

An Evaluation of The University as a Learning Organization

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Abstract: Problem Statement: Organizations have become dinosaurs vanished due to their inflexibility with the environment. Universities as organizations with traditional structure should take steps towards new structural design as well as technological innovations. Creating learning organization is one way of restructuring the organization toward vitality. **Question.** How do personnel of Kharazmi University evaluate the university for each indicators of Learning Organization? **Method:** The 30- item Standardized questionnaire of Weick and Leon's model (1995) was used to collect data to evaluate five indicators of a learning organization. A sample population of 248 was selected from full time employed administrative personnel of the University. Central tendency measures as well as Freidman Test and U Man Test were used to analyze the data. **Results:** While the first three indicators showed not desired, innovation and performance were relatively desired. **Conclusion:** The study has implications for the university leaders towards improvement of learning organizations. **Purpose:** This survey study was to evaluate Kharazmi University based on Weick and Leon's (1995) model of Learning Organization.

Key words: learning organization, university, evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Considering the historical trend of the establishment of organizations in recent decades, one will find that they have become dinosaurs vanished due to their inflexibility with the environment. To cope with global changes, the large organizations with traditional structure should take steps towards new structural design as well as technological innovations (Daft, 1987). Creating learning organization is one way of restructuring the organization toward vitality. A learning organization is one in which learning happens for continuous change. To facilitate this trend, a learning process should be in agenda of the organization (Sugerman (2000). Organizational learning, then, will be a process of finding mistakes and a chance of recovering and reformation (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

As Farr (2000) states organizational learning is a process in which organizational knowledge will be produces. This should specifically occur in such institutions as schools and universities. Learning, innovation, change, and competition should be flourished in universities, if not other institutions. Iranian universities claim to be competitive in the global education market. Moving toward learning organization might be one of major routes toward globalization and competitiveness. With the beginning of 1990s, organizations adopted a restructuring of their systems to be able to compete with the rapid changes of technology, economy, culture and politics. Leaders found that life of the organization highly depends on the learning as a major tool to save and make them effective. A research revealed that more than one third of the 500 large corporations collapsed in 1970s . The roots of these huge collapses could be found in lack of learning capacity of the members of the organizations (Senge, 1990). Training doesn't really occur. A research revealed that 90% of traditional trainings do not lead to a real learning in the work place (Detterman, 1993). Learning Organization is a type of organization whose activities and performances are reformed and recovered by knowledge and understanding.

A Learning Organization is one in which activities will be boosted by better understanding of its members staff. Learning Organization is one in which learning will be occurred cooperatively and change will happen constantly in order to be able to manage with the changing world (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). A L.O. is one in which staff is able to create new knowledge (Garvin, 1993). Learning organization facilitates organizational learning through new structures and strategies (Chacon, 2004). A learning organization has the capacity for effective learning in order to improve the organizational identity (Skerlavaj & Et. el., 2008). In a learning organization, mistakes are found by every single member of the organization and so are introduced the solutions (Argyris & Schon, 2008).

In an analysis of the literature on OLC, Chiva et al. (2007) carried out an integrative analysis of the literature on OLC and proposed five essential facilitating factors: experimentation, risk taking, interaction with the external environment, dialogue and participative decision making.

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Farhangi (2001) conducted a research for the purpose of designing a model to measure learning organizations in Iranian administrative system. The main indicators known in this research survey were organizational structure, decision making, culture, environment and technology. Following results were revealed: organizational structure in Iranian institutions were tough and inflexible although technology is prepared enough to accept change; visions are unclear; trainings did not lead to competencies required for managers; weak analysis of internal and external resources were usually introduced; a conservative culture with low risk taking ruled among the managers.

In a research conducted by Philips (2003) among some private sector firms, based on Senge's (1994) model of learning organization, it was revealed that there was a tremendous difference between the status quo and the desired (expected) situation in terms of innovation.

