Can Universities Learn?

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Abstract

The universities now a days are caught up in a reform cycle imposed by the changing power structures of the political system. But the universities of the future are expected to be agile and responsive to the dramatic rise in knowledge requirements. An examination of the current realities reveals that they are far from ready to tackle such a challenge. The current fascination of the universities with quality tools is not proving effective. A model based on ‘Learning Organisation’ along with ‘University of Learning’ concepts is a balanced one both from educational and managerial perspectives. Attempts at the implementation of a similar model in the school system is reported to be satisfactory. It is now the universities’ turn to look for a way.

Keywords: Quality in higher education, Performance of higher education, Learning Organisation, University of Learning.

Universities and Reforms

The nineties (1990s) can be described as a decade of heightened interest in universities as organisations. Their performance has been the subject of many investigations (e.g. West’s committee in Australia, Dearing committee in UK). The recommendations from these committees have consistently identified new directions the universities must take in order to make their performance effective. Such guidelines become the norms by which the universities would conduct themselves in the ensuing years. Generally, in the normal alternating cycle of politics, a new committee comes along in a few years time to spell out new set of priorities (for instance in Australia, the Quality Assurance norm of early 90s was replaced by entrepreneurial requirements of West’s recommendations). Thus, in turn, the pattern of conduct of universities becomes a series of reaction to directives from governments, controlled by different political philosophies at different points of time. A brief history of such interactions have been covered in an earlier paper (Srikanthan, 1999).

The government or the funding body forms the immediate external environment for the universities. The former dictates the level of autonomy and nature of accountability required. Different patterns of relationship between the two characteristics in different regions of the world were generalized and discussed in detail in the earlier paper (ibid.). This relationship inevitably develops a strong external focus in the governing bodies of the universities. One of the effects of such an external focus by a university is that such a directive tendency becomes the norm, and gets embedded in all its internal transactions as a bureaucratic culture. This results in a hierarchic structure, which becomes minimally amenable to any critical review.

The above circumstances become significant, when one examines the potential future challenges which might confront the universities. One can then reasonably postulate the organisational characteristics required of a university to respond such challenges. Equally, there is a necessity to understand the current realities of their organisational structure in greater detail in order to determine the current gaps and to establish a possible way forward. Some attempts to address these issues are made in this paper.

Universities of Future

It has been a great concern for academics and sociologists all round the world as to what might be the role of universities in the future societies as the new millennium rolls on. Examining ‘The Idea of a University?’,
Sutherland (1994) notes that the governments have been very tentative in handling the increasing numbers for higher education participation in the last two decades of twentieth century. They have been caught between the dichotomous notions of equity (in meeting the needs of a diverse customer base), and maintaining standards of education. All the indications point out to a continuing acceleration of numbers participating in the system. Only an on going dialogue among the academic community can resolve many of the problems. Boyer (1994) talks of ‘scholarship of integration’ as a distinguishing characteristic of the education of future. Academics will actively collaborate to end the ‘disciplinary fragmentation’ seen today which ‘is counter to the sense of wholeness’. ‘Scientists and philosophers will discover a common ground’. ‘Students will be involved in a vibrant program of general education’ moving from getting ‘information to knowledge’.

Talking about the signs of the information era emerging, Marchese(1998) says that by the end of 1990s information revolution began to be seen ‘as a far sighted tip of an ice berg’, when the new providers like Phoenix university and many other ‘virtual universities’ spread across the world-wide-web making ‘geography largely irrelevant’. ‘University without walls’-‘the electronic campus is already a virtual reality’ says Wright, (1994). ‘Many were left to wonder that bigger bergs were forming and charting them..could be difficult’. ‘Traditional sectors of Higher Education are too stodgy to exploit … the developments. Or when they do they are so ponderous, inefficient and costly in their approach, that they might as well not bother’ (Finn Jr., discussions, Marchese, 1998). Based on this the overall prognosis is (Jones, discussions, Marchese, 1998):
- The overall market for post secondary education will (continue to) expand dramatically.
- The established institutions will be forced to rethink their places in the larger scheme of things, focussing on their strengths to identifiable market niches.

According to Sutherland (1994) the vice chancellors of the future universities must ‘introduce new and alien styles of management… to formulate and achieve objectives’. Gazing in the crystal ball at the ‘University of 2050’ Gunkel (1994) sees them as organisations of ‘creativity and innovation’. By that time, knowledge will have come to dominate the economy more and more. Ultimately it will be ‘the most important raw material’ and will be ‘the one (to be) continuously enriched’. ‘Knowledge intensive economy will replace work or capital intensive economy’. The role of the universities will be one of ‘guiding and combining the flow of knowledge’(ibid.). The whole concept of education will shift as a result. This will have a fundamental influence on the universities. The period of education will expand to one’s whole working life. This will put the academia in a strong position of influence in the community. Wright (1994) sees the future universities facing an unprecedented challenge of ‘developing elastic delivery which personalises the learning program’ in spite of the massive numbers involved. Gunkel (1994) considers that tackling all these ‘will require techniques beyond anything we know, far more complex than the knowledge engineering exercises embarked upon so far’. Boyer (1994) thinks that the universities ‘will turn into a more fluid model’. Wright (1994) makes the notion more graphic when she says ‘The university will become less of an institution, more of a focal point, an agency, a facilitator’.

**Current Realities**

To manage this brave new world the universities of the future will be facing, the organisational characteristics required are to be cultivated here and now. Some of the features required of the future academics are:

- An ability to operate at the depth of a discipline specialty, at the same time be involved in a course team to make the learner experience meaningful,
- An ability to manage extreme complexity,
- A collaborative approach to develop integrated and interactive programs, and
- A capacity to manage and plan technology applications, with a view to using them as tools.

But in reality, many universities remain ‘novice cultures in developing approaches consistent with the obvious insights’ (Ewell, 1997) of a proactive nature, such as listed above.

The propensity of the universities to develop a bureaucratic culture was mentioned earlier (in the section ‘University and Reforms’). A number of studies tend to confirm that. Cassidy (1998) talks of ‘the problem of entrenched hierarchy that dominates a traditional university – in common with the civil service and the military’. Bramble (1996) sees ‘the university in class terms with a small ruling elite dominating the lives of a majority of workers (academic and general staff)’.
Franklin et al. (1998) talk of the ‘dominant modernist machine metaphor’ embraced by universities with ‘people arranged in logical mechanical relationships’ with deans, heads of departments, staff appraisal, pass rates, funding formula etc. These generate hierarchies with ‘functional silos’ with ‘cultural and communication barriers’ as a consequence. There is a multitude of ‘centrifugal forces’ which drain a faculty member’s individual energy (Lorange, 1996): intensive teaching loads, endless meetings, compliance with excessive bureaucratic norms etc.

In addition the funding bodies frequently introduce some performance monitoring requirements like quality assurance, etc. Such things tend to be seen by the academic community as ‘no more than instruments of managerialism in Higher Education’ (Westerheijden, 1999). Between the funding body and the universities most of the control functions tend to be at the higher echelons of the organisations. For example in USA, most of the accreditations of the university programs tend to be done by studying the resource level of the provider organisations. This gives a ‘provider-centric view of quality’ (Jones et al., 1998), not ‘learner centered’.

As one studies the literature, one tends to develop a rather pessimistic view of the preparedness of the university sector to shape up its organisational characteristics to match the future challenges it is set to face with the advent of knowledge age. Ewell (1997) sums it all up when he says ‘each system is perfectly constructed to produce the results it achieves’, as per organisational dynamists, then ‘that Higher Education is underperforming should come as no surprise’.

**Rationale for Learning**

Under the exhortation of the funding bodies the universities adopted a number of measures to improve their operational effectiveness. The measures included quality assurance practices based on international standard ISO – 9000, Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Excellence model based on Awards Criteria. The universities were ‘required to behave like commercial enterprises in a fiercely competitive market’ (Williams, 1993). The theoretical compatibility of these measures to higher education raised a considerable controversy. Harvey et al. (1996) saw these approaches ‘as a rebuilding of old quality control, at best’. Dill (1997), on the other hand, saw these techniques as providing ‘a coherent point of view that has added value...’. Bonvillian et al. (p39, Sims & Sims, 1995) observed that most of the literature dealing with TQM is focussed on ‘administrative operations and not on core functions of teaching and learning’. Lieshout (1995) noted that ‘..adoption of new assessment procedures comes from institutions lower on the reputation ladder..’. TQM’s lack of any theoretical basis, either from management literature or educational research, has led to its being taunted as ‘a religion’ (Westerheijden, 1999). Piper (1996) sees that most of the activities in the area ‘represent work which busies itself with minutiae rather than facing up to the issues of high quality in higher education...gentle ambles on the foothills...(not) an attempt on the heights’.

On the other hand, the theories on ‘learning organisation’ as expounded by Argyris (Argyris and Schon, 1978) and Senge (1990) provides a comprehensive basis for quality in organisational processes. A learning organisation represents the ultimate transformation of culture as the organisation progresses along the path of quality management by consistently empowering the employees. According to Senge, typically an organisation changes from a ‘Controlling organisation’ to a learning one by mastering certain (five) disciplines. They are personal disciplines relating to how people think, what they want and how they relate to each other. Through learning, the organisation attains a capacity to create its future (ch1, pt1, Senge, 1990). The relevance of the learning organisation model to the universities’ ideal of collegial culture was explored in detail in the earlier publications (Srikanthan, 1996, Piper, 1996). ‘What university could refuse to embrace that as an ideal?’ wonders Piper (ibid.).

