The contextualist model and organisational change: a case of higher education transformation

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews the adequacy of five behaviour-oriented organisational change models. First, three textbooks models, viz. Lewin's three phase change model, Action Research Model, and Contemporary Adaptations to Action Research; second, Contingency models, and third, the Contextualist model are critically reviewed. The review is aimed at ascertaining their adequacy in explaining the Large Scale Organisational Change (LSOC) in the South African Higher Education (HE) sector. This LSOC is manifested in the form of mergers and incorporations among institutions of higher learning as legislated in the Higher Education Act of 1997. The review reveals that the textbook and contingency models are inadequate in addressing the question of LSOC in the HE sector as they are ahistorical, acontextual, and aprocessual in character. An argument is presented that the contextualist approach is adequate in addressing the problem because it takes into account the historical, contextual, and processual nature of change. A paradigm shift is recommended where there should be some significant departure from reliance on textbook models, particularly Lewin’s three phase change model, and contingency models, to a contextualist model.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with a review of organisational change models. The review is done in an attempt to ascertain the best theoretical explanation of the recent change taking place in the South African higher education (HE) sector. This change is manifested in the form of mergers and incorporations of the different public institutions of higher learning. These mergers and incorporations are taking place within the context of an Act of Parliament, viz. The Higher Education Act of 1997.

The paper focuses primarily on the contextualist model. It is argued that this model is the most appropriate and adequate model in explaining change in the HE sector because it is historical, contextual, and processual in nature. The shortcomings of other organisational change models in accounting for change in the HE sector are also pointed out.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the years a number of organisational change models have been developed in an attempt to account for the complex process and implementation of organisational change. Such models, however, appear to fail to account for the kind of change taking place in the South African HE sector precisely because they are ahistorical, acontextual, and aprocessual in nature. A review of such models needs to be done in trying to determine their adequacy or inadequacy in accounting for change relative to the HE sector. In creating new knowledge, it would seem that for a model to provide a convincing account of change in the HE sector, such a model should necessarily be contextual in character.
3. WHAT IS ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE?

The phenomenon of change has become a central management issue in modern organisations. According to McLagan (2002: 28), change is a relatively recent management topic all over the world and, whilst it has been an issue, it is one of the issues today. Change is also a costly, arduous, and intellectually demanding exercise as organisations try and implement complex, unprecedented, organisation-wide initiatives such as re-engineering, diversity interventions, globalisation, installing quality and productivity programmes or entering complex alliances, mergers and acquisitions. Despite all of this, change is an inseparable part of organisations, and it will certainly “not disappear or dissipate” (Paton & McCalman, 2001: 5). Organisations no longer have a choice; they are confronted with pressures to change, otherwise this may lead to their downfall (Nicholson: 1993: 207). Moreover, the rate of organisational change is clearly accelerating today (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 614). Change is therefore a foremost concern of organisations and it is, for that matter, always problematic (Nicholson, 1993: 207).

Organisational change therefore refers to any alteration in activities or tasks (Dawson, 1994: 10). It is a “modification or transformation of the organisation’s structure, processes, or goals” (Write & Noe, 1996: 192). It may involve minor changes in procedures and/or operations or transformational changes brought about by rapid expansion into international markets, mergers, or major restructuring (Kanter, 1991: 154) cited in Dawson (1994: 10). However, King and Anderson (2002: 4) argue that organisational change “generally indicates a macro-level approach, which is more concerned with the organisation as a whole and its major subsystems than with the experiences of small work groups and individuals” and that the focus is basically on large-scale changes. Whatever the case may be, organisational change implies a departure, whether subtle or drastic, from routine to new ways of doing things. It is equally applicable at business or corporate levels or within an industry.

The kind of organisational change that is the focus of this paper is planned change. Planned change is “designed and implemented in an orderly and timely fashion in anticipation of future events” (Smit & Cronje, 1999: 261). It is thus not haphazard but is organised and implemented with some degree of caution. It is based on 3 key dimensions, viz. the magnitude of organisational change, the degree to which the client system is organised, and whether the setting is domestic or international (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 32 - 33). This paper focuses on the first dimension, i.e. the magnitude of organisational change. Change, according to this dimension, is arranged along a continuum from incremental changes - also known as reformational changes - that entail fine-tuning the organisation, on the one extreme, to quantum changes - also known as transformational or fundamental changes - that entail fundamentally altering how the organisation operates, on the other extreme (Coetsee, 2002: 18 - 19). Ledford et al (1990) as cited in Dawson (1994: 10), refer to the latter as Large-Scale Organisational Change (LSOC). This paper focuses on transformational change as it involves an LSOC which aims at overhauling the entire HE sector.

