meso' level, as opposed to the broader macro level of the whole institution or the more limited micro level of the individual. Social Practice theory, coupled with a layered, critical realist ontology, provides one methodology for the evaluation of change at this level, and may be more optimal when compared to techno-rational, or managerial, theories. Simple social practice models allow the use of a wide variety of research methods to gather rich data which can then be analysed at different depths and from the perspectives of different staff groups. Straightforward models also have the benefit of being more comprehensible to research participants and can add methodological coherence of an inquiry. The reported study started by drawing on the findings of a broad reaching survey, which then allowed an interview protocol to be derived. The consequent semi-structured interviews elicited further insights of meaning into the understanding of the change initiative by different staff groups. These were then compared to documents, meeting observations and reports. Results gained through this process demonstrated the multi-dimensional complexity of materials, meanings and competencies. The literature and data demonstrate that evaluating change in this manner presents some fundamental challenges: indeed, the theoretical underpinning can be seen as debatable and consequently other aspects of the methodology can also be challenged. Nevertheless, the richness of the data obtained can be used to derive some insights into factors which encourage and inhibit effective change at this meso level, possibly extendable to other contexts. The simple theoretical model used has some limitations and a more refined model is proposed.

### **Keywords**

Organisational change, academic department, social practice theory, meso