Curriculum Politics in Higher Education:

What Educators need to do to Survive

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are increasingly experiencing pressure regarding their expected role in addressing immediate and long-term sustainable development challenges. Decisions about what should be taught are heavily influenced by socio-political needs and aspirations. The push towards entrepreneurship education is, perhaps, one example where some governments expect higher education institutions to encourage entrepreneurial development and awareness among students of the institutions. Indeed, political action has become a well-known force in education systems throughout the world. Utilizing a conceptual approach, this paper examines the theory and practice of curriculum politics in the Trinidad and Tobago higher education sector. It also explores various ways in which educators can survive the perceived threat of political interference in curriculum decision making. Notwithstanding the role of politics in curriculum decision making, the paper supports the view that unrestrained political intervention from non-education sources may threaten the quality of higher education programmes. As such, educators must come to terms with the reality of curriculum politics and find ways to function optimally in any given political context.

Keywords: Curriculum politics, Higher education, Educators

1. Introduction

One of the criticisms leveled at higher education institutions in both developed and developing countries is that they fail to adjust to national requirements. Such institutions continue to either produce graduates who cannot be absorbed by the economy or those whose training cannot equip them to adequately perform tasks the nation expects of them. Many higher education institutions, therefore, experience some degree of pressure to address immediate and long-term sustainable development challenges.

The push towards entrepreneurship education is, perhaps, one example where some governments expect higher education institutions to encourage entrepreneurial development and awareness among students of the institutions (Seikkula-Leion, 2011). This move contrasts sharply with traditional views about the role and functions of universities. For example, while traditional educationists advocate a return of the university to research and teaching tasks, some governments embrace the Triple Helix thesis which posits that universities and higher education institutions can play a critical role in innovation by partnering with industry and government (Dzisah & Etzkowitz, 2008). The Triple Helix is based on the premise that the university plays an enhanced role in development through collaboration with government and industry. Such interaction among university, industry and government is critical in facilitating the conditions for innovation and sustainable development in a knowledge-based society (Dzisah & Etzkowitz, 2008).

A similar challenge for tertiary institutions in these circumstances is that the curriculum meets the requirements of the national economy, the needs of society, and the future challenges and aspirations of the nation (Primrose & Alexander, 2013). Curriculum development is an elaborate process which requires extensive planning if implementation is to be successful. In a politically charged society, the task of curriculum development becomes even more difficult with political manipulation through external pressure groups and organizations. In his study on curriculum politics, Unruh (as cited in English, 1983) posits that political astuteness is an indispensable qualification for curriculum leaders and developers operating in such a complex political milieu. Hough (1978) expresses a similar view that curriculum workers must learn to function adroitly in such a political atmosphere. Steller (1980) also

agrees that while unchecked political intervention from non-education sources can threaten the quality of education programmes, curriculum developers can capitalize on political processes to institute change. But this may not be an easy undertaking according to Unruh (as cited in English, 1983) since it requires expertness, political awareness and continuing dialogue among decision makers for resolution of conflicts and agreement on major goals.

The major objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine the concept of curriculum politics in higher education and explore survival strategies for educators operating in an environment where there may be a perceived or real threat of political interference in curriculum decision making. The study employs a conceptual approach aimed at expanding and applying the theory of curriculum politics to a Trinidad and Tobago context. Unlike empirical data-based research, conceptual research focuses on abstract ideas or theories for the purpose of developing new concepts or reinterpreting existing ones. In this paper, concepts of politics, public policy and curriculum are examined to develop a theory of how curriculum politics operates in the higher education sector and how curriculum workers can survive in such a complex political environment.

2. Conceptual framework

This paper utilizes a framework based on Benjamin Levin's work (as cited in Connelly, Fang He & Phillion, 2008) on curriculum policy and the politics of what should be learned in schools. Lasswell's (1958) study on politics and Tinder's (2003) work on political thinking also provide a sound theoretical foundation for the study of curriculum politics. Examples from the local context are also employed to support the discussion on curriculum politics in Trinidad and Tobago higher education institutions and the need for survival strategies to cope with what some educators may perceive as a major problem in the education sector.

3. Conceptions of curriculum, public policy and politics

3.1 Curriculum

In this paper, curriculum is defined broadly as a plan to guide instruction or a written document with content and planned learning experiences for achieving desired goals or ends (Tyler & Hlebowitsh, 2013; Taba, 1962; Pratt, 1994; Willis & Bondi, 2010; Marsh & Willis, 2007; Doll, 1996). However, a comprehensive view of curriculum must take into consideration not only the planned curriculum, but also the enacted or taught curriculum, the experienced curriculum, and the tested curriculum as well as the hidden curriculum (Kelly, 2004; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013; Giroux, & Purpel, 1983). But curriculum is also viewed as an arena for social engineering which takes into account all the experiences individuals are expected to have in order to become the kind of productive citizens they ought to be.

