RESEARCH ARTICLE:

An Analysis of Stakeholder Engagement in the E-Learning Policy-Making Process at a Higher Education Institution in South Africa

Patricia Rudo Makwambeni[1], Blessing Makwambeni[2] and Sam Erevbenagie Usadolo[3]

Abstract

Over the past two decades, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa have been formulating e-learning policies to assist them to realise the full potential of using ICTs in teaching and learning. E-learning policies serve as guiding frameworks that create enabling environments for embedding ICTs in teaching and learning. The development of e-learning policies has attracted various stakeholders and actors with varied interests, views, priorities, influence and power. Consequently, stakeholder engagement is now an essential factor in the policy process. The efficacy of an e-learning policy can therefore be judged based on the multiple perspectives that it includes and the inclusion of those it affects in the policy-making process. In light of this background, this paper examined stakeholder engagement that characterised the e-learning policy formulation process at a University of Technology in South Africa (UoT). How stakeholders were engaged in the policy-making process using stakeholder engagement as its analytical framework, the stakeholders and actors involved in the policy formulation process and the nature of the dialogue that informed the policy formulation process were examined. The qualitative study gathered evidence using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The study's findings show that the policy-making process at the UoT followed a bureaucratic process dominated by one actor, the policy delegate. Key stakeholders were excluded during the policy formulation process and were only consulted at the drafting stage. As a result, stakeholder engagement in the policy formulation process was low, resulting in key stakeholders and actors lacking policy ownership. Our findings also show that the exclusion of key stakeholders in the policy formulation process resulted in a policy that exclusively focuses on the Learner Management System and overlooks other technologies that play a crucial role in teaching and learning. These findings suggest the need to include all critical stakeholders and actors affected and interested in the e-learning policy at every stage of the policy formulation process.

Keywords: *e-learning; policy-making; stakeholder engagement; decision-making; e-learning policy*

Introduction

The past two decades have seen higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa formulating e-learning policies to help them realise the full potential of using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in teaching and learning (Chikuni *et al*., 2021). The development of e-learning policies in South Africa's HEIs has attracted various stakeholders and actors with varied and, at times, conflicting interests, views, influence and power in the university 'service chain'. Stakeholders are important in the policy process and invariably shape e-learning policy discourses. The term "stakeholder" is defined differently in the literature (Dawes *et al*., 2015; McGrath and Whitty, 2017). A stakeholder can be considered a person who has something to gain or lose through the outcomes of a planning process (McGrath and Whitty, 2017; Jayiya *et al*., 2022). The term also refers to groups or individuals related to the organisation's objectives (Usadolo and Caldwell, 2016; Silva and de Campos, 2020). As a result, stakeholder engagement has

[1]University of Cape Town, patricia.makwambeni@uct.ac.za | https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4889-0455
[2]Cape Peninsula University of Technology, makwambenib@cput.ac.za | https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0188-260X
[3]Durban University of Technology, samu@dut.ac.za | https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6291-7680

become a critical aspect to consider in policy-making processes in HEIs (Chan, 2021). The policy-making process requires the involvement of groups of stakeholders who affect and are affected by the policy being formulated. Scholars such as Khanyile (2018) and Chan (2021) have expressed the need for universities to engage with their diverse stakeholders in the policy-making process.

E-learning, defined as using technologies in teaching and learning, is supported by online teaching environments in learning management systems (LMS). E-learning is significant in HEIs in South Africa because it can carry large class sizes and is not limited by place and time. For students, e-learning provides equal access to learning resources, supports different learning styles, promotes collaboration and engagement and can leverage analytics to support students at risk of failing. Although the primary stakeholders in e-learning are the learners, e-learning in HEIs in SA has been viewed as an ecosystem comprising different stakeholders (Van de Heyde and Siebrits, 2019). The development of e-learning policies in HEIs in South Africa dates back to a White Paper on e-education written in 2004, which emphasised the government's commitment to electronic technologies in education. Between 2000 and 2010, HEIs integrated ICTs, acquired LMSs, and created e-learning centres, thus addressing online learning environments (Madiba, 2009). E-learning policies were formulated to institutionalise new ways of teaching with technology. E-learning policies represent a leading voice in a dialogue about the actions and priorities required from different stakeholders in HEIs (Jones, 2009). They serve as guiding frameworks to create enabling environments for embedding e-learning in teaching and learning within HEIs. The policies also provide evidence of how HEIs address the challenges of teaching and learning using ICTs. Globally, it has been observed that e-learning policies exist in different forms and vary in terms of meeting the requirements of faculty and students (Oake, 2010).

