

What organizational challenges can the recent demands concerning learning environment in higher education present to universities, and how are the universities expected to respond to them?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to identify the organizational challenges emerge inside universities due the recent demands regarding their learning environment and expects universities' responses towards them. Based on institutional theory and the research on universities' organizational features, it has been possible to identify four challenges and expect three inter-related responses. The findings call for more attention to universities' institutional dynamics when researching their learning environments; how they affect universities' responses to the demands concerning this concept.

Introduction

The concept of learning environment has recently gained increased attention among educational researchers and policy makers. It has been seen as a significant instrument for facing quality challenges in higher education, especially related to the massification, internationalization and globalization of higher education. Higher education institutions have been faced with the question of how to provide good quality of education to an increased and diverse numbers of students, and what to offer their students to support them in the achievement of good learning outcomes (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000; Liefner, 2003; Stensaker & Harvey, 2013). The emphasis on this question has increased with the internationalization and globalization of higher education, and the rise of notions such as knowledge economy and knowledge society (Findly & Tierney, 2010; Brine, 2006; Robertson, 2005; Marginson & Van der Wende, 2006). Here, higher education institutions have been challenged to respond to the global competition that emerged for knowledge resources, including human resources such as students, researchers and experts.

Many of the studies mentioned above, in addition to Aldridge & Fraser (1999), Trigwell & Ashwin (2006), and Hovdhaugen & Aamodt (2009), have outlined improvised learning environments as a key tool for facing these challenges. The studies have identified a strong connection between the learning environments provided by higher education institutions and how many students the institutions attract, as well as a connection between learning environments and students' learning outcomes. In short, the better the learning environment in a given institution, the more new students it can attract and the better learning outcomes its students achieve.

Therefore, educational policies and reforms in many countries, in addition to key international organizations, have recently been paying increased attention to this concept, pushing higher education institutions to improve their learning environments (see for example, the law relating universities and university colleges passed by the Norwegian Parliament in 2005 [Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2014]; the quality code for higher education

introduced in 2011 [United Kingdom Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2014], the higher education opportunity act passed by the US Congress in 2008 [US Department of Education, 2014], in addition to the recommendations on higher education by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2000; European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2010; and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2004).

– *What demands have been introduced regarding this concept?*

In a comprehensive review, by Abualrub, *et al.* (2013), of the literature written on this concept, they identified three main lenses through which the concept of learning environment has been approached. The first lens sees learning environment as connected to pedagogical issues, including how teaching is conducted, and how curricula and study programs are designed and developed. The second lens focuses on the organizational and administrative arrangements needed to support teaching and learning activities, and their associated resources and facilities. The third lens looks at the networking opportunities offered to students for establishing and engaging in academic and social networks. A cross cutting theme is the importance of (1) addressing the increase in student diversity and numbers, (2) employing advanced technologies in teaching and learning, and (3) following market needs and the changes in job markets; all have been emphasized as core demands concerning higher education institutions' learning environments that have emerged as a result of the changes in higher education outlined above.

For the first demand, a strong focus has been put on developing teaching methods and learning facilities that can engage and support students with different learning cultures, improving administrative and capacities, welfare services, and infrastructures that cover the needs of an increased and diverse numbers of students, in addition to providing equal opportunities for all students to establish and join networks that fit their social and study interests. For the second demand, the emphasis has been on employing advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) in education, equipping teachers and students with the skills required for using them, and creating blended teaching methods where these technologies are with face-to-face communication. For the third demand, the stress has been on offering more programs and courses in applied sciences; specifically in the fields that are gaining more interest in market and industry, in addition to developing the curriculums to include more emphasis on work oriented skills.

Regardless of researchers' analytical orientations, their empirical findings have often depended on the students' perceptions of the concept, while neglecting the perspective of educational institutions. Although higher education institutions are held responsible of providing good learning environments, their views of the concept and how they address its associated demands, from an institutional perspective have rarely been investigated.

This paper looks at the learning environment demands outlined from the perspective of higher education institutions, specifically the universities. In particular, the paper aims to identify what organizational challenges that these demands might present to universities and how the universities can respond to them. (The contents of this paper have been developed and used as a main part of a framework established by the author for a study that he is currently conducting on how Norwegian universities are responding to the global demands regarding HEIs' learning environments).

– *Method used*

The research method used for the above purpose consists of two main steps. The first step was to find what directs and characterizes higher education institutions' behaviours; specifically the universities, towards external changes and demands. For this purpose, we drew on institutional theory and its views about the ways in which organizations respond to change, and on the results of institutional studies conducted on universities' institutional and organizational structures and behaviours.

