

**MIDDLE MANAGERS: MANAGING CHANGE IN  
A LAO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Educational Leadership and Management  
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## DECLARATION

**Name of candidate:** Kertmee SACKDANOUVONG

This thesis entitled: **“Middle Managers: Managing Change in a Lao higher education institution”** is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of Master of Educational Leadership and Management.

### CANDIDATE’S DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- This Thesis/Dissertation/Research Project presents my own work;
- The contribution of supervisors and others to this work was consistent with the Unitec regulations and policies.
- Research for this work has been conducted in accordance with the Unitec Research Ethics Committee Policy and Procedures, and has fulfilled any requirements set for this project by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee.

Research Ethic Committee Approval Number: 2012-1061

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## ABSTRACT

Academic middle managers in Lao higher education have a pivotal role in managing changes and academic curricula. They have become a significant force in the current context of Lao higher education since their expertise and knowledge are utilised to effectively manage change, yet they still have many difficulties and challenges as universities and higher education institutions in Laos have undergone significant changes.

This qualitative research investigated the perspectives of senior managers and academic middle managers in relation to the academic middle manager's role in managing change, the perspectives of successful change, and the challenges that the academic middle manager faces when managing change. Two data gathering methods were employed: a semi-structured interview with five senior managers, and an open-ended questionnaire with forty academic middle managers from five faculties of a Lao higher education institution.

The findings of this study revealed three key roles of academic middle managers: taking initiatives to lead change, interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practice, and representing the faculty senior management. The research also showed that successful change management was associated with creating a clear vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating the practice of change regularly, change knowledge and personal capabilities, and communication skills. The research also indicated two major challenges faced by academic middle managers: carrying out the role effectively to interpret strategies and policies into practice, and changing the culture.

This research highlights the need for the Lao Ministry of Education, higher education institutions, and senior faculty managers to acknowledge the contribution of academic middle managers as agents of change and to provide them with adequate support. Also, a sound change model is needed for effectively guiding the leadership and management of change in Lao higher education institutions.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMM	Academic Middle Manager
FA	Faculty A
FB	Faculty B
FC	Faculty C
FD	Faculty D
FE	Faculty E
HE	Higher Education
HoDs	Heads of Department
SM	Senior Manager

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The global context of the late 1970s and 1980s have seen intense downward pressure on all forms of expenditure in higher education funding and the effects of increased commercial activities (Weber & Weber, 2001). There has been a movement away from collegial administrative structures that has resulted in a changing ethos towards more corporate and profit-focused management goals in universities (Kok, Douglas, & McClelland, 2008). These market forces have changed current organisational paradigms towards not only being reactive but also proactive to consumers' demands (Anninos, 2007; Onsman, 2008). It is, perhaps, partly this push that influences universities to adopt increased commercial practices to compete nationally and internationally with other competitors by aiming to match students and market needs (Kok et al., 2008).

Several researchers note that higher education organisations have undergone a phenomenal amount of change for decades (Davies, Hides, & Casey, 2001), and the change within these organisations has been one of the major concerns of higher education scholars (Kondakci & Van den Broeck, 2009). McRoy and Gibbs (2009) state that living with change and managing its process is an essential skill for all those in education both at a personal and professional level. Likewise, Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005) add that managing change in universities is a difficult task, particularly operating at times of pressure due to various compelling drivers for change. Several researchers (Davies et al., 2001; Lucas, 2001; Martincic, 2010; McRoy & Gibbs, 2003; Mulinge & Munyae, 2008) point out to the fact that increasing globalisation, government initiatives to do more with less, because of budgetary constraints, the demands of students and local communities, technological advancement, changed market conditions, changing legislation, and the increasing emphasis on accountability are seen as the main drivers for change in higher education institutions.

These forces bring about the challenges and pressures for higher education to change, and these are evident on all sides as the pace of change is ever increasing (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). In this regard, Rebora and Turri (2010) support that tertiary organisations, like all organisations, are in an environment of intense change, and face drivers for change and preservation that are deeply rooted in their organisational nature and mission. Faced with such a number of change forces, many countries and tertiary institutions have turned to innovations in order to respond to such a number of change forces (Mulinge & Munyae, 2008). It is apparent that universities and other providers of tertiary education must seek creative solutions and must innovate in order to meet the growing demand for higher education and the many challenges (Martincic, 2010; Mulinge & Munyae, 2008). The innovations in tertiary institutions can take the forms of activities which aim at improving the quality of studies, sustaining and developing the quality of educational programs, increasing access to higher education, and improving the management of higher education (Mulinge & Munyae, 2008).

Tertiary institutions, therefore, have to follow the opportunities and avoid the threats which may occur in the contemporary turbulent environment (Martincic, 2010) since no organisation, large or small, local or global is immune to change (Kotter, 1998). Martincic (2010) further asserts that successful implementing and managing of change is urgently required for each higher education organisation. Leading and managing the staff is becoming a key contribution and the most significant aspect during the process of change (Martincic, 2010). Rebora and Turri (2010) support that change management in higher education organisations is mainly accomplished by influencing the behaviour of the individuals working in them, and because professionals are mostly checked upon when they are appointed or promoted, higher education organisation efforts have to focus on these stages.

This chapter will present the background for the research; the rationale will then be explained while the research aims and questions will be explored in the following section. Finally, the thesis will be outlined.

## **BACKGROUND**

Since the research was conducted in Laos, my home country, the specific context needs to be considered. As in developing countries, higher education in Laos has also undergone significant change over a decade, and the change is on-going as the economic status of the country is rapidly growing. Higher education reforms in Laos cover both public and private tertiary education due to the Prime Minister's Decree on the establishment of the National University of Laos in 1995 (Ogawa, 2008; Weidman, 1995). This reform provides the necessary framework for the liberalisation and privatisation of higher education on a larger scale in order to meet the social and economic demands of the country (Ministry of Education, 2008). As a result of the orientation of new economic mechanism in the late 1990s (Ogawa, 2008; Weidman, 1995), the Lao higher education sector needs to alter their goals in order to build the capacity to catch up with other ASEAN countries educationally, economically and socially (Syharath, 2011).

It is further asserted by the Asian Development Bank (2000) and Ogawa (2008) that the rapid growth and change in the Lao higher education sector are seen as the first priority and the most significant engine for Laos to accomplish its Millennium Development Goals by 2015 to elevate the country from its current state of developing to well-developed by 2020. This rapid growth in Lao higher education, however, has brought many issues and challenges that are required to be addressed such as a higher demand for qualified human resources (P Bouphe, 2008; Syharath, 2011). What's more, it is noted that there is a crucial shortage of qualified and experienced lecturers, managers and administrators in Lao higher education (Asian Development Bank, 2000; p. Bouphe, 2010).

## **RATIONALE**

Since universities and higher education institutions in Laos have undergone significant change, academic middle managers inevitably have difficulties in managing required change. These academic middle managers, according to

Syharath's (2011) research conducted in a Lao university showed that there were many difficulties, demands and complexities in the role of a middle manager. He continued that the clarity and these complexities are more likely to cause difficulties and challenges for academic middle managers in understanding and developing their role (Syharath, 2011). The Ministry of Education (2008) and Ogawa (2008) also reveal that higher education middle managers in the current context of Lao higher education are facing tremendous challenges associated with their roles of teaching and managing tasks.

Furthermore, there is little empirically based understanding of the roles of academic middle managers in further education; even though, these middle managers possess a pivotal role within a complex setting, translating purpose and vision of the institution into practical actions and outcomes (Briggs, 2005). As Kallenberg (2007) supports, despite the fact that academic middle managers have critical roles contributing to strategic innovation and change management in universities, their roles have largely remained unexplored in the literature on higher education context. Research on what academic middle managers actually perform in university has been minimal (Kallenberg, 2007). This proposed study, therefore, hopes to contribute new knowledge on the role of academic middle managers in relation to change management in the context of Lao higher education sector.

Academic middle managers often see themselves isolated in the middle of the conflict between accountability and educational autonomy in the rapid changing environment (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Marshall, 2008; Ramsden, 1998). Higher education academic middle managers must now handle the issues of strategy, development, culture and personnel within a structural framework identified by top management and constrained by organisational change (Eisenbach, Watson, & Rajnandini, 1999; Lavarda, Canet-Giner, & Peris-Bonet, 2010; Leader, 2004). As an academic middle manager in a large tertiary institution which has undergone substantial and on-going organisational change, I am interested in the role that the academic middle managers play in managing change, their perceptions of success,

and the challenges of change management that would be important in establishing an organisational culture and climate contributing to successful change management. While there are several middle management positions in a Lao tertiary institution where this study was conducted, this research is limited to academic middle managers in the academic departments of the university where there are significant changes that have occurred since its inception in 1995.

My own experience of organisational change has been located within my place of employment in a Lao higher education institution where tremendous and sustained change at whole organisation as well as departmental level re-organisation has taken place for years. More specifically, the issues of my interest are associated with how higher education academic middle managers in this academic institution might produce a significant contribution to radical organisational change. In this regard, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the role that academic middle managers play in change management as a number of authors emphasise that academic higher education middle managers help develop and interpret the organisation's policies, strategies, vision and ideas into concrete actions and change (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Valentino, 2004). Higher education middle managers establish clear goals for the change effort, involving launching communication and training efforts, and promoting opportunities for staff members' participation (Caldwell, 2003). Through dominating and influencing the flow of information, higher education middle managers can be a creative force for organisational change (Briggs, 2001).



## **RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS**

The overall objective of this research is to investigate the role of higher education academic middle managers in managing change in the current academic context of Lao higher education. This study aims to identify the role that the academic middle managers play in managing change, their perceptions of success, and the challenges of change management that would be important in establishing an organisational culture and climate contributing to successful change management. This research hopes to contribute to the new knowledge on the role of academic middle managers in managing change in the Lao higher education sector since there is a gap in the research in the context of developing countries.

### **Research aims**

- To describe and critique the role that academic middle managers in Lao higher education play in managing organisational change.
- To examine senior and academic middle managers' perspectives of successful change management strategies.
- To analyse the challenges or tensions for academic middle managers in managing change.

### **Research questions**

1. What is the role of academic middle managers in Lao higher education in relation to managing successful organisational change?
2. What are the perspectives of Lao higher education senior managers and academic middle managers towards successful change management?
3. Why do academic middle managers in Lao higher education face challenges in managing change?

## **THESIS OUTLINE**

The thesis is organised into six chapters as follows:

Chapter one has presented the background and the rationale for this study and outlined the aims and research questions which frame the shape of this thesis.

Chapter two critically reviews a wide range of the relevant literature. It identifies four research themes or issues that are drawn from literature. These themes, when combined, make up the major focus of this work. Part one critically reviews the concepts of middle management which include the role of an academic middle manager in higher education (HE) and the challenges for the academic middle managers during change. Part two reviews and discusses leadership for change management. In part three, organisational culture in a time of change is reviewed, and the final part critically reviews organisational change.

Chapter three firstly provides an overview of the methodology, the rationale and justification for choosing a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis for this study. It describes and discusses the research methods, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires employed for data collecting, and the strategies for data analysis is then discussed. Finally, the reliability of results is examined with the ethical considerations.

Chapter four details the data results and findings gathered from semi-structured interviews with faculty deans and vice deans as senior managers and from an open-ended questionnaire with heads of departments and associate heads of department as academic middle managers. The data results and findings are organised according to the themes identified.

Chapter five discusses the findings of chapter four using the key research questions to frame the shape of the discussion and then integrates these with reference to the literature reviewed in chapter two.

Chapter six concludes with a brief review of the study and the main research findings are highlighted. Strengths and limitations of the research process undertaken, recommendations, and suggestions for further research are addressed.

The following literature reviewed provided the conceptual framework to develop the methodology for this research and highlighted the issues for middle managers in the higher education sector.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter was critically reviewed a wide range of literature associated with concepts of middle management that involve the role of academic middle managers in higher education, and the challenges of the academic middle managers during change. It then critically reviews leadership for change management, organisational culture in times of change, and the context of organisational change.

#### **CONCEPT OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT**

Middle management is a concept that can be viewed from multiple contexts. In the business context on the one hand, middle management can be best viewed as “two levels below the CEO and one level above line workers and professions”(Huy, 2001, p. 2). Uytterhoeven (1989) supports that the middle manager has been variously discussed as “a general manager who is responsible for a particular business unit at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy” (p.136). In this respect, middle manager is in “a hierarchy of authority between the operating core and the apex” (Mintzberg, 1989, p. 98), or “those below the small group of top strategic managers and above first-level supervision” (Dopson, Risk, & Stewart, 1996, p. 136).

Middle management in school sectors, on the other hand, denotes “a layer of management between the senior management team and those at the chalk face” (Fleming, 2000, p. 2). This is asserted by Bennett (1995) who comments that middle management implies a hierarchical structure which “assumes a downward flow of authority from the leader, given in order to promote what the leader seeks” (p. 2). Bennett (1995) goes on to argue that this image suggests:

An assumption of middle manager loyalty to higher leadership, and the role of the middle manager in this sense involves the transmission of information and command up and down the line, leading to the concept of middle managers as key brokers within the organisation. (p. 2)

There is, however, more evidence in higher education (HE) that the concept of the middle manager has been at times understood as the aspect of what it is to be a manager in organisational terms, and at other times as conservative impediment between senior management and the workforce (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). This is echoed by Kallenberg (2007) that up to the 1990's the roles of academic middle managers were perceived as those of senior teachers or professors who also happened to engage in administrative work. The academic middle manager, as Gleeson and Shain (1999) state, is employed as a diverse group which is commonly referred to within HE as middle management. Particularly within various institutions, academic middle managers are known as a program manager (Kallenberg, 2007), a program leader who is assumed by the higher education workforce to provide managerial responsibility for the course coordination (Gleeson & Shain, 1999), and vitality to the heart of higher education institutions (London, 2011).

The role of the academic middle manager is important to the college or university's effectiveness in carrying out its mission and realising its vision for the future (Folan & Seagren, 2003) although there are various perceptions of middle management from different contexts. The middle management is a 'black box of taken-for-granted givens and assumptions' which must be opened, probed and discussed if academic middle managers are to effectively contribute to whole institution functions and change (Hannay & Ross, 1999, p. 356), and to have the most effective influence on the faculty (London, 2011).

## **Academic middle manager's role in higher education**

A growing body of literature has investigated the role of academic middle managers in higher education (HE). From a detailed examination of the role and responsibilities of heads of department in Australian universities, Sarros, Gmelch and Tanewski (1997) identify four aspects of the role. That is, academic middle managers are seen as a leader, an academic staff developer, a scholar and as a manager (Sarros et al., 1997). According to Earley (1998), academic middle managers are involved in strategy, "given preconditions as a flat management structure, an appropriate organisational culture and the willingness of the individual to become involved" (p.150). Gleeson and Shain (1999) point out that HE academic middle managers work strategically to ensure that their academic staff are protected, and that educational values are promoted as much as possible within the new management culture of higher education.

Busher and Harris (1999) identify four dimensions of the academic middle manager's role: the role of translation, transformation, supervisory leadership, and representative leadership. These roles are that academic middle managers translate policies and perspectives of senior managers into departmental practices, use their expert knowledge to improve staff and student performance, and liaison inside and out the institution (Busher & Harris, 1999). Research by Briggs (2005) indicates that middle managers see themselves as 'a bridging gap' taking college objectives and interpreting them; whereas, the study by Bowman shows that academic middle managers require a diverse set of leadership capabilities associated with communicating, problem-solving, cultural management, coaching, and transition skills.

Hancock and Hellawell (2003) put forward that in today's world, academic middle managers are seen to:

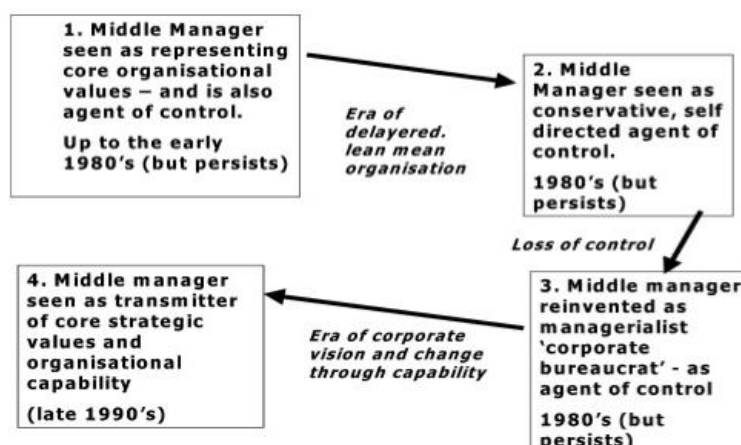
Be far more than the traditional link between the policy-makers and the workers on the shop floor. They need to be interpreters and authors of strategy who are making

strategic decisions at their own level and operating both inside and outside the institutions. (p. 5)

In light of this, Leader (2004) asserts that HE academic middle managers' effectiveness in contributing to strategic decision-making process is either facilitated or hindered by the management culture and structural framework of the individual institution. The contribution of academic middle managers is "perceived as more extensive and pervasive than simply paying the lip service to or fulfilling the requirements of a further education strategic management tool (Leader, 2004, p. 77). With respect to strategic innovation, "academic middle managers are at a crucial position in the organisation, they work at the level at which university policies and strategies are effectively translated into practices and into concrete actions" (Kallenberg, 2007, p. 21).