In a research conducted for the fulfillment of a doctorate dissertation, Smith (2003) tried to develop a conceptual model for learning organization at the university level. Smith's study used Senge's (1990) five disciplines of a *learning organization*: Personal Mastery, Shared Vision, Team Learning, Mental Models, and Systems Thinking. Each of the disciplines was defined by four levels of institutional involvement: (1) essence or value (state of being or mastery of a discipline) as the core; (2) principles or policies (guiding ideas or insights); (3) practices ("what is done"); and, (4) outcomes (expected results if a university was a *learning organization*). Twenty-five University and State leaders were purposively chosen to represent various levels of the University's governance structure. Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol developed to explore the existence and relevance of the components of the conceptual model. An audit of the study's data collection processes and interpretations confirmed the "reasonableness" of the findings. Findings of the study included: (1) Components of the conceptual model were present in the University and valued by the interviewees; (2) Reflection was added as a sixth discipline to the model; (3) Lack of clarity about the connection between organizational health and organizational/individual outcomes; and, (4) Perception of faculty isolation and lack of involvement with the organization.

In her study for Ph.D. degree, Collie (2002) used a *learning organization* framework to understand academic departments' efforts to improve teaching. While *higher education* institutions have long had structures and processes to facilitate organizational learning for institutional improvement, there is controversy over whether this results in improved performance. This research was situated amid the persistent concerns about the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. The theoretical framework guiding this research was generated from literature on *learning organizations*. A *learning organization* is devoted to continuous improvement through continuous learning. The establishment of three theoretical constructs represented the fundamental concepts of a *learning organization* and delineated the academic department as a *learning organization*: *Vision and Leadership*, *Knowledge and Communication Management*, and *Learning Culture*. This research addressed (1) the relationship among measures of the *learning organization* constructs, *Vision and Leadership*, *Knowledge and Communication Management*, and *Learning Culture*, and the measure of the construct Teaching Improvement and (2) the relationship between measures of the *learning organization* constructs, *Vision and Leadership*, *Knowledge and Communication Management*, and *Learning Culture*, and departmental characteristics. The population for the study consisted of academic departments in Doctoral/Research Universities-Extensive. A cross-sectional survey canvassed four hundred and two department chairs about their perceptions of departmental processes for the improvement of teaching. One hundred and ninety-six chairs responded, resulting in an overall response rate of 48.7%. Correlation and regression analyses revealed statistically significant relationships among the independent variables, measures of the *learning organization* constructs, *Vision and Leadership*, *Knowledge and Communication Management*, and *Learning Culture* and the dependent variable, the measure of the construct *Teaching Improvement*. Nine departmental characteristics showed statistically significant relationships with the measures of the *learning organization* constructs. The findings confirmed the association of *learning organization* behaviors with teaching improvement. Based on the results, departmental efforts to improve teaching should concentrate on the effective use of information about teaching, such as student evaluations, and the cultivation of an environment supportive of teaching.

There is a need for universities to develop stronger community linkages to respond to the complex social issues of the 21st century. Institutions should undergo change in order to more fully embrace their civic role, and community engagement. In a qualitative case study, Anderson (2006) explores how a new center for community partnerships has influenced change processes at one public research university. The study examines pre-center planning phases as well as the first three years of operation of the center. Data were collected through documents, observation, and one-on-one interviews. Interviews were conducted with 29 individuals from the university in fall 2005. The findings show that the decision to embark upon a change initiative was predominantly a response to external calls for improved university engagement in the community. However, within the university undertaking institutional change efforts was framed as an opportunity to advance scholarship. The center's main efforts promoted a conception of community engagement as a scholarly endeavor. The strategy to focus center programs on faculty and scholarly-based community engagement

reflected a culturally appropriate strategy to provide institutional affirmation of such activities. The center's efforts to foster change on campus were marked by development of programs that provided support directly to individual participants rather than through academic departments or administrative bodies. Finally, the center's early operation indicates that its culturally coherent strategies served to foster a new vision of community engagement by influencing individuals' meaning-making processes around civic engagement.

Motshekga-Sebolai (2003) emphasized on the need for lifelong learning among staff in higher education institutions since they are supposed to contribute to the economic and social development needs of the country and the need to keep abreast of change to provide effective and efficient service to their customers.

Beodeker (2006) identified six factors that supported collaboration between faculty and student affairs staff including the role of senior administrative leadership, the power of personal relationships, promoting the principles of *learning organizations*, dialogue, intentionality and viewing collaboration as a process. Most importantly, the study introduces the theoretical foundations of intercultural communication as a means for understanding and advancing collaboration within the academic environment.

