

# Universities as Learning Organization: From Rhetoric to Reality

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**Abstract:** Educational organizations, are one of the most important social organizations, thus they have to improve the learning capabilities of their personnel in order to respond to globalization and technological changes. Universities in this globalised world face competition from other state universities as well as from private and corporate run universities. Learning management has become the key focus area for every organization. Since the main objective of universities is to provide learning, this paper delineates the characteristics of learning universities and provides a conceptual model for a learning university. In order for the universities to be successful in the world today, it is critical to create systems where faculty continuously learns and keep on sharing the learned information. This requires the universities to have a clear road map, embedding learning mechanisms and knowledge management practices.

**Key Words:** Learning organizations, Learning universities, Collaboration, Knowledge management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The rapid changes in environmental factors have increased complexities and ambiguities at organizations, thus posing serious challenges to the organizations. Educational organizations, are one of the most important social organizations, thus they have to improve the learning capabilities of their personnel in order to respond to such changes. For students to acquire the new skills required to work in the new information economy there has been an increased demand for higher education at universities resulting in massification of universities. The impact of provision of education, importantly higher education on any nations long term well being is considerable. As postulated by Schon, 1973, every institute must invent and develop learning systems capable of bringing their own transformations. The emergence of the idea of the 'learning organization' is wrapped up with notions such as 'the learning society'. Universities in this globalised world face competition from other state universities as well as from private and corporate run universities. Learning management has become the key focus area for every organization. Since the main objective of universities is to provide learning, the characteristics of learning organization practices need to be investigated.

## 2. CONCEPT OF LEARNING ORGANIZATION:

"Learning Organization is an organization in which people continuously expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge 1990). A learning organization is described as one which consciously manages its learning processes through an inquiry driven orientation among all its members (Kim 1992), which provides stimulating climates for its members in which they continually strive for new approaches to the acquisition of knowledge (Baker and Camarata, 1998), which learns and continually transform itself to better manage knowledge and empowers people within and outside the company to learn as they work (Marquardt, 1996). To gain a better understanding of how learning organization looks like, Marsick and Watkins (1999) have identified seven dimensions of the learning organization: creating continuous learning opportunities, promoting dialogue and enquiry, promoting collaboration and team learning, empowering people towards a collective vision, establishing systems to capture and share learning, connecting the organization to its environment and providing strategic leadership for learning.

In 1978, Argyris Schon published organizational Learning, "A theory in Action Perspective". They developed the concept of learning as new insights or new knowledge building on their distinction between single loop and double loop learning. The first publication with the phrase Learning organization in the title was first used by Hayes et al in "creating the Learning organization" in 1988. The term learning organization was popularized by Peter Senge (1990) in his bestselling book on the subject, "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization".

## 3. SIGNIFICANCE OF UNIVERSITIES AS LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

Universities are knowledge and learning providers. As per times higher education survey, Indian universities are not ranked amongst the top world universities. A creation of successful knowledge management system in universities will allow solving the problems quickly and effectively, making an effective presentation on the market of educational services. In this competitive world, the focus of universities should be more on learning rather than on

teaching. Teaching is a finite activity which ends as soon as the teacher is no longer around, while learning is finite and can take place anytime, anywhere. Learning how to learn should be the main target. Universities have to undertake excellent research leading to excellent teaching which has built reputations for institutions like Oxford and Harvard and also promote the overall development of society by bringing in new processes and innovations, acting as a force for social change. By becoming Learning organization the university can become both profitable and competitive (Kapp,1999). As universities exist as organizations for learning, they have to transform themselves as learning Organization. Using the characteristics postulated by Senge(1990) the universities have to become Learning Organization where all members learn and use that learning to achieve both organization as well as individual goals, while also teaching the students to learn 'how to learn'. Contemporary universities are facing the challenges due to reduced funding across globe by state and national governments who emphasize decreased spending and improved finances. With changing times in this information based economy and society, the students need to acquire a different skill set rather than only the technical skill for long term working life.

