

The Art of Program Management – How to Balance Multiple Tasks and Conflicting Stakeholder Interests

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Abstract:

Program management includes a multitude of decisions on numerous parameters: course content, modes of delivery, management of professional and academic standards, admission, grading, finance, and marketing.

At the same time, program management is seen as an organisational response to demands from multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests. How does the process assure salient stakeholders influence on program management decisions? Five groups of stakeholders are considered: Faculty/academics, students, industry/employers, the Institution (senior management), and society at large.

Different HEIs have chosen different solutions to program management.

In this paper we (1) sketch a conceptual framework for an analysis of HE program management and (2) describe the framework for study program management at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) in Denmark, reflecting on the benefits and shortcomings of this particular organisational model. The discussion serves as a point of departure for developing a holistic model that both addresses multiple tasks and legitimate stakeholder interests.

1.0 A Stakeholder Model of Program Management

The management of Higher Education programs is situated in a cross-fire of different perspectives and interests. The basic goal of operating within the budgets provided is circumscribed with academic goals – providing qualified content – and industrial goals like educating a competent labour force. In addition, every program must contribute to the overall institutional goals associated with the university. The group of significant stakeholders and interests comprehend academic disciplines, political forces on a societal and local level, students and employers.

In the scheme below, the different goals are listed as column headings, while rows are labelled with stakeholder designations.

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	Quality parameters				
Stakeholders	EMPLOYMENT: RELEVANT QUALIFICATIONS	PROCESS: EFFICIENCY AND LEGALITY	ACADEMIC: ADVANCING RESEARCH	INSTITUTION: UNIVERSITY REPUTATION	
INDUSTRY/ PROFESSION	Supply of qualified labour	Conformity with professional norms			
STUDENTS	Employability, career opportunities		Access to research careers		
SOCIETY/ POLITICS AND ECONOMY	Supply of qualified labour	Completion, retention, legality	Feeding Research		
PROFESSORS/ DISCIPLINE			Theoretical rigour	Supporting academic status	
UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT	Employability	Operational and cost efficiency, stability		Supporting institutional status	

Figure 1: Key Stakeholders and Quality Parameters

The task of program management is, then, to optimize a complicated mixture of different goals, in interplay of different stakeholder interests. The ideational context is also complicated: different approaches to higher education see it in different ways. From an idealistic, perhaps Humboldtian perspective, higher education is a self-initiated research and discovery process. Universities exist to provide a framework for the students' striving for knowledge. Alternatively, an industrial model suggests that students are initiated into given fields of research, as apprentices to the masters of the field. The roles of professors and the regulatory framework are different along these lines – professors can be absolute authorities and 'owners' of the content of programmes, or they can be functionaries in the educational machinery. The regulatory framework can be either slim and liberal, or dense and bureaucratic.

Another important ideational distinction is between elitism and egalitarianism. The classical, professor-dominated university is elitist, because research is a competitive, elitist field. The more modern, industrial university is egalitarian in the sense that its task is to identify and develop talent in all social groups and all relevant fields. This distinction is important for the rules of student admission and the awarding of degrees

In the research literature, there is very little discussion of program management, while issues of general university management are frequently discussed (King, R., 2009; Nair, C.S. e.a. 2010; Brown, R., 2011).

2.0 Program Management – the Danish framework

The Danish regulatory framework and educational culture is very much on the egalitarian and industrial-bureaucratic side: a dense net of regulations, mostly emanating from the central Act on Universities (Consolidation Act no. 1368 of 7 December 2007). This act provides detailed procedures for

- university governance

- university finances
- admission of students: numbers, selection criteria, process
- examinations: procedures, forms
- degree programs: levels, labels, management, structure
- grading and assessment
- universities' measuring and publishing of performance
- student rights
- professors' qualifications and employment

This extensive set of rules applies to all programs that lead to a legally mandated degree. In the following, we are not concerned with courses and programs that exist outside this framework – short courses in executive education, labour market courses, etc.

At the program level, two features are prominent: the mandatory program committees or “study boards” that all programs must have. And the obligatory course plans and program regulations that must exist for all such programs.