Organisational change in this paper refers to the transformation of institutions of higher learning by way of merging these institutions to create completely new institutions with new identities, structures, cultures, reward systems, information processes and work designs. Transformation, as opposed to crescive change, is a form of enacted change which is planned and whose intention is to bring about
significant changes in, for example, how an institution is led (Norris, 2001: 220). Whilst transformation is purposefully planned to change organisational structures and relationships, cresive change is unplanned and occurs through a natural course of events.

Given that change is such an intricate and complicated phenomenon, will established, existing organisational change models provide an adequate and convincing account of change in the HE sector or is there a need for a model that would necessarily create new knowledge in the areas of change management and organisational development? This paper endeavours to, inter alia, address this question.

4. BACKGROUND TO CHANGE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

The post-1994 era has been characterised by the promulgation of various pieces of legislation in all public spheres, the HE sector included (Strydom & Hay, 2001: 82). The purpose of legislation is to overhaul the social, political, cultural and economic institutions so as to align them with the new democratic dispensation. The HE sector in particular has seen various pieces of legislation coming into being so as to bring meaningful transformation to the sector (Gultig, 2000: 40 - 41; Strydom & Hay, 2001: 82).

The transformation process began with the establishment of the National Commission on Higher Education in 1995 which put together a document entitled Framework for the Transformation on Higher Education and which formed a basis for the government's policy on HE (Gultig, 2000: 41). This was followed by the White Paper in 1997 entitled A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Brunyee, 2001: 9). Subsequent to the White Paper, the Higher Education Act was promulgated in 1997 (Reddy, 2000: 80) followed by the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) in 2001 (Jansen, 2001: 1) which outlines the framework mechanisms for implementing and realising the policy goals of the White Paper. There is a golden thread that connects all of these legislative documents which aim at bringing about change in the HE sector in South Africa. It is the NPHE that proposes the mergers of public HE institutions which is “...the most ambitious and comprehensive change programme in the world today” (Frans van Vught, Rector of the University of Twente and former director of the centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, quoted by Cloete, Bunting & Kulati, 2000: 9).

The HE sector has been undergoing change in various ways particularly after 1994: influx of black students to historically white institutions (Gultig, 2000: 44); regional collaboration and formations of consortia among institutions (Reddy, 2000: 81 - 84; Hay, Fourie, & Hay, 2001: 101); imperatives on institutional governance enshrined in the HE Act of 1997 (File, 2000: 30 - 31; Nadison, 2000: 71 - 73); the list is endless. This paper focuses on the most recent developments in the sector, that which has been articulated in the NPHE and which was approved by cabinet and gazetted on 9 March 2001, viz. the mergers of different institutions. This is a large-scale, almost inconceivable change programme the world has seen in recent times. Can existing organisational change models provide a convincing account of such massive change?

5. A FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

The basic framework followed in this paper is the contextualist framework which was
initiated by research on organisational change done by Pettigrew and others at the University of Warwick in the UK (Walsham, 1993: 188). What this framework entails is that any theoretically sound and practically useful research on organisational change should involve the continuous interplay between ideas about three factors, viz. context, process, and content of change.

According to Walsham (1993: 188), the context of change delineates the boundaries within which change occurs. The argument here is that change should be seen, interpreted and linked both to intra-organisational and broader context. This means that change should not be understood as separate from the historical, organisational, or economic circumstances that led to its initiation. For a better understanding and management of change, all of these factors have to be taken into consideration. The process of change reveals that change is not a straightforward, rational process devoid of problems and obstacles. It is rather a jointly analytical, educational and political process. The content or substance of the change programme involves the specific aspects of transformation to be examined such as manpower, geographical positioning corporate culture (Pettigrew : 1987: 657), technology, products, or systems (Walsham, 1993: 191). In sum, “...it is the relationship between the content of a specific change strategy, the context in which the change takes place and the process by which it occurs which is the basic analytical framework adopted by the contextualist approach” (Dawson, 1994: 23).

6. APPROACH ADOPTED

The approach adopted is such that a study of the different organisational change models, from Lewin’s three-phase model to the contextualist model, is done with a view to indicating their adequacies vis-a-vis their inadequacies in explaining the change process in the HE sector. The choice of the change models is purposeful in the sense that only those models that are behaviour-oriented (Burke, 1982: 168) are discussed. Obviously, there is a number of models of organisational change that emphasise aspects such as technology, finance, informational terms, etc. Nevertheless, organisational change theorists and Organisational Development (OD) practitioners must necessarily rely on behaviour-oriented models since the role of these people is to understand what people do in their organisations, and not what the machines do, by contrast. It will be indicated that the contextualist approach is more appropriate to explaining change in the HE sector as it is historical, contextual and processual in character.

Following Mouton (2001: 93), the review of the models is organised in such a manner that the position that will be adopted in the paper is discussed at the end. The discussion thus commences with those behaviour-oriented models that are believed to be inappropriate or have been discredited by recent scholarship. This is then followed by a discussion of the position that will form a frame of reference for the paper. In other words, the discussion is not necessarily chronological in terms of the year of development of the models, but Lewin’s model as a precursor to other models is discussed first. The discussion of the change models thus proceeds as follows: First is the discussion of the textbook models which include Lewin’s three-phase model of planned change and two Organisational Development (OD) models, viz. the Action Research Model and Contemporary Adaptations to Action Research. Second is the discussion of contingency models that emerged from North America and Australia. Third is the discussion of the contextualist model that emerged from Britain. In short, following Dawson (1994: 12 - 13), a critical evaluation of the change models
is done by providing a critique of the textbook (conventional) models to planned change; evaluating the revival in contingency models; and examining the growing academic movement towards contextual models in the study of organisational change.

7. MODELS OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

The change models have shed some light on the concept of organisational change and have provided a relatively fair account thereof despite being subjected to heavy criticism. The understanding of the intricacies that go with organisational change is directly attributable to these models although change itself does not happen uniformly across organisations nor can it be divided into watertight compartments. Nevertheless, they have unequivocally done justice to this concept. Because of the dynamism of change, flexible thinking on the part of theorists is necessary to provide a convincing account of change. Otherwise, the adage that “when you have a hammer, all you can see are nails”, will hold true.

7.1 Textbook models

The concept of textbook model or orthodoxy is used by Dawson (1994: 1017) to refer to those change models that are common in introductory textbooks on organisational change and that have been adopted as the models of change. This has led to the reluctance of scholars to incorporate contrasting models of change into such textbooks with the consequence of limiting the availability and appeal of alternative models. The conservatism and rigidity to an accepted framework or approach has led to the marginalisation of the ongoing academic debates that would provide students with ongoing competing models of change.

A number of such textbook models have been developed and have focussed primarily on how change can be implemented. In this paper three such models are discussed. While Burke (1982: 44) contends that “most practitioners agree that three models are the underlying and guiding frames of reference for any OD effort”, this scholar differs with Cummings and Worley (2001: 22) on one of the three models. They do agree on Lewin’s model and the Action Research model as being important models of planned change. Burke’s third model is one of phases of planned change developed by Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958). Cummings and Worley discuss the Contemporary Adaptations to Action Research as the third model. In this paper, Burke’s third model is not discussed because it is outdated. The three models discussed are Lewin’s model, Action Research model, and Contemporary Adaptations to Action Research. It is worth noting, however, that Lewin’s model is an organisational change model that has also been applied as an OD model (King & Anderson, 2002: 169) whereas the latter two are purely OD models. OD is a discipline focussing on organisational change (McLagan, 2002: 5). It is essentially “the identification of the gap between the present functioning of the organisation and where the organisation intends to move to in terms of its strategic plan, the closing of this gap through planned interventions and the effective management of resistance to change” (Coetsee, 2002: 4).

7.1.1 Lewin’s change model

Lewin’s 1951 seminal work on change marks the beginning of the development of a scientific method to describe organisational change. Most of the models that emerged
subsequently reflect some influence of Lewin’s model. A seven stage model of OD, for example, was proposed by Edgar House in 1980 and was based upon Lewin’s original model (King & Anderson, 2002: 171). Thus the predominant models on the management of change remain rooted to the orthodoxy imposed by Lewin’s model (Dawson, 1994: 2). Contemporary management texts uncritically adopt this model almost without exception, giving the impression that this model is flawless. The model has proven to be useful in understanding planned change under relatively stable conditions but this usefulness might become a fallacy given the dynamic nature of change in today’s business world.

Lewin’s model of planned change is thus one of the earliest change models in which Lewin proposed that the change process can be divided into three stages, viz. unfreezing, moving (changing) and refreezing (King and Anderson, 2002: 170; Yukl, 1998: 440). It still remains an influential theory and a common approach advocated by management educationalists and is also widely taught in business departments and management schools world-wide (Dawson, 1994: 16 - 17).

A summary of the assumptions that underlie this model is provided by Kreitner and Kinicki (1998: 619):

- The process of change entails learning something new and discontinuing current attitudes, behaviours or organisational practices.
- There is motivation for change as no change will take place without such a motivation. This constitutes the most difficult part of the change process.
- Organisational change is contingent upon people. People are central to any change process, whether such change is on structure, group process, reward systems, or job design.
- There will always be resistance to change despite the high desirability of change goals.
- Reinforcing new behaviours, attitudes and organisational practices is required for attaining effective change.

The main focus of the unfreezing stage is, according to Kreitner and Kinicki (1998: 619) to create a motivation for change. That is, there has to be that readiness to expect and accept that change is inevitable. This provides encouragement to employees to replace their old behaviours and attitudes with those that leaders desire so that they eventually become dissatisfied with outdated ways of doing things. Leaders thus begin to unfreeze the process by psychologically disconfirming the suitability of the employees’ current behaviour and attitudes (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 23). Leaders also endeavour to devise ways and means of reducing the barriers to change, and to also generate employee support (Dawson, 1994: 16).

The moving stage entails looking for new ways of doing things and selecting a promising approach (Yukl, 1998: 440). Employees are provided with new information, new behavioural model, and so on with the purpose of helping them learn new concepts or points of view (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 619). In general, the moving stage entails shifting the behaviour of the organisation, department, or individual to a new level such as, for example, intervening in the system to develop new behaviours, values, and attitudes by changing organisational structures and processes.

The stage of refreezing is where change is being stabilised by way of assisting
employees to integrate the behaviour or attitude that has been changed into their normal way of doing things (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 619). Refreezing is usually accomplished by using supporting mechanisms which reinforce the new organisational state such as, for example, organisational culture, norms, politics, and structures (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 23).

Lewin’s model was applied to the British Airways’ (BA) change effort by Goodstein and Burke (1993: 164 - 172). These scholars found that the change process at BA was actually based on open-systems thinking, a phased model of managing change as well as multiple levels (individual, structural, and systems) and interpersonal levels, for implementing change. Although the change process within BA was a massive one, the application of Lewin’s model provides an important and different perspective on how an organisation can cope with an increasing competitive environment.

Although Lewin’s change model has provided a foundation and a platform for systematically providing a scientific account of planned change in organisations, it has been subjected to wide criticism. This model is quite elementary and outdated (Coetsee, 2002: 14) with its inception dating back to 1951. Therefore, relying on a model that is more than half a century old, whilst there have been rapid theoretical developments in the area of organisational change, would be empirically unsound. The model is useful in understanding planned change under relatively stable conditions and organisational change is itself a very dynamic phenomenon in today’s business environment, thereby rendering the model obsolete (Dawson, 1994: 3). Furthermore, Dawson contends that the model is more prescriptive and less analytical as it endeavours to implement stability and reinforce behaviour which conforms to a rigid set of procedures for new work arrangements. This, in essence, does not meet the growing requirements for employee flexibility and structural adaptation to the unfolding and complex nature of ongoing change processes. This model is thus inappropriate to organisations operating in rapidly changing environments (Dawson, 1994: 17).

7.1.2 Action Research Model

The Action Research model is an OD model that focuses on planned change as a cyclical process (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 23). An initial research about an organisation is undertaken which provides information to guide action that follows. The result of this action is assessed to provide further information that guides further action, and so on and so forth. This cyclic process involves a considerable level and collaboration among members of the organisation and OD practitioners. It focuses heavily on data gathering and diagnosis before action planning and implementation of results after action had taken place. This model provides an interplay between action and research. As Lewin (1946) cited in Burke (1982: 45) pointed out, there is “no action without research, and no research without action”.

This model has a two-fold aim: first, it helps specific organisations to implement planned change; second, it develops more general knowledge that can be applied to other settings (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 23). The major steps in the OD programme comprise: problem identification, consultation with a behavioural science expert; data gathering and preliminary analysis; feedback to a key client or group; joint diagnosis of the problem; joint action planning; action; and data gathering after

The most famous action research project was undertaken by John R.P French and his client Lester Coch in 1948 (Burke, 1993: 45; King and Anderson, 2002: 196 - 197). Their study on workers’ resistance to change in a pajama factory did not only illustrate action research at its best but also provided the theoretical basis for what is now called participative management.

The criticism levelled at this OD model according to Dawson (1994: 16) is firstly that it adopts a normative framework and is based on the assumption that there is one best way to manage change that will necessarily increase both organisational effectiveness and employee well-being; secondly, Ledfort et al (1990: 4 - 6) as cited in Dawson (1994: 16) contend that professional OD consultants engaged in OD are not that bothered with theory development or with the design of systematic problems of research. They are rather more concerned with a set of normative prescriptions which guide their practice in managing change. This is an inflexible, narrow-minded view which does not take into account the fact that change is dynamic and needs flexible thinking on the part of consultants; thirdly, this method fails to account for the increasing incidence of revolutionary change which may more effectively be achieved by coercive top-down strategies of change (Dumphy & Stace, 1990: 67) as cited in Dawson (1994: 16).