In South Africa, it has been observed that policymakers, as e-learning advocates, play an integral role in developing policies that can promote the use of ICTs in teaching and learning practices (Chikuni *et al.*, 2021). However, the efficacy of e-learning policies can be related to the multiplicity of perspectives that are included (and excluded) in the policy-making process. Chikuni *et al.* (2021) observed that e-learning policies in South Africa tend to be underpinned by different e-learning discourses, with some emphasising determinist policies while others are dominated by substantivism and critical discourses. These discourses are primarily influenced by the views and interests of the stakeholders who participate in the policy formulation process (Chikuni, 2017). Although studies have examined the different discourses that inform e-learning policies in HEIs in South Africa (see Chikuni, 2017), there is a paucity of research that examines stakeholder engagement during the e-learning policy formulation process in HEIs to understand how the different stakeholders and actors are engaged, what their views and interests are, and how these factors invariably shape e-learning policies (Khanyile, 2018; Chan, 2018). One of the challenges that hinder the success of e-learning in HEIs in South Africa is that there is no clear understanding of the needs and concerns of various stakeholders (Msomi and Hoque, 2018).

In light of this background, stakeholder engagement during the e-learning policy formulation process at a University of Technology (UoT) in South Africa is analysed in this paper. A UoT was purposely chosen from the 26 HEIs in South Africa due to its emphasis on technology and being one of the first HEIs to develop an e-learning policy in South Africa (Chikuni, 2017). This decision was also informed by the university's vision to be at the heart of technology education and innovation in Africa. The study's objectives are based on two propositions: First, stakeholders have different levels of power and interests in the policy-making process, and second, the nature and quality of dialogue that informs the e-learning formulation process affects the policy outcome. Answers to the following questions were sought to achieve the objectives of the study:

    i.   How were stakeholders involved in the identification of the policy problem?
    ii.   Who was involved in formulating the policy, and what role did they play?
    iii.   Whose interests were served by the interaction?
    iv.   How effective were the dialogue processes?

E-learning policy-making in HEIs in South Africa involves many stakeholders with divergent views on using ICTs in teaching and learning (Chikuni *et al.*, 2021). This divergence of views speaks to a complex stakeholder network that needs to be managed to achieve policy objectives. Chikuni *et al.* (2021) observed that e-learning policy networks in HEIs in South Africa comprise stakeholders with competing views on technologies' role in education. The study

revealed that e-learning policy stakeholders in e-learning centres argue with a technologically determinist view about technology in teaching, which tends to be narrow and unsympathetic to the demands and pressures such technologies may place on academics. In contrast, academics tend to foreground a discourse focusing more on pedagogy and learning in resolving e-learning issues (Chikuni *et al*., 2021). E-learning policy debates in South African HEIs are complicated by the varying interests of stakeholder groups and illuminated by the loosely coupled nature of universities and their emphasis on academic autonomy.

Besides the IT centres and academics, other stakeholders in the university service chain also take a keen interest in how technologies are used. Stakeholders in the quality improvement offices have a vested interest in questioning the quality of the learning taking place. As primary stakeholders in e-learning, students also have preferences and challenges to consider when delivering e-learning. As a result of this complexity, management needs to develop strategies that can harmonise conflicting viewpoints and interests (Chan, 2021). Non-supportive stakeholders with a high potential for threat and a low potential for cooperation are of particular concern to organisations. They greatly concern managers (Mitchell *et al*., 1997). In the South African context, this scenario has been further challenged by the emergence of the COVID-19 virus, which forced universities to offer programs fully online (Matsilele, 2021). Post-COVID-19, some programmes have remained entirely online while others have a blended design. However, the inevitable shift in the delivery of teaching and learning sparked much interest from various stakeholders with a vested interest in how education is delivered in HEIs. The quality of online engagements, the value of online assessments, the inequality of engagements, varying levels of digital literacy and infrastructural arrangements for disadvantaged groups have been questioned. All these issues speak to the contested nature of e-learning policy engagements.