In spite of the fact that the roles and responsibilities of the heads of department (HoDs) have been expanded over the decade, being critical to the organisation's effectiveness requires the HoDs to consider many aspects (Filan & Seagren, 2003). Filan and Seagren suggest that the HoDs are required to understand themselves, understand transformational leadership, establish and maintain relationships, lead teams, strategic planning and change, and connect through community. Besides these issues, Briggs (2005) emphasises five key aspects of academic middle managers as a corporate agent, implementer, staff manager, liaison and leader. Likewise, Clegg and McAuley (2005) suggest four dominant discourses that represent the roles of academic middle managers in HE (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: The four periods of middle management



(Clegg & McAuley, 2005, p. 24)

The four dominant discourses see academic middle managers for core academic values, an agent of control, a corporate bureaucrat, and as the transmitter of organisational wisdom. Academic middle managers, as Bryman (2007) comments, act as a role model with credibility, and in doing so, they form the role model for staff members, so that it is important for them to have credibility as an academic, as well as in terms of being a leader (Bryman, 2007). He goes on to note that the academic middle managers are communicating well about the direction the department is going, they ensure that their staff members are apprised of the direction of the department since this can assist them to develop a sense of ownership of the leader's vision (Bryman, 2007).

Recent empirical studies in HE emphasise the role of HE middle managers. Briggs (2007) notes that academic middle managers as leaders carry out the purpose of the college, and potentially their professional role is considered as powerful through leading the process of teaching and learning. Smith and Winter-Irving (2009) further assert that the survival of universities in an increasing business-oriented environment may rely largely on the business capability and expertise of their front-line or middle-level managers, "all of whom are now expected to exhibit a high level of knowledge and expertise in financial and human resource management, planning, strategy, conflict resolution, change management, and industrial relations" (p.74). Nevertheless academic middle



managers occupy multiple roles and responsibilities, they are seen as “the key figures in ensuring the well-being and productivity of their faculty, and hence, of their college or university” (Gappa & Trice, 2010, p. 3).

### **The challenges for academic middle managers in managing change**

In this section, the challenges of the academic middle manager’s role is first critically reviewed while the challenges related to change management will then be later reviewed and discussed. The roles of academic middle managers in HE become increasingly challenging as tertiary institutions respond to the existence of institutional autonomy, performance management, and diminishing resources (Briggs, 2007; Kogan, Khawas, & Moses, 1994; Leader, 2004). Kogan et al. (1994) argue that academic middle managers are under pressures from the administration and their academic staff; their staff management role becomes more demanding and critical; and their own teaching, scholarship and research inevitably suffer. Sarros, Gmelch and Tanewski (1997) endorse this view that the role has stresses for academic middle managers to maintain a research publication record with the administrative demands of the job. They have to supervise and evaluate staff performance, handle conflicting demands and goals, and deal with student problems (Sarros et al., 1997; G Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). This pressure can lead to an ambiguity and confusion as asserted by Jackson (1999).

Previous researchers highlight that academic middle managers are caught in various positions where they have to seek the balance. As posited by Hancock and Hellowell (2001), the academic middle managers occupy the positions in which they have to find a balance between the temporary hierarchy of their administrative position and the on-going collegiality with their peers. Kallenberg (2007) points out that the academic middle managers, at the very least, are the linking pin between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ processes. They need to seek a balance between the teaching staff and the administrators, between education and research, and ultimately, between hierarchy and collegiality (Kallenberg,

2007). Likewise, it is echoed by several researchers that academic middle managers not only mediate tensions between funding and curriculum, but also filter competing messages from above and below concerned with interpreting policy into practice, while this can cause potential conflict between senior managers and lecturers (Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009; Wolverton, Robert Ackerman, & Spencer Holt, 2005).

Furthermore, as Briggs (2001) highlights, the more challenges for academic middle managers are that there is often a lack of clarity about the boundaries of middle managers, an inconsistency regarding the way they are managed, and a tendency to be treated as the unquestioning 'mouthpiece' of the senior management team. Briggs (2001) adds that academic staff at all levels anticipate the middle manager to create and monitor the frameworks by which the primary work of the institution is operated, as well as to maintain "a collective culture of capable leadership" (Leader, 2004, p. 69). These required roles can be hindered without clearly defined priorities and boundaries of responsibility (Briggs, 2001; Leader, 2004). Additionally, a number of tensions relating to their roles can occur as academic middle managers must bridge the gap between senior management and the academic staff of the university (Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009).

Although there is considerable literature written on the role of academic middle managers in HE (Briggs, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005; Hancock & Hellawell, 2001, 2003; M. P. Jackson, 1999), there exists very little literature that describes the work of academic middle managers in HE contributing to change management (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Lavarda et al., 2010; Marshall, 2008; Moses & Roe, 1990). In the context of change management, the academic middle manager can be viewed as analogous to the concept of the master craftsman (Jaeger & Pekruhl, 1998); they operate in an environment where teamwork is valued as motivator, moderator or coach (Clegg & McAuley, 2005).

Academic middle managers see themselves as representing core academic values rather than representing core organisational values (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; French, 2001; Ramsden, 1998). Their role is becoming challenging as higher education institutions have changed management systems from collegial leadership to more management-based steering structures (Kok et al., 2008; Rasmussen, 2002). As a result, the academic middle managers are required to manage both external and internal changes in their organisation's work process, financial systems, networking, management and leadership, and complex goal structures (De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Rasmussen, 2002; Smith & Winter-  
Irving, 2009).

Research by Caldwell (2003) shows that HE middle managers are substantially anticipated to exhibit a positive and exemplary change orientation as shown by personal flexibility, the competence to deal with uncertainty and the ability to take risks. Alexiadou (2001) reinforces that academic middle managers mediate change, acting effectively within constraints and generating structures that accommodate new realities. In this vein, they possess institutional knowledge and usually have the experience to be innovative, plan and manage change in the organisation . They are at the forefront of change in major areas, including teaching and learning and in the advancement of core pedagogical and academic, as well as organisational goals (Clegg & McAuley, 2005).

There is, however, a common agreement that academic middle managers have to be masters and slaves and serve the top, the middle and the bottom (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Kallenberg, 2007). As argued by Leader (2004), on the one hand, academic middle managers convey the senior management team's strategic message downwards to team members, while on the other hand, teaching colleagues and support staff expect practical issues of delivering the curriculum and responsibility for the learner experience to take priority (Leader, 2004). In this sense, academic middle managers are concerned with reconciling both top-level perspectives and with lower level implementation issues (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Marshall, 2008). Although change initiatives derive from senior managers, the

critical implementation of the initiatives remains primarily in the hands of the academic middle managers (Leader, 2004).

Furthermore, academic middle managers deal with the management of the tension between long-term and short-term organisational objectives, and the individuals' development in embedding processes of change and renewal into the organisation (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). They operate as "mediators of change between senior managers and team members, translating policy into practice by constructing the art of the possible...in ways which are acceptable and make sense of both groups" (Gleeson & Shain, 1999, p. 470). In doing so, as Marshall (2008) suggest, the academic middle manager must be able to create possible options, and be skillful in assisting academic staff reason through the options.

Academic middle managers, similarly, should be considered as strategic assets through recognition of their link with organisational core capability and competitive advantage (Hannay & Ross, 1999); they are required to simultaneously understand the need for change, prepare for change, stimulate change, and manage change as emphasised by Kallenberg (2007). Therefore, this can be challenged where the requirement of the role is to act as colleague during times of trouble and as individuals who are seen to learn with their peers in times of change (Huy, 2001).

## **LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT**

### **Definition of leadership**

Leadership has a common theme as an influence process. Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) note that leadership, in most conceptions, is seen as an influence process that influences individuals to think or act differently according to a task or a situation. Likewise, Bush (2003) proposes three dimensions of leadership that need to be considered such as leadership as influence, leadership and values, and leadership and visions, while at the same time, leadership, which

is argued by Seashore Lewis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010), is commonly concerned with two functions, providing direction and exercising influence. This is supported by Kotter (1990) who concludes that a leader has the ability to influence a group of individuals towards the achievement of a particular objective.

### **The role of leadership in change management**

Leadership in the process of change is also emphasised and is often perceived to be the crucial factor in ensuring successful change (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009), and essential in order to generate vision, communicate policy and deploy strategy (Davies et al., 2001). It is noted that leading change has always been an integral part of leadership although many theories pay little attention to change behaviour (Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). The authors go on to assert that “leaders perform as the main role models for change and provide the motivation and communication to keep change efforts moving forward; strong, committed leadership is crucial to successful change” (Draf & Pirola-Merlo, p. 480).

Leadership in the initiation and management of change is also highlighted by Kotter (1996) and Caldwell (2003) with an emphasis on establishing direction, aligning, motivating, and inspiring people. Shanley (2006) argues that while leadership has often been seen as a primary focus of senior managers, the reality in most organisations is that all managers need to develop leadership capacity and skills. Leaders or managers in today’s most successful organisations must recognise that “internal changes must keep pace with what is happening in the external environment” (Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009, p. 480). As it is put forward by Burnes (2003), the two greatest challenges facing organisations today are leadership and change.

Davies, Hides and Casey (2001) and Marticic (2010), moreover, assert that leadership is needed when an organisation seeks to implement radical or

strategic change. Davies et al.'s (2001) research in HE reveals that for universities to survive, leadership is inevitable since it helps to drive the change process for success. McRoy and Gibbs (2009) further emphasise:

Leadership plays a central and important function in the change management process. Just as change is complex, so is the act of leadership which requires those who aspire to lead to be able to communicate desired vision, model the roles that will lead to effective implementation, and possess the managerial skills to deal with aspects of change such as barriers and fear, as well as being endowed with the ability to recognise and engage with informal power agents who may resist the change process. (p. 687)

A number of researchers suggest a type of leadership, that is, transformational leadership which is considered related to the management of change (Bass, 1985; Bryman, 1992; Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Eisenbach et al., 1999; Graetz, Rimmer, Smith, & Lawrence, 2011; Ramsden, 1998; Vinger, 2009). Transformational leadership can be characterised by the ability to bring about significant change; and transformational leaders have the capacity to lead changes in the organisation's vision, strategy and culture to promote innovation (Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009).

Bass (1985) and Eisenbach et al. (1999) support that transformational leaders motivate followers to identify with the leader's vision and devote their self-interest for that of the group or the organisation. What's more, it is echoed that transformational leaders raise the follower's sense of purpose and level of motivation (Bryman, 1992; Cameron & Green, 2012; Graetz et al., 2011), and the strategies used in this leadership involves actively communicating educational values and beliefs, involving staff in cooperative planning, and using management mechanisms to support changes in an educational organisation (Ramsden, 1998; G Scott et al., 2008). Ramsden (1998) and Vinger (2009) stress the importance that transformational leaders work as actor of change or change agents who do not only manage change but are also the initiators of change.

It is important to note that transformational leadership is not only a kind of leadership to successful change management (Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). What emerges as the key principle components is the need for strong leaders to perform their critical roles (Graetz et al., 2011; Kotter, 1998). Leaders need to create a sense of urgency, a need for change, and to gain staff members' support and commitment (Graetz et al., 2011; Kotter, 1998). They are required to give meaning and structure to the change effort, and provide a focus and a sense of direction that must be realistic and acceptable to the majority of staff members (Davies et al., 2001; Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Graetz et al., 2011; D. Jackson, 2000; Rasmussen, 2002). Leadership of change has to begin with a big picture approach concerning with an analysis of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses against the trends in an external environment (Graetz et al., 2011; Martincic, 2010).

## **ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE IN TIMES OF CHANGE**

### **Understanding organisational culture**

Organisational culture has a significant effect on organisational performance (Alvesson, 2002; Graetz et al., 2011) , and it is important as a way of understanding organisational life in all its richness and variations (Alvesson, 2002). As pointed out by Bolman and Deal (2008), organisational culture is established over time as staff members develop their “beliefs, values, practice, and artifacts that seem to work and are passed to new members” (pp. 277-288). Several authors view organisational culture as intangible shared meanings, basic assumptions and beliefs which are shared by individuals or groups within organisation (Cunliffe, 2008; Lok & Crawford, 1999; Stoll & Fink, 2001), it is a mixture of observable forms and non-observable meaning and assumptions (Schein, 2010) while these aspects of organisational culture are often unspoken and unconsciously operated (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Cunliffe, 2008).

In light of different interpretations, several researchers agree that organisational culture is the basic assumptions, shared values, and beliefs of the organisational members about the activities of the organisation (Alvesson, 2002; Cunliffe, 2008; Mills, Dye, & Mills, 2009; Yukl, 2002). It is a pattern of beliefs and expectations that are common to members of a social unit, and subsequently set the behaviour standards for all new members (Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Graetz et al., 2011). It is supported that organisational culture is the 'social glue' (Prosser, 1999) and 'super glue' that holds and unites individuals together, and helps them to achieve the organisational goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 253).

### **The importance of culture in change management**

Organisational culture plays a critical role and has begun to take hold among leaders or managers of change (Anderson, 2010). Graetz et al. (2011) stress that culture can influence how and why change might be implemented and how and why it might be resisted. Schein (2010) asserts that when an organisation has a purpose, a new strategy, or a change agenda, then determining how the culture impacts on these issues is not only useful but also essential in most cases. Schein goes on that culture can be implicated in the change process while sometimes it becomes the direction for target of change. As suggested by Schein (2010), it is necessary to "have a way of assessing culture rapidly so that the change leaders can determine how culture elements will help them, will hinder them, or will become change target in their own right" (p. 315).

Cameron and Green (2012) similarly recommend that organisations should consider culture change if the current culture does not adequately support the achievement of strategic objectives for change. Draft and Pirola-Merlo (2009) put forward that culture should involve the values and assumptions needed by the organisation to achieve its changing environment. They further note that if the competitive environment needs speed and flexibility, the organisational culture should include values that support adaptability, collaboration across departments



and a quick response to the changing environment. This view is emphasised by Alvesson (2002) who supports that in order to make any 'real change' possible, leaders or managers need to change individuals' ideas and values, hence giving priority to a cultural level. Therefore, culture is highly significant for how an organisation operates from strategic change to day-to-day leadership and how managers and members relate to and interact with others (Alvesson, 2002). Also, improving one's skill in observing and understanding organisational culture allows the leaders to better understand potential obstacles and areas of resistance to any changes (Anderson, 2010).

Furthermore, it is pointed out that culture can be an axis of the organisation and central to all elements of the organisational life since it mirrors thought, feeling and action which are conducive to effective leadership and management in the context of change (Alvesson, 2002; T Bush & Middlewood, 2005; Fullan, 2001). Educational leaders should bear in mind that a strong culture forms a strong organisation (Handy, 1993), they need to know how and understand what the organisational culture is and use their ability to modify that culture to meet the needs of the organisation as it deals with changes (Bernick, 2002; Dimmock & Walker, 2002; Walker & Lambert, 1995).

The success or the failure of changes within organisations can be dependent on the shared values and beliefs of members who would take change initiatives when it is about to change (Fullan, 2001; Schein, 2010). If and when culture becomes dysfunctional and it needs to change, then leaders need to manage such cultural change, and if the leaders are not conscious of the cultures, those cultures will, in turn, manage them (Munck, 2002). Therefore, it is vital to understand the cultures if leaders are to bring about change (Fullan, 2001; Schein, 2010).

## **ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE**

Organisations in the new era are different; the pace of change in the organisations is much faster, and the change needs to occur in order to prepare better for situations (Rowling, 2003). While some authors consider organisational change as a complex system that rarely functions to maintain individuals without changing roles of those who involve (Bolman & Deal, 2008), other scholars claim that organisational change is “an alteration of a core aspect of an organisation’s operation” (Mills et al., 2009, p. 4). Moreover, Piggot-Irvine (2005) notes that organisational change is a process consisting of illusiveness, complexity and multi-dimension in which members are involved individually or collectively, either in a voluntary or in an involuntary manner. Likewise, Graetz et al. (2011) add that organisational change management is complex; it needs the simultaneous implementation of a range of activities, and change cannot be implemented until an organisation recognises the change forces are at work.

### **Perspectives of change management**

Managing change in an organisation requires different perspectives of change management. As it is pointed out, change cannot be carried out through ‘one-best-way practices’; instead, individuals need to consider that there are many different ways of achieving change outcomes (Clegg, Kornberger, & Pitsis, 2009). To support this, Graetz et al. (2011) assert that taking a different perspective from many complex aspects of organisational life is useful to create ways of thinking about and responding to the need for change in the organisation.

Van de Ven and Poole (1995) also reveal that change perspectives describe the primarily different sequences of change intervention, or what can be seen as motors of change. This denotes that there are ways of looking at organisations and each provides a unique way of perceiving and introducing change (Clegg et al., 2009; Graetz et al., 2011; Hayes, 2007). If the managers have an appreciation of the different change perspectives, it can help them to turn around the way the process of change is viewed, and while it in turn can assist them to

deal with change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). As Morgan (1997) asserts, “reality has a tendency to reveal itself in accordance with the perspectives through which it is engaged” (p. 350). Additionally, a range of change perspectives can provide the scope to understand a situation from many angles and establish different modes of engagement in managing change (Graetz et al., 2011).

Different perspectives of change, furthermore, can foster managers to understand and see a big picture of change. Seeing change in the picture, the best leaders or managers do not only possess essential skills and knowledge, but they are also particularly sensitive to staff members’ motives, understand the human, subjective side of change and operate contingently by being able to “read and match” (G Scott, 1999, p. 5). This implies that it is best to consider what is going on in each unique situation in order to develop the most appropriate response to that situation (G Scott, 1999). As suggested by Burnes (2000), change can come in all shapes, sizes and forms; it is difficult to create an accurate picture of the degree of difficulty that organisations face in managing change successfully.

It is important for managers to develop an overall framework in order to make sense of what is happening when change is in the air (Fullan, 2001; G Scott, 1999). In other words, Scott (1999) articulates that managers need to be able to see how the many aspects of their daily experience with change in an organisation fit together into one big picture. This is due to the fact that change is complex, ongoing and involves loss (Fullan, 2001; Piggot-Irvine, 2005). Piggot-Irvine (2005) further stresses that with loss there is a normal response in keeping with grief. Therefore, managers’ understanding of their own response to, and their perspectives of change are a critical first step in managing change; and these would allow them to empathise with response from their staff members (Piggot-Irvine, 2005). As stated by Carnall (2003), “Managing change effectively reduces anxiety and helps those individuals who find change stressful to cope with it. This in turn leads to a more positive attitude to change” (p. 126).

## **Capabilities for change management**

Organisations possess different potentials for success while successful change seems to require the alignment of an organisation's internal structure, individual actions, and collective goals in order to achieve optimal results (Graetz et al., 2011). French (2001) and Wallace (2003) indicate that one of the missing ingredients in most failed change cases is the appreciation and use of change knowledge. Change knowledge is the insight and understanding about the change process and the key drivers that make for successful change in practice (Allix & Gronn, 2005).

In relation to attributes of change, Caldwell (2003) describes that attributes are concerned with "mixed skills, knowledge, capabilities, competencies and personal characteristics that are perceived to be of considerable importance to change agents in performing their role" (p. 287). From this empirical study, Caldwell (2003) reveals a number of key attributes of change managers, namely, empowering others, team building, learning from others, adaptability and flexibility, open to new ideas, and managing resistance. Another study by Gilley, McMillan and Gilley (2009) suggests the values of interpersonal skills in successfully implementing change, specifically the abilities to motivate, communicate, and create environments supportive of teams. Leaders who possess and exhibit these skills are perceived as more effective in driving change (Gilley et al., 2009). Further, Kotter (2007) adds that successful change is also dependent on leader's ability to lead transformative processes. It is noted that leaders' communication skills, their use of language, their capabilities to strengthen relationships and their abilities to establish the basic principles holding the organisation together are some of the routes to change leadership success (Kotter, 2007).

Another recent research by Higgs and Rowland (2011) proposes four critical behaviour sets associated with change success, and these include 'attractor', 'edge and tension', 'container', and 'transforming space'. Within these characteristics, managers respectively articulate a magnetic energy force in the

organisation to pull it toward its goals; they amplify the disturbance created by the change process while staying firm to keep the change process on course (Higgs & Rowland, 2011). Managers also establish change in the “here and now” based on the assumption that “the only thing one can change is the present moment” (Higgs & Rowland, 2011, p. 314). If managers have a variety of attributes to perform their critical role as the change agents (Graetz et al., 2011), they can help staff to avoid feeling disempowered and resistant to, or alienated from the changes that are proposed by external or internal forces (Bruckman, 2008).

### **Change models**

Bolman and Deal (2008) reveal that too many change initiatives fail because they rely largely on gathering data, analysing, reporting and presenting instead of a more creative approach focusing on feeling that motivates useful action. They note that change agents often fail “when they rely mostly on reason and structure while neglecting human, political, and symbolic element” (p. 394). Effective and successful organisational change may require integrating and employing a number of change models. Kurt Lewin’s three-step-model for change has been cited by several researchers (Cameron & Green, 2012; Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Schein, 2010). The model involves ‘unfreezing—movement—refreezing’ (Cameron & Green, 2012). Cameron and Green (2012) comment that the first step concerns with the current stage, surfacing the driving and resisting forces and picturing a desired end state while Draft and Pirola-Merlo (2009) and Schein (2010) assert that this step is a process of creating motivation, readiness for change and removing resistance. The second step is relating to moving to a new state through participation and involvement (Cameron & Green, 2012); it is the process of helping individuals to see things differently and react differently in the future (Schein, 2010). The final step integrates the change process through taking the new, changed way of doing things and fitting it comfortably into one’s total self-concept (Schein, 2010) by setting policy, rewarding success and creating new standards (Cameron & Green, 2012).

Beckhard and Harris (1977), in addition, introduce a process model framework for managing organisational change. They propose that large-scale, complex, organisational change can be conceptualised as movement from a 'present' state to a 'future' state with the most important 'transition state' being in between the two. Beckhard and Harris (1977) further assert that organisational change is conceptualised as an activity of assessing the current organisational situation, present state; identifying the desired future, future state; and planning ways to accomplish that desired future and implementing the plans, transition state.

Interestingly, Kotter (2007) claims that change could stick when it becomes 'the way we do things around here', when it "seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body". Kotter suggests an eight-step process model for transforming organisations that currently provides a familiar vocabulary for the change process:

- (1) Establishing a sense of urgency;
  - (2) Forming a powerful guiding coalition;
  - (3) Creating a vision;
  - (4) Communicating the vision;
  - (5) Empowering others to act on the vision;
  - (6) Planning for and creating short-term wins;
  - (7) Consolidating improvements and producing still more change;
  - (8) Institutionalising new approaches.
- (Kotter, 2007, p. 99)

The model addresses some of the power issues in making change happen, highlights the importance of a 'felt need' for change in the organisation, and emphasises the need to communicate the vision and keep communication levels extremely high throughout the process (Cameron & Green, 2012). Bolman and Deal (2008) further emphasise that the model depicts a dynamic process moving through time, although not necessarily in the linear sequence. In reality, stages overlap, and change agents sometimes need to cycle back to earlier phases. Furthermore, Cardno (2006) suggests the process of action research that can be

used as beneficial means to bring about genuine change from within a school. The process is cyclic which involves key components of issue identification, reconnaissance, intervention, and evaluation. It is noted that this process “moves through stages of investigating and analysing a problem (reconnaissance), to planning a change strategy and then implementing this (intervention), followed by monitoring the change and reflecting on its effectiveness (evaluation)” (Cardno, 2006, p. 457).

Regardless of the plethora of proposed change methods to make sure that change is successful over the long term, there is common agreement that the real change is not something that could be simply imposed (King, Fowler, & Zeithaml, 2001). It requires effective change managers to have the support of key constituents, working in both formal and informal positions of influence and authority at different levels of the organisation, who assist to build widespread commitment and involvement (Caldwell, 2003; Fullan, 2003; Graetz et al., 2011; Schein, 2010). It indeed requires effective change managers to keep in mind the key constituents of change that cover sound preparation, a clear defined and accepted focus for change, inclusive planning for implementation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of change implementation (Cardno, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Piggot-Irvine, 2002; G Scott, 1999).

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have reviewed four major literature themes. Part one commenced with a critical review of the concepts of middle management, the role of academic middle managers in HE and in change management. Part two examined the role of leadership in change management while part three examined and discussed organisational culture in times of change. The final part critically reviewed the context of organisational change, perspectives towards change, change capabilities, and approaches to managing organisational change.

This review of literature pertaining to the research topic assisted the researcher with identification of current issues to frame the research questions and to select the research method.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter begins briefly with an overview of educational research, research methodology, epistemology, ontology and research paradigms. Key aspects of qualitative and quantitative research approaches are discussed and the rationale for choosing a qualitative research methodology is justified. The two data collection methods, the 'semi-structured interview' and the 'open-ended questionnaire' are discussed in relation to relevant literature. Key issues associated with appropriateness of choice and sampling are explained and strategies for data analysis are identified and discussed. Particular emphasis is given to how the aspects of validity, reliability and triangulation were strengthened. Lastly, ethical issues are considered with the discussion focused on how these issues are addressed within the context of this research.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

##### **Overview of educational research**

According to De Lansheere (1997), educational research emerged prior to 1900 with the deductive empirical research paradigm. This paradigm is associated with normative or positive approaches to empirical research. De Lansheere reports that after 1900 the study of educational problems focused on social and human research. The contrasting social science qualitative approach has emerged during the last three or four decades with interpretive or anti-positivist approaches to research (Creswell, 2002). Educational research is conducted in educational settings and may relate itself to an individual, a group, or an organisation. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) note that educational research is concerned with "the systematic and scholarly application of the principles of a science of behaviour to the problems of teaching and learning within education and to the clarification of issues having direct or indirect bearing on these concepts" (p. 1).

Educational research is multi-disciplinary as it draws on many disciplines making educational studies exciting and challenging (Coleman & Briggs, 2002). In light of this, educational research has absorbed several competing views of the social sciences; it is ultimately concerned with not only enhancing educational practice but also extending knowledge within research traditions and approaches (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). It is further revealed that educational research does not only include a body of knowledge drawn from many disciplines, but also “involves instruction in the processes by which knowledge is acquired, propagated and used to influence change in the thinking of individual persons as well as change in the structures of society through social action” (Keeves, 1997, p. 277). Husen (1997) shares a similar view that the ultimate purpose of knowledge arrived at in educational research is “to provide a basis for action” (p. 20). Thus, when knowledge and prevailing world view shape research behaviour, they form a research paradigm (Husen, 1997; Keeves, 1997).

### **Research methodology**

Research methodology may be referred to the process or plan of action that a researcher uses to link methods to outcomes when studying theoretical arguments of the research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2003; Coleman & Briggs, 2002). While Leedy (1997) describes methodology as a process through which the researcher attempts to “achieve systematically and with the support of data the answer to a question, the resolution of a problem, or a greater understanding of a phenomenon” (p. 5), Burns (1994) considers research methodology as a systematic approach to problem solving that includes ongoing collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Davidson and Tolich (1999) further add that “when we talk about methodology, what we are really talking about is a certain order of philosophical commitment” (pp. 25-26). Methodology is important as it determines the approaches, methods, and strategies to be employed by the researcher (Creswell, 2002).

A consideration of any methodological approaches and data collection methods should primarily consider the epistemological and ontological understandings that underpin them. Epistemology is seen as the philosophical theory of knowledge that seeks to define knowledge, distinguish its principle varieties, identify its sources, and establish its limits; it is “the branch that deals with how we know what we know” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 25). The authors further state that research paradigms explain a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions which merge to “describe an entire way of looking at the world” (p. 26). Epistemology involves the communication of our assumptions; it is not only how our knowledge is acquired, but also how “it is communicated to others” (Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007, p. 7). Cohen et al. (2007) explain that “how one aligns oneself in the particular debate profoundly affects how one will go about uncovering knowledge of social behaviour” (p.7). Bryman (2008) adds to the aspect of epistemology that “an epistemological issue concerns the question of what is or should be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline” (p.13).

Epistemology is inseparably embedded and built upon our ontological assumptions that are associated with the questions about “what does, or can exist in the world” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 24). The authors maintain that different cultures and sub-cultures often have different beliefs. The differences in beliefs about what actual reality is can affect the way one perceives and engages in situations (Cohen et al., 2007). This research is concerned with perceptions of successful change management from two different groups of individuals, senior and academic middle managers in a Lao higher education institution; it took the epistemological position of interpretivism. While groups of individuals may have similar positions, they are unlikely to be identical (Cohen et al., 2007). Each individual may bring their own set of beliefs to a particular context, their ontological and epistemological understandings. In order to fully understand, analyse, and thereby facilitate improvement in any given situation, an individual must be concerned with “an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world” (Cohen et al., 2007. p. 8). Thus, “all research makes some kinds of assumption about issues such as what things

there are in the world, how we can know certain things, and what counts as legitimate knowledge” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 25).

### **Research paradigms**

Research paradigms are described as methodological approaches. According to Davidson and Tolich (2003), the term “paradigm is used in social science to describe an entire way of looking at the world” (p. 26). Neuman (2003) puts forward that a paradigm is “a basic orientation to theory and research” (p.70). The paradigm has a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions, and these assumptions relate to what the world is made of and how it works (Davidson & Tolich, 2003; Neuman, 2003). There are two main contrasting paradigms, ‘positivism’ and ‘interpretivism’. As noted by Bryman (2008), positivism is embedded in the epistemological belief that “only phenomena and hence knowledge confirmed by the senses can genuinely be warranted as knowledge” (p.13). Therefore, reality is seen as objective. In light of this, Davidson and Tolich (2003) clarify that social reality can be studied through its component and individual parts.

Researchers with a positivist perspective are more likely to emphasise the ‘proving of theory’ and realise that social science should be studied through the “application of the methods of the natural science” (Bryman, 2008, p. 13). In contrast, interpretivism is referred to as the interpretive approach embraces the idea that the whole is more than the sum of the parts (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Neuman (2003) adds to this aspect that an interpretive approach is the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of individuals in natural settings in order to understand and interpret how individuals create and maintain their social worlds. It claims knowledge through a set of assumptions used by researchers to understand the world in which individuals work and live (Creswell, 2002). Participants, hence, cannot be studied and meaning gained separate to the context of any given situation (Cohen et al., 2007). This study, thus, is suited to the interpretive approach as it

seeks perceptions of success from individual senior and academic middle managers towards change management, and perceptions of academic middle managers' roles in managing change in a particular context where these individuals work (Creswell, 2002), and how they maintain their roles in managing change (Neuman, 2003).

### **Qualitative and quantitative approach**

Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, thus qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings which is attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative approaches place an emphasis on the process and meaning that underlie various behaviour patterns that are not measured in quantity, intensity or frequency (Neuman, 2003). Instead, the emphasis is on the use of words to give meaning to personal experience rather than numbers (Coleman & Briggs, 2002). In contrast, quantitative research exhibits a view of the relationship between theory and research as deductive and a predilection for a natural science approach and as having an objectivist conception of social reality (Bryman, 2008). Quantitative approaches test scientific hypothesis statements rather than understanding the human environment and their behaviours (Bell, 2007; Denscombe, 1998). It uses a rational, linear method of combining deductive logic with precise empirical measurement (Neuman, 2003). Qualitative research, on the other hand, applies ethnographies, grounded theory, case studies, and phenomenological and narrative research to show that the research findings are individual as they are based on lived realities (Creswell, 2002). More specifically, qualitative research deals with the socially constructed nature of reality and looks closely at relationships between the researcher and the study and the situational constraints (Neuman, 2003).

## **Rationale for a qualitative approach to research**

This research is best suited to a qualitative approach as it focuses on the subjective perspectives or perceptions of senior managers and academic middle managers towards successful change management in Lao higher education. As Bryman (2008) notes, the qualitative approach facilitates a researcher's understanding of actions based on subjective, values inherent realities, and in this case those experienced by senior managers and academic middle managers within their own particular context of managing organisational change in a Lao tertiary institution.

The aims of this research were to investigate the role of academic middle managers in relation to change management, perceptions of successful change management from both senior and academic middle managers and the challenges academic middle managers faced in managing change. The use of a qualitative methodology in this instance was congruent with the aims and objectives of the research project and was supported by Bryman (2004), who postulates that many qualitative researchers express a commitment to viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the individuals that they study. This would have the benefit of bringing to light how existing academic middle managers go about executing their roles within the context of change management in higher education.

In order to gather rich, in depth data, a qualitative method was appropriate in order to closely examine their individual situations (Coleman & Briggs, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Cohen et al. (2011) state that qualitative research "provides an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours" (p. 219). It allows voices to participants, and probes issues underpinning the surface of presenting behaviours and actions (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 219). Besides that, Creswell (2002) notes that the choice of approach also depends on "whether the intent is to specify the type of information to be

collected in advance of the study or to allow it to emerge from participants in the project” (p.17). The emphasis implicit in the research questions posed for this study was on developing and seeking an understanding of the perspectives of senior and academic middle managers who are close to the issues of change management in their organisation.

The qualitative research methodology has its core aspect in that the whole is more important than the sum of the parts (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). This approach claims knowledge through a set of assumptions used by researchers to understand the world in which individuals work and live (Creswell, 2002). As Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). This allowed me to closely investigate the role of academic middle managers in managing change in a Lao higher education institution. It enabled me in the real setting of the higher education institution to talk to both senior and middle managers who are actually carrying out their role as change agents. This approach further aided me to collect rich, in-depth data from the senior and academic middle managers in order to investigate their individual situations, experiences and perspectives as reported by them (Coleman & Briggs, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The research is an attempt to develop or add to the discourse by which theory might be regenerated or further developed. As Bryman (2008) emphasises, “generation of theories” rather than “the testing of theories that are specified at the outset” (p. 15) is the domain of qualitative research. Qualitative research places an emphasis on the process and meaning that underlie various behaviour patterns which are not measured in quantity, intensity or frequency (Bryman, 2008). Instead, the emphasis is on the use of words to give meaning to personal experience rather than numbers (Bryman, 2008; Coleman & Briggs, 2002).

Collins (1998) further asserts that researchers who are “committed to making a real contribution to the study and practice of change and its management” should employ qualitative methodology that highlight relevant “issues surrounding change, and the attitudes and behaviours of individuals” involved in it (p.190). These have an alignment with the research questions posed for my study as they seek information from individual senior and middle managers in relation to their perspectives, roles and challenges in managing successful organisational change. Therefore, the qualitative research methodology is appropriate for this study in order to capture the perspectives of both groups of senior managers and academic middle managers in order to explore how they interpret the middle managers’ roles in change management, and the challenges in managing change. As Lincoln and Guba (2005) stress, with qualitative research, the researcher is able to permit readers to hear the exact words of the research participants.

### **SAMPLE SELECTION**

As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2003) noted, the quality of research is dependent on both its use of an appropriate tool and the “suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted” (p. 92). As the overall aim of this research was not to be generalisable but rather to look in depth at a specific aspect of change management in a tertiary institution the sample needed to be purposive. The scope of this research focused on the academic middle manager’s roles in managing change, the perspectives, and the challenges of managing organisational change in a Lao higher education institution.

The research obtained information in one Lao tertiary education institution located in the researcher’s hometown. The criteria for the selection of the participants for this research were respondents who were a senior manager or an academic middle manager in Lao higher education. The majority of senior managers who participated in the interview were mainly faculty deans; whereas, academic middle managers who completed the open-ended questionnaire were mainly considered as heads of departments. Permission was gained after several



contacts with the Lao higher education institution in order to conduct the interviews and administer the open-ended questionnaires in five different faculties. Participation in this research study was voluntary and informed consent was gained from deans and then from the participants.

The data collection for this research was gathered in Laos, a country in which not many local people speak English so the interviews and open-ended questionnaires were presented in two languages, Lao and English. The senior managers and academic middle managers, heads of departments were initially contacted by telephone and email in order to seek approval to take part in this research study. The senior managers and heads of departments in five different faculties in a Lao higher education institution agreed to participate. Five interviews with senior managers were conducted and forty copies of open-ended questionnaires were distributed in the faculties.

### **Semi-structured interview sample**

Five senior managers were selected from five faculties within a Lao tertiary education institution for the semi-structured interview. The Deans or Associated Deans in each of the five faculties were interviewed in July and August 2012. The semi-structured interviews were an appropriate method in which access to this knowledge and were chosen as a means to achieve the aims of this research. Interviews were conducted faculty by faculty in order to ensure the characteristics of each were maintained. The interviews ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes in duration. The interviews were conducted around three topics together with guided questions. The topics were concerned with the role of academic middle managers in relation to managing change, perspectives or perceptions of successful change management, and the challenges in managing change in a Lao higher education institution. As Bryman (2008) and Denscombe (2007) suggest, the use of the interview topics is seen as allowing greater flexibility in the interview process.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed as Bouma (1998) and Cohen et al. (2011) recommend that interviews should be recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were then sent out to participants so that they had the opportunity to verify them (Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007). Selection of the sample is based on the purposive sampling strategy since the overall aim of this research is to look in depth at specific aspect of change management in a tertiary institution. As Neuman (2003) argues, one of the aspects of purposive sample is that it exists when a researcher wants to target particular personnel for an in-depth investigation. "The purpose is less to generalise to a larger population than it is to gain deeper understanding of types" (Neuman, 2003, p. 213).

### **Open-ended questionnaire sample**

Five faculties were approached to participate in the open-ended questionnaire and forty academic middle managers or heads of departments were selected. The selection of the participants is based on a non-probability sample which several authors (Bryman, 2008; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Fox, Martin, & Green, 2007; Neuman, 2003) emphasise that a non-probability sample is increasingly seen as a common sampling strategy applied by qualitative researchers in social research. This type of sampling strategy, by its nature, derives from "the researcher targeting a particular group, in the full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population; it simply represents itself, and it is frequently the case in small scale research" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 102). Flick (1998) further supports that for qualitative researchers "it is their relevance to the research topic rather than their representativeness which determines the way in which the people to be studied are selected" (p. 41).

The open-ended questionnaire was distributed to academic middle managers in order to seek in-depth answers relating to their views and perspectives towards change management. As Yin (2003) argues, the respondents to the questionnaire are seen as "participant observers" (p. 93). Thus, the questionnaire in this study gathered data from middle managers as if it were the eyes of a single participant

observer (Yin, 2003). The open-ended questionnaire was generally completed in thirty to forty-five minutes. A self-completed questionnaire has its advantages in terms of less cost, quickness of administering and conveniences for respondents. Bryman (2008) confirms that “the questionnaires are more convenient for respondents because they can complete a questionnaire when they want and at the speed that they want to go” (p. 218). Since higher education institutions are extremely busy organisations, the open-ended questionnaires are therefore more convenient to administer and cause less disruption for participants (Bell, 2007; Bryman, 2008). It was anticipated that with the initial contact with the five deans and their secretaries to assist with the distribution of the questionnaires, there should be a higher response rate.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

Research methods can be defined as the tools, instruments, techniques, procedures or approaches adopted by the researcher to collect data for interpretation, explanation and prediction (Cohen et al., 2011; Coleman & Briggs, 2002; Creswell, 2002). Two research methods employed in this study were semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires.

### **Semi-structured interview**

The semi-structured interview was selected as an appropriate method to collect data from senior managers’ perspectives, experiences, opinions and interpretations of the academic middle manager’s role in managing change. The interview is probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research; it has different forms, including a focus group interview, a structured and a semi-structured interview, and an unstructured interview (Bryman, 2008). The interview as noted by Cardno (2003), is the richest source of data. It is seen as “a two person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 269).

The semi-structured interview was selected as my first method of data collection in order to gather the data from the senior managers regarding their perspectives

of successful change management, the challenges in change management and their interpretation of the academic middle manager's role in managing change. The semi-structured interview is aligned closely with the unstructured interview in terms of purpose although it is a mixture of both structured and unstructured interview (Hinds, 2000). Denscombe (2007) claims that the semi-structured interview has a greater set structure in that there is a set of topics and questions; it is also "flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered" (p.176). The interviewer allows the interviewee to generate ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised . In addition, the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule (Denscombe, 2007); whereas, the sequence of questions can be varied, and "the interviewer usually has some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies" (Bryman, 2008, p.196).

Neuman (2003) and Check and Chutt (2012), furthermore, emphasise that the response rates can be high in employing this method and the interviewer can ask all types of questions. Check and Chutt (2012) put forward that "respondents' interpretation of questions can be probed and clarified, therefore the interviewer is well placed to gain a full understanding of what the respondents want to say" (p.174). By its very purpose and nature, this method then was selected as 'best fit for purpose'. This method would allow me as a researcher a structure to guide the work while at the same time still facilitating a degree of freedom for the interviewee to introduce aspects that I may be unaware of and did not anticipate (Check & Schutt, 2012; Denscombe, 2007; Neuman, 2003). Overall, the interview used in this study was designed for senior managers in a Lao tertiary education institution to provide their perspectives of successful change management and their perceptions of academic middle managers' roles in managing change (see Appendix 1, p.104-105).

## **Open-ended questionnaire**

The second method of data collection in this study was an open-ended questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaire is seen as a form of written interview that relies on open-ended questions and a structured format involving predefined questions that are covered in turn (Hinds, 2000). A number of authors emphasise that the open-ended questionnaire is a widely used and useful instrument for collecting data, providing structures, being able to be administered without the presence of the researcher, and often being comparatively straightforward to analyse (Cohen et al., 2007; Denscombe, 1998; Hinds, 2000). Hinds (2000) further states that an open-ended questionnaire is “concerned with gathering data from, usually, a large number of respondents, and the data gathered usually focuses on the views, ideas and attitudes” (p. 41). As the aims of this study is concerned with the views or perspectives of senior and academic middle managers towards successful change management; towards the roles of middle managers, and challenges in managing change, this research method, open-ended questionnaire is considered appropriate in this research. Bryman (2008) and Neuman (2003) suggest that open-ended questionnaire has advantages as the respondents can answer in their own terms; unusual responses can be derived; questions do not suggest answers; and, therefore new knowledge and understanding of issues can be tapped into and they are useful in exploring new issues.

There are key principles to be considered when designing the questionnaire. Researchers point to the importance of clear appearance or clear presentation of the questionnaire as well the types of questions to be asked as ones of the critical principles (Bell, 2007; Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2000; Neuman, 2003). This is to ensure that the questionnaire has a layout easy on the eye, and facilitates the answering of all questions that are relevant to the research questions as emphasised by Bryman (2008). Cohen et al. (2000) add that the questionnaire must look easy, attractive and interesting, rather than complicated. Thus, the questions for the data gathering in this study were open and allowed the

respondents to write down their views, ideas, perspectives and suggestions about the questions posed (Hinds, 2000; Neuman, 2003).

Likewise, careful wording of the questions was adhered to, paying specific attention to creating concise and clear questions that related to my research questions, while trying to gain information from several perspectives from academic middle managers. As noted by many researchers, the questionnaire must have clear instructions and precise wording where the respondents are introduced to the purposes of each section of the questionnaire, so that they can be involved in it (Bell, 2007; Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007). It is therefore important for the researcher to avoid confusion or ambiguity and keep respondents' perspectives in mind when designing the questionnaire (Bell, 2007; Hinds, 2000; Neuman, 2003). The open-ended questionnaire for this research study was designed for academic middle managers, their roles in managing change, the perspectives of success and the challenges in managing change in Lao higher education in order to meet the primary objectives of the research (see Appendix 2, p.106-111).

Furthermore, there are important issues to be considered before piloting the questionnaire. These issues are concerned with checking the clarity of the questionnaire items, eliminating difficulties in wording, gaining feedback on response categories for both closed and open-ended questions, and checking time for completing the questionnaire whether the questionnaire is too long or too short (Bell, 2007; Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007; Hinds, 2000; Neuman, 2003). It is worth to point out that getting feedback from the respondents or from relevant audiences is of paramount importance because this will ensure that the respondents do not misunderstand or make the least mistakes of the questions that the researcher asks (Bell, 2007; Hinds, 2000).

Therefore, "pre-testing or piloting the questionnaire will help reveal any problematic areas" (Hinds, 2000, p. 46). In this study, I pre-tested or piloted the

open-ended questionnaire on three academic middle managers who were considered as a similar group to my main population within my place of employment in order to ensure that the questions gained desired responses and to see if any issues were problematic. Indeed, minor suggestions were made and I adjusted the questions accordingly. As suggested by Bell (2007), “all data-collecting instruments have to be piloted” (p. 232), although the researcher may have consulted everybody about everything, “but it is only when a group of similar to your main population completes your questionnaire and provides feedback that you know for sure that all is well” (p. 232).

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis of qualitative research involves multiple strategies and requires a systematic and explicit approach. According to Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland (2006), data analysis involves a “transformative process in which raw data are turned into findings or results” (p. 36). They go on to determine four defining characteristics of qualitative data analysis. The process is primarily inductive rather than deductive, the researcher is the central key element, the process is highly interactive between research and data, and it is time consuming. In addition, Bryman (2008) reveals that data analysis occurs in tandem with data collection so that the process is recursive and dynamic; whereas, Miles and Huberman (1994) point out that data analysis is described pragmatically as containing three interrelated process concerning with data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Neuman (2003) further considers data analysis as “examining, sorting, categorizing, evaluating, comparing, synthesizing, and contemplating the coded data as well as reviewing the raw and recorded data” (p. 448).

### **Semi-structured interview analysis**

Thematic coding identified as a central strategy by Denscombe (2007), Gubrium and Holstein (2002), Neuman (2003) and Lofland et al. (2006), was used to analyse the data from both the semi-structured interviews and the open-ended

questionnaires in order to identify and analyse common themes. Thematic coding can be used with several types of data that focuses on specific acts, conversations, reports, behaviours, interactions, activities, contexts, settings, conditions, actions, strategies, or practices (Cohen et al., 2011).

The interview data that was gathered from five senior managers in the five faculties in a Lao tertiary education institution was audiotaped and transcribed before being identified and transformed into categories. According to Bryman (2008), Cohen et al. (2011), Neuman (2003), and Lofland et al. (2006), qualitative analysis essentially begin with a series of codes which the essence of coding is the process of sorting the data into various categories. Also, Hannay and Ross (1999) note that the common elements are identified as the basis of the coding system and are applied to all interview data and questionnaires so that they reflect the purpose of the research. Numerical and coloured coding of the participants (senior managers) in the interview was also used such as: SM1-SM5. This allowed for ease of administration and assisted to facilitate analysis. Additionally, notes and remarks were initially jotted down once transcripts were first read stressing relevant points of interest and marginal notes were made.

### **Open-ended questionnaire analysis**

The strategy explained in the interview analysis namely, thematic coding were used for the open-ended questionnaire. The data from the open-ended questionnaires, which was collected from 40 academic middle managers in the five faculties of a Lao higher education institution, was formatted and coded as to being used to analyse the main themes that address the research questions. I also numerically coded individually the academic middle manager's each response such as: AMM1-AMM40. I identified common themes in the data by looking at and colour-highlighting repetition of words, similarities or differences between the academic middle managers' responses. These suggestions from Ryan and Bernard (2003) provide a good starting point for a more thorough data analysis. Each answer or comment from the open-ended questionnaires was



read several times and emerging themes were colour coded. The thematic coding involved making decisions about how to classify or categorise particular pieces of data, creating coding reliability was a crucial part of the process; therefore, supervisors were consulted over such decisions to enhance the reliability of the coding. In order for this research to be rigorous issues of both validity and reliability were addressed.

## **VALIDITY OF RESULTS**

### **Validity**

The strength of a piece of research can be dependent upon the researcher being able to demonstrate its rigour. The rigour is associated with validity and reliability. Validity can be best thought of as the measure of whether “a particular instrument measures what it claims to measure” (Cohen et al., 2007, p.133). According to Davidson and Tolich (2003), validity is considered as “the extent to which a question or variable accurately reflects the concept the researcher is actually looking for” (p. 31). Validity is also seen as a complex issue and requires the researcher to ask whether the questions employed truly measure the concept being researched (Bryman, 2008; Leedy, 1997). Validity is a key to effective research. In order to ensure the validity of both data collection and data analysis, validity can be addressed through authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness, and integrity even though the use of data triangulation can strengthen the credibility and validity of the research (Bryman, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 2005). In this qualitative research, it was the perceptions of successful change management from both senior and academic middle managers, the challenges, and the role experiences in change management faced by academic middle managers in a Lao higher education institution that were investigated through interviews and open-ended questionnaires. In relation to authenticity and credibility issues, this study could be addressed through the recording of the original data and the confidential storage of accurate typescripts (Cohen et al., 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

This study ensured that all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in order to provide participants with opportunity to check for accuracy, and their feedback was requested so that the degree of consistency was maintained. Transcriptions were completed by the interviewer and this facilitated consistency of interpretation and an understanding of voice inflections. Respondent validation was sought from all participants. In brief, validity is critical evidence in establishing and assessing the quality of a research in the qualitative research.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation, according to Bryman (2008), Cardno (2003), Cohen et al. (2011) and Yin (1994), is an important means of ensuring validity in qualitative research. The use of triangulation that involves the use of multiple methods or multiple sources of information to generate data as a validation procedure is a sound way of strengthening the credibility of a study (Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2011). In other words, triangulation is utilised as a check on data due to the careful use of multiple sources can lead to more valid data (Cohen et al., 2011). As posited by Davidson and Tolich (1999), triangulation is to use multiple sources of data to collect evidence. In this research study, the most significant methodological triangulation was to use multiple source of data collection such as semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires from five different faculties and from different groups of respondents.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical considerations are a critical aspect of all research. Bryman (2008) asserts that ethical issues cannot be ignored as they relate to the integrity of a piece of research and of the disciplines that are involved. In this regard, it is important to point to the principles of ethical consideration as Davidson and Tolich (1999) suggest five key principles; namely, do no harm, voluntary participation, informed consent, avoid deceit, and ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, no participants must in any way be adversely affected by participating in this research. While the primacy of ethical conduct has driven the design and

processes of the research, ethical approval for the project as meeting ethical principles is obtained from the Unitech Research Ethics' Committee (UREC, 2009). Also, Cohen et al. (2007) identify that the fundamental principle is that of informed consent. Thus, a formal written request will be made by letter using UREC guidelines to the five faculties in a Lao university in order to gain permission and access.