3.2 Public policy

Public policy generally refers to government action to address a public issue by instituting laws and regulations. Education is one such issue addressed by public policy. Levin (as cited in Connelly et al., 2008) supports the view that public policy is about the rules and procedures governing public sector activity. He argues that politics governs almost every aspect of education in relation to what schooling is provided, how, to whom, in what form, by whom, and with what resources. Indeed, policies shape the structure of higher education as well as the curriculum offered at those institutions. Therefore, the question of value for money is a major concern for taxpayers and politicians who increasingly hold education institutions accountable for public spending and the quality of education provided to citizens (Lawton, 2012; Leathwood & Phillips, 2000). Since curriculum is largely about what is taught, issues surrounding value and quality at higher education institutions also become legitimate matters of public policy.

3.3 Politics

Important policy decisions are made through political processes. Put another way, one can say that politics is the process used by any society to determine how power, wealth, opportunity, status and other social goods are distributed to members of that society (Young, Levin & Wallin, 2007). In this paper, discussions about politics are not limited to the formal processes of government. Rather, according to Levin (as cited in Connelly et. al., 2008), they seek to embrace a broader view of politics as extending beyond formal processes to include a wide range of informal influences and larger social processes. Lasswell's (1958) definition of politics as "who gets what" can be applied to every setting including the classroom in higher education institutions. Tinder's (2003) description of a political system is equally apt. He describes a political system as a set of arrangements by which some people dominate others. In his study on curriculum policy, and what should be learned in schools, Levin posits (as cited in Connelly et. al., 2008), that since political influence is usually unequal, those persons who have the least status are also the ones with the least influence on political decision making. Curriculum politics, therefore, should be seen as

part of the overall process of government and involves decisions about curriculum content including what body of knowledge should be included or excluded from the curriculum.

4. Issues in curriculum politics

Understanding the dynamics of curriculum politics is fundamental to understanding the nature of higher education in Trinidad and Tobago. Current issues in curriculum politics include discussions on the type of curriculum; what should be included or excluded in the content of the curriculum; the question of content versus pedagogy; tension in curriculum decision making between expert opinion and public opinion; competition among higher education institutions; and the expectations of government, employers, and students regarding the need for work-ready graduates to meet national and industry needs. These issues also form part of the curriculum politics that engage the attention of higher education institutions operating in the Trinidad and Tobago context. Take for example, government's new policy directives for teacher education in Trinidad and Tobago.

In its quest to reform the system of teacher education, the government of Trinidad and Tobago took a policy decision to change from a two-year teachers' diploma to a four-year bachelor degree in education for persons wishing to enter the teaching profession. This policy decision required a total overhaul of the curriculum to focus on new content and pedagogy courses for prospective teachers. Since there was a specific need for suitably trained teachers to effectively teach social studies and integrated science at the secondary school level, curriculum workers embarked on an extensive curriculum development process utilizing the appropriate broad-fields curriculum design to meet government's need for a particular type of trained professional.

Completion of this new curriculum coincided with a change in government, which took a different policy decision regarding the curriculum content for social studies and integrated science. In the interest of meeting national needs as well as the expectations of graduates of the teacher education programme, educationists were forced to revise the curriculum in keeping with new policy directives from a new political directorate. Tensions between expert opinion and government opinion quickly dissipated in the face of government monopoly over the hiring of graduates as teachers in the school system.

Competition among higher education institutions can be regarded as a corollary to curriculum politics that permeates the Trinidad and Tobago higher education sector. As a result, the island's three major institutions of higher learning are locked in competition over student recruitment in the face of government monopoly over the employment of new entrants into the teaching service. The question of content versus pedagogy continues to engage the attention of curriculum developers as they grapple with public concern for competent teachers at all levels of the school system with sound pedagogical and subject content knowledge.

Competition also exists in other educational areas requiring government funding based on national development needs. This form of curriculum politics sometimes results in higher education institutions jostling each other for government-assisted research grants and educational consultancies aimed at advancing government's goals for the education sector. Internal competition also occurs between faculties with the same institution as curriculum wars erupt on matters regarding allocation of scarce funds for research and development of new programmes to meet the needs of a changing society.

5. Surviving curriculum politics

While it is difficult to ignore the reality of curriculum politics, educators in the tertiary sector can find ways to function optimally by exploring the following survival strategies:

- understanding that curriculum is not the exclusive domain of educators
- understanding how to capitalize on political processes
- understanding how to utilize informal influences to garner curriculum support
- understanding and accepting responsibility for promoting, and maintaining a quality culture

5.1 Understanding that curriculum is not the exclusive domain of educators

Some educators hold the view that curriculum should not be set by the whims of politicians who may be here today and gone tomorrow. Such individuals either misunderstand the role of politics in curriculum decision making or ignore its potent effect on education at all levels including the tertiary sector. If politics is the primary process through which education policy decisions are made, then curriculum is as much a political activity as it is an educational enterprise (Marsh & Willis, 2007; Apple, 2004). Curriculum politics, therefore, should be seen as part of the overall process of government in determining not only what should be taught but also the amount of government

funding to be applied to education projects and institutions. Phillips and Hawthrone (1978) argue that approval of annual budget allocations to educational institutions is a highly political activity that involves political bargaining regarding who gets what, when, and how. In order to survive, educators and curriculum developers in higher education institutions must come to terms with the reality that curriculum is not the exclusive domain of educators. This understanding can go a long way in reducing the tension in curriculum decision making between expert opinion and public opinion. Rather than adopting an adversarial posture, educationists are more likely to benefit through partnership with government policy brokers in making curriculum decisions at higher education institutions.

5.2 Understanding how to capitalize on political processes

As a survival strategy, educators in the Trinidad and Tobago higher education sector can also use politics for the benefit of curriculum development. To do so, they must keep abreast of the latest government policies and incentives regarding tertiary level education. Take for example, government's attempts at reforming the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system in Trinidad and Tobago. This was done through establishing policies on a national system for assuring quality in TVET with emphasis on post-secondary training in construction, tourism and hospitality. Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) also found government support in bolstering TVET at post-secondary and higher education institutions (Trinidad and Tobago National Report on Technical and Vocational Education and Training, n.d.). These initiatives present an excellent opportunity for educators at the tertiary levels to modify existing curriculum in keeping with government's new policy directives for TVET.

Ramkissoon-Babwah's (2012) entrepreneurship education model of Trinidad and Tobago is a fine example of what educators can do to capitalize on government's focus on entrepreneurship in the higher education sector. Her study highlights a relationship between entrepreneurship and national development and argues for a robust framework to guide, design, and evaluate entrepreneurship educational initiatives. Ramkissoon-Babwah's work represents a good response to government's policy decision to integrate entrepreneurship curriculum across disciplines in vocational technical and tertiary levels of education.

Some higher education institutions have also demonstrated the ability to capitalize on government's policy shifts towards building a new economy that is capable of generating higher levels of productivity, competitiveness and innovation-driven economic growth (Ministry of Planning and the Economy, 2011). The COSTAATT-Babson initiative is one such example where an institution of higher learning was able to secure government's funding to strengthen the institution's capacity to identify and support burgeoning entrepreneurs across all programmes offered at the institution.

The University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) Business Plan and IDEAS competition is another example of an institution's attempt at capitalizing on government's development priorities regarding entrepreneurial activity and wealth generation. This Business Plan and IDEAS initiative was designed primarily to promote entrepreneurship among students and staff at the university. So too was the university's attempts at establishing business incubators to foster entrepreneurial mindsets of both students and staff at the institution. The COSTAATT-Babson initiative as well as UTT Business Plan and IDEAS competition provide useful examples of how educators can use politics to benefit curriculum development at the tertiary level.

In response to government's challenge to make service learning programmes sustainable, one higher education institution adapted its curriculum to bolster a sense of social responsibility among students. The service learning programme at UTT comprises a combination of teaching and learning through community service and classroom instruction. Government policy makers believe that this hands-on approach encourages an attitude of volunteerism among students and builds social capital (De Souza, 2013). At UTT, several programmes have been redesigned to accommodate service learning as part of the institution's attempt to address a national requirement for strengthening community while imparting the sense of civic responsibility among students in the higher education sector. Other tertiary education sectors including the University of the Southern Caribbean also embrace service learning as a means of providing students with an opportunity to demonstrate a sense of social responsibility as graduates prepare for further national service.

Since important policy decisions are made through political processes, educators should make every effort to capitalize on these processes to survive curriculum politics and advance the cause of higher education in Trinidad and Tobago.