Stakeholder engagement originates in organisational literature and strategic management as an approach to managing firms (Freeman, 2010; Goyal, 2022; Harrison *et al*., 2015; Freeman *et al*., 2017). The idea of stakeholder engagement, closely tied to stakeholder theory, suggests that stakeholders must be involved in decision-making. Stakeholder engagement illuminates the dialogue processes that policymakers engage in. An organisation's success depends on creating an honest dialogue with its diverse stakeholders (Usadolo and Caldwel, 2016; Freeman *et al*., 2017; Barnes *et al*., 2022). Stakeholder engagement processes expose several factors beneath policy problems, decisions undertaken and procedures followed to develop policies. Analysing the interaction among stakeholders in a university during the e-learning policy formulation process may provide valuable insights into stakeholder interests, perceptions, conflicts and preferred policy responses that could foster or hinder the innovative use of ICTs in teaching and learning. Very little research on stakeholder management strategies is employed in HEIs (Khanyile, 2018; Chan, 2021). Examining this sector is crucial because HEIs unique organisational structure is characterised by loose connections between various professional groups and academic staff who are largely autonomous (Honkimaki *et al*., 2021). The involvement of stakeholders is beneficial to policy-making processes. Policy choices and alternatives are widened, reducing conflicts and disagreements in policy-making and ensuring that goals are met. Stakeholder involvement in the policy-making process may also lead to policy ownership and buy-in from the key decision-makers (Thokala and Madhavan, 2018).

Conceptualising Stakeholder Engagement in HEIs

Stakeholder engagement can be defined as an opportunity for actors to share values, practices, strategies, information, etc. (Silva and de Campos, 2020). The Victoria State Government (2011: 2) states that "effective stakeholder engagement enables better planned and informed policies, projects, programmes and services". Engagement with multiple actors, distinct in nature and culture, is a continuous learning process that builds strong relations once different views and a collective understanding are achieved (Benson *et al*., 2016). Thus, engagement in the dialogue processes should be "far-reaching, inclusive and balanced" (Amaeshi and Crane, 2006: 249). The multitude of stakeholders HEIs have to engage implies the need for an effective strategy to understand and manage relationships. These relationships impact on HEIs success (Jongbloed *et al.,* 2008). Figure 1 is a stakeholder management model developed by Chan (2021: 21) that illuminates various stakeholders in HEIs.
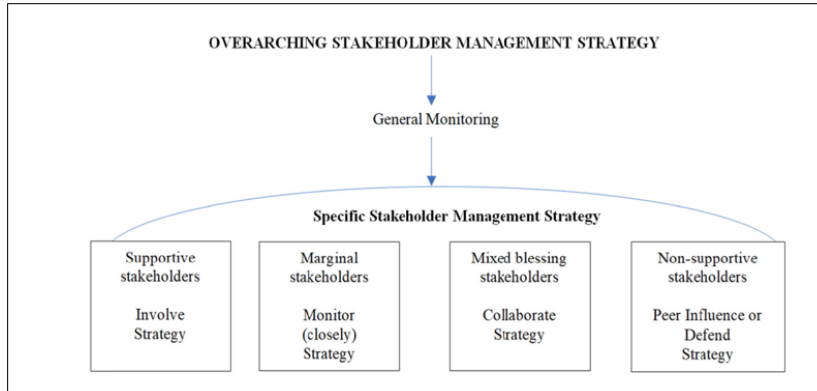
Figure 1: Stakeholder management model for HEIs (Chan, 2021: 21)

There are various levels through which stakeholders can be engaged in e-learning policy-making processes. IAP2 (2007) developed a participation model with five stakeholder engagement levels: to inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. These levels are based on the nature and quality of information exchanged and disseminated by policy actors, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Levels through which stakeholders can be engaged in e-learning policy-making processes (Dinges *et al.*, 2017)

Informing and consultation present the lowest levels of stakeholder engagement. The stakeholders' level of interest and influence is mapped into a quadrant that describes the type of engagement with different stakeholders. Informing means stakeholders are merely informed about the policy or by allowing visitors to policy discussions (State Government Victoria, 2011). Consultation is considered the lowest level of stakeholder engagement at the problem identification phase. It can be understood as conducting various interviews and surveys, opening up draft policies for public comment, and using Web 2.0 tools to gather ideas from multiple stakeholders. To involve is to work directly with stakeholders throughout the process to ensure their concerns and aspirations are understood and considered (IAP2, 2007). To empower is when the stakeholders are given full responsibility in decision-making.

The first exchange, or dialogue, can encourage or hinder subsequent participation (Silva and de Campos, 2020; Makwambeni and Matsika, 2022). Depending on the participants and the organisational setting in which the interaction

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takes place, stakeholder dialogues can take many forms (Silva and de Compos, 2020). Stakeholder dialogues can be as straightforward as a discussion, yet they sometimes aim to forge consensus (van de Kerkhof, 2006). As a result, for dialogue to be successful, participants must be open to other points of view (Pillay, 2010). Dialogue must move beyond conventional communication methods if a more profound understanding is to be achieved (Silva and de Campos, 2020). Stakeholder conversation should be seen as a sophisticated style of communication that encourages participation, reciprocal obligations for information sharing, transparency and commitment to identify policy problems and seek solutions. Stakeholder dialogues allow stakeholders to critique organisational practices (Desai, 2018). It is crucial to decide who is involved. However, in HEIs, where stakeholders represent varying interests, it is difficult to define who is important or unimportant in dialogues (Honkimäki *et al.,* 2021). South African HEIs have struggled to identify and analyse their stakeholders (Khanyile, 2018). Stakeholders must be engaged n the policy-making process as long as the policy network remains sizeable and efficient (Pedersen, 2006).

Pedersen (2006) explored the concept of stakeholder engagement in dialogue processes and devised a categorisation that represents various levels to judge if an organisation's interaction with its stakeholders has been highly engaging or hardly engaging (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Levels of stakeholder engagement in dialogue processes (Pedersen 2006: 141)

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology and a case study research approach to gain insight into stakeholder engagement during the e-learning policy formulation process at the chosen UoT. The data analysed in the study was collected using semi-structured interviews with fourteen (14) participants involved in the e-learning policy formulation process at the UoT. Two sampling procedures were employed in the study. Purposive sampling was used to identify policy actors initially engaged in the policy process. At the same time, a snowballing technique was used to identify actors who were privy to the policy formulation process at the UoT. The sampling process started with one key participant at the UoT. The participant then mentioned other participants until no new names appeared (Neumann, 2006). The participants identified through snowball sampling consisted of individuals who participated in the e-learning policy formulation process at the UoT (see Table 1). The data gathered using semi-structured interviews was triangulated with insights derived from document analysis.

Triangulation was performed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Document analysis was applied to analyse documents such as the draft policy and minutes of meetings that took place during the policy formulation process. These documents were made available by the policy actors voluntarily. A deductive approach was used to analyse the documents and interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Dawadi, 2021). Data were coded into themes derived from the levels of stakeholder engagement in dialogue processes (Dinges *et al*., 2017; Pedersen, 2006). The engagement level characterises the themes: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. Several ethical considerations were encountered during the study. Ethical clearance was secured from the UoT to conduct the study. For anonymity and confidentiality, the case used in the research and the participants involved in the policy process were de-identified.