Each program must be governed by a study board, established by the Dean. Several programs can share a study board, but all must belong to one. Each board must comprise equal numbers of representatives of the academic staff and students, elected by and from those groups. The chairman is a professor, the vice chairman a student.

Each program must also have a program director, appointed by the Dean, frequently the same individual as the committee chairman. The board and the director are charged with the practical organization of teaching and exams.

The study board shall ensure the organization, realization and development of the study program and teaching. Its main objectives are to:

- ensure and develop the quality of the study program and the teaching, and to follow up on evaluations of the program and teaching
- produce proposals for curricula and changes thereto, approve professors' suggestions for syllabi, and approve the organization of teaching and assessment
- process applications from students concerning all the ordinary matters in the program - credit transfers, special dispensations and exemptions, and other extraordinary issues
- reflect and pronounce on all matters of importance to the study programs and teaching within the area and discuss issues related to the study program and the teaching as presented by the Rector or the Dean.

Degree programs offered by Danish universities are subject to a comprehensive set of national regulations, as listed above. Complying with these regulations is a necessary condition for being licensed to offer the program. The following list specifies the contents of some of the national Danish program regulations. All degree programs must

1. ...establish a set of “Program Regulations”, specifying program learning goals, course structure, course workloads (ECTS), exams and grading, admission requirements
2. ... comply with the National Danish Qualification Framework (a translation of the European one), specifying general learning goals at Bachelor, Diploma, Specialized Master, General Master (MBA), and PhD level.
3. ... comply with the “Ministerial Order on University Examinations”, specifying guidelines for examination objectives, examination types, assessment and test procedures, number of examination attempts, curriculum requirements, program certificates, examination appeals, complaints and appeals procedures, rules concerning students’ intellectual property rights, etc.
4. ... be graded according to the Danish version of the ECTS grading scale (absolute grading, total assessment of attainment of learning goals)
5. ... comply with the Danish Censor Regulations, a unique system of Government appointed, external examiners who attend 33% of all final exams, including capstone exams. The censors (some of whom come from universities, others from business) supervise both the academic content of the exam and the legal procedures. Their reports to the Study Board/Program Director of the program form a procedure for systematic feed-back from external stakeholders.
6. ... meet the standards of ACE Denmark, the Danish accreditation institution established in 2008 to conduct accreditation of all Danish university degree programs according to a number of specific standards. Standards include labour market for the graduates; research base of the program; organisation of the program and the learning processes; faculty qualifications; quality assurance; and attainment of learning goals.

3.0 Program Management at Copenhagen Business School

According to these national rules and regulations Copenhagen Business School has developed a specific model for program management with the following characteristics:

1. Decentralized study boards at individual program level (a total of more than 40 study boards)
2. Matrix organization of programs and courses (courses are not ‘owned’ by the faculty)
3. Program Regulations for each program, defining learning goals, courses, curricula, exam regulations for the entire program.
4. Student evaluations of all courses
5. Graduate surveys after program graduation
6. Corporate advisory boards at school-, department-, and program level
7. Clear CBS program quality policy with well defined quality standards and processes for learning, pedagogy, evaluation and assessment common to all degree programs

At the heart of the national Danish framework – and also at CBS – is the Study Board. CBS has decided to establish their Study Boards at the most decentralized level – the individual program level. This means that CBS has more than 40 Study Boards comprised of approximately 150 people, half of which are students and half faculty. This gives room for a very broad involvement and possible engagement in program management for both faculty and students. It does also, however, create difficulties in coordination between programs.

Another characteristic, quite unique to CBS, is the matrix organization of the programs. This means that the faculty doesn't 'own' the programs and the courses, even though they represent academia, the basic raw material in Higher Education. Rather, faculty is considered the 'seller', while the program director and the study board assume the role as 'buyer' in a market of knowledge, constituting the degree program. One implication of this system is that CBS programs are less supply-driven and more driven by students' demands. Of course faculty has an important influence, but not the decisive power to enforce e.g. a certain curriculum against the majority of the study board. Students' influence is further secured by systematic course and program evaluations at the end of each term and at the completion of the program.

