

Chapter 1

Universities as Knowledge– Intensive Learning Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to critically analyze the universities as knowledge intensive learning organizations. It is axiomatic that universities are knowledge organizations since by their own nature universities create, acquire, and transfer knowledge in complex ways. They are knowledge intensive organizations since the density of knowledge field and the dynamics of knowledge processing are much greater than many other organizations. Since learning is one of the major processes within any university, people may consider universities as being by definition learning organizations. This idea induced by a semantic halo effect may lead to a major error. Although a university is an organization based on learning processes, it is not necessary a learning organization. This paper performs a functional analysis of the specific knowledge processes in order to identify the necessary conditions for a generic university to become a learning organization.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are among the oldest institutions in Europe, solving creatively the paradox of continuity for many centuries. The paradox is generated by the mission of the university which integrates conflicting tasks ranging from knowledge preservation to knowledge creation: ‘Their survival, often in the same locations, even in the

same buildings, with many of the same activities, may on one level be proof of their conservatism. I believe that on another level it is also proof of the ability of the university to anticipate, to generate or incorporate new knowledge and new ways of thinking – sometimes hesitantly, sometimes slowly, but always with its essential intellectual values and mission intact’ (Mayor, 1997, p. 143). Based on a minimum set of functional characteristics, experts in the history of higher education consider the first European universities those cre-

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ated in Bologna, Paris and Montpellier, followed by those developed at Oxford and Salamanca (Rüegg, 2004). The venerable Bologna University dates from 1088, and the famous Oxford University dates from 1187. However, the mission and the functional matrix of those initial institutions of higher education differ considerably from the present day universities.

Main activities associated with these universities were collecting knowledge, preserving it and transfer it to the new generations of students. Knowledge generation was not a part of their mission. A professor was mostly a scholar and not a researcher. Knowledge was considered as a complete set of concepts and ideas about the world, and it was quite static in time. Thus, the purpose of professors was only to transfer this knowledge body to the students. We may say that these first institutions have been designed to acquire and process knowledge, and to deliver value for society in terms of mental representations. The second generation of universities have been established mostly by religious and political powers aiming at developing professional elites to serve their social institutions (Harayama, 1997; Jongbloed et al., 1999). Their main functional structures were designed for professional oriented knowledge processing.

In 1810, the University of Berlin was founded on a new paradigm developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In this new perspective, a university should approach knowledge scientifically (Gibbons, 1997; Marga, 2005; Mehallis, 1997). It should produce knowledge, not re-produce it. 'According to Humboldt's conception, research progress contributes to the elaboration of a system of values that has an influence beyond the walls of academic institutions.' (Harayama, 1997, p. 9). The new Humboldtian paradigm is founded on the unity and the complementary role of teaching and research functions: 'The subjects to be taught are composed not only of already consolidated knowledge, but also of those elements that remain to be discovered. Therefore, the teaching

and learning process through the activities of research.' (Harayama, 1997, p. 13). Knowledge generation proved to be a natural constituent of the modern university, its contribution being taken into account in any evaluation metric and any system of ranking universities (Aguillo, Ortega & Fernandez, 2008; Cheng & Liu, 2008). Thus, we may say that universities are entities dedicated to create, preserve and transfer knowledge. Some authors discuss now about a third mission of the university which is that of creating services for society. This is a rather debatable issue since:

'There is a part of the academic community that is already processing the first academic revolution, i.e. the evolution from teaching to research. Similar resistances found in the first revolution appeared over the last thirty years during the process of applying the second revolution: from teaching and research to services.' (Montesinos et al., 2008, p. 259).

The mission of the university, as resulted from its historical evolution, is to create, preserve and transfer knowledge to students and to society. Since all of these mission components involve knowledge creation and knowledge transformation processes, the university is a knowledge intensive organization. Also, universities are by their nature learning based organizations. They deliver knowledge to the students through teaching processes. Students acquire knowledge through learning processes, from their professors and from other different knowledge resources. Since learning is a fundamental process within any university, people may consider universities as being learning organizations. This would be a major mistake, since the transition from individual to collective learning and from collective to organizational learning requires some critical functional conditions that are not fulfilled by most of the universities. The purpose of this chapter is to critically assess and analyse the functional processes within a generic university, and then to

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