Findings and Discussion

The study's findings show that the e-learning policy at the UoT was formulated after the realisation that most academics were neglecting the use of the integrated LMS. These findings support Swart's (2016) research at the Central University of Technology, which discovered that UoTs in South Africa frequently employ a blended learning strategy rather than a wholly online one. As a result, the LMS is used as a repository for course content and location to submit assignments (Swart, 2016: 41). When conducting a quality audit at the institution, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) made the finding that the LMS was underutilised. The policy was formulated in response to this finding to encourage staff to use the LMS. However, despite the policy, the UoT still struggles to embed e-learning. Our findings show that there is a lack of ownership of the policy. The study's findings indicated that the interests of key stakeholders differed, and, as a result, some of these stakeholders claim that their opinions were not taken into account when decisions were made. The simplest way to understand these results is to look at Madiba's (2009) study, which showed how e-learning centres in South Africa grew out of several learning domains, with some significantly favouring technology in teaching over pedagogy.

Identification of the policy problem

Findings from the study show that the issue of using electronic technologies for teaching and learning at the UoT was identified as an issue that needed an institutional policy response due to the HEQC audit. In this light, the e-learning policy was part of the policies that the institution had to develop for its institutional portfolio after conducting a self-evaluation of the institution as required by the HEQC during the audit process. The policy was therefore developed as part of the institutional strategic improvement plan recommended by the HEQC. The following observations were shared by two stakeholders in the policy process:

> *The e-learning policy was part of the policies we needed to provide as part of the quality audits. So that highlighted the importance of the policies or absence thereof. That was also the reason why we needed that policy. So again the Quality Management Directorate (QMD)… stated that we needed a policy in that space.*

> *What happened is that UoT was trying to come up with a strategic plan for ICTs in the university and I participated in that workshop where we were talking about the quality improvement plans for e-learning but we were trying to look at the issues raised in the audit report, which was saying that the LMS was not properly used.*

A policy is situated concerning the issue at hand, as well as within the socio-historical and political setting in which it was created (Hanberger, 2001: 48). It was noted from the findings that the policy formulation process was an attempt to respond to the demands of HEQC. A study by Matsebetlela (2015) examined the influence of the HEQC's Institutional Audits on teaching and learning at three South African Universities. The findings revealed that the institutions seemed to be struggling to implement their improvement plan effectively and probably needed support. Our findings show several discrepancies in identifying the policy problem to be addressed by the e-learning policy. The first problem arose from the fact that the HEQC triggered the policy. The dialogue process lacked openness and was structured around fixed issues and difficulties that the HEQC had raised. As a result, some stakeholders felt that there was no institutional readiness to adopt e-learning, and one commented that:

> *My concern about the policy generally was about e-learning readiness at the institution. My feeling was that the policy did not take note of the way in which e-learning has been successfully implemented in other institutions.*

The primary stakeholders who developed the e-learning policy relied on the HEQC's audit reports for ideas and cognitive frameworks that informed the process. Therefore, the policy's development was not characterised by an open dialogue where stakeholders bring issues to the fore. Instead, the development of the e-learning policy became an exercise that sought to address the problems raised by the HEQC, among them being the low use of the LMS, as evidenced in the excerpt below:

> *In terms of e-learning, when we did the institutional audit, it started emerging that a lot of the academics were very frustrated by the current IT environment at the UoT. It wasn't supporting what they wanted. At the same time, academics didn't want to use the LMS and, instead, were doing their own thing, so they were setting up blogs, twitters and google docs and communicating directly with students outside the institutional environment.*

> *Most universities have implemented the LMS, but it would seem as if lecturers don't actually use the platform that much, and students prefer to use social media, etc. The concern with academics is that they feel that it is limiting.*

Based on the preceding discussion, the HEQC provided the lens through which the policy problem and the process of its resolution came to be viewed.