Zally & Jafarnejad (2002) conducted a research to measure learning organization among the state universities in Tehran. Based on Weick and Leon's model (1995), results revealed that universities in the study were not learning organizations. The study also observed that mean of indicators were below medium level. Mean of leadership with vision, however, was 2.75. The researchers concluded that university leaders in the population studied implemented little innovation in administrative affairs. Poor strategic planning as well as low accountability were observed in the study. Academic staff evaluation by students have been conceived as to mislead university leaders due to being influenced by the social and political culture of the education environment.

Weick and Leon (1995) introduced 5 principles to evaluate a learning organization. These are mainly: *Visions, Standards, Knowledge acquisitions, Innovations and Performance* (Diagram 1). According to this model, the following formula may determine the degree to which a university may fit with learning organization model:

$$Learning\ Organization = f(V, S, K, I, P)$$

The multiple sign means that if one of the factors die, all organization will die too. In other words, a zero degree for one factor will turn the whole equation into zero, no matter if the others stand excellent.

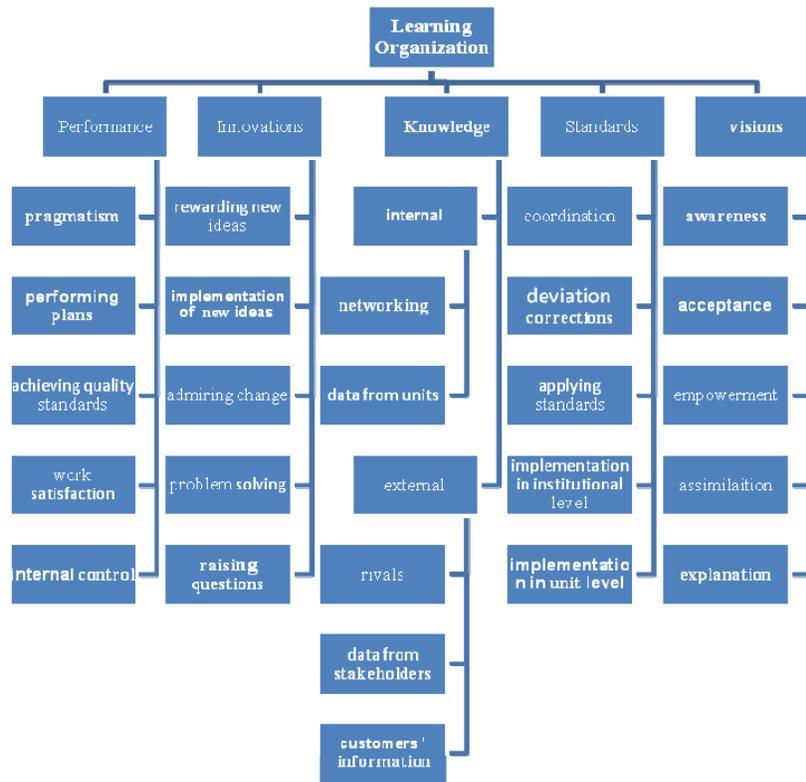


Diagram 1: Weick and Leon's model of Learning Organization (1995)

2. Purpose for the Research:

The present study was to evaluate Kharazmi University based on Weick and Leon's model of Learning Organization. Questions to be answered are as follows:

Question 1. How do personnel of Kharazmi University evaluate the university for each indicators of Learning Organization?

Question 2. Do all responses have the same value for indicators?

Question 3. How different is the total value of the status quo and the highest desired situation at university level ?

Question 4. What is the perception difference between male and female personnel?

Question 5. What is the perception difference among the personnel with different education background?

Methodology:

3.1. Population:

The statistical population for present study included all 702 full time employed administrative personnel of Kharazmi University. By use of Krejci & Morgan's table (1970), sample population was 248. Only 171 responded to questionnaires distributed.

3.2. Instrumentation:

Standardized questionnaire of Weick and Leon's model (1995) was used to collect data to evaluate five indicators of a learning organization, namely *Visions, Standards, Knowledge acquisitions, Innