

BENCHMARKING IN UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS A LEARNING ORGANISATION

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Abstract

Background. Universities possess an inherent imperative of self-improvement derived from their mission and they act as a source, transformer and propagator of learning and knowledge. Therefore incorporating a learning organisation concept in higher education institutions (HEIs) seems natural.

Research aims. A lack of clear and explicit practical hints on how to incorporate the concept into a university was identified as a cognitive gap in the literature. The key research aim of the paper was to analyse the concept of a learning organisation in the context of HEIs, present conditions facilitating implementation of the concept in HEIs and indicate how systematic usage of benchmarking can help HEIs to become learning organisations.

Method. In the paper an in-depth study and critical analysis of literature on learning organisation in the context of HEIs was performed. The author points to benchmarking as a tool enhancing the impact of the learning organisation concept. In the study a set of recommendations for HEIs aiming at becoming a learning organisation was developed.

Key Findings. In the paper the thesis that systematic usage of benchmarking helps a university to become a learning organisation was stated and supported. Benchmarking comprises interorganisational learning. It involves descriptive learning about competition and the environment of the organisation. Universities willing to become learning organisations should develop a climate of creativity and lateral thinking which enhances learning in the process of benchmarking.

Keywords: Benchmarking, Learning organisation, University management, Creativity

INTRODUCTION

Both constant development and breakthrough changes are achieved through learning. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are no exception and need to follow changes and benefit from best practices of competitors. The term "learning" has many definitions but most universal seems the one developed by P. Senge, one of the precursors of the learning organisation concept. In his opinion learning means not only obtaining information as in reading a book and now thinking you know how to ride a bike, it is a change in the way of thinking called metanoia (Senge, 2006). In the process of learning change is the key element. This aspect is stressed by Schmidt (2010), who defines learning as a change between two states in a system, the state before and after learning.

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A synthesis of the views on organisational learning was presented by A. Örténbald, who conducted a very in-depth study on organisational learning and learning organisation and he proposed a definition in which he confronted these two terms, which helps to distinguish between them (Örténbald, 2001). He highlighted that organisational learning concerns processes and actions through which an organisation learns and learning organisation is an organisational form defined by the ability to learn and by the learning outcomes.

The concept of a learning organisation was founded on the basis of organisational learning theory. Among the authors of the concept are C. Argyris and D. Schön, but this is P. Senge and his work *The fifth discipline. The art and practice of the learning organisation* that is regarded as the most influential on the concept development. The analysis of the available literature confirms that this work comprises foundation of this field of knowledge and the definitions created over the years most often repeat, reinterpret or develop P. Senge concept. He defines a learning organisation as an organisation with bigger and bigger potential to create its own future (Senge, 2006). He also stresses that in a learning organisation people constantly broaden their possibilities to gain desired results, new models of brave thinking are created, team aspirations are developed and organisation staff constantly learns how to learn.

He defined five disciplines of a learning organisation as fields that need to be improved: personal mastery, mental models, building a common vision, group learning and systemic thinking. The fifth discipline reminds us that the sum of the whole can exceed the sum its elements. Development of the five disciplines enables organisational progress and gaining competitive advantage (Senge, 2006).

LEARNING ORGANISATION IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In the literature the learning organisation concept is rarely referred to HEIs. The research is rather focused on the concept itself than on the possibilities of its application in a higher education setting. The object of the investigation are mainly identifying the barriers against the implementation of the concept.

The specificity of universities as public institutions such as among others: high formality, little flexibility, hermetic style of management, strong resistance to changes, little or no money for experiments in implementing new management methods, techniques and tools – do not support application of the learning organisation concept. HEIs as a mainstay of tradition are not willing to modernise their management.

Hierarchical relations between staff members and students make teamwork more difficult.

Another reason for individualism, disintegration and lack of common vision of the university is a stronger identification with the scientific discipline community than with an organisational unit or the whole institution. The introverted nature of scholars is often compared to that of hobbyists, who represent no interest in the wellbeing of the whole organisation functioning behind a kind of defensive wall of their specialisation (van Vought, 1995). Strong relations within the scientific discipline are attributed among others to the peer-review system (Clark, 1987).

Despite the difficulties that can be referred to the specificity of HEIs, they seem to be a natural environment for a learning organisation since their core mission: teaching students and doing research, involves learning. Recommendation of its application was formulated among others by European University Association (EUA), which indicates that HEIs should build an environment supporting creativity through suitable organisational structure and including cultural and ethical aspects of work life (EUA, 2007). The learning organisation concept is also recommended to be implemented in HEIs by M. E. Boyce (2003), Bui and Baruch (2010), Dill (1999), Kristensen (1999), Hodgkinson and Brown (2003).