The second problem in identifying the policy problem was the rigid conceptualisation of e-learning by the policymakers. From the findings, most actors voiced their concerns that the policy problem was conflated into a Blackboard problem, with e-learning being defined as the use of the LMS, resulting in the neglect of other technologies falling outside the scope of the LMS. Hardee *et al*. (2004: 6) affirm, "The problem is at the center of policy making". In formulating the e-learning policy at the UoT, policymakers focused their attention on solving issues raised in the audit report, which pertained to the poor infrastructure at the university, particularly the low use of the Blackboard platform. The naming of the policy issue led to a narrow conceptualisation of e-learning, which rigidly addressed e-learning as a Blackboard activity whilst failing to recognise the significance and impact of other emerging electronic technologies affecting teaching and learning through other means such as web 3.0 technologies accessed through mobile phones. Some notable conflicts resulted from the narrow portrayal of e-learning in the policy. One group of stakeholders felt that their ideas to incorporate other technologies in the e-learning policy had been neglected, resulting in them drafting another policy on social media that had been blocked by the decision-making body at the university:

> *Yeah, we developed them, drafted them [social media guidelines/policy], developed a document, and then it went into the usual consultation, but somewhere it got stuck. So, I think the institution is not ready or not interested in engaging them [social media technologies], and I think that it's very risky. It's not the right approach to take to ignore it. I mean, it's an issue that's coming up, and people are using them. I mean, ignoring won't make it go away; it will keep on being used more and more; it will be just people will have to mix and match…people will look beyond the LMS.*

Pateman (1970: 70-71) differentiated between two levels of participation, namely, full and partial. The former is a situation whereby stakeholders have "equal power to determine the outcome of decisions", and the latter is "one stakeholder having the final power to decide. The policy-making process suffered from low levels of stakeholder engagement. Although an effort was made to involve all relevant stakeholder groups in an open workshop, only two key stakeholder groups were included in drafting the policy, the Centre for E-Learning (CEL) and the Quality Management Directorate [QMD]. Other actors were asked to comment on the draft through an online discussion and the targeted circulation of the policy. There was no collaboration with critical stakeholders at the policy draft stage. Inclusion in the dialogue process was low. The tolerance level in the dialogue process was also low when the group held meetings where some members suggested some changes to the policy. However, only one position prevailed over the others.

The policy delegates who drafted the policy used an online discussion board to reach potential stakeholders far and wide through the university's seven campuses and to see what types of groups were interested in the e-learning policy. Targeted circulation of the policy was also used to reach potentially interested stakeholders to share their ideas. The virtual discussion board helped to find out who was interested. Knowing how close they were to the topic and what they could contribute was important. The analysis showed that the online discussion list created a false sense of transparency in a policy-making environment riddled with inequality. One respondent captures the inequality:

> *I think because we are a university, decision-making processes are not very transparent, not democratic. It's just in the hands of a few people who are like bottlenecks everywhere; everything goes to those two or three people, and they are just not open.*

Stakeholders involved in the e-learning policy-making process

Stakeholders who formulated the e-learning policy were mapped using stakeholder analysis to understand their role in the process, their power in the institution and their interest and level of participation in the policy issue. The stakeholders involved in formulating the e-learning policy and the stakeholder groups they represent at the university are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: A brief description of stakeholders involved in the formulation of an e-learning policy at the University of Technology

Actor	Stakeholder Group	Brief description
Deputy Librarian	Library	Representing the interests of the Library.
Information literacy Librarian	Library	Involved in teaching information literacy to staff and a member of the university library consortium.
Webmaster	Marketing and communication	Responsible for managing the university website and a virtual discussion list where policies are sent and circulated for discussion with all members of staff.
Educational technologist	Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED)	Primarily concerned with pedagogy in teaching and learning. The CHED also has a multi-media production unit that became a little bit more academic but often found itself in competition with the Centre for E-Learning.
Dean	Deans' Forum	A member of the ICT committee at the senate and a teaching staff member
Director: E- learning	Centre for E-learning (CEL)	Responsible for overseeing the use of the integrated learner management system.
Instructional designer	CEL	Works as an instructional designer for the Centre for e-learning. Duties involve technical support on using the Blackboard platform, teaching and training, and support of lecturers on using the Blackboard learner management system.
Director	CHED	Head of Department
Professor	CHED	Staff development, teaching staff, planning workshops, and seminar series on the use of technologies in teaching and learning; running projects, departmental training, and research on the use of technologies in teaching.
Director	Information Communication Technology Services (ICTS)	Responsible for areas of centralised policy on ICTs. Deals with IT infrastructure support, all maintenance and services on the end user computing side (e.g., laptops and PCs and such types of accessories across all the campuses).
Director	Quality Management Office	Responsible for quality assurance.
Teaching and Learning Coordinator	Faculty of Education	Responsible for teaching education courses.
Web Editor	Marketing and communication	Responsible for the website.
Teaching and Learning Coordinator	Faculty of Education	Teaching of undergraduate students in the Department of Education.