Several authors emphasise that participants must be informed about the aims of the research and their role involved in the research (Bouma, 1998; Bryman, 2008; Cardno, 2003; Davidson & Tolich, 1999). As posited by Bouma (1998), Bryman (2008) and Cohen et al (2011), participants should be voluntary and kept confidential. In this study, whilst all participants were voluntary and they could withdraw at any time, they were assured that the data and the identity of their institution and faculties were kept confidential. Privacy has been guaranteed by ensuring that all data is kept in a secure place and that access is limited to those who have been disclosed as having access (Bouma, 1998; Cohen et al., 2011). All this information was given in an information letter attached to the open-ended questionnaire. In addition, all interviewees were given an information sheet both before the interview. Copies of this sheet were made available at the beginning of the interview and the researcher verbally explained the purpose and attempted to put the interviewees at ease.

As a researcher conducting research in my home country of Laos where there are a number of ethnic minority groups and tribes, I am aware of and recognise the ongoing effects of ethnic status. As cautioned by Bouma (1998) and Wilkinson (2001), those who conduct a research must be aware of ethnic issues involved in their research. Ethics plays an integral part in educational research and the researcher must ensure that the research is ethical in terms of its design, methods, data analysis, presentation and its conclusions (Wellington, 2000). In this respect, this study did not focus on any ethnic groups or tribes while it merely focused on the aspect of organisational change in the five faculties of a Lao higher education institution. I have a professional obligation to preserve my

participants' anonymity and to ensure that they were not harmed by my research. The participants right to privacy was protected through the provision of confidentiality (Davidson & Tolich, 1999; Wilkinson, 2001).

A further key ethical issue in my research was to gain permission for access into the five faculties that I planned to work with. Key contact persons were the deans of the five faculties whose permission was essential to administer the open-ended questionnaire, and these persons were contacted at the outset. Also, the deans or associate deans were asked for their voluntary approval to participate in five individual interviews by providing them with key information of the research purpose and process, together with an information sheet. The forms of communication involved email, formal writing and telephone. All research must address the issues around 'conflict of interest'. For this reason, although I used my department as the pilot school to pre-test the open-ended questionnaire, no participants from my own department were invited to participate in this research, and as I was on study leave and technically, not an academic staff member for the year, but rather as a scholar-practitioner. There were no conflicts of interest with the five faculties taking part in this research since I had no links with the chosen faculties beyond a professional association. Finally and most importantly, this research project was complied with UREC guidelines and the data collection stage was not proceeded until UREC approval was given (UREC, 2009).

## **Summary**

This chapter has provided a discussion of the complex nature of research in the social science field. It provided an overview of educational research, research methodology and research paradigms. This research drew on an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach. It employed the qualitative data collection methods of semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire with five senior managers and forty academic middle managers accordingly in a Lao tertiary education institution. Explanations of each method have included an examination of its principles, its sample selections and its strengths while the data

analysis related to each method was also discussed. The chapter concluded with the discussions on reliability of results and ethical considerations and how each related to the study.

The following chapter summarises the findings of this study conducted with academic middle managers and senior managers in a Lao higher education institution.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides a summary of the data results and findings gathered from the five faculties of a Lao higher education institution, through semi-structured interviews with five senior managers, and through an open-ended questionnaire with forty academic middle managers. The research design focused on investigating the senior managers and academic middle managers perspectives on change management, their perspectives of successful change management, and the challenges in managing change in a Lao higher education institution.

The data results from both the interview and the open-ended questionnaire have identified and contributed new knowledge on the role of academic middle managers in change management, the successful strategies of change and the challenge for academic middle managers in managing change in the Lao higher education sector. Research findings will be presented in specification to senior managers' perspectives gathered from the interviews, and academic middle managers' perspectives gathered from the open-ended questionnaire respectively.

#### **INTERVIEW RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

##### **Senior managers perspectives**

This part summarised the research findings based on the individual interviews with five senior managers from the five faculties in a Lao higher education institution. The interview participants were simply coded by letters with the number (SM1, SM2, SM3, SM4, SM5), while their faculties were coded with letters (FA, FB, FC, FD, FE) in order to avoid identification. The interviews were associated with the middle managers' roles in managing change, successful change management strategies, and the challenges for academic middle

managers in managing change. The interview questions (see Appendix 1, p.104-105) were designed for faculty deans as senior managers to express their perspectives of the academic middle managers in the context of change management in the Lao higher education sector. The interviews with the senior managers not only assisted the researcher to answer the sub-questions but also to find out their perspectives within the context of their respective faculty.

### **Research question one**

#### **What is the role of academic middle managers in Lao higher education in relation to managing organisational change?**

Three main issues associated with an academic middle manager's role in change management are discussed: taking initiatives to lead change, representing the senior management, and the implementation of strategies and policies into practice.

#### **Taking initiatives to lead change**

The issue of taking initiatives to lead change, or acting as a leader was seen as the first key role of academic middle managers in managing change. The five senior managers from the five faculties expressed the view that academic middle managers play an important role in leading and supervising academic staff and teachers to manage change and academic tasks in the department. The following comments convey senior managers' thoughts about their academic middle managers:

*The heads of departments have the most important roles in developing and carrying out academic activities. They must take initiative, not to wait for the commands... They work closely with the teachers, lead the teachers to manage change,... in the department (SM1).*

*Indeed, at the department level, HoDs carry out their role as a leader to work collaboratively with the deans and teachers to manage change in line with the change policy of the university (SM2).*

Furthermore, it was added that the HoDs do not only perform their role as a leader of change, but also as a supervisor of multi-tasks in the department as another two senior managers reported:

*Our HoDs have a role to lead academic staff members and teachers in the department in relation to curriculum organisation, practice and improvement with an assignment from the deans...In this, they must take an initiative to supervise and lead the teachers to operate those tasks (SM3).*

*Speaking of HoDs, in fact, they are the leader and the supervisor who lead and supervise their team members in all areas of work, such as: human resources, curriculum...and leading change in the department (SM4).*

### **Representing the senior management**

This issue emerged as the second issue associated with the role of the academic middle manager in the context of change. Four out of five senior managers raised the issue of representation when they perceived the HoDs as a representative for them. Two senior managers stated that:

*...Besides that, they are the key person of change because they conduct their roles for the senior management; represent us and the bottom level (SM1).*

*Now they do what? Besides leading and supervising on academic management tasks, HoDs must be a representative for the deans. They must identify and analyse what changes are needed to...in the department in order to keep pace with the change (SM2).*



Other two senior managers also commented that academic middle managers play a pivotal role in managing the delivery of the core academic curriculum, and bringing a great success to the faculty:

*So, we are also the one who set the roles and responsibilities for them—specifically, they are our representative, our linker of all... because of what? because all of the products that we get are from the departments, so we see the HoDs as our most important representative. We cannot leave them out (SM4).*

*Moreover, they are our representative—from being a representative, they will be a real leader in their level... to ensure that changes are launched and operated effectively in their specific department. For example, in the Department of Geography, History,...and Tourism Management. Several achievements come from the departments (SM5).*

### **Interpretation of strategies and policies into practices**

Interpreting the senior management strategies into practices is found as another issue concerned with the role of academic middle managers in managing change in the Lao higher education institution. Three out of five senior managers revealed that strategies or policies are made at the faculty senior management level, or from the university level; whereas, the key implementers are at the department level. Two senior managers expressed that:

*We make strategic plans and set up policies, and provide directions... What the HoDs do, their role is to translate and promulgate those strategies into action in their department...they organise a meeting for discussion with the staff and teachers (SM5).*

*Our HoDs analyse,...and take strategies of the faculty to interpret and practise in the department...it's a part of their duty to operate those things effectively in the department with their team members (SM4).*

## **Research question two**

### **What is the perspective of Lao higher education senior managers towards successful change management?**

Two important issues were identified: planning, leading and evaluating, and change knowledge and personal capabilities emerged from the interview data associated with successful change management.

#### **Planning, leading, implementing and evaluating**

The issue of planning, implementing, leading and evaluating was seen as a major issue indicated in senior managers' perspectives of successful change management. All the five senior managers from five faculties expressed the view that successful change management came from several factors, in this, they stressed the need for creating a plan, an implementation of the plan, a revision and an evaluation of the change practices regularly.

*In fact, successful change management is a demanding and inevitable thing that managers in all levels must think about. We must think that things need to be improved and changed all the time. If we do not think about this, we will not catch up with the change... Managers must understand and know about change, they must plan, implement and lead. At the same time, they must know how to review and evaluate what has been practised as to see if it really works or not (SM1).*

*...there must be a plan of work and a plan of budget. We often say that we will change this or change that, but ultimately we don't get anything because we don't have a plan, a budget and our staff members' thoughts are not clear. So, planning and thoughts of staff members must go together (SM2).*

One senior manager commented during the interview that successful change should be in line with the change policy of the university, and leaders in the faculty need to work together to make a strategic plan for change:

*Successful change is dependent on several factors...especially, managers must study how change can be suited in the new change policy of the university. This is important!...The deans, the vice deans and the heads of departments have to work together to establish a strategic plan...After that, we have to make an operational plan... We think that good planning is one thing that can help us move forward to successful change in our faculty (SM 3).*

While another two senior managers stressed that success was not only concerned with planning, but it had to be taken seriously to put the plan into actions and to hold a meeting to discuss and review the progress regularly:

*To manage change successfully in the faculty we must have good strategic plans and interpret them into agendas and actions in various departments in our faculty. We must organise a meeting to discuss, to get feedback, and to review regularly in order to adjust and improve what we have practised (SM4).*

*In successful change, we must take it seriously and pay a close attention to it... mostly, we apply the change policy of the University to interpret it into our own plan in the faculty. This is to create our strategic plan regarding what changes we need to make in our faculty. Planning must come first (SM5).*

### **Change knowledge and personal capabilities**

More than half of the senior managers noted the importance for leaders to have change knowledge and personal capabilities to manage the change. They

suggested that leaders should have sound knowledge of change if they wanted to manage change effectively:

*...At the same time, we must have sound knowledge of change and be competent, while knowing your staff members' capabilities and their potentials is also important in managing change effectively (SM3).*

*So in order to manage change effectively, one thing that we need to have is change knowledge... what do you know about change and what should you do about it?; how will you plan and how to control it?... If you don't know, you don't know what do...you don't know how to lead your staff to manage change...(SM1).*

The findings also showed that effective change managers must have a capability for building harmony, transparency and willingness among their team members and staff members, as one senior manager said:

*The managers themselves must be competent, build internal harmony. The second aspect is that they must be willing and transparent to staff members in their team, or else they will lose trust and face with resistance (SM4).*

### **Research question three**

#### **Why do academic middle managers in Lao higher education face challenges in managing change?**

The findings revealed that the challenges of managing change in a Lao tertiary institution existed in two levels, faculty level and departmental. The senior managers in the interviews were asked about challenges in managing change at the faculty level and at the departmental level which is related to the challenge that their academic middle managers may face. At the faculty level, it was indicated that the issues of inadequate resources and changing the culture emerged as two main issues of challenges. Meanwhile, at the departmental level the issue of carrying out the role effectively to interpret strategies and policies into

practices, and change knowledge and capabilities emerged as the challenges for academic middle managers. The identified issues will be presented at faculty and at departmental levels.

## **FACULTY LEVEL**

### **Inadequate resources**

Inadequate resources occurred as one of the challenges in managing change at this level; within this, the majority of the interviewed participants raised the issues of inadequate human resources and insufficient budget during the interviews. A senior manager from one faculty (FC) reported that his faculty was a newly established faculty that lacked qualified staff to contribute to the management and the development of change programmes:

*We have many challenges in the faculty. Why do I say so? It is because our faculty is a new-established faculty, and one of the vital challenges is inadequate resource, human resources... We started this faculty from zero in terms of human resources. From the beginning, we were only a centre with only four key persons... now we have become a faculty in our ninth year, we need many qualified academic staff members to contribute to our several change programmes (SM 3).*

The senior manager from another faculty (FA) developed an aspect of this issue when he commented on the challenge in his faculty in terms of inadequate human resources and inadequate budget. He noted that supportive factors were required to manage change in the faculty; while at the same time, he emphasised the budget as the major challenge:

*As I have said we need to have four supportive factors in order to manage a change program in our faculty, such as: human resources, budget, tools and information. Although we have human resources to conduct any change programmes..., we still lack the budget to launch those*

*programmes, we now still face a big challenge to manage change in the faculty (SM 1).*

### **Changing the culture**

While a majority of the senior managers saw inadequate resources as the challenge, the issue of changing culture emerged from the data. It was reported by a senior manager in the interview that culture was not created in a short time: as it has been a long established culture. She stated that this would have an effect when there was a change:

*I think culture is the most challenge of managing change in our faculty because culture is not created for a short time—we have made it in our faculty for a very long time; our teachers have made it for quite a long time. ... we have to change because we want to develop our faculty, and to keep pace with the current and the future situations (SM4).*

Another senior manager expressed that the big challenge of change management in his faculty was to change staff members' thoughts and culture in order to make them to be one. He stated that the teachers in the faculty graduated from different countries in which they might have their own culture from where they were taught and studied:

*The challenges of change management in our faculty is changing the culture and uniting a variety of knowledge, points of views from our teachers who graduated from many countries in order to compile these varieties to be one. Of course, the teachers may have their own culture of learning and teaching from where they have been taught and studied, so gathering and changing their own culture to be one in our context in order to achieve our faculty goal is the biggest challenge for us (SM2).*

## DEPARTMENTAL LEVEL

### Translating policies into practices

The issue of translating policies into practices occurred from the interview data as the main challenge for academic middle managers when managing change. Three out of five senior managers from the five faculties similarly pointed out the fact that HoDs faced challenges as they carried out their role in interpreting policies from the faculty senior management team into practices within their department. One senior manager (FC) noted that the challenge was not only associated with policy interpretation, but also with HoDs' capabilities and talent as well, as he stated:

*Mostly, what we can see is an interpretation of a new policy into practice at their level because many policies are made by the faculty top management. The HoDs are to put those policies into practice. It also depends on their capability, their personal talents and techniques to interpret and put them into practice. If they can do well, their staff members will also have a high consensus (SM3).*

Whereas, another senior manager (FD) added to this issue that HoDs had to ensure that their staff members clearly understand the policies while understanding any new change policies could not occur right away, it needed time to do that:

*At the departmental level if we look closely at the challenge for the middle managers, it is when they practice a new policy because they have to make their staff members understand the new policy without any resistances. Understanding the policy can't be happened immediately. They must take time to do that (SM4).*

Furthermore, the senior manager (FE) put forward that HoDs had to carry out their role of translating policies; while at the same time, they had to deal with conflicts when managing change in the department:

*Generally, it is about police practices. Based on their role, the middle managers are those who convey a policy to practice in the department. They have to deal with conflict, or resistances that can be occurred if they misinterpret. So, these can be their challenge to manage changes in the department (SM 5).*

### **Change knowledge and capabilities**

Knowledge and capabilities of change did not only emerge as a contribution to a success of change, but they emerged as a challenge to academic middle managers in managing change. When the senior managers were asked to talk about the challenges to HoDs, some of them noted that knowledge of change or capabilities in a specific field seemed to be a challenge for HoDs since they needed to have knowledge of change and capabilities if they wanted to manage change effectively:

*In fact, we encourage and support them to be creative and innovative in order to carry out their role in managing change. What we want to emphasise here is that their own capabilities and knowledge of change are the challenge for them. They need to have sufficient capabilities of change if they want to manage it effectively (SM1).*

*For the heads of departments, I think that the challenge for them is their role itself because they have to educate and teach others; while at the same time, they have to upgrade their knowledge, and capabilities of specific field if they want to manage well (SM2).*



## **OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

### **Academic middle managers perspectives**

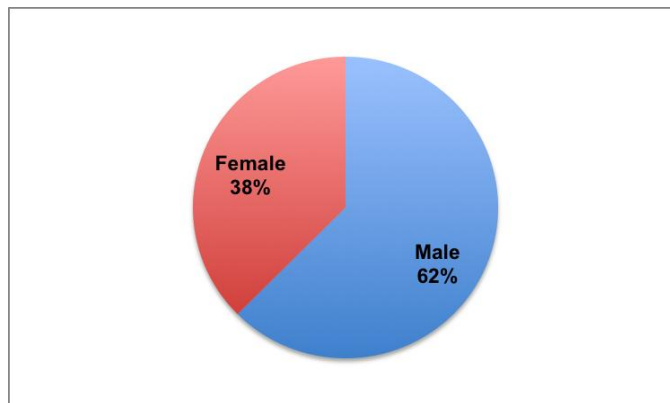
This part summarised the research results and findings from the open-ended questionnaire completed by forty academic middle managers (heads of departments) from five faculties in a Lao higher education institution. A total forty copies of the open-ended questionnaire were distributed in the five faculties (eight copies per faculty) by the researcher with the assistance of the contact person in each faculty. Of the study population, thirty-two out of forty participants in participating faculties completed and returned the open-ended questionnaire (n=32); whereas, there was a high returning rate of 80 percent.

The designed open-ended questionnaire, included eleven questions, was divided into three sections; namely demographic information, academic middle manager's role and perspectives toward change management, and the challenges in managing change. This open-ended questionnaire (see, pp.106-111) was intended to gather information from the academic middle managers on their perceptions of successful change management, their roles in managing change, and the challenges they faced when managing change in a Lao higher education institution.

### **Demographic information on academic middle managers**

The data from the chart below (figure 4.1) indicated that the number of males who were employed as an academic middle manager in Lao higher education was higher than the number of the female academic middle managers. While sixty-two percent of males were academic middle managers, thirty-eight percent of the respondents were females. Although female participants were less than males in this study, it did not affect the response rate since this study did not focus on gender, but rather their roles in change management, their perspectives of success, and the challenges they faced.

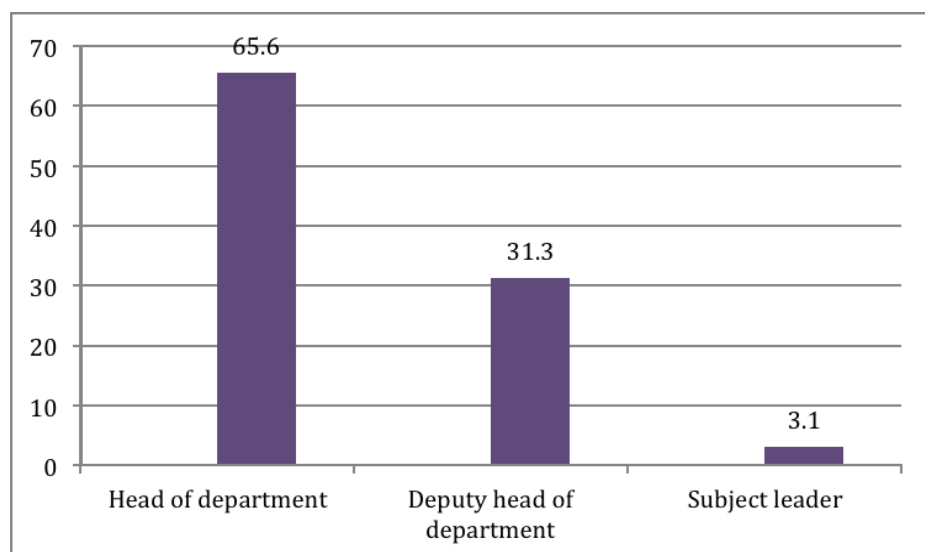
Figure 4.1: Gender ratio of participants



### Positions

The participants in this study defined themselves in the open-ended questionnaire as an academic middle manager with both teaching and managerial responsibilities. Most of the academic middle managers, 65.6 % were employed as a head of department while 31.3 % were holding a position as a deputy head of department. Another interesting point to be noted was that only one person of the respondents was head of a curriculum or subject leader (see figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Position classification of academic middle managers



## **Middle management experience**

The majority of the participants to the open-ended questionnaire who were employed as an academic middle manager had more than ten years of experience. It was clear from the data that whereas there were 40.6 % of the academic middle managers who had experience of more than ten years in the middle management position, 21.9 % of the respondents had five to ten years experience, and 37.5 % of the middle managers had less than five years experience in a Lao higher education institution (see table 4.4).

Table 4.1: Years of employment as an academic middle manager

<b>Years of being employed as an academic middle manager</b>	
<b>Number of years</b>	<b>Middle managers' response (%)</b>
More than 10 years	40.6 %
5-10 years	21.9 %
Less than 5 years	37.5 %
Total	100%

## **Research question one**

### **What is the role of academic middle managers in Lao higher education in relation to managing organisational change?**

The research findings from the open-ended questionnaire indicated that the issues of leading and supervising, and interpreting policies and plans into practice emerged as two main issues in relation to an academic middle manager's role in managing change in a Lao higher education institution.

## **Leading and supervising**

Twenty-five out of thirty-two academic middle managers from the five faculties indicated that leading and supervising were a critical aspect of their role in managing change in their department. In this context, they saw themselves as both a leader and a supervisor of their academic staff in multi-spheres of academic tasks and change management in their department. The following comments conveyed HoDs' perceptions of their roles in the context of change:

*My role is to manage academic work at the departmental level....I lead teachers to manage changes at the department such as improving an existing curriculum and establishing a new one.... (AMM 22).*

*At the departmental level, I have the right to assign work to academic staff members, supervise and lead them to carry out a new policy which is related to our department... (AMM 8).*

While some of the respondents did comment on the issue of leading and supervising, others pointed out their roles and responsibilities were not only to lead and supervise, but also to provide the directions to their staff in managerial tasks and academic work, as two academic middle managers stated:

*One of my key responsibilities is to lead and provide direction to teachers, monitor and evaluate the practices of academic activities and changes in the department (AMM 20).*

*I am a department leader, so my role is important in leading my teachers in all areas of work of the department. I provide supervisions and directions to them to manage curriculums, adapt or to change them when they are needed to (AMM 4).*

Within the same issue of leading and supervising identified by the majority of the respondents, there seemed to be variance between the participants as some of

them felt that they had to do several tasks to manage change in their department. It was commented by two of the academic middle managers that:

*My roles are to lead teachers in all areas of work in the department, build harmonies among teachers and staff members, plan and manage human resources, encourage and support academic staff members to manage changes (AMM 26).*

*In managing change and performing my role as an academic leader, I work collaboratively with my colleagues to make short and long-term plans for the department. I carry out my role to monitor and evaluate teachers' performances... I lead them to organise and conduct academic tasks, plans and policies relevant to the department (AMM 12).*

### **Interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practice**

The interpretation of strategies, policies or plans concerned with changes into practice at the departmental level emerged as another important issue. More than half of the participants who completed the open-ended questionnaire pointed out to their role as being an interpreter and putting into action the faculty senior management's vision, plans and policies with their staff members in the department:

*I am responsible for leading in most areas of work in the department,... interpreting and putting policies, plans about academic issues, changes and other managerial tasks from the faculty senior management team into practice with academic staff in the department (AMM 23).*

*I supervise my team members, teachers and administrative staff members on general managerial tasks, while at the same time; I am also responsible for assisting the faculty senior management teams... translating the faculty vision, plans and policies into actions in the department (AMM 16).*

It was also made clear that some academic middle managers did not only deal with the issue of translating vision, policies and plans into actions, but they also had to take initiative and deal with many managerial tasks such as:

*My roles are to put plans and the new mechanism of change from the faculty senior management team into practice with teachers and staff members in my department. Besides that, it is my duty to lead and take initiatives of change in the area of my responsibilities such as improving curriculums, making plans, and building capacities for the department (AMM7).*

*As I am a middle manager in the sphere of academic work, I manage and organise learning and teaching tasks in the department; I organise teachers to teaching schedule. ... I also lead teachers to develop a new curriculum and improve the one that is needed (AMM 30).*

Another academic middle manager commented on this issue that as a change agent they also act as a representative for the faculty senior management in carrying out plans and strategies of the faculty:

*Besides that... as a change agent, I also represent between the deans and my members to carry out policies, and put strategies of the faculty either about human resources, research, curriculum improvement, and the new change mechanism into effect within the department that I am leading (AMM 3).*

## **Research question two**

### **What is the perspective of Lao higher education academic middle managers towards successful change management?**

It was revealed by the academic middle managers that creating a clear vision, planning, monitoring and evaluating was seen as a critical issue related to the successful change management in the Lao higher education sector. Good communication skills were also perceived as another important issue contributing to the success of change management in the institution as well.

#### **Creating a clear vision, planning, monitoring and evaluating**

The majority of the academic middle managers, twenty-one out of the thirty-two who responded, felt that successful change management was dependent on several factors, and it was indeed needed for their organisation. However, they expressed similar views that successful change management required leaders or managers in all levels to consider the issues of vision, planning, monitoring and evaluation of the practices. The comments below made by the academic middle managers represent their perspectives:

*Successful change management is necessary for our faculty in order to keep pace with the external environment. Managers in all levels such as deans, heads of departments...must create a clear vision, have a clear goal, create a short and long term plans of actions, and implement the plans in the faculty (AMM 32).*

*Change management, which leads to succeed, is not static, but flexible and creative...it helps us catching up with the current changing situation. Managers must have a clear vision, identify change and set up specific objectives. Successful change management needs a plan, an implementation, an evaluation and an analysis of the pros and cons (AMM 10).*

Consequently, some participants expressed the feeling that effective change management was useful and contributed to an improvement in the institution. They stressed that change needed to be identified, understood, evaluated and reviewed regularly :

*I think that it will be very useful for the organisation. The key person in charge of change must have capabilities in planning, monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the practices consistently. If the managers can do that I think that there will be a success in managing several tasks in the faculty (AMM 29).*

*Change can lead to an improvement,... achieve a better outcome. So, we need to know and properly understand how necessary the change is. We need to define and make a clear plan about change (AMM 24).*

Indeed, two academic middle managers pointed out the importance of internal factors associated with strategic planning, an evaluation, and the implementation of change at the faculty and at the departmental levels:

*Successful change management will bring an organisation to a better status. It needs a strategic plan that is relevant to the changing environment; it needs an operation from both the top and the bottom...an evaluation of risks and effects is also important in change management (AMM 16).*

*I think that successful change management is dependent on several internal factors. When the internal factors are weak, for example, a lack of evaluation, a lack of participation, a lack of agreement, and a lack of planning and reviewing, then it is hard for change to happen (AMM 13).*



## **Communication Skills**

Academic middle managers saw the issue of communication as another essential components for successful change management. Eleven out of the thirty-two respondents confirmed that communication skills was vital for effective change management as strategies, visions and plans of change needed to be conveyed to staff members. The following comments represent academic middle managers' perspectives regarding this issue:

*Success comes from many factors. The managers have to define what change is, align people to strategies and have a creative communication technique to carry out strategies (AMM 3).*

*I think a good communication skill is an inevitable aspect of the change managers because they must communicate the plan to their staff members so that they can understand and practice the plan (AMM 15).*

Two other academic middle managers commented that change must be in accordance with the current context while an identification of change, a plan of change and communication still play a considerable part in effective change management. Two academic middle managers specifically commented:

*It is a sort of management that many people want in the organisation. Before achieving a success, there has to be an identification of change, a plan of change, and a clear communication to personnel who is responsible for that particular work (AMM 21).*

*I think that to manage a change successfully the managers must have a clear vision of change, identify what is needed to be changed and have an operational plan. In that, they must be good at communicating the change to their members (AMM 1).*

### **Research question three**

#### **Why do academic middle managers in Lao higher education face challenges in managing change?**

##### **Carrying out the role effectively**

The major challenge that emerged from the data was that twenty-four of the academic middle managers identified the challenge of carrying out their role effectively when managing change. This was in terms of interpreting the visions, policies, and plans from the faculty senior management teams, and in terms of being in the middle of the two tiers of management. Two respondents expressed the challenge they faced:

*What I found was that carrying out my role as a change manager was quite hard for me because I was in the middle so translating strategies and policies from the faculty leaders was hard. I had to deal with both my directors and with my academic staff members (AMM 1).*

*I often remind myself that I must do well for my roles when I put the leader team's vision, strategies and policies on any changes into practice in my department because many academic staff members and teachers have different ideas and perspectives. They can come up with agreement or resistance to the practice any time (AMM 20).*

On the one hand, two academic middle managers expressed the view that sometimes the plans or policies from the faculty were quite complex and were not in accordance with the current situation. This could pose more challenges for them if they did not operate well, and a potential conflict or resistance from their staff could occur:

*Sometimes the plan from the top management of the faculty doesn't match with the current situation and the internal and external demands, and this creates a challenge when translating them into action. I could say that*

*sometimes staff members weren't willing to follow the plans, and even resisted (AMM 5).*

*Interpreting policies and plans from the top is not an easy task at my level, especially dealing with my subordinates. This can cause a potential conflict and resistance if I don't do well. But if I could do well, it will be good for both the department and the faculty (AMM 2).*

While on the other hand, another academic middle manager expressed that working between the two tiers of management was a challenge because he had to deal with a variety of ideas and perspectives of their staff members:

*To make my academic staff understand the senior management vision, policies and plans was a difficult thing for me because different teachers have their own ideas and points of views. I work between the people, so there is a risk of creating a conflict between the two sides when I carry out my roles and responsibilities (AMM 3).*

### **Changing the culture**

Another challenge that academic middle managers in the Lao higher education faced was related to changing the culture. Nearly half of the participants commented on this issue in relation to staff members' thoughts about changes. It was reported by the participants that teachers and staff members' thoughts about what they have practised for a long time, or about what they used to do that needed to be changed if they want the change to happen:

*Many teachers and academic staff members still have traditional concepts of working, reluctant to change, and not accept new change...(AMM 17).*

*Teachers and staff members are accustomed to regulations, ways of working in the old ways...so, what many of us must do is to change this culture simultaneously (AMM 22).*

Furthermore, it was added by two respondents that it was not only difficult for teachers and academic staff to understand change, but sometimes they were also reluctant to change. As a result, this created more difficulties for the academic middle managers to manage change:

*Teachers do not understand the objectives of change, they do not know that when there is a change, what they will get from that change. This makes them unsure about change and leads to a resistance to change, unwilling to change. Then it will affect the management of change. We have to make them clear while at the same we have to change their concepts and their thoughts about change too (AMM 5).*

*Changing academic staff's culture of working is not a smooth task..., they are not willing to (AMM 25).*

## **Summary**

The data revealed three key important roles of academic middle managers of change, included taking initiatives to lead change; interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practice; and representing the senior management. With respect to successful change, both senior managers and academic middle managers mainly saw the issue of creating a clear vision, planning, leading, monitoring, implementing and evaluating the change practice. While the significance of change knowledge and personal capabilities, and communication skills were acknowledged separately.

Regarding the challenges, senior managers at the faculty level saw the issues of inadequate resources, changing the culture, change knowledge and personal capabilities, and interpretation of policies into practice; whereas the issues of carrying the role effectively to interpret policies into practice, and changing the culture were seen as the major challenge faced by academic middle managers when managing change.

Synthesising through the research findings, the common themes which have been surfaced by both groups of the senior and academic middle managers were: taking initiatives to lead change, interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practice; creating a clear vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating; change knowledge and personal capabilities; communication; carrying out the role effectively; and changing the culture. These significant findings will be further discussed in the following chapter with support from the literature reviewed in chapter two.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the significant findings extracted from the data reported in chapter four with support from the literature reviewed in chapter two. In this study, both groups of senior managers and academic middle managers identified several issues relating to an academic middle manager's role in managing change, the perspectives on successful change management, and the challenges that academic middle managers faced in managing change. These major issues included taking initiatives to lead change; interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practices; representing the faculty senior management; creating a vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating; change knowledge and personal capabilities; communication; carrying out the role effectively and changing the culture. These significant findings are discussed and structured according to the themes categorised under the headings of the research questions.

#### **ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER'S ROLE IN MANAGING CHANGE IN LAO**

##### **HIGHER EDUCATION**

One of the aims of this study was to investigate the role of the academic middle manager in relation to change management in Lao higher education. The data was gathered through the semi-structured interview with the faculty senior managers, and through the open-ended questionnaire with forty academic middle managers in a Lao higher education institution. The data indicated three important roles of the academic middle managers of change.

## **Taking initiatives to lead change**

Both groups of senior managers and academic middle managers agreed that academic middle managers were in a position where their role was critical and significant to managing change in their departments because they are the key persons who work closely with academic staff and teachers to manage academic activities and change in the departments. The research findings showed that academic middle managers were expected to show initiative to lead and manage change. This thematic finding that has come from the empirical data can be supported by several notable researchers that academic middle managers play a significant and integral role in leading and managing academic tasks and changes in the department (Alexiadou, 2001; Briggs, 2005; Filan & Seagren, 2003; Hannay & Ross, 1999; Kedian, 2006; London, 2011; Sarros et al., 1997). Also, Clegg and McAuley (2005) indicated that academic middle managers are “at the forefront of change in the key areas such as...core pedagogical and academic, as well as organisational goals” (p. 30). Academic middle managers are not only seen as a leader who carries out the purpose of their institution (Briggs, 2007), but also as “the key figures in ensuring the well-being and productivity of their faculty, and hence, of their university” (Gappa & Trice, 2010, p. 3).

Research conducted by Caldwell (2003) and by Smith and Winter-Irving (2009) also reinforces this thematic finding that academic middle managers are expected to exhibit a high level of knowledge, a positive and exemplary change orientation as shown by the competence to deal with uncertainty and the capability to take initiative in managing change. Likewise, this finding is echoed by Leader (2004) who notes that the critical implementation of the change initiatives are primarily in the hands of the academic middle managers although change initiatives are derived from senior managers.

Besides performing their role as a leader of change, academic middle managers are seen as a supervisor who supervises and provides direction to their academic staff and teachers in several areas of work. This was conveyed by both senior and academic middle managers. A senior manager stated that *speaking of HoDs, in fact, they are the leader and the supervisor who lead and supervise their team members in all areas of work, such as: human resources, curriculum...and leading change in the department (SM4)*, while an academic middle manager reported that *...I provide supervisions and directions to them to manage curriculums, adapt or to change them when they are needed to (AMM 4)*.

These findings corroborate with the idea of Bryman (2007) who supports that academic middle managers should be a role model for staff members; they provide direction and supervision about where the department is going, and ensure that their staff members are informed of the direction of the department (Bryman, 2007). Busher and Harris (1999) support these findings when they emphasise the importance of the supervisory leadership role of academic middle managers who provide primary supervisions and directions to their staff members.

### **Interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practice**

It is interesting to note that one of the key aspects found related to the role of academic middle managers in managing change was that both groups of senior managers and academic middle managers agreed and confirmed that academic middle managers were seen as an interpreter or as a translator of strategies and policies developed by the faculty senior management into departmental practices. This thematic finding is highlighted by Hancock and Hellawell (2003) who note that academic middle managers in today's world are:

Far more than the traditional link between the policy-makers and the workers on the shop floor. They need to be interpreters and authors of strategy who are making strategic decisions at their own level and operating both inside and outside the institutions. (p. 5)



It was clearly commented by an academic middle manager that *I am responsible for leading in most areas of work in the department, ... interpreting and putting policies, plans about academic issues, changes and other managerial tasks from the faculty senior management team into practices with academic staff in the department (AMM 23)*. Again, this finding is well supported in the literature around the role of academic middle manager in higher education as Kallenberg (2007) echoes that “academic middle managers are at a crucial position in the organisation, they work at the level at which university policies and strategies are effectively translated into practices and into concrete actions” (p. 21). Furthermore, Busher and Harris (1999) confirm that academic middle managers interpret policies and senior managers’ perspectives into departmental practices, utilise their expert knowledge to improve staff performance, and coordinates inside and outside the institution.

### **Representing the senior management**

Surprisingly, this issue of representing the senior management was seen more by senior managers than by academic middle managers. The study showed that senior managers from the five faculties are acutely aware of the representing role and see an importance that their respective academic middle managers articulated when managing change. A senior manager said: *So, we are also the one who set the roles and responsibilities for them—specifically, they are our representative, our linker of all!...because of what? Because all of the products that we get are from the departments, so we see HoDs as our most important representative. We cannot leave them out (SM4)*. This perspective is echoed by several notable researchers (Briggs, 2005; Gleeson & Shain, 1999) who highlight the nature of the pivotal role of academic middle managers as a representative or a bridging gap between the senior management and the bottom level. While Clegg and McAuley (2005) support that “academic middle managers, rather than representing core organisational values, see themselves as representing core academic values” (p. 25). In other words, this could be that the core academic values particularly reside in a higher education institution where academic middle managers primarily represent the senior management.

The research findings showed that both groups of senior and academic middle managers in a Lao higher education institution identified several issues relating to the roles of the academic middle managers in change management. The issues ranged from taking initiatives to lead change, interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practices to representing the senior management. Importantly, these roles are seen as pivotal to their departments and faculties, and thus, to the institution (Briggs, 2005; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Hannay & Ross, 1999; Kallenberg, 2007; Leader, 2004)

## **PERSPECTIVES OF SUCCESSFUL CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN LAO HIGHER EDUCATION**

The findings of this research showed that successful change management stems from several factors according to the perspectives of senior managers and academic middle managers. One significant finding is that creating a vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating was agreed by both senior managers and academic middle managers; whereas, change knowledge and personal capabilities, and communication skills were seen separately.

### **Creating a vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating**

The most interesting finding related to successful change management is that both groups of senior managers and academic middle managers shared their similar perspectives that successful change management is dependent on many issues associated with creating a vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating the change practices regularly. These significant findings are resonated with the literature by several researchers who emphasise the key components of effective change management that integrates creating a vision, issue identification, planning, implementation and evaluation of the practices (Beckhard & Harris, 1977; Cameron & Green, 2012; Fullan, 2003; Piggot-Irvine, 2002; Scott, 1999; 2003). Furthermore, Cardno's (2006) action research model well supports these significant findings when she suggests that what effective change managers should do is to "investigate and analyse a problem, plan a

change strategy, then implement the change, and followed by monitoring the change and reflecting on its effectiveness” (p. 457). The findings are also supported by Kotter (2007) who proposes that the critical stages of his change model involves ‘establishing a sense of urgency’, in other words, assessing the current situation, ‘creating a vision’, ‘planning for and creating short-term wins’ (p. 99). That is, planning ways to achieve the change and implementing the change plans.

It was made strikingly clear that the considerable components of effective change management were conveyed by both senior managers and academic middle managers in Lao higher education. Therefore, it is important for effective change managers to keep in mind the key variables of change that cover sound preparation, a clear defined and accepted focus for change, inclusive planning for implementation, implementation and the monitoring, and evaluation of change implementation as emphasised by several authors (Cardno, 2006; Kotter, 2007; Piggot-Irvine, 2005; Scott, 1999).

### **Change knowledge and personal Capabilities**

The data showed that the issue of change knowledge and personal capabilities was only seen by senior managers. Based on the data from the interviews, more than half of the senior managers reported that sound knowledge of change and personal capabilities were essential for effective change management. As one senior manager said, *So in order to manage change effectively, one thing that we need to have is change knowledge... what do you know about change and what should you do about it?; how will you plan and how to control it?... If you don't know, you don't know what do...you don't know how to lead your staff to manage change...(SM1)*. This is consistent with French (2001) and Wallace (2003) who identify that one of the key missing components in most failed change cases is the appreciation and use of change knowledge. Also, Alix and Gronn (2005) assert that change knowledge provides the insight and understanding about the change process, and is the key driver for managing change successfully. The

findings are again echoed in the literature by Bruckman (2008), Caldwell (2003) and Graetz et al. (2011) who suggest change leaders need to have personal capabilities if they want to manage change effectively. It is noted that leaders who have a variety of personal capabilities to carry out their role as the change agents can help their staff to avoid feeling disempowered and resistant to, or alienated from the changes (Bruckman, 2008; Graetz et al., 2011; Higgs & Rowland, 2011).

### **Communication Skills**

In contrast to change knowledge and personal capabilities, the issue of communication was seen by several academic middle managers as conducive to successful change management. In the study, academic middle managers acknowledged that good communication skills and creative communication are required for change leaders or managers because they need to communicate their change strategies to staff members so that they understand clearly the strategies. One academic middle manager noted that *I think...a good communication skill is an inevitable aspect of the change managers because they must communicate the plan to their staff members so that they can understand and practice the plan... (AMM 15)*. Another middle manager further added: *success comes from many sources. The managers have to define what change is, align people to strategies and have a creative communication technique to carry out the their strategies and visions (AMM 3)*.

These perspectives are in accordance with Kotter (2007) who succinctly notes that the leaders' communication skills and their use of language to strengthen relationships and to hold the organisation together are some of the routes to change leadership success in the transformative process; whilst, Cameron and Green (2012) reinforce that change leaders need to communicate the vision and keep communication levels extremely high throughout this process. These findings are again relevant to what Davies et al. (2001) and McRoy and Gibbs (2009) argue, change leaders must be able to communicate change policies, strategies and the desired vision. Whereas, Draft and Pirola-Merlo (2009) support

this issue by stating that “change leaders must perform their role for change and provide...communication to keep change efforts moving forward” (p. 480).

## **CHALLENGES THAT ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGERS FACED IN MANAGING CHANGE IN LAO HIGHER EDUCATION**

The data from both the interview and from the open-ended questionnaire indicated that academic middle managers faced difficult challenges or tensions when managing change in Lao higher education. These challenges, carrying out the role effectively, and changing the culture are evident from both groups of senior managers and academic middle managers.

### **Carrying out the role effectively**

It is significant to note that senior managers and academic middle managers both agreed and considered the issue of carrying out the role effectively as one of the challenges for academic middle managers. This was in relation to the fact that academic middle managers had to interpret and put policies, strategies, or plans from the faculty senior management teams into practices in the department. This thematic finding is well supported by the literature that academic middle managers carry out their role to mediate change between senior managers and team members, translate policy into practices in ways that are acceptable and understandable to both groups (Gleeson & Shain, 1999). Interestingly, several notable researchers reinforce that academic middle managers do not only mediate tensions between funding curriculum, but also filter competing and strategic messages from above and below associated with interpreting policies, strategies, and visions into practices while this can cause potential conflict between senior managers and lecturers (Leader, 2004; Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009; Wolverson, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005).

Furthermore, academic middle managers emphasised the tension that they faced. This is due to the fact that they must bridge the gap between the senior management and the academic staff, and because they work between the two tiers of management. As one respondent said, *to make my academic staff understand the senior management vision, policies and plans was a difficult thing for me because different teachers have their own ideas and points of views. I work between the people, so there is a risk of creating conflict between the two sides when I carry out my roles and responsibilities (AMM 3)*. This is echoed by Smith and Winter-Irving's (2009) research when they indicated that a number of tensions exist with the academic middle manager's role because they must bridge the gap between senior management and the academic staff. According to Kallenberg (2007), academic middle managers are the linking pin between the top-down and bottom-up processes as they must seek a balance between the temporary hierarchy of their administrative position and the on-going collegiality with their peers (Hancock & Hellawell, 2001; Kogan et al., 1994). While finding the balance academic middle managers can have potential tensions or conflicts since they are concerned with reconciling with top-level perspectives and with bottom level implementation issues (Clegg & McAuley, 2005).

### **Changing the culture**

Another major challenge that emerged from the data was the issue of culture. What was interesting to be noted was that both groups of senior managers and academic middle managers unanimously agreed that changing the culture was a big challenge in managing change. It was noted that if they wanted to make the change happen, the culture needed to be changed; while at the same, this could bring about a negative effect on their academic staff. This finding is consistent with Schein (2010) who argues that when an organisation has a purpose, a new strategy and a change agenda, then identifying how the culture impacts is not only vital but also useful in many cases. Change leaders should consider changing the culture if the current culture does not sufficiently support the achievement of strategic objectives for change as suggested by Cameron and Green (2012) and Graetz et al. (2011). Likewise, Schein (2010) reinforces that it

is essential to “have a way of assessing culture rapidly so that the change leaders can determine how culture elements will help them, will hinder them, or will become a change target in their own right” (p. 315).

The research findings also showed that academic middle managers faced the challenge because they had to change teachers’ culture and thinking about change if the change was to be effectively implemented. One academic middle manager specifically commented that *teachers do not understand the objectives of change, they do not know that when there is a change, what they will get from that change. This makes them unsure about change and leads to a resistance to change, unwilling to change. Then it will affect the management of change. We have to make them clear while at the same we have to change their concepts, their thoughts about change too (AMM 5)*. This perspective aligns with Alvesson (2002) who reinforces that making any real change possible requires leaders to change individuals’ ideas and values, therefore giving priority to a cultural level because culture is highly significant for how an organisation operates from strategic change to day-to-day leadership. Several authors further highlight that culture is an axis of an organisation and vital to all elements of the organisational life since it mirrors thoughts, feelings and actions contributed to effective management of change (T Bush & Middlewood, 2005; Dimmock & Walker, 2002; Fullan, 2001). Therefore, change managers need to consider culture change if they want to manage the change effectively (Anderson, 2010; Schein, 2010; Walker & Lambert, 1995).

## **Summary**

This chapter has discussed the empirical data from the study and linked it to the literature reviewed in chapter two. The discussion has been centred, first, on the role of academic middle managers in change management and then on the major issues of taking initiative to lead change; interpreting policies, strategies and plans into departmental practices; and representing the faculty senior management. Then the discussion has moved on to both senior and academic

middle managers' perspectives of successful change management while this provided the discussion on the key issues of planning, leading, monitoring, and evaluating; sound change knowledge and personal capabilities; and good communication. Finally, the discussion focused on the major challenges or tensions that academic middle managers faced in managing change. The final chapter draws conclusions in response to the three original research questions while the strengths, limitations and recommendations for future research are addressed.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This study investigated academic middle managers' roles in relation to change management, perceptions of successful change management, and challenges that academic middle managers faced in managing change in a Lao higher education institution through the perceptions of the senior managers and academic middle managers. This chapter focuses on three main areas. Firstly, it considers the conclusions drawn from the study and presents these under the three key research questions which include: What is the role of academic middle managers in Lao higher education in relation to managing successful organisational change? What are the perspectives of Lao higher education senior managers and academic middle managers towards successful change management? Why do academic middle managers in Lao higher education face challenges in managing change? The chapter then moves onto strengths and limitations before concluding with further recommendations for future study.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

By employing a qualitative, interpretive approach, I have generated descriptive data from two different perspectives; senior managers and academic middle managers or HODs. The conclusions and recommendations have been drawn from the empirical data collected and analysed from two groups above and the two data gathering methods; a semi-structured interview and an open-ended questionnaire.

#### **What is the role of academic middle managers in Lao higher education in relation to managing successful organisational change?**

This study revealed that academic middle managers in Lao higher education have three critical roles in relation to change management. The roles are

associated with taking initiatives to lead change, interpreting strategies, policies and plans into practices, and representing the senior management. This research showed that academic middle managers are highly expected to take initiative to lead and to provide supervision and direction to their academic staff members while managing change. Several researchers reinforce these findings that academic middle managers are the key figures at the forefront of change, and those who utilise a high level of knowledge and exemplary change orientation to deal with uncertainty and take initiatives to lead change (Caldwell, 2003; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Filan & Seagren, 2003; Gappa & Trice, 2010; Leader, 2004; Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009). Yet, in the context of change, Bryman (2007) and Busher and Harris (1999) commented that academic middle managers perform their supervisory leadership role providing direction and supervision to staff members in regards to the strategic direction of their department.

This research also indicated that academic middle managers in Lao higher education on behalf of the faculty senior management interpreted strategies, policies and plans into departmental practices when managing change. As highlighted by Hancock and Hellowell (2003), academic middle managers in today's world are seen as "far more than the traditional link between the policy-makers and the workers on the shop floor"; they must be "interpreters...of strategy who are making strategic decisions at their own level and operating both inside and outside the institution" (p. 5). Kallenberg (2007), in addition, supported that "academic middle managers are at a crucial position in the organisation, they work at the level at which university policies and strategies are effectively translated into practices and into concrete actions" (p. 21).

The study showed that the senior managers were delegating management responsibilities for change to their middle managers. This role, however, was echoed by Briggs (2001), Briggs (2005) and Gleeson and Shain (1999) who emphasised the importance of a representative role as a bridging gap between the senior management and staff members. In addition to this, "academic middle

managers, rather than representing core organisational values, see themselves as representing core academic values” (Clegg & McAuley, 2005, p. 25). This may reflect the reality that academic middle managers in higher education play a pivotal role in fostering academic values that reside in the educational institution.

A conclusion can be drawn from this study that academic middle managers performed varied and significant roles in relation to managing change in the current academic context of Lao higher education. The research indicated that academic middle managers were more likely to perform their leadership role in taking initiatives, and providing directions and supervisions for their staff in managing change; yet, their interpreting and representative roles remained essential to managing change in this particular context. These three roles, therefore, were perceived as pivotal for academic middle managers in the context of change, and such roles abound in the literature around the academic middle managers in higher education (Bryman, 2007; Caldwell, 2003; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Filan & Seagren, 2003; Leader, 2004; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; Sarros et al., 1997; Scott, 2003; Scott et al., 2008; Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009).

### **What are the perspectives of Lao higher education senior managers and academic middle managers towards successful change management?**

This research has identified a range of successful change-related constituents from both perspectives of senior managers and academic middle managers in a Lao higher education institution. Surprisingly, the empirical data from this study revealed that all five senior managers and twenty-one of the thirty-two academic middle managers unanimously perceived creating a clear vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating as a key strategy conducive to successful change management in a Lao higher education institution. In agreement with the literature, senior managers and academic middle managers hold a similar view that successful change management stemmed from several sources. However, the key constituents of effective, genuine change are associated with a clear vision, issue identification, planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the

practices of change effectiveness regularly as noted by several authors (Beckhard & Harris, 1977; Cameron & Green, 2012; Cardno, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Kotter, 2007; Piggot-Irvine, 2002; Scott, 1999; G Scott, 2003).

The research findings also showed that other significant components for successful change management in Lao higher education were concerned with change knowledge and personal capabilities, and communication skills. Unsurprisingly, senior managers and academic middle managers had a different perspective on these two issues, as they perceived these separately. Although there was a difference between the two findings, change knowledge and personal capabilities, and communication skills were conducive to effective change implementation in Lao higher education. On the one hand, change knowledge and personal capabilities were in line with the literature by Alix and Gronn (2005), French (2001) and Wallace (2003) who considered change knowledge as the insight, the understanding and the key driver to manage change effectively. Other researchers further emphasised having a variety of personal capabilities for effective change managers (Bruckman, 2008; Graetz et al., 2011; Higgs & Rowland, 2011).

While on the other hand, communication skills aligned with the literature by which several researchers emphasised the importance of communication skills in change management (Cameron & Green, 2012; Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; Kotter, 2007; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). This supports the literature that change leaders must be able to communicate their change policies, strategies and the designed visions to staff members (Davies et al., 2001; Draft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). Therefore, a conclusion could be drawn from this study that successful change management is dependent on several factors and there is no single component for success. Indeed, it is important for senior managers and academic middle managers in Lao higher education to pay more attention to the issue of creating a clear vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating the change effectiveness; on change knowledge and personal

capability, and on communication skills as the findings showed in this study.

### **Why do academic middle managers in Lao higher education face challenges in managing change?**

The findings revealed the key challenges for academic middle managers when managing change in a Lao higher education institution. The study showed that carrying out the role effectively and changing the culture were seen as the huge challenge for the middle managers. Unanimously, both the faculty senior managers and academic middle managers perceived that the challenges that the academic middle managers faced was to perform their role effectively to interpret strategies and policies from the faculty senior management into the departmental practice. In fact, the challenges or tensions are more likely to occur because academic middle managers mediate tensions and change between senior managers and team members in ways that must be acceptable and understandable to both groups (Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Kallenberg, 2007). This reflects the reality of being in the middle that academic middle managers must filter competing messages, be a linking pin and a bridging gap between senior managers and academic staff in managing change; therefore, they are more likely to create a potential conflict and face more tensions as highlighted by many researchers in the field (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009; Wolverson, Robert Ackerman, et al., 2005)

The findings also indicated another challenge that academic middle managers faced was changing the culture. This study showed that two groups of senior managers and academic middle managers emphasised the need to change the culture when managing change in the institution. They acknowledged that changing teachers and staff members' thoughts, values and means of working was challenged, and it was not a smooth task to do so; on the contrary, this would impact on their academic staff. They also signalled that they had to implement the change because they want their faculty to go further than the status quo, and to catch up with the changing situation. This necessity of

changing the culture reflects the literature that change leaders must change individuals' ideas and values in order to make any real change possible, hence giving priority to a cultural level (Alvesson, 2002). Likewise, Cameron and Green (2012) and Schein (2010) support that change leaders should identify the culture impacts, and consider changing the culture if the current culture does not adequately foster the accomplishment of strategic objectives for change.

A conclusion, therefore, can be drawn that academic middle managers faced huge challenges in managing change because of a need to carry out the role effectively by interpreting strategies and policies into practice and changing the culture. Due to the reality of being in the middle position, they must mediate tensions and change, bridge the gap, and reconcile between the senior managers' perspectives and the bottom-level change-related implementation issues. While doing this, academic middle managers are vulnerable to create a potential conflict and face more challenges and tensions (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Smith & Winter-*Irving*, 2009). The study also concluded that because academic middle managers have to change the culture of their teachers and staff members, they could be more exposed to tensions and challenges, and faced with resistances when managing change. Since culture represents thoughts, feelings and actions conducive to change (T Bush & Middlewood, 2005; Dimmock & Walker, 2002; Fullan, 2001), academic middle managers have to consider changing the culture if they want to manage the change effectively (Anderson, 2010; Schein, 2010; Walker & Lambert, 1995).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation One

***Senior faculty managers should acknowledge the contribution of their academic middle managers and provide the support and opportunity for them to have formal and informal training relating to change management.***

The findings showed that academic middle managers played a crucial role in managing change. The roles ranged from taking initiatives to lead change, interpreting policies and strategies into practice, and to representing the senior management. These roles are reflected and abound in the literature by several researchers in higher education (Byman, 2007; Caldwell, 2003; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Filan & Seagren, 2003; Leader, 2004; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; Sarros et al., 1997; G Scott, 2003; G Scott et al., 2008; Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009). Therefore, what might be a possible recommendation is that senior managers should see the importance of the contribution their respective academic middle managers make, and provide support or opportunity for them to have a formal or informal training relating to change management. This would in turn strengthen their roles and build more capabilities to lead and manage change in the academic curriculum since they represent the core academic values (Clegg & McAuley, 2005).

### Recommendation Two

***The Ministry of Education and the higher education institutions in Laos work together to create a change model with appropriate and related variables for effective change.***

In relation to perspectives of successful change management, the research revealed that successful change was dependent on several factors. Meanwhile, the key components for effective change were perceived to be concerned with creating a clear vision, planning, leading, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of change practice regularly. Further more, change knowledge and personal capabilities, and communication skills were also essential to successful

change management. These key variables are echoed in the literature review (Beckhard & Harris, 1977; Cardno, 2006; Graetz et al., 2011; Kotter, 2007; Piggot-Irvine, 2002; G Scott, 1999).

According to these major findings, it is therefore recommended that the Ministry of Education and the higher education institutions in Laos work together to create a change model with appropriate and related variables for effective change. This would enable change leaders or managers not only to prepare and build the capacity for leadership and management of change, but also to effectively guide the practices of change management in Lao higher education.

### **Recommendation Three**

***The policy makers, including the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions in Laos, should make clear and relevant policies which critically consider the key interpreter and implementer, the academic middle manager who will actually have the task of implementing the policies with the academic staff.***

The third recommendation is related to the challenges faced by academic middle managers in managing change. Several academic middle managers and senior managers indicated a major challenge; that academic middle managers had to carry out their role effectively to interpret strategies and policies into the departmental practice, and to change the culture. This in turn, had the potential to cause conflict and resistance from staff to change as echoed in the literature (Briggs, 2001; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Smith & Winter-Irving, 2009). Therefore, a possible recommendation for these is that the policy makers, including the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions in Laos, should make clear and relevant policies which critically consider the key interpreter and implementer, the academic middle managers who will actually have the task of implementing the policies with the real tensions and challenges.



#### **Recommendation Four**

***Academic middle managers should also seek knowledge and develop capabilities related to organisational culture in order to deal with potential conflict and resistance from academic staff when managing change.***

The final recommendation is that academic middle managers themselves need to gain knowledge and develop their personal capabilities associated with change management or organisational culture. So that they apply this knowledge and associated capabilities to effectively deal with potential conflict and resistance from academic staff when managing change.

### **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH**

#### **The Strengths of the Research**

One of the significant strengths of this research was the validity, triangulation, and reliability of the data collection since this research employed two data collection methods, the interview and open-ended questionnaire in the five different of faculties of a Lao higher education institution with two different groups of participants. It is noted that triangulation is the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some human behaviour (Cohen et al., 2003). Also, the use of data triangulation can strengthen the credibility and validity of the research (Bryman, 2008; Cardno, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007). By employing a qualitative methodology and using two different groups of participants and two methods of data collection, the validity and the trustworthiness of the result in this study is enhanced (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Furthermore, the strength of this research was that senior managers and academic middle managers were willing to participate and expressed their perspectives, while this allowed for two different viewpoints to be accessed.

#### **The Limitations of the Research**

This research has some limitations which must be kept in mind when reading the research. One of the limitations is that there was a gap in the literature available

on the role of academic middle managers in relation to managing change in higher education in the developing countries where this research was conducted.

The literature on academic middle managers in higher education and in the school sector in developed countries was reviewed and was applied to the Lao higher education sector. Even though the literature of this research has been mainly critiqued and conducted in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United State of America, the issues raised corresponded to the findings in the Lao higher education context.

The final limitation is that teachers within the department teams were not part of this study. Their voices or perspectives are missing from the data and these perspectives would have been interesting and informative perspectives to look into in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the role that academic middle managers play in managing change, and also what teachers in the department teams believe to be related to successful change management and the challenges for change managers.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

For future research into this area, the researcher of this study would like to recommend that the future research should be conducted to collect a larger data base from more faculties across the Lao higher education sectors, both public and private sectors. This would either support or challenge the findings of the research and contribute to a wider knowledge base of research on academic middle managers' roles in managing change in Lao higher education institutions. Further, the Lao higher educational institutions could apply the findings to inform their practice and these would inform institutional leaders and managers about the academic middle management role and the challenge that they face in managing change.

Since this study has not included the perspectives of teachers and academic staff members, it is recommended that further research should include those missing perspectives. This would provide contrasts and comparisons to the findings presented in this research, with a broader range of perspectives.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, this study adds to the limited, sparse body of literature and knowledge on academic middle management of change in Lao higher education. The research investigates the role of academic middle managers in managing change, senior and academic middle managers' perceptions of successful change, and the challenges that academic middle managers faced when managing change in the current context of Lao higher education. In order for academic middle managers in Lao higher education to effectively complete their role as a change leader or middle manager, the major issues and recommendations outlined in this research need to be considered by senior managers, the Lao Ministry of Education, and Lao higher education institutions. Lao higher education institutions need to consider these recommendations in order to survive in an on-going competitive international environment.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: Semi-structured interview



Phone 09 815 4311 Fax 09 815 4310 web [www.unitec.ac.nz](http://www.unitec.ac.nz)

Address Carrington Rd, Mt Albert, Private Bag 92025, Auckland, New Zealand

#### **I. Perspectives of Senior Managers towards Successful Change**

1. What is your understanding of change management?
2. What are your perceptions of successful change management?

#### **II. Perspectives of Senior Managers towards Academic Middle Managers' Roles in Managing Organisational Change**

1. What roles do the academic middle managers have in your faculty?; and what roles do they have in relation to change management?
2. In your view, what core capabilities should academic middle managers have to manage change successfully?
3. How can these capabilities be strengthened?
4. What practices/methods do you believe academic middle managers should employ to minimize the potential negative impact of change?

#### **III. Challenges in Managing Change**

1. In your point of view, what are the challenges of change management in your faculty?

2. What do you think are the challenges of the academic middle managers' roles in managing change?
3. What are the main difficulties or barriers to academic middle managers performing their role effectively when managing change?
4. Do you believe that your support is an important contribution to academic middle managers managing change? If so, what support did/should you provide them?

Note: do you have any other comments on the role of academic middle managers in relation to managing change?

**Thank you very much for your valuable time to contribute informative information, answers, and comments to this interview.**

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (2012-1061) This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from 17 July 2012 to 17 July 2013. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 7248). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**

## APPENDIX 2: Open-ended questionnaire



Phone 09 815 4311 Fax 09 815 4310 web [www.unitec.ac.nz](http://www.unitec.ac.nz)

Address Carrington Rd, Mt Albert, Private Bag 92025, Auckland, New Zealand

### **Middle Managers: Managing Change in a Lao Higher Education Institution**

This open-ended questionnaire is intended to:

- Seek information about the role of academic middle managers in managing change, and their perceptions of successful change management.
- Analyse the challenges in managing organisational change.

Your answers contributing to this questionnaire will be confidential and will be used in my thesis only. Please provide answers or comments as much as possible.

Thank you for participating in this open-ended questionnaire and contributing to a better understanding of the role of academic middle managers in relation to successful change management in Lao higher education institution.

#### **Definition of terms:**

**“Academic Middle Managers”** can be described in the sense of academic staff with leadership or management roles or duties. This may involve a head of department, a programme coordinator, a program director, or equivalent.

**“Organizational Change”** covers a wide range of activities, from low-level interactive changes through to fundamental reorganisation in the ways that organisations operate.

**Part I. Background Information**

Q1. Please tick (✓) in the circle that is the most relevant to you.

Q1.1 Gender

- Male                       Female

Q1.2 What is your position in your faculty?

- Dean                                       Head of Department  
 Subject leader                       Head of Office  
 Other (please specify).....

Q1.3 How long have you been employed in this position?

- <5 years                       5-10 years  
 > 10 years

**Part II. The Role and Perspectives of Academic Middle Managers towards Change Management**

Q2. What are your perspectives towards successful change management?

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Q3. What roles do you have in your organisation/faculty?; and what is your role in relation to change management?

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Q4. In your view, what core capabilities should academic middle managers have in order to manage change successfully?

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Q5. How can these capabilities be strengthened?

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### Part III. Challenges in Managing Organisational Change

Q6. What do you think are the challenges of your role in managing change in your faculty? and Why?

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Q7. What areas of change do you manage in your faculty?

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Q8. What difficulties or barriers do you face when you managed change in your organisation?

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Q9. What methods or practices did/do you employ in order to avoid negative resistance from your colleagues or from staff members when managing change?

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Q10. What support did you have from your managers and from your staff when managing change?

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Q11. Do you think that colleagues who have the same position need support when managing change? If so, what will be the support? And from whom?

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Note: Please make any other comments regarding your role in change management, your perspectives and the challenges that you faced in managing change.

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Thank you very much for your cooperation and for taking the time to provide valuable answers, information, and comments to this open-ended questionnaire.

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (2012-1061) This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from 17 July 2012 to 17 July 2013. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 7248). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**

## **APPENDIX 3: Organisational permission letter**

### **Template**

#### **LETTER PROVIDING ORGANISATION'S PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

**[Organisation's letterhead]**

**Date**

**Address letter to: Kertmee Sackdanouvong**

**RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management thesis**

**THESIS TITLE: (Middle Managers: Managing Change in a Lao Higher Education Institution)**

#### **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project and I give permission for research to be conducted in my organisation. I understand that the name of my organisation will not be used in any public reports.

**Signature**

**Name of signatory**

**Title of signatory**



#### **APPENDIX 4: Information sheet: For organisation**

##### **Title of Thesis: (Middle Managers: Managing Change in a Lao Higher Education Institution)**

My name is Kertmee Sackdanouvong. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology. I am seeking your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate the role of higher education middle managers in managing organizational change in the current context of Lao higher education. I am particularly interested in the roles that academic middle managers play in managing organisational change; their perspectives of success and the challenges that the academic middle managers face when managing change in a higher education institution.

I request your participation in the following way:

I will be collecting data using an interview with senior managers and an open-ended questionnaire with academic middle managers, which will take approximately thirty to forty minutes. I would appreciate being able to conduct these interviews and questionnaires in your faculty at a time that is mutually suitable.

You have the right to decline to participate if you wish. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form regarding this event.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the Thesis. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Dr Josephine Howse and may be contacted by email or phone.

Phone: +64 9 8154321 ext 8348. Email [jhowse@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:jhowse@unitec.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely

Kertmee SACKDANOUVONG

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (2012-1061)**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 17 July 2012 to 17 July 2013. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**



## **APPENDIX 5: Information sheet: Interview**

### **Title of Thesis: Middle managers: Managing Change in a Lao Higher Education Institution**

My name is Kertmee Sackdanouvong. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology and seek your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate the role of academic higher education middle managers in managing organizational change in the current context of Lao higher education. I particularly interested in the roles that academic middle managers play in managing organisational change; their perspectives of success and the challenges that they face when managing change.

I request your participation in the following way:

I will be collecting data using an interview of approximately thirty to forty minutes duration. I would be very much appreciate being able to interview you at a time that is mutually suitable.

If you agree to participate, I will be asking you to sign a consent form regarding the interview. It is understood that you may withdraw at any time during the interview and may also refuse to answer specific questions. I will be recording your contribution and will provide a transcript for you to check before data analysis is undertaken.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the Thesis and information may identify you will be kept separate and entirely confidential.

I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Dr Josephine Howse and may be contacted by email or phone.

Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext 8348. Email: [jhowse@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:jhowse@unitec.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely

kertmee Sackdanouvong

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (2012-1061)**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 17 July to 17 July 2013. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**





## **APPENDIX 6: Information sheet–open-ended questionnaire**

### **Title of Thesis: Middle managers: Managing Change in a Lao Higher Education Institution**

My name is Kertmee Sackdanouvong. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology and seek your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate the role of academic higher education middle managers in managing organizational change in the current context of Lao higher education. I particularly interested in the roles that academic middle managers play in managing organisational change; their perspectives and capabilities of change management.

I request your participation in the following way:

I will be collecting data using an open-ended questionnaire of approximately thirty to forty minutes duration. I would be very much appreciate being able to administer the questionnaire to you. The questionnaire will be given to you by the researcher, and the questionnaire will be in an envelope which is enclosed with an empty envelop together with a return stamp in order for you to send it back to the researcher when you have completed it.

If you agree to participate, I will be asking you to sign a consent form regarding the questionnaire. It is understood that you may withdraw at any time during completing the questionnaire and may refuse to answer specific questions.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the Thesis and information may identify you will be kept separate and entirely confidential.

I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Dr Josephine Howse and may be contacted by email or phone.

Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext 8348. Email: [jhowse@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:jhowse@unitec.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely

Kertmee Sackdanouvong

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (2012-1061)**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 17 July 2012 to 17 July 2013. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**



**APPENDIX 7: Adult consent form: Interview**

**Research event: Individual interview**

**Researcher: Kertmee Sackdanouvong**

**Programme: Master of Educational Leadership and Management**

**THESIS TITLE: (Middle Managers: Managing Change in a Lao Higher Education Institution)**

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered. I understand that neither my name nor the name of my organisation will be used in any public reports.

I also understand that I will be provided with a transcript for checking before data analysis is started.

I am aware that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project up to the stage when analysis of data has been completed.

**I agree to take part in this project.**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (2012-1061)**

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 17 July 2012 to 17 July 2013. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.



**APPENDIX 8: Adult consent form: Open-ended questionnaire**

**Research event: Open-Ended Questionnaire**

**Researcher: Kertmee Sackdanouvong**

**Programme: Master of Educational Leadership and Management**

**THESIS TITLE: (Middle Managers: Managing Change in a Lao Higher Education Institution)**

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered. I understand that neither my name nor the name of my organisation will be used in any public reports.

I am aware that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project up to the stage when analysis of data has been completed.

**I agree to take part in this project.**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (2012-1061)**

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 17 July 2012 to 17 July 2013. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.