Bowden and Marton (1998) developed a model clarifying the core processes of a university, and enunciated a way of understanding the quality of its operation. They postulate that in all its commonly perceived functions: teaching, research or community involvement, the core process is one of learning (at different levels). Hence they argue that quality in university context has a lot to do with quality of learning. They describe the quality of learning as having a lot to do with qualities of different ways of seeing, that a learner gains: multiplicity of perspectives or richness of vision.

The authors examine the organisational characteristics conducive to quality of its processes and derive the attributes of a ‘university of learning’. The characteristics proposed coincide remarkably with those proposed by
Senge (1990) in his learning organisation model, even though the authors (Bowden & Marton) have based their work entirely on contemporary education literature. This should surprise no one, as Senge himself admits that his theories are no more than a collection of principles derived by many individuals looking at excellence in human endeavour in different walks of life.

Bowden-and-Marton’s model clearly allows us to understand the nature of core characteristics which should underpin a ‘university of learning’. In table 1, these are viewed in comparison to the learning disciplines as proposed by Senge, as it would apply to the case of a group of academics involved in the teaching of a professional course.

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<th>Learning Organisation (Senge,1990)</th>
<th>University of Learning (Bowden &amp; Marton,98)</th>
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<td><strong>Personal mastery:</strong> each person has a clear vision and understand the current reality. As a result there is a creative tension which is directed to exploration of alternatives.</td>
<td>Academics commit themselves to a deep exploration of the subject matter from the learner’s perspective to develop alternative patterns of understanding.</td>
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<td><strong>Systems Thinking:</strong> The group develops a holistic view of the situation and explore the interconnections and interactions. They visualise patterns of cause and effects</td>
<td>The academics develop a holistic view of the competencies created by the course experience in students. They explore the potentials for ‘discerning variation’.</td>
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<td><strong>Team Learning:</strong> Synergistic involvement in the work group tasks by each one. Use of ‘dialogue’ and ‘skilful discussions’.</td>
<td>Synergistic involvement in a course/research team. Developing, along with colleagues, a holistic view of student competencies.</td>
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<td><strong>Shared Vision:</strong> Alignment of objectives of all members of the group.</td>
<td>‘A collective consciousness of what is common and what is complementary’ (p276).</td>
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<td><strong>Mental Models:</strong> A balanced advocacy with inquiry, in clarifying intentions and assumptions. Awareness of ‘leaps of abstraction’.</td>
<td>‘Differences and complementarities brought into the open’ (p201) to get a clear view of each one’s position. Uninhibited communication.</td>
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A study of the models reveals clear basis for developing a ‘University of Learning’ through the use of the disciplines of a ‘Learning Organisation’. Looking ahead, the rate at which the universities of the future learn ‘may become only sustainable competitive advantage’ (Stata, 1989) in such a knowledge intensive age. With the acquisition of such an ability organisations will be able to ‘formulate alternative perspectives ..of the business and the world in which they operate’ to respond flexibly (Stewart, 1996).

Lack of any meaningful examples of a ‘Learning Organisation’ is often reported in literature – ‘..it is never seen.’ (Waterman, 1995), ‘..is easier said than done.’ (Pedlar et al., 1991). In more recent literature it is claimed that the learning principles could be adapted to monitor and enhance the performance of schools. In their exhaustive study Leithwood and Louis (1998) claim that ‘any school can become a learning organisation’ (p19). The aim is to make them capable of providing an ‘adaptive education’ to make students capable of understanding ‘multiple perspectives’ (p1) (cf. ‘discerning variation’ of Bowden & Marton). The schools collectively discover ‘more efficient and effective ways of accomplishing its objectives’ (p2). They become ‘not only self organising but also continuously refining in response to the circumstances’ (p4). Being ‘..open chaotic social systems, the schools are not amenable to rational centralised management..’, but are able to better perform as learning organisations (p6). ‘In short, they are schools that know themselves’ (p19). One should now wait and see whether indeed any such study of universities may appear soon.

**Universities and Learning**

The reported success of the concepts of the ‘Learning Organisation’ with respect to schools lends credence to the argument (Franklin et al., 1998) that ‘if the idealisations of a learning organisation is to find expression anywhere, the potential home should be (universities) where the learning process itself figures as a dominant theme…’. In such a case the universities will also ‘have a unique opportunity to lead the development of the concept in practice as well as in theory’
So finally, the answer to the question in the title becomes obvious: Universities indeed can learn. They must become vibrant organisational learning entities to play their rightful role in social development. But can this keep pace with the rapid transformation in the sector still remains a moot question.

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