The role and influence of stakeholders in the policy formulation process

Patton and Sawicki (1993) observe that part of the problem definition is understanding the positions and influence of various individuals and groups; in this case, the analyst asks who is concerned about the problem. Why? What are their stakes in the issue? What power do they have to affect a policy decision? Our findings revealed that four groups impacted the institution's e-learning policy formulation. They are the Quality Management Office (QMO), the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), the CEL and the ICTS. A stakeholder categorisation and differentiation method of power interest was used to classify the stakeholders, as illustrated in Figure 5 below:
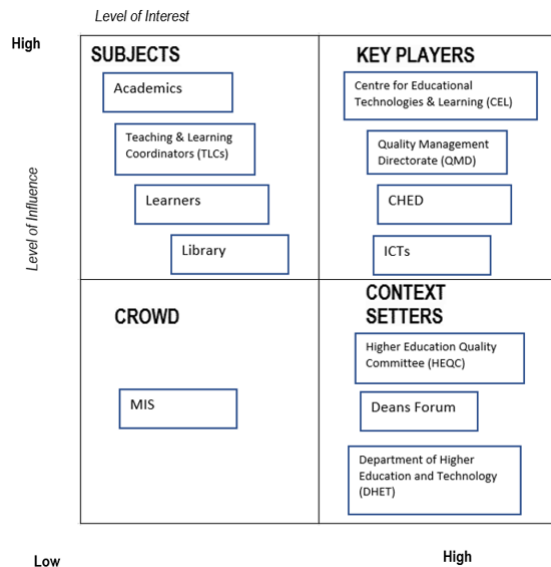
Figure 5: Analyzing the stakeholder map

'Key players', as depicted in Figure 5, had a high interest in the e-learning policy and high power to influence decision-making. Another important group in the process were the 'context setters' who had low interest in the policy issue but high power to influence decision-making. In policy-making processes, context setters are a vital group to manage. Newcombe (2003: 845) avers their level of interest in the organisation's strategies will remain low as long as they feel satisfied with the policies adopted. If they become dissatisfied then, because of their powerful position they can easily increase their interest and end up becoming key players in the process. 'Subjects' had a high interest in the policy issue but little power to influence the policy-making process. For example, learners were the subject of e-learning policy discussions with academics but could less influence the policy-making process. Our findings show that students and other academics were informed about the policy through an online discussion list hosted at the university network. QMD was a crucial player in the process. They organised the workshops and offered technical assistance in developing institutional policies, creating a template and a procedure for policy making. Thus, the QMD operated from a position of power during the process, working closely with the HEQC and providing intellectual resources for the policy-making process. The CEL was the custodian of the policy. They drafted the policy in close consultation with the QMD. They had the power to determine what would be considered in the policy and filter any unfavourable policy recommendations after receiving comments from all the network members.

Interests of key players in the e-learning policy network

ICTS was involved in formulating the policy, mainly because they sit in a strategic position regarding the operation of the LMS. Their role was to authenticate entry into the LMS. Hence they were expected to be present as it had emerged that academics were not using the Blackboard platform because of poor protocols around logging onto the university network. One actor from ICTS articulated their interest in participating in the e-learning policy-making process below:

> *In terms of operation, the e-learning system has to integrate into an environment. So where we sit in, we have to ensure that when people authenticate into the e-learning system, it's the same authentication used in other systems.*

The Director of ICTS's interest was to look for broader policy issues related to ICT integration regarding infrastructure provision. He possessed the resources to ensure the system's integration into the university ICT network. Given his strategic positioning in the process, he had the power to influence decision-making. However, although the Director had the potential to influence the decisions taken, he did not have any objections to the policy:

> *The policy was circulated to us, so it came to my desk for comments. I didn't read it very thoroughly because, in terms of what my role is, it wasn't that important in the context of an e-learning policy. After all, I do not deal*

with that directly. But I was looking at where to fit issues, looking at the bigger policy environment, like my role was to say, hang on, it doesn't address the information security policy, or you need to reference the information security policy. I wasn't part of the initial workshops, but it was discussed at various levels in other forums. I can't remember anything that was contentious, but I was more interested in issues that were part of the information security policy. I didn't have any major objections to the e-learning policy as such.

It was noted that using ICTs in teaching challenges traditional teaching values and is taken up with varying levels of interest by different individuals. Interest and power are not static because stakeholders change positions, and tensions can arise when key players have conflicting interests (Reed *et al.*, 2009). One key stakeholder group whose interests needed to be managed during the policy-making process was the CHED.

The exercise of power during the policy-making process

Our findings revealed that there were variations in the power that actors had to influence decision-making. E-learning's location at the intersection of electronic technologies and learning attracted two centres of power (the CEL and CHED) whose roles were either overlapping or unclear. There was unhealthy tension and power contestation between these two power blocs. The nature of the tension was ventilated by one academic serving in the Deans' forum:

> *The other reason why I stayed clear of it was that at this university, in terms of e-learning, we have these two centres of power: We have the CEL and the CHED, and I was just not going to go there….eeehm. I feel that this policy will never work until such a time that the institution fixes the schism between CEL and CHED. You can't have two centres of power, and in fact, there are three centres of power. There's CHED with teaching and learning, there is CEL, and there's ICTs and the IT infrastructure….So there is the CEL and the CHED. It's not a happy situation, so there's often quite a lot of conflict and competition.*

Power dynamics amongst the key players also revolved around debates on academic autonomy versus control, as reflected below:

> *As soon as we started talking e-learning and obviously someone like the Director for CEL was at the forefront, we got a lot of problems from the social media groupings. There were two ladies involved, but they were extremely upset and what they were upset about at the time was control. They were insisting that they needed to be a place for creativity, and to this day, there is continued fighting.*

The exercise of power by some key policy stakeholders led to a lack of policy ownership by the actors who formulated the policy. The lack of ownership arose from a position of powerlessness where it was felt that the policy was being forced on academics by management when academics were not ready to follow the procedure because their preferences had not been considered. Academics' reactions to the policy were that they could not be forced to use what they do not want to use and that consultations should be made with academics to ascertain why they are not using the LMS and prefer other technologies. One policy actor reinforces this view:

> *I can't force anybody to use anything if they don't want to. If I don't ask them if it's useful for them. To me, there's a huge communication gap between management and the users, and as long as they don't change that, it will be hard to develop anything that is helpful.*

Conclusion

In this study, stakeholder engagement during the e-learning policy formulation process at a UoT in South Africa was analysed. The findings show that the policy-making process at the UoT largely followed a bureaucratic process. A single actor, the policy delegate, mainly shaped the drafting of the policy. Key stakeholders interested in the policy outcome were excluded at the policy formulation stage and only consulted at the draft stage. Thus, stakeholder engagement in the policy formulation process was low, resulting in a lack of policy ownership by key stakeholders and actors at the UoT. The study's findings also show that the exclusion of key stakeholders in the policy formulation directly impacted the policy outcome. The exclusion of other key stakeholders with alternative views and interests in e-learning is mainly attributable to promulgating a policy that exclusively focuses on the LMS and overlooks other technologies

that play a key role in teaching and learning. The findings further indicate that low stakeholder engagement during the policy formulation process led to the policy problem at the UoT being shaped exclusively by external actors like the HEQC with minimal input from internal stakeholders. As evidenced in the study, the stakeholder dialogue and engagement process suffered from low levels of inclusion and tolerance and a lack of openness because it was structured around fixed issues and problems, denying stakeholders the power to influence decision-making. These findings have implications for e-learning policy development in HEIs. The findings suggest the need to promote higher levels of stakeholder engagement during the e-learning policy development process so that the policy can reflect all stakeholders' views, thereby gaining greater efficacy and currency among academics and learners.

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