7.1.3 Contemporary Adaptations to Action Research

According to Cummings and Worley (2001: 26), Action Research has undergone 2 key adaptations. First, contemporary applications have increased, quite considerably, the degree of member involvement in the change process. This is opposed to, for example, traditional approaches to planned change which depend on consultants to execute change activities, with the agreement and collaboration of management. The tendency these days is to involve organisation members in change processes although in OD, consultant-dominated change still persists. This model is referred to as “participatory action research”, “action learning”, “action science”, or “self design”. It emphasises the need for members of the organisation to learn about planned change and by so doing, gain the knowledge and skills necessary to change the organisation. The role that OD consultants play here is to work with members of the organisation so as to facilitate the learning process. Both the OD consultants and members are “co-learners” and neither dominates the change process. Each brings unique contributions such as information and expertise to the situation. OD consultants, for example, know how to design diagnostic instruments and OD interventions whereas members know the organisation and how it functions.

Second, there is an “interpretive” or “social constructionist” approach to planned change called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). “Appreciative Inquiry is an emerging behavioural science technology, based on an action-research model and clearly normative, that approaches organisational diagnosis from the standpoint of understanding what are positive events or characteristics in the organisation; analyzes and operationalizes them, and develops models that will reinforce and multiply them throughout an organisation” (Craig, 1996). AI challenges the assumption that organisations are like problems to be solved and that member conversations focus on the organisation’s faults (Cummings and Worley, 2001: 27). It suggests, however, that member conversations should be about what the
organisation is doing right as a premise for organisational change. That is, “AI
proposes to get members talking about - appreciating in dialogue, as it were - such
“working” features in responses to “positive questions”” (Golembiewski, 1998: 4). It
helps members to understand and describe the organisation when it is working at its
best (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 26). Members are broadly involved in creating a
new vision and conversations centre around an organisation’s potential and this
creates positive expectations.

The six major steps in the OD programme comprise: choosing positive subjects;
collecting positive stories from broad participation; examining data and developing
possibility propositions; developing a vision with broad participation; developing
action plans; and evaluating (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 27).

The AI adaptation to action research is lacking in many respects. On many an
occasion, organisational change is not based on choosing positive subjects. Change
is mostly initiated precisely because of negative subjects that are perceived to be
existing within an organisation. The point of departure would thus be to highlight all
the negative subjects that render change inevitable. Also, change is mostly not based
on the collection of positive stories. This is a narrow-minded view of change. In fact,
the change programme is embarked upon so as to bring about positive stories and
not that the collection of positive stories necessarily bring about change. Finally,
change is mostly not based on developing possibility propositions as, in most
instances, no best practice exists that would lead to practices that would be ideal for
future organising.

7.1.4 Comparison of the textbook models

According to Cummings and Worley (2001: 28), all the three textbook approaches
discussed above provide a description of the phases by which planned change
occurs in organisations. They do overlap at some points as they, for example, outline
organisational change as occurring in some stages, i.e. the preliminary stage
(unfreezing, diagnosis, or examining positive aspects of the organisation). Lewin’s
model differs from the other two models in that the former focuses on the general
process of planned change, instead of focussing on specific OD activities like it is the
case with the other two models. Contemporary Adaptations to Action Research differs
from both Lewin’s model and Action Research in terms of the level of involvement of
the members and the focus of change. The latter two models emphasise the role of
the consultant and accord limited involvement to members in the change process.
The first model treats both consultants and members as co-learners who are heavily
engaged in planned change. Furthermore, Lewin’s model and Action Research are
concerned primarily with fixing problems than with what the organisation does well
and expanding on those strengths.

7.2 Contingency models

Whilst Lewin’s change model and OD models provide a description of the phases by
which planned change occurs in organisations (Cummings & Worley, 2001:22),
contingency models look at situational factors as determinants of organisational
design, i.e. the relationship between the organisation and its environment. According
to the contingency approach to organisation design, the effectiveness of
organisations surfaces when they are structured to fit the demands of the situation; in
other words, by creating an effective organisation-environment fit (Kreitner & Kinicki,
Contingency models assess the degree of environmental uncertainty and use various organisation design configurations to achieve an effective organisation-environment fit.