In the literature there is little information on how to implement the concept in HEIs practice. The answer to this question can be found in relating the P. Senge five disciplines to HEIs. The model formulated by Bui and Baruch (2010) can serve as a source of valuable knowledge. To each discipline they added antecedents, moderators and outcomes. The illustration of the assumptions made by Bui and Baruch are presented in Figure 1.

The antecedents of the personal mastery indicated by the authors are personal values, motivation and individual learning. According to Bui and Baruch, scientific staff are expected to act as moral guides and exemplars with standards a little higher than the rest of the society. Motivation and individual learning is an obvious element of scientific work. As a moderating tool they indicate personal policy in a HEI which enhances personal development.

The second moderator is the higher education sector. According to the authors there can be a difference in the extent to which an institution takes care about personal development of staff between public and private HEIs. Personal mastery fits higher education very well since scientific staff are highly qualified and possess a precise vision of their career development. The effects of personal mastery are self-efficacy, life and work balance and individual success.

According to Bui and Baruch model, the antecedents of mental models are leadership and organisational culture. Leadership in the higher education context means creation of such an organisational culture that would allow teachers, students and parents to form a team that learns together. Citing Gudz (2004), and Tsai and Beverton (2007) the authors highlight that leaders in higher education are most often good teachers, but they have problems with a servant role. It can be stated that this is especially true in Poland where higher education managers are mainly scientific staff elected for a term of office, often with little or no experience in managing people. Organisational culture in HEIs and especially the high level of individualism at work, is a barrier in organisational learning according to the authors, but it changes especially in big universities where there is greater team work in research.

Communication enabling knowledge transfer is a driving force moderating mental models. This communication in HEIs is facilitated with technology. The next moderator is the environment encouraging learning and professional development. The effect of mental models is knowledge sharing.

In case of group learning, which Bui and Baruch describe as real challenge in HEIs, the antecedents comprise leadership, organisational culture and goal setting. This is supported by highly qualified staff. The effect of group learning despite knowledge sharing is improvement of group functioning. As a justification of including this effect in the model they cite the research of Kinnie and Woodfield (2008), who claim that group functioning is being improved by group engaging, training, organisational culture and leadership. The moderator of group learning is communication.

The antecedents of a common vision are leadership and organisational culture, moderators are: sector, size of an HEI and communication. Depending on the ownership of a HEI (private or public) there will be different goals and common vision of an HEI. The awareness of the vision is dependent on efficiency of communication which naturally is more effective in a smaller university than in a big organisation. The effect of a common vision despite improvement of group functioning is individual and organisational success. The level of satisfaction from goal achievement can be treated as a measure of these effects.

The next step is the perfection of the fifth discipline – systemic thinking. It involves development of a right leadership and organisational culture, as well as taking care of the competences. Human resources policy determines these aspects. The effects of systemic thinking functioning embracing all areas of university functioning, lead to the success of the whole institution.