#### **4. IMPEDIMENTS TO UNIVERSITIES AS LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS:**

As the movement of universities towards learning organizations involves change, it is imperative to understand the factors restraining the change. Bimbaum (2000) once said that "It is as difficult to change a university as it is to change religion". He argues that each institution serves a fundamentally different purpose and cannot function like business, entrepreneurial and commercial ventures. He maintains that universities should conserve their core set of principles to maintain their social significance. There is a debate whether the universities should function as a corporate entity or as entrepreneurial venture or as non-profit institutions. Kezar(2006) gave fixed tenure, departmentalization, scholarly skepticism, weak management, competitiveness, acute specialization and lower inter and intra level communication leading to less collaboration as impediments to universities transformation to learning organization. According to White and Weathers (2005) the obstacles to university being Learning Organization are conservative goals of organization, faculty autonomy and competition and academic skepticism. Hodgkinson and Stewart(1998) gave the potential obstacles as skepticism inherent in scientific methods, jargon influenced communicative barriers and different priorities for university work. Senge (2000) also specifies that Learning organization is a vision, not a model without any summary of practices. The paradox faced by universities when trying to develop into a learning organization is the consistent lack of understanding of the characteristics that make an organization a learning organization.

#### **5. FACTORS FACILITATING UNIVERSITIES AS LEARNING ORGANIZATION:**

Organizations can use Information and communication tools in an effort to manage its knowledge, enabling it to become a learning organization (Zack,1999). A major characteristics of learning organization is its ability to improve performance by collecting and sharing information within and between organizations. Reece( 2004) in a study on Australian universities brought out leadership, vision, Human resource management, Culture, role in society, accessibility, resources, Information technology and global reach as factors positively affecting the transformation of Universities as learning Organizations. As per Jill Jeffery it is possible to transform universities into learning organization when change agents address legitimate reservations regarding differing institutional purposes, reward and facilitate change, sustain efforts, establish formal and informal structures to promote collaboration and implement change at a judicious pace. Senge (2000) emphasized the need for change by changing the traditional structures based on executive control to flexible organizational structures based on collaboration at multiple levels. For universities it implies that the head of departments, faculty and students should play central roles as change agents. As faculty and students are aware of universities legitimate concerns, change efforts initiated by them can succeed in promoting Organizational Learning. Watkins (2005) emphasized collaboration, transparency, capacity building and proactivity as factors facilitating organizational Learning. White and Weathers(2005) advocated focusing on small incremental changes, e.g. university stakeholders interested in transforming their programs can volunteer to participate in a task force and can model student- centered teaching practices. Lucas(2000) gave a collaborative model involving team effort, communication and empowerment for leading academic change. Kuh(1999) suggests the need for a rethinking of what constitutes liberal education in the present context, increased faculty effort to cultivate deep intellectual skills (analysis and self directed learning) and development of curriculum that serve the learning purposes. Kezar(2006) recommended reviewing the university mission and communicating it across campus, building network for collaboration capitalizing on external professional organizations, building cross- discipline centers, reward structures and revamped campus computing and controlling systems, promoting, disseminating and reiterating collaborative values through student centered teaching, innovation and major campus documents, faculties involvement in leading sessions about the benefits of collaboration. Dill (1999) reiterated culture of evidence based learning, increased cross-disciplinary coordination, collection of external feedback and faculty's belief that teaching is an art than science. Borzsony wanted the traditional university structures to be transformed into more flexible, collaborative structures e.g. collaborating with students who learn transferable skills, help the university develop

programs and teach as well as learn from university. Harman (2005) in a study in Australian higher education institutes found that although faculty resisted change to a commercial, entrepreneurial and managerial university but after change they remained highly productive and strongly committed to researching, teaching and addressing social problems. B. Patnaik *et al*, 2013 conducted an empirical study on organizational learning in Indian educational organizations. The study attempted to emphasize the scope of organizational learning in both the public and private sector technological institutes in India. Results indicated that the extent of organizational learning is below the expected level in both public and private sectors. Leadership emerged as the most valued factor in the private sector institutes and third among eight dimensions in the public ones, the onus lies in leading these institutes with able heads that inspire the employees to learn and adapt.

In a study by Reynolds and Ablett (1998) on 61 managers from organizations participating in management charter initiative (MCI) standards, 84% of the sample was interested in the concept of learning organization, only 10% claimed to have adopted the concept in practice and only 0.25 % were able to report on process of implementation. This shows that the notion of learning organizations is attractive but the organizations are unable to transform the rhetoric into practice. In this light few learning organization consultants like Pedler, head of learning company, U.K. *et al* (1998) have established the importance of identifying the changes in the practices and procedures which are acceptable to the employees and can make the organizations move towards a learning organization.

## 6. CONCEPTUAL MODEL:

The model linking factors affecting the transformation of universities as learning organization as shown in Fig 1 is conceptualized by the author of this paper after reviewing the above literature. **Collaboration** includes **Intra collaboration** between heads, faculty and students, **Inter collaboration** between different departments, **External Collaboration** with corporate, professional organizations, other universities in the country and across globe.

**Cultural change** includes learning culture, open communication, free flow of information, team culture, empowerment, transparency, innovative culture.

**Structure and systems** include capacity building of faculty and students, learning enhancing reward structures; student centered teaching practices, shared vision

**Knowledge management** includes using Information technology for knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and knowledge dissemination.

**Leadership** includes transformational leadership which facilitates learning at all levels in the organization.

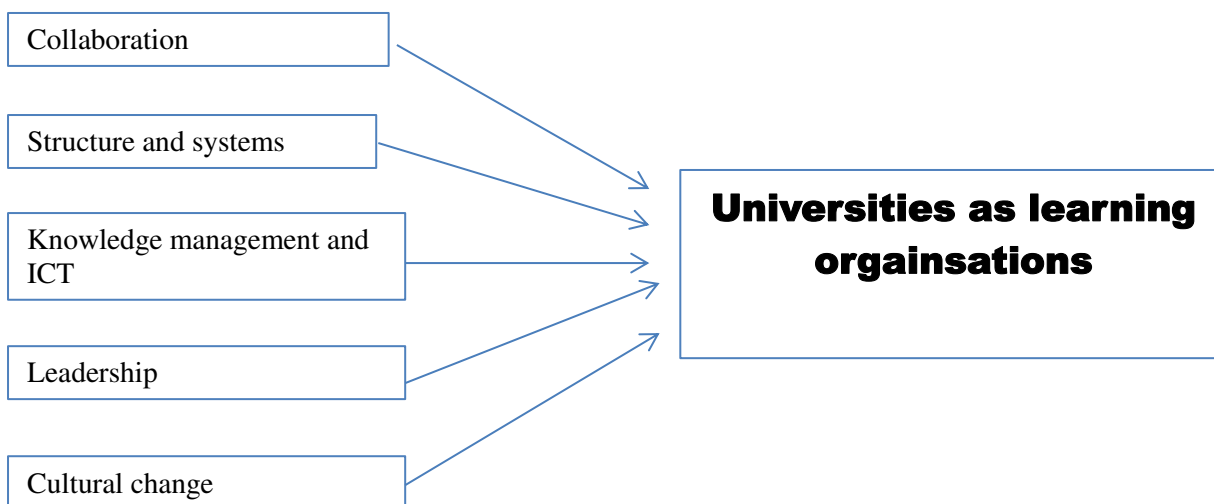


Fig 1 Conceptual model

## 7. CONCLUSION:

Therefore, Universities have to become Learning organizations to provide the students and the faculty with continuous learning mechanisms. It is necessary to speak about a new role of Universities in informational society, which requires a new attitude towards the management of knowledge and the system of knowledge management and Learning organization. In other words, Universities have significant opportunities to apply knowledge management practices and adopt learning organization characteristics to support every part of their mission—from education to public service to research including faculty and student learning approach. However, implementing these mechanisms require in depth study of these gaps and research. With the advent of private universities, proliferation of technology

and internationalization of education the state and central universities of India are facing tough competition and need to have a competitive advantage in the continuously changing environment. In order for the universities to be successful in the world today, it is critical to create systems where faculty continuously learn and keep on sharing the learned information. The change of university to be a learning organization has to be incremental as sudden change results in more resistance to change. Incorporating the factors facilitating change and removing impediments to change based on change models using faculty and students as change agents and can transform the universities into learning universities. This requires the universities to have a clear road map, embedding learning mechanisms and knowledge management practices.

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