

Chapter 4

Knowledge Management Solution to Challenges of Higher Education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article presents challenges facing higher education in South Africa and how knowledge management can be applied to ameliorate the situation. Some of these challenges include internal and external pressures for accountability and transparency in the management of the institutions; declining state subsidies; stiff competition from global counterparts; low graduate throughput; declining enrolments; inadequate facilities (e.g. space, ICTs and equipment); ill-prepared graduates for the job market; limited partnership with industry and government; brain drain; bureaucracy and general poor service delivery. The authors submit that South African universities have largely not embraced knowledge management practices and argue that KM integration within the universities' strategic processes and operations can help address the challenges facing them. The paper is largely based on authoritative secondary and primary sources complemented by the authors' experiences working within university environments in Southern Africa.

INTRODUCTION

As centres of knowledge, universities have long been under public scrutiny because of the special status they enjoy in society and their dependence on public funding. The World Bank (1999)

observes that there is always a push for higher education to become relevant to the changing needs of society out of various drivers and trends including the transition towards a knowledge-based economy, massification and democratisation of higher education, and the integration and assimilation of information technology into the academic environment. Internationalisation of

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higher education and proliferation of research collaboration coupled with the growing student mobility and increased competition for funding have, recently occasioned global ranking of universities based on their research outputs, quality of graduates, use of ICTs, visibility on the Web, number of international faculty, number of Nobel Prize, laureates, impact of research, etc.

Universities of today are expected to meet more complex society expectations. The early universities were not necessarily centres of scientific discovery as they merely collected knowledge, preserved it and passed it on without the need to create or apply such knowledge (The Higher Education Working Group, 2005). The role of a modern university as espoused by the founder Wilhelm von Humboldt, who in 1809 established the Berlin University, includes knowledge creation; knowledge dissemination; and academic service to society. Moreover, a modern university is expected to guarantee the most efficient contact between university research results and their possible applications in society. Universities also promote lifelong learning because in some disciplines, what students learn today, will be obsolete tomorrow and in order to prevent this, universities must offer a wide-range of courses and seminars to make sure that graduates can keep up with scientific developments.

There is increased external and internal pressure on universities with regard to information needs of faculty and administrative staff. The pressure arises because of the need to keep abreast of changing standards, curricula, and pedagogical methods; the need to expand universe of knowledge; limited budgets for conference and research; demands for accountability and improvement in education. Moreover, though some universities have information systems in place, a number of barriers limit their use. Such barriers include the lack of staff to provide analyses of raw data, variant standard of data collection within departments, lack of leadership due to high staff turnover, lack of integration of technology in the curricula, lack

of integration of information management systems in the missions and visions of universities, and distrust about sharing of data among staff due to risk of misrepresentation.

CHALLENGES FACING SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

South Africa consists of 23 public universities (Ministry of Education, 2006) following the completion of the restructuring process which started in 2002 and resulted in mergers of some of the original 36 state universities and technikons (now universities of technology). The challenges engendered by this restructuring process included de-racialising education, forging new institutional identities and cultures through development of new institutional missions, social educational roles, and academic programme mixes. Moreover, the restructuring process obligated the universities to achieve equity, standardise language of instruction, undertake curriculum reform, expand access, etc. Besides, South African formal education is largely modelled on Anglo-Saxon tradition which is proletariat in nature, and the curricula is shaped to a high degree in such a manner that primary and secondary education were not meant to be preparatory processes to university (The Higher Education Working Group, 2005) instead, the path to a university is perceived as being a progression from primary through secondary to tertiary level. In addition, a lot of resources have been allocated to education without necessarily getting the desired outcomes. Traditionally, there has long been a misplaced notion within the South African higher education that theory comes out of the academic universities and is then converted into applied technology in the technical colleges and university of technologies.

Florida (2000) points out that during the 1980s, the university was posed as an underutilized weapon in the battle for industrial competitiveness and regional economic growth and had a

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