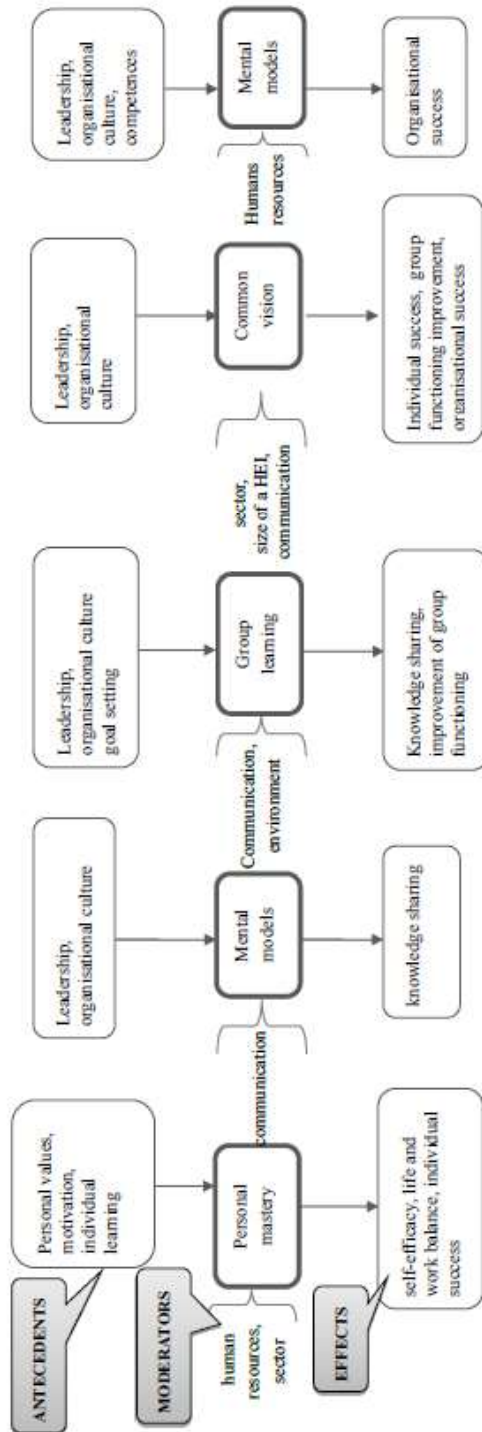


Figure 1. Model of a Learning Organisation in a HEI

Source: Kuźmicz 2015 a. p. 58.

Bui and Baruch's model definitely broadens the Senge conception and it should be treated as an added value to the discussion about learning organisation concept implementation in HEIs. Therefore it seems justified to extend it because the indicated moderators and effects seem to not to exhaust the catalogue of the factors connected with the five disciplines. Moreover the information about them seems very laconic and despite the fact that they are substantiated with literature, their description is brief and they lack argumentation. The main limitation of the work of H. Bui and Y. Baruch is their concentration on scientific and teaching staff and students as the only participants in academic life. It omits the administrative staff who comprise the hard core of the HEI as an organisation.

Jablecka proposes an alternative model of transformation of an HEI from a traditional organisation into one closer to the learning organisation (Jablecka, 2004). First she assumes complying with the five disciplines of Senge. Second, she recommends establishment of a strategy based on learning. Third, she indicates the necessity to overcome barriers typical to a traditional university and using the strengths of the university as an organisation. As a fourth step, procedures and structures supporting the development of a learning organisation should be developed. Jablecka (2004) also stresses the need of interorganisational learning through comparisons in the process of benchmarking.

Most publications in the matter of a university as a learning organisation tackle the problem very superficially, just sketching the context of a learning organisation. In order to fulfil this gap, on the basis of the works on many authors (among others: Örtenblad, 2004; Hawkins, 2004; Pedler & Aspinwall, 1998; Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994), that a learning organisation cannot be described because each organisation is unique and therefore has its own specific concept which should be developed, it can be stated that development of a learning organisation concept specific for HEIs is substantiated. Örtenbald, a great researcher of learning organisation highlights the importance of a contextual perspective (Örtenbald 2013). He claims that the concept has to be put into context, understood as a set of assumptions about a particular setting in terms of meaning and quality.

Key elements fostering organisational learning in HEIs are indicated by Chrispen and Mukeredz (2013): developing people and partnerships (Gaviano, 2010), building leadership capacity, creating a culture of transformation (transformational leadership), quality assurance framework based on the principles of reflexion and self-evaluation, intellectual stimulation, taking care of teacher's and student's autonomy, continuous

professional development, fostering enquiry, creativity and innovation, enhancing team working skills.

As recommendations for HEIs undertaking the challenge to implement the concept of a learning organisation, the following can be enumerated:

1. The role of a rector as a servant leadership (Kofman & Senge 1995) – democratic, caring and competent behaviour;
2. Propagating a climate of innovation, creativity and open presentation of own views;
3. Encouraging competence development (not only of scientific and teaching staff but also of administrative and technical workers);
4. Work organisation with projects and teams;
5. Making teams out of representatives of different organisational units, or in the case of research projects from representatives of different scientific disciplines;
6. Creating mechanisms and procedures of knowledge storing so that it does not disappear with the staff fluctuation;
7. Openness of the HEI to the outside world, to cooperation with researches and teaching staff from different HEIs from inside and outside the country, consulting with business and public administration representatives;
8. Analysing finished undertakings (its course and outcomes), learning from own mistakes (lessons learned);
9. More open communication, effective information canals, staff members often have no opportunity to gain knowledge about the matters concerning their institution;
10. Getting inspiration from business.

The need of constant and systematic learning in an organisation is connected with the fact that organisational knowledge becomes outdated and its propagation outside of the organisation leads to the loss of key competences and commensurate loss of competitive advantage (Jablecka, 2004). The learning organisation concept seems to be appropriate in HEI setting being under global competition pressure and from the inner imperative of self-improvement deriving from the mission of the HEI as a source, transformer and propagator of knowledge.

RELATIONS BETWEEN BENCHMARKING, CREATIVITY AND LEARNING ORGANISATION

Benchmarking seems to be the tool that can effectively help universities to become learning organisations. Its essence is to systematically learn from the best through creative adaptation of observed practices to the

HEI's needs. Benchmarking supports transparency, promotes teamwork and propagates learning as a leverage to development.