The basic tenet of contingency models is that it is possible to identify the most appropriate organisational form to fit a situation in which a business has to operate, notwithstanding the fact that there is no one best way of organising. In essence, they argue that the best way to organise depends on circumstances. They reject a search for a universal model of organisational change and instead, aim at developing useful generalisations about strategies and structures under different typical conditions (Dawson, 1994: 18). The contingent factors deemed to be of primary importance include the environment and single variables such as technology, organisational size (Write & Noe, 1996: 161 - 162; Strickland, 1998: 32), and strategic choice (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 599).

Two studies have attempted to isolate the environment as a contingent factor within the contingency approach, i.e. the environment is said to be the primary determinant of effective organisational structure (Paton & McCalman, 2001: 131 - 132; King & Anderson, 2002: 129 - 130). First, a study of 1961 by British behavioural scientists Tom Burn and G.M. Stalker found that mechanistic organisations - rigid, command and control bureaucracies - tended to be effective in stable situations (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 592). The idea behind this kind of an organisation is to allow it to function in an efficient manner, just like a well-oiled machine (Write & Noe, 1996: 162). In unstable situations, organic organisations - fluid and flexible network of multitalented people - were more effective. Their findings underscored the need for a contingency approach to organisation design. Second, a study of 1967 by Harvard researchers Paul Lawrence and Jay Lorsch explained how two structural forces simultaneously fragment the organisation and bind it together (Burke, 1982: 182; Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 592). Successful organisations achieved a proper balance between two opposing structural forces of differentiation and integration (Burke, 1982: 182). The former forces the organisation apart through a variety of mechanisms such as hierarchy, rules, teams and liaison while the latter draws the organisation together (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 592).

Whilst the preceding studies are based on an environmental imperative, others contend that a factor such as the organisation’s core technology holds the key to organisational structure (Write & Noe, 1996: 166). One such study based on the technological imperative was done by Joan Woodward in 1965 by studying 100 small manufacturing firms in southern England. Her findings revealed that there were distinct structural patterns for effective and ineffective companies based on technologies of low, medium, or high complexity. Those effective organisations with low- or high- complexity technology tended to have an organic structure whereas those based on technology of medium complexity tended to have a mechanistic structure. On the basis of this, Woodward concluded that technology was the overriding determinant of organisational structure (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 596).

Organisational size as an important structural variable and contingency factor can be described from 2 perspectives. First is the perspective that advocates economies of scale and propagates the “bigger is better” model (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998 597). This perspective assumes that the per-unit cost of production decreases as the organisation grows; bigger is said to be more efficient. Thus, a bigger organisation may require more formal supervision for it to be efficient (Write & Noe, 1996: 165).
Second is the perspective that advocates the law of diminishing returns and propagates the “small is beautiful” model (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998: 597). This perspective assumes that oversized organisations are plagued by costly behavioural problems and are said to breed apathy and alienation that result in such negative aspects as turnover and absenteeism. Thus a small company can function efficiently with a simple undifferentiated structure and can probably coordinate work informally (Write & Noe, 1998: 165).

According to Kreitner & Kinicki (1998: 599), in 1972, John Child, a British sociologist rejected the notion of environment as a contingency factor and instead proposed a *strategic choice* model that is based on behavioural rather than rational economic principles. The fundamental belief of this theory is that structure resulted from a political process involving organisational power holders. Therefore, an organisation’s structure is determined by a dominant coalition of top-management strategies. The specific choices or decisions is a reflection of how the dominant coalition perceives environmental constraints and the organisation’s objectives. These particular choices are tempered with by the decision maker’s personal beliefs, attitudes, values, and ethics.

Contingency models have not gone without heavy criticism as well. Dawson (1994: 20 - 22) points out that these models fail to provide an account of the differences between participants by focussing on the technical problem of matching situations to organisational form. This is in sharp contrast to the textbook models that place emphasis on members and OD consultants and do not care much about the situation and the structure of the organisation (Cummings & Worley, 2001: 28). The contingency approach also does not tackle the political dimension of change. Politics are almost always behind organisational change. Therefore, any change process that is oblivious to politics is baseless. The contingency approach also does not make any attempt at providing a typology of change strategies as well as the conditions for their use during the actual process of organisational change. The main problem of the contingency approaches is their tendency to impose unidirectional rational models on change which happens to be a complex and dynamic process (Dawson, 1994: 22).

### 7.3 Contextualist model

The contextualist model emerged as an attempt to shift the focus of scholars away from the textbook models, particularly Lewin’s three-phase model, which had become the model upon which scholars relied to explain organisational change. It emerged through the work done by Pettigrew and others at the University of Warwick in the UK (Walsham, 1993: 88). The contextualist model was thus initiated in Britain and it advocates the development of an alternative theoretical framework in tackling the processual nature of change (Clark et al, 1988, Pettigrew, 1987a and 1987b) cited in Dawson (1994: 12).