The corporate voice is not so direct. Advisory boards are established at three levels – the Dean's advisory board advises the Dean on general issues concerning employers' expectations of the graduates' qualifications and competences, while employer panels at department level advises faculty on issues related to particular disciplines. These panels are, however, not focusing directly on the program, but rather on the disciplines constituting the program. Therefore, some programs have established corporate advisory boards, for the specific program. These boards do, however, not function well for generalist programs where there is no well defined labour market.

The institutional voice is primarily represented by Senior Management of the institution. In particular the Dean of Education who has the overall responsibility of academic and pedagogical quality of the programs. The Dean has the authority to appoint the Program Directors and, by that, the direct influence on program management. Senior Management also controls the financial resources and thereby the possibility to financially support specific programs and initiatives. Finally, senior management possess the power to close down programs and to seek for accreditation of new programs. The institutional voice is also represented in the Academic Council with representatives from the faculty, students and Senior Management. The Academic Council discusses issues of strategic importance to the institution and expresses their opinion to the President. The Academic Council only has a consultative role and will usually not discuss issues concerning individual programs.

The CBS system of program management in a stakeholder perspective can be illustrated like this:

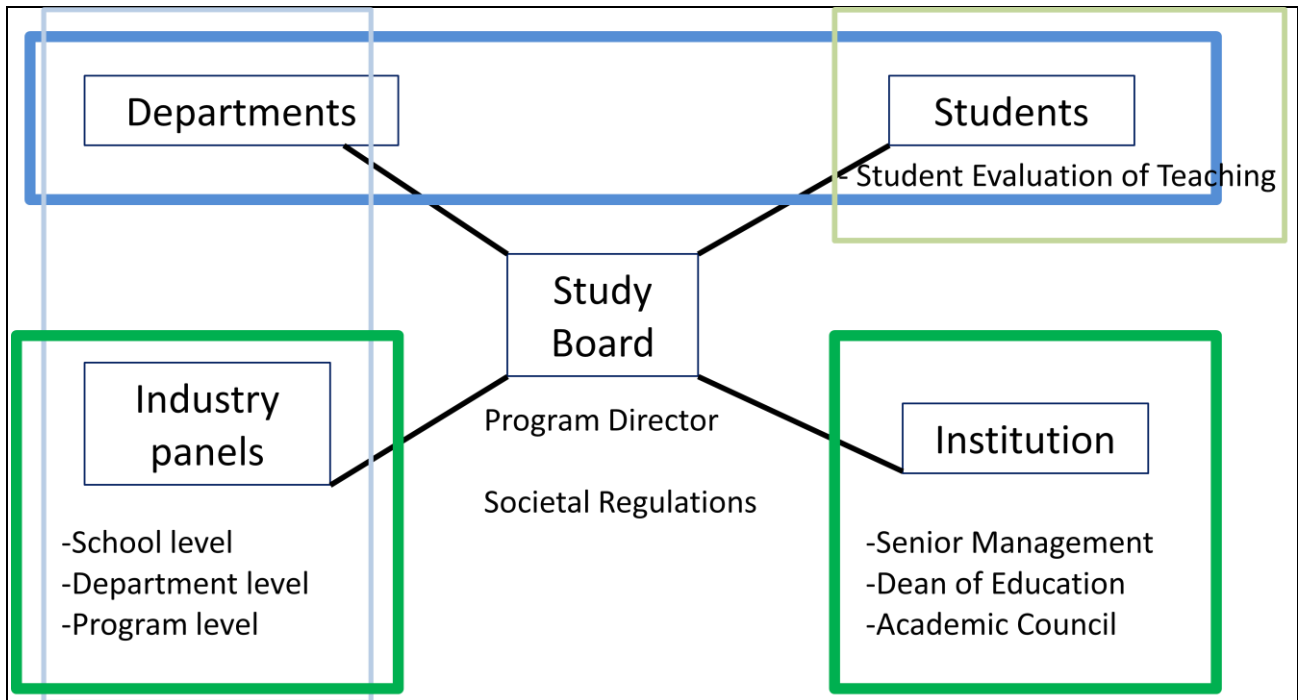


Figure 2: The CBS Framework for Program Management

4.0 Discussion of the CBS Model – pros and cons

The CBS model has a number of advantages from a stakeholder perspective, but also shortcomings.

The decentralized model – although resource demanding – mobilizes a great number of student representatives, and thus the student body at large, to assume responsibility of their learning and ideally this should improve their motivation and active participation in the program. The same can be said about faculty; the Study Board organization creates a forum for academic discussion with colleagues from other disciplines that stimulate a fresh perception of one’s own academic base.

Students and faculty have the dominating influence on the program and its courses, but with important regulatory institutional governance from the Dean of Education. The model secures that the natural faculty focus on academic rigor is balanced by the students’ legitimate interest in employability and career. In particular the lack of professors’ ‘ownership’ of the courses avoids the potential risk of conservatism and stagnation. Some might argue that students are not qualified to make such curricula decisions. The CBS experience demonstrates the opposite, but any way the model secures that a dialogue takes place which in itself should lead to better course and program decisions.

The influence from employers is limited, moderated through the decisive voice of the study boards and the Dean. In addition, students are not invited to discuss with employers in the advisory boards. This compartmentalization may limit the dialogue between stakeholders, but can also be seen as creating a necessary structure for the decision process. The highly decentralized model, in spite of its advantage in mobilizing broad groups of faculty and students, has two major shortcomings: First, It is difficult and time consuming to enforce standard formats for course length, pedagogy, QA processes, and administrative processes across programs. New ideas and principles must be ‘sold’ to a great number of stakeholders

(program directors, faculty and students) in order to gain acceptance. CBS has institutionalized monthly meetings and annual seminars with program directors exactly to address such issues of 'standardization', with some success, but with a considerable investment of resources. Secondly, the decentralized model focuses study board decisions mainly on current academic details of the programs, and less on other issues of program management, such as marketing, recruitment of applicants, admission, finances, pastoral care of students, career service, and alumni relations. These elements, some of which have a longer time horizon than the program length, tend to be prioritized lower than elements of immediate interest to present students.

Program innovation is an important issue, but not always high on the agenda of study boards in the decentralized model; their focus is more on day to day administration than on transformational steps that may improve the program in the long run.. The CBS experience is that initiatives to transform existing programs or develop new ones are often developed by individual faculty or groups of faculty with good ideas of potential market opportunities, sometimes based on surveys, sometimes inspired by new research agendas. The decision process then has to be managed by the office of the Dean of education, which has an important role in supporting and guiding the innovation process.

Also, internationalization of the program must be secured across the study boards. E.g. policies to engage in double degree arrangements with international partners, general principles of student exchange, language policy, etc., are actively supported by some study boards, but must in other cases be driven by the Dean and senior management.

5.0 Conclusion – Questions for discussion

In this paper we have analyzed one particular organizational response to the general question in program management: How to balance the (partly conflicting) interests of different stakeholders, while at the same time meet international academic standards (e.g. from accreditation bodies such as AACSB, EQUIS), adhere to national regulatory requirements, and find a suitable balance of focus between academic and more managerial issues. CBS' model addresses some of the challenges, but far from all, so we are still searching for a more holistic approach to one of the most important challenges in higher education. The questions to be discussed could therefore be

1. How, i.e. under which organizational setting, can local commitment and self-governance at program level (with focus on day-to-day academic issues) be combined with legitimate management requirements to meet institutional goals (e.g. fit with overall program portfolio, cohort size, operational efficiency, cost consciousness, growth) and international academic standards in terms of assurance of learning and quality management?
2. How are the signals from national and international employers, from global trends in the demand for qualified labor, and from national and international competitors collected and analyzed in order to inform program innovation and academic entrepreneurship in a system that is heavily regulated by national framework of legislation?

Answers to these questions will in our opinion be necessary for universities that want to remain in the premier league of their profession.

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