There are numerous definitions of benchmarking in the literature. For the sake of this study definitions underlining the learning aspect have been chosen. Benchmarking as a process of evaluation and best practice application is described by Kulmala (2003), and Pieske (1994) claims that benchmarking is a method of comparing with the best and learning from them in a systematic, detailed and branch independent way. In the European Benchmarking Initiative (EBI), benchmarking was meant as an internal organisational activity which aims to improve the organisation's performance by learning about possible improvements of its primary or support processes through looking at these processes in other, better-performing organisations (van Vought et al., 2008).

Most of the definitions emphasise that benchmarking should be used systematically, it should be continual and improvement oriented. Benchmarking should be perceived as a tool useful in the improvement of organisational units functioning and flexibility – adapting easily in the higher education setting. Benchmarking has been successfully applied over the years in HEIs in Great Britain, Germany, USA and Australia, the countries which can be seen as leaders in this field.

At the beginning, benchmarking in higher education was applied in the field of management of libraries, fixed assets, campus, energy and finance (Lund, 1998). The most recent practical benchmarking initiatives embrace all aspects of university functioning: research (Tijssen, van Leeuwen, & van Wijk, 2009; Global Research Benchmarking System, 2012; ACU, 2014), teaching (Kuźmicz, 2015b; The Council on Social Work Education), administrative activity (Manzini & Lazzarotti, 2006; Hagelund, 1999) and managerial processes (Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 2010).

Through systematic usage of benchmarking, HEIs can become learning organisations. Benchmarking involves interorganisational learning. From the perspective of this study, the typology of ways of interorganisational learning proposed Fahley (1999), and interpreted and thoroughly discussed by Rokita (2003) is important. It differentiates between descriptive learning about a certain competitor, learning through comparison of at least two similar competitors and learning on the basis of a broad spectrum of knowledge about organisation environment. The appropriate tool for such a learning seems to be benchmarking.

Depending on the specificity of organisation and its profile of activity, four types of learning organisations can be distinguished (Örtenblad, 2004):

1. A learning-at-work organisation – learning takes place in a certain context and there is no possibility of applying formal courses;
2. An organisational learning organisation – single-loop learning – in the organisation functioning routines are constantly being improved and actions are evaluated and challenged (double-loop learning). The knowledge generated in these processes is kept in the organisation;
3. A learning climate – in the organisation climate supporting learning is created, for instance time for learning is provided and learning is not controlled;
4. A learning structure – very elastic, decentralised organisational structure, teamwork.

With respect to HEIs the concept of an organisational learning organisation and a learning climate seems to be suitable to implement. A learning-at-work organisation can be implemented in production companies and a learning structure can be introduced in big enterprises. In HEIs due to their specificity and academic tradition a very flexible and decentralised structure would be impossible to implement.

The process of learning significantly supports creating a climate for creativity and lateral thinking in the organisation. Creativity is a field of study in psychology, but recently it also become an intensive area for investigation in the management sciences. On the basis of literature overview Brzeziński (2009) defined the following points of interest in the field of creativity: (a) creativity of organisation staff members, (b) creativity of certain functions and scopes of organisation activity, (c) creativity in management, (d) the concept of a creative organisation.

With regard to benchmarking creativity of organisation staff members, creativity in management and the concept of a creative organisation can be applied. Creativity of organisation staff members according to Brzeziński (2009), is related to arousing the creativity of staff members and teams, promoting creative conduct, learning and discovering the potential of creativity. Creativity in management embraces management with the usage of creative thinking and decision problems solving in the field of managing team potential and creating creative environment. In the concept of a creative organisation M. Brzeziński includes the metaphor of a united mind of organisation and the concept of a team based organisation (Brzeziński, 2009).

HEIs should in particular build a climate for creativity defined as repetitive models of behaviour, attitude and feelings, which characterise the organisational life (Brzeziński, 2009). According to G. Ekvall, acknowledged as the author of the concept of the climate for creativity in organisation, climate for creativity evaluates through confronting

the staff with organisational life, structure, policy, aims, tasks, workload and other staff members (Ekvall & Ryhammar, 1999). It influences the processes in the organisation for instance in problem solving, decision making, planning, communication, learning or motivating. Climate for creativity has an impact on the outcomes of organisation functioning. It can be described as intervening variable, an active operator modifying the relation of inputs and outputs (Figure 2).

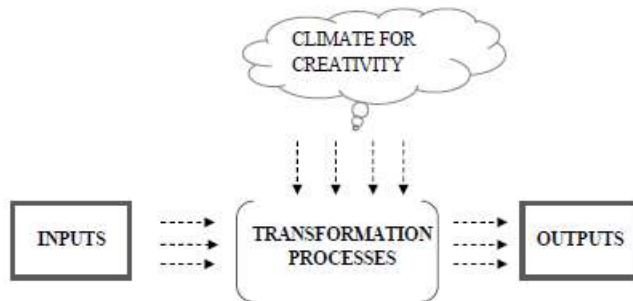


Figure 2. Climate for Creativity as the Intervening Variable in the Process of Transforming Inputs Into Outputs

Source: Kuźmicz (2015a, p. 209).

Creating the climate for creativity through supporting undertaking initiatives, presenting opinions, introducing new ideas without fear of negative assessment or without constraints of very formal communication, limits reluctance towards new challenges, undertakings or changes.

Developing of a climate for creativity in an organisation may be seen as a factor supporting benchmarking because of the need for creative adaptation of ideas or solutions noticed in partner institutions with whom comparisons are taking place. Special attention should be paid to operational creativity indispensable in making variants, choosing and implementing the outcomes of concept creativity (indispensable in developing new methods or concepts) (Brzeziński, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

HEIs should become learning organisations able to learn about themselves, understanding their own problems and making improvements judging from their own experience. HEIs as learning organisations should therefore support brave thinking and free development of team aspirations where staff members learn how to learn together. HEIs, in which collective and individual learning is promoted are a perfect environment for benchmarking which is a tool of innovative adaptation of practices. Its essence is to learn from the observation of competitors or

partners, who are more advanced in a certain field of activity. Systematic benchmarking activities support transparency and implement positive routines, helping institutions to become a learning organisation.

HEIs aiming at becoming a learning organisation make efforts to develop a climate for creativity and lateral thinking supporting creative adaptation of processes and learning in a process of benchmarking. Systematic usage of benchmarking improves HEIs functioning because of implementing innovative solutions which are a hybrid of best practices learned from partners and from the HEIs themselves.

To become a learning organisation, HEIs should encourage competence development of all staff members (teaching and non-teaching), facilitate knowledge exchange by team work and create mechanisms and procedures for knowledge storing so that it does not disappear with staff fluctuation. They should become more open to the cooperation with researches and teaching staff from different HEIs from inside and outside the country, they should consult with business and public administration representatives. They should also focus on such issues as analysing finished undertakings and learning from their mistakes. HEIs should also exercise more open communication to provide staff members the possibility to gain knowledge about the matters concerning their institution.

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BENCHMARKING W KSZTAŁTOWANIU UCZELNI JAKO ORGANIZACJI UCZĄCEJ SIĘ

Abstrakt

Tło badań. Uczelnie posiadają wewnętrzny imperatyw samorozwoju wynikający z ich misji, działają one bowiem jako źródło, transformator i propagator nauki. Zastosowanie koncepcji organizacji uczącej się w środowisku uczelni wydaje się więc naturalne.

Cele badań. Brak jasnych i szczegółowych wytycznych, w jaki sposób koncepcja ta powinna być wdrażana w uczelni, zidentyfikowano jako lukę w literaturze przedmiotu. Głównym celem badawczym było przeanalizowanie koncepcji organizacji uczącej się w kontekście uczelni, przedstawienie warunków ułatwiających wdrożenie koncepcji w szkołach wyższych i wskazanie jak systematyczne stosowanie benchmarkingu może wspomóc uczelnie w staniu się organizacjami uczącymi się.

Metody. W artykule przedstawiono wnikliwą i krytyczną analizę literatury z zakresu koncepcji organizacji uczącej się w kontekście szkół wyższych. Autorka wskazuje benchmarking jako narzędzie wzmacniające oddziaływanie koncepcji organizacji uczącej się. W artykule przedstawiono opracowane rekomendacje dla szkół wyższych chcących stać się organizacjami uczącymi się.

Kluczowe wnioski. W pracy postawiono i zweryfikowano tezę, że systematyczne zastosowanie benchmarkingu wspomaga rozwój uczelni jako organizacji uczącej się. Benchmarking obejmuje międzyorganizacyjne uczenie się. Zawiera deskryptywne uczenie się o konkurencji i środowisku organizacji. Uczelnie chcące stać się organizacjami uczącymi się powinny tworzyć klimat dla kreatywności i myślenia lateralnego, które wspomaga uczenie się w procesie benchmarkingu.

Słowa kluczowe: benchmarking, organizacja ucząca się, zarządzanie uczelnią, kreatywność