Pettigrew’s work entailed developing a theory through field work in both the public and private sectors in the form of longitudinal case studies that provided a convincing account of organisational change (Walsham, 1993: 188). Because of absolute reliance on textbook models which were found to be flawed in many respects, “there is a clear evidence of a need to revise our use of conventional textbook models and develop alternative “contextualised” or “processual” frameworks for understanding large-scale organisational change” (Laughlin, 1991: 209 - 32) cited in Dawson (1994: 25). Thus, the contextualist approach emerged precisely because a lot of research on
organisational change is ahistorical, aprocessual, and acontextual in character (Walsham, 1993: 188; Pettigrew, 1997: 655). The studies of organisational change that allow the change process to reveal itself in any kind of temporal and contextual manner, are remarkably few (Pettigrew, 1987: 655).

Pettigrew highlights the contextual nature of change within organisational theory by emphasising a number of factors, viz. embeddedness; acknowledging interdependent levels of analysis; interconnectedness of change over time; how the change context shapes and is shaped by action; and the multi-causation and non-linear nature of change (Strickland, 1998: 50).

The fundamental tenet of the contextualist approach is that organisational change should involve the continuous interplay between ideas about 3 factors, viz.

- the context in which changes are occurring;
- the substance or content of the change programme; and
- the process (rather than snap-shot analysis) of change (Dawson, 1994: 24).

The figure below indicates these factors (Pettigrew, 1987: 657):

![Figure 1: The broad contextualist framework](image)

Pettigrew (1987: 657) contends that the premise for the analysis of organisational change rests on the notion that formulating the content of any new strategic change necessarily entails managing its context and process. The outer context includes such elements as the social, economic, political, and competitive environment in which the organisation exists. The inner context refers to such elements as structure, corporate culture, and political context that exist within the organisation and through which ideas for organisational change have to proceed. Walsham (1993: 189)
expatiates on context by adding further elements such as stakeholder perspective, history of existing procedures and systems, informal networks and procedures, and infrastructure needs which must of necessity be identified for the analysis of the context of organisational change. The content of organisational change refers to the particular areas of transformation that are being examined (Pettigrew, 1987: 657). For example, the organisation may be seeking to change technology, products, systems (Walsham, 1993: 191), manpower, geographical positioning, or corporate culture (Pettigrew, 1987: 657).

The process of organisational change refers to the actions, reactions, and interactions from various interested parties in an attempt to move the organisation from its present state to its future state (Pettigrew, 1987: 657 - 658). Walsham (1993: 190) contends that two perspectives also constitute the elements of process. First is the power/political perspective which views organisational change essentially as a consequence or product of a legitimisation process which has been created by the interests and commitments of some individuals and groups although such interests and commitments are expressed in rational/analytical terms. Second is the cultural perspective which focusses on shared meanings and norms of behaviour. In broad terms, therefore, the “what” of change is its content; the “why” of change is the analysis of the inner and outer context; and the “how” of change is understood from the analysis of the process (Pettigrew, 1987: 658).

What constitutes the contextualist approach, according to Dawson (1994: 24 - 25), is driven by the need for vertical and horizontal levels of analysis and this refutes the simplistic, one-dimensional and discontinuous view of change as advocated by earlier organisational change theorists (Strickland, 1998: 50). The vertical level of analysis, on the one hand, refers to the outer contextual factors such as the environment and the inner contextual factors such as interest-group behaviour (Dawson, 1994: 24 - 25). The horizontal level of analysis, on the other hand, refers to the temporal interconnectedness between future expectations, present events and historical events. Thus, “An approach that offers both multilevel, or vertical analysis and processual, or horizontal, analysis is said to be contextualist in character” (Pettigrew, 1987: 656).

The contextualist model was used by Walsham (1993: 188 - 196) to explain the change process which involved the implementation of the MRP system in the Processing Company which was a wholly-owned subsidiary of a large international manufacturing organisation. The implementation of the MRP system was, to a large extent, unsuccessful and Walsham argues that a formal consideration of the context and process of change as well as the interrelationships and links between them are an absolute essential in helping to understand some of the problems which occurred in the company.

7.4.1 Textbook models, contingency models, and higher education transformation

Having outlined the various models of change above, the question that needs to be answered is which model is more adequate in explaining change within the HE sector. This question, however, has been implicitly answered in the preceding discussion and it is evident that the contextual approach is, to a large extent, appropriate in addressing the question of change in the sector.
Lewin’s three-phase model has been discredited for firstly, its antiquity; secondly, its inefficiency in providing an understanding of planned change under relatively stable conditions but failing to do so under dynamic and turbulent conditions, thereby rendering itself inappropriate to organisations operating in rapidly changing environments; thirdly, its prescriptiveness in providing a rigid set of procedures for new work environments coupled with failure to be analytical; and fourthly, its failure to meet the growing requirements for employee flexibility and structural adaptation to the unfolding and complex nature of ongoing change processes. Lewin’s model, despite being a pioneer of organisational change and enjoying wide-ranging popularity among scholars is deemed inadequate in addressing the LSOC such as is the case with the HE sector.

In the same vein, the Action Research model and Contemporary Adaptations to Action Research are also deemed inadequate. They are OD models which advocate the involvement of professional OD consultants who design and implement intervention techniques to address change but without bothering themselves with theory development or with the design of systematic problems of research. Their inappropriateness is exacerbated by the fact that they provide an inflexible, narrow-minded view which assumes that there is one best way to manage change. This is a scientifically fallacious conception which has to be rejected if justice has to be done in explaining LSOC.

Contingency approaches are also inadequate in providing a convincing account of change in the HE sector. For instance, the technical problem of matching the situational, contingent factors (environment, technology, organisational size, and strategic choice) to organisational form does not account for the dynamism and complexity of change. Also, they do not tackle the political dimension of change. Change in the HE sector is not about a situation-organisation fit. It is rather a complex process which is historical, contextual and processual in character.

7.5 Contextualist model and higher education transformation

The application of the contextualist model to the transformation of the HE sector is not, by any means, meant to be exhaustive. The purpose is to indicate that this model is more appropriate compared to the other change models discussed. The contextualist model is thus chosen in this paper because it creates new knowledge in change management and OD and treats organisational change as historical, contextual and processual in character.

It is important to look at the role played by history because history directly informs the need to change. The historical background provides a clear picture as to what is it that led to the inevitability of change and here history is intertwined with politics. For example, the pre-1994 era is the one that most South Africans would like to put to oblivion primarily because of apartheid. In a foreword to a document entitled Transformation and Restructuring: A New Institutional Landscape for Higher Education of June 2002, the Minister of Education argues that the institutional structure of the HE system originated from the geopolitical imagination of apartheid’s master planner, Hendrick Verwoed, as embodied in his ideological vision of separate but equal development. This was manifested, inter alia, in the promulgation of the Universities Extension Act in 1959 which virtually restricted access to HE along racial and ethnic lines.
The aim of the Act was two-fold. First, it was to make sure that Historically White Institutions (HWI’s) were used as a vehicle for addressing the educational, ideological, political, cultural, social and economic needs of White South Africans. Second, it was to establish institutions that would produce tokens of Black people to service the apartheid-created homelands. The latter aim did not realise because of uncompromising student resistance which, in the end, resulted in the demise of apartheid. The HE system has hitherto been a disappointingly disjointed entity because of the Universities Extension Act, among others. Unfortunately, the apartheid legacy continues to burden the HE system which is still highly fragmented along racial lines and has been unable to meet the challenges of reconstruction and development.

The coming into being of the new political dispensation necessitated the immediate overhaul of the HE system which was heading for the doldrums. In order to redress the mishaps and imbalances of the past, government through the Ministry of Education, embarked upon a wide-ranging consultative process about changing the HE system. This consultative process resulted in the emergence and promulgation of various policy documents and pieces of legislation which aimed at bringing about the mammoth, unprecedented and positive changes to the sector.

The outer context of change in the HE sector addresses the fragmented social aspects of the South African society. Different racial groups had their own institutions such as the Afrikaans institutions, Black institutions, Indian institutions, etc. which perpetuated the separate but equal development philosophy. This had an enormous impact on the economy of the country as Black institutions provided programmes that were not geared towards addressing the economic needs and as such failed to address the demands of reconstruction and development. The inner context involves the way HE institutions are structured in terms of management and governance structures. The imperatives on institutional management and governance are addressed in the HE Act of 1997. The corporate culture, which still reflects ideologies, values and norms of different racial and cultural groups also have to be given due cognisance. This also addresses the entire question of politics.

The process of organisational change refers to the actions by the Ministry to merge the different institutions and to create a single coordinated HE system in the country as well as the reactions and interactions from various interested and affected parties in an attempt to move the sector from its present state to its future state.

8. CONCLUSION

Although the discussion of the change models above is not exhaustive, it suffices to say that the contextualist model is more appropriate than the other change models in accounting for change in the HE sector, thereby creating new knowledge. This is so because the contextualist model is historical, contextual and processual in character. The discussion will hopefully provide some paradigm shift from reliance on textbook approaches, especially Lewin’s three phase model, to a contextualist or processual model in explaining LSOC.

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