The second step was to look at what have been mainly required from universities in the demands introduced in higher education studies concerning learning environment, and identify (a) what challenges each requirement present to universities' institutional structures features identified in the first step, and (b) how universities can respond to these challenges based on the views of institutional theory on organization' behaviour towards external challenges and changes. The findings of the two steps are present in the next section

Findings

What views have institutional theory presented about organizations' behaviour towards change?

The theory's main assumption is that organizations within the same field develop through time similar internal structures, values and norms that create common behaviours among them towards change (Olsen, 2007; Selznick, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1997). However, three different views have been represented in institutional research in terms of how the internal dynamics of organisations direct their behaviour.

The first view sees that organizations are mainly driven by the values and cultures of their members (Selznick; 1957, 1996, Barney, 1986; Dunn & Ginsberg 1986; Hatch, 1993). It says that through time, organizations' members develop sets of values, norms and cultures which spread within and across organizations in the same institution, and become the main reference based on which organizations respond to external changes and demands. According to this view, any change introduced to organizations is filtered through their members' sets of work values, norms and cultures. If it corresponds with them, it will be accepted. Otherwise, it will be rejected.

The second view disagrees with this. Instead of organizations' members and their associated norms and values, the external environment is perceived as the main director of organisations' behaviour. The demands of external forces such as society, market and government is seen to have the main say in how organizations' behave towards change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The main justification of this view is that organizations' existence and continuity rely on the legitimacy and support provided by the external forces that surround them (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Scott, 2001; Scott & Meyer, 1994). Therefore, they have no choice other than to follow what these forces demand and expect from them.

The third view, which is adopted here, combines the previous two views. It agrees that the organizations' survival depends on responding to the demands of external forces. However, it also stresses the role of organizations' members and their associated values and cultures, in the implementation of these demands (Greenwood & Hinings 1996; Edelman & Bening, 1999; Hrebiniak & Joyce, 1985; Meyer *et al.*, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1997). The view emphasizes that without the support and cooperation of their members, organizations will not be able to meet the demands introduced to them. Based on this, it sees that (1) organizations have to refer to their main internal powers to decide how to handle the demands of their external environment and the challenges they might represent to their values and structures, and (2) in cooperation with their internal loci of power, organizations attempt to search for strategic steps and organizational arrangements through which they can simultaneously maintain their internal values and structures, and address external demands with as little time and few internal conflicts as possible.

When doing this, organizations tend to look for role models among themselves. A phenomenon highlighted in many of the above studies, in addition to Oliver, 1997. According to these studies, organizations seek out competency blueprints in several ways, including direct or indirect imitation of successful role models. Still, when looking at outside models, the organizations attempt to adapt what they learn from these models to their own internal settings, in addition to the circumstances in their surrounding environments. As explained in the studies: in spite of the similarities developed among organizations within the same field; both in their structures and behaviours towards change, they have two reasons to be different from each other: the demands and conditions where they are located, and their own internal cultural and normative configurations. These configurations consist of common mission, norms and cultures embedded through time within each organization (see also, Greenwood *et al.*, 2008; and Scott 2004; March and Olsen, 2005). The studies have described these configurations as the identity of organization that distinguishes it from other organizations and contributes in shaping the ways in which they cope with the external challenges and changes.

What have the institutional studies on universities found regarding their organizational structures and behaviour?

Many institutional studies in higher education, including Clark (1972, 1983, 1987); Sporn, 1991; Meyer *et al.* (2007), Fry (2009); Olsen (2005); Ramirez & Christensen (2012); and Becher & Trowler (2001), found that universities have similar features that (1) spread across them as organizations within the same field, creating among them common institutional behaviours, and (2) are mainly developed by academics. As said in the studies, universities are organisations where academics have the dominant power in how education and research are organised, and where academics' values and principles form a main reference for how universities respond to the changes around them. Institutional autonomy, autonomy of disciplines, academic freedom and democracy, and free and critical thinking constitute common examples of academics' shared values which have spread and been institutionalized among universities, and become through time the main references based on which universities function and behave towards external change. This is in addition to academics' strong emphasis on (1) what they see as their core "mission", defined as acquiring and delivering knowledge in their disciplines, and (2) the protection of the traditions and standards they established for doing this, including (a) the requirements and conditions to join and graduate from educational and research programs in their academic fields, (b) the content of the

curriculums and materials used in these programs, and (c) the methods of designing, delivering and studying the curriculum contents. These values and principles have been stressed in the studies as the common ground on which all academics stand united in the face of external changes and challenges, regardless of their disciplines and professional backgrounds. In this context, universities have been described as “unions” or “federations” of different academic “tribes”. Each tribe has its own terminologies, language, heroes, and study and research traditions, but they all, as the studies said, share the same mission and adopt the values and principles outlined above as the main basis on which their “federations” should function.

In this context, the studies have also found that universities tend to look for role models among them and attempt to imitate the ways in which they are structured and behave towards change. In spite of this, the studies have stressed that universities’ behaviours are not identical to each other. A main reason mentioned for this is the organizational identity developed among the academics within each university. Here, the studies specifically pointed to the common values, mission, norms and habits embedded though time within each university; through a shared history of collective struggle and success stories that its members have gone through or “inherited”. These points, as said in the studies, form the identity or the spirit of the university that distinguishes it from other universities and helps it to stand in the face of and adapt to the handle the external challenges and changes. However, the studies have also added other two reasons for universities to be different from each other. The first reason is connected to country and region in which the universities are located. Here, the studies found that universities attempt to adapt what they learn from other universities to the demands and socio-economic structures in their region and country. The second reason is the increased global competition between universities resulted from emergence of the notion of knowledge economy and the pressures on higher education institutions to respond to the global and local market needs. As explained in the studies, due to this reason, universities attempt to distinguish themselves and compete which university can (1) provide the market and the society with the graduates with the knowledge and skills they need; in a shorter time and with a fewer costs, and (2) attract more knowledge resources, including students, teachers and researchers, that can enable them to do this, including students, teachers and researchers.

This, however, point to that academics are not the only players in deciding how universities should behave and function. In this context, many of the higher education studies mentioned above, in addition to Colbeck (2002); Jongbloed (2003);, Maassen & Stensaker (2011), found that academics’ power and capacity to run “their” organizations has been challenged by two other forces, the state and the market, especially since the emergence of the modern nation state and with the increase in global economic competition. In particular, massification, internationalization and globalization of higher education have challenged the academics’ control of universities, including (1) whom to teach; by forcing universities to open their doors to increased and diverse numbers of students, and compete for attracting more local and international students (2) what to teach; by pushing universities to focus on the market oriented programs and work skills; to meet the market orientations and the needs in job markets both in their regions and the globe (3) how to teach, by pressing universities for the employment of new technologies and methods in teaching.

Here; in the context of these changes, the pressures on universities to improve their learning environments (mentioned in the introduction) have come, emphasizing it as a key tool for providing a good quality of education to an increased and diverse number of students, and for winning the global competition emerged for attracting new students and meeting market

demands. As explained in the introduction, the main focus of these pressures has been on the importance of (1) addressing the increase in student diversity and numbers, (2) employing advanced technologies in teaching and learning, and (3) following market needs and the changes in job markets; all introduced to universities as the major demands they should meet when developing their learning environments. However, as shown below, these demands include four challenging requirements to universities; each of them can present a serious challenge to the universities' internal structures and traditions emphasized in research.

What organizational challenges can the emerged learning environment demands present to universities?

- The first main requirement that the learning environment demands (mentioned above and explained in the introduction) have placed on universities is to improve their administrative capacities in order to be able to (1) provide the massive waves of new students with the required information and support, (2) coordinate an increasing number of educational programs, (3) recruit additional teachers, (4) insure the implementation of newly introduced regulations, and (5) follow up with the logistics and budgets needed for all of this (Ellström *et al.* 2008; Del Favero 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Huang & Fisher, 2011; Stensaker *et al.* 2006; Fry, 2009). In this context, a strong pressure has been put on universities to employ additional numbers of professional administrators with wider authorities. This goes with the pressures on universities to adopt new public management methods which (1) include a strong focus on how to increase the numbers of students universities can attract and the numbers of their graduates, in a shorter time and with few costs, and (2) calls for increasing the number of professional managers and for more authority to be put in the hands (Olsen, 2005; Dill 2000; Del Favero, 2002; Birnbaum, 1989; Reed 2002; Ramirez & Christensen, 2012). This threatens the position of academics that have been mentioned in research as historically being the “rulers” of “their” universities.
- The second requirement focuses on the issue of diversity among students, asking universities to develop new teaching methods that can and address the increasing diversity in the students' learning cultures (Aldridge & Fraser, 1999; Macias & Dolan, 2009; March & Olsen, 2005). This presents a challenge to universities as they have to change the methods they have established through a long period of teaching a less diverse community of learners. Moreover, the focus of the demands with regard to this issue exceeds the learning cultures among students and includes the increased differences in their socio-cultural backgrounds. For this, universities have been asked to provide equal opportunities for all students to join and establish networks and associations that meet their social and cultural interests (Ippolito, 2007; Guo & Chase, 2011). The challenge for universities here is how to address this demand when there is a conflict between students' interests, backgrounds and or expectations and universities' cultural and social codes and traditions.
- The third requirement is related to the demand to universities to follow the progress in educational technologies when designing their learning environments. Universities have been asked to catch up with the new developments in these technologies and employ them in their teaching and learning activities (Adams & Granić, 2009; Land & Hannafin; 2000; Segrave & Holt, 2003; Kirschner & Vilsteren, 1997). The challenge to universities here goes with that mentioned in the previous point; how to “convince” their teachers who have