5.3 Understanding how to utilize informal influences to garner curriculum support

Another facet of curriculum politics is the level of influence different actors exert on the curriculum process (Marsh & Willis, 2007). While it is a political reality that some people have greater power than others in making curriculum decisions, educators and curriculum planners must develop the art of negotiation and sharing in order to survive in such an environment (Phillips & Hawthorne, 1978). Educators must, therefore, accept the idea that compromise is a valid and appropriate part of their decision making function. The sooner educators can come to terms with this reality, the sooner they will be able to understand the value of utilizing informal influences to garner support in curriculum decision making.

Informal influences come from several sources outside of the formal higher education sector. The mass media, for example, can play a critical role in influencing curriculum decision by putting pressure on policy makers to take into account the views of all stakeholders (Kamugisha & Mateng'e, 2014). A case in point was government's decision to incorporate one institution of higher learning under the aegis of another in an attempt to maximize resources and bolster support for a burgeoning national university. Objections to this move came from a number of leading trade unions including the Banking, Insurance and General Workers Union; the Federation of Independent Trade Unions and NGOs; the National Association of Technical Tertiary and Professional Educators of Trinidad and Tobago; the Communication Workers' Union; the Oilfield Workers' Trade Union; and the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (Bruzal, 2009). These unions wrote letters to the newspapers and called press conferences to condemn the merger while threatening to take the matter to the streets if the government did not reverse its decision. With mounting pressure from these influential groups facilitated by the mass media, policy brokers had no choice but to reverse government decision to integrate the two institutions.

Employers also have a role to play in influencing curriculum decisions by expressing preference for one type of graduate over another (Marsh & Willis, 2007). These employers can assist by providing information about key sectors with high employment growth potential as well as those sectors with skill deficits. Such information can be beneficial to educators and curriculum developers in making decisions about content adjustments to ensure that higher education programmes remain relevant in terms of meeting the needs of a changing labour market.

In attempting to garner support for curriculum decision making, educators need to become more vocal about matters relating to schooling and education at all levels of the education system including the tertiary sector. This can be accomplished through letters to the press; seminars, workshops and consultations with government policy brokers and the public; professional associations; non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and other pressure groups. Since curriculum work involves an interchange of ideas and experiences, curriculum developers cannot avoid sharing and borrowing ideas from a variety of sources (Hough, 1969). Such interaction can go a long way in fostering confidence and cooperation among educators and policy makers.

5.4 Understanding and accepting the responsibility for promoting, and maintaining a quality culture

While it is clear that curriculum is not the exclusive domain of educators, higher education professionals should not lose sight of their responsibility for promoting and maintaining a quality culture at their institutions. At the heart of this quality culture is the need for higher education institutions to continuously improve their curriculum to ensure that all programmes meet high quality standards of fitness for purpose and value for money.

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) offer a solid theoretical basis for understanding the concept of quality culture in higher education institutions. They argue that the quality culture concept is heavily related to political ambitions of changing the way higher education institutions work. And while a responsive quality culture is primarily led by external governmental imperatives, a regenerative quality culture is focused on internal developments albeit fully aware of the external context and government expectations (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Therefore, it is important for educators to understand that although higher education institutions should make the most of government initiatives, they should also maintain a well coordinated plan for their internal regeneration and improvement (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). This is critical for maintaining institutional effectiveness and continuing accreditation status in an increasingly competitive higher education sector.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the concept of curriculum politics in higher education and explored survival strategies for educators working in the tertiary sector. The paper emphasized the point that curriculum politics involves discussions on the overall shape of the curriculum in terms of what content should be included or excluded in programmes offered at higher education institutions. These discussions involve a wide range of participants including politicians and government policy brokers who influence curriculum through political processes. While the planned curriculum

may be influenced by political interference, educators do have some control over the enacted and experienced curriculum. The environment within which learning takes place can also be affected due to lack of sufficient funding for resources to enhance student learning experiences. Still, educators can maintain quality by carefully manipulating scarce resources while at the same time applying innovative teaching-learning strategies to facilitate optimum learning at the tertiary level.

Despite its many shortcomings, politics remains an essential part of education and curriculum decision making. However, unchecked political interventions from non-education sources may threaten the quality of educational programmes offered at higher education institutions. In these circumstances, educators need to develop survival strategies which capitalize on political processes. They must also develop the art of negotiation and collaboration in order to survive in a highly charged political environment. While it may be in the interest of higher education professionals to accept the reality of curriculum politics, they must also accept responsibility for promoting and maintaining a quality culture cognizant of the political context within which higher education institutions continue to operate. In the final analysis, the burden of providing quality and value for money remains the responsibility of individuals operating at higher education institutions and not policy brokers in government.

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