been using “old” teaching techniques for a long time to use the new technologies introduced in education.

- The fourth requirement is connected to the demand to universities to adapt to the orientations of market needs. Here, universities have been asked to give the priority to the applied fields of science both in their educational and research programs, in addition to focusing on work oriented skills in their curricula (Clark, 1998; Biesta 2011; Enders & Fulton, 2002; Findly & Tierney, 2010). This demand has come in the context of the pressures on universities to compete with other universities in the world which university can be the first to respond successfully to the market changes; a competition which emerged due to the rise of the notion of knowledge economy in the globe linking knowledge institutions to the economic developments (Gornitzka & Langfeld; 2008), Huang, 2006; Teichler, 2009, 2011). However, such demand presents a threat to the “tribal” structure of universities highlighted in research. Favours specific fields over the others goes against the principle of equality and mutual respect between universities’ academic “tribes”; one of the main values outlined in research as the basis on which universities have been developed as “federations” or “unions” of different academics from different disciplines.

How can universities respond to these challenges?

Based on institutional research’s third view about organization’ behaviour mentioned above and with reference to universities’ shared institutional characteristics identified in research, it is possible to expect that the ways in which universities address the challenges outlined in relation to these demands would include:

1. Developing a set of:
 - a) (Re) arrangements of how they organize and manage their activities; specifically those that are central to the relevant demands. This includes: the administration responsible of learning environment development, methods and technologies used for teaching, subjects of the characteristics of educational programs, and the contents of curricula.
 - b) Strategic steps to keep the new arrangements in line with their internal structures, values and traditions. The aim is to avoid internal clashes, and to meet the demands with as little internal conflict as possible.
2. A strong reliance on academics as universities’ main internal power. They are expected to be universities’ reference for developing the arrangements and plans for meeting learning environments demands.
3. A search for role models among other universities that work in similar socio-economic circumstances and face the same types of learning environment demands; attempt to imitate their ways in which they respond to those demands, but after filtering them against their own organizational cultures and identities.

Examples of universities’ responses to each challenge mentioned above will be provided in the presentation of this paper, in addition to examples from the empirical data that have been

collected till now in a field study which the author has been conducting on learning environments in Norwegian universities.

Conclusion

A main conclusion that can be drawn based on this paper is that more attention should be paid to universities' institutional dynamics in the research and policies which focus on learning environment in higher education. The above findings and assumptions can help as a framework for investigating how universities address the demands introduced in relation to their learning environment, by examining how universities' plans and strategies for meeting these demands are influenced by their different institutional features at play, and by exploring the interplay between them with regard to decisions that they made in response to the demands. Relevant questions here include (1) what factors influence the ability of a given university to successfully employ its internal work values and traditions for handling learning environment demands and the challenges they present, and (2) which learning environment challenge or challenges are the most difficult to handle by universities and why; what differences or similarities with regard to this question can be found within and among universities, and what reasons stand behind these differences and similarities. The last but not the least question is what resources and models the universities can refer to when they develop the ways that they use for addressing learning environment demands and challenges; what characterizes these resources; why universities refer to them and to which extent they are influenced by them.

Further studies that investigate these questions can provide a more comprehensive picture of universities' perspectives of learning environment and how they handle the demands and challenges associated to this concept. This will in its turn present additional contributions to fill the gap in learning environment studies and policies in higher education which, as mentioned in the introduction, in spite of their increased emphasis on the need for universities to continuously develop their learning environments, have paid less attention to their views of the concept and how they address its associated demands and challenges, from an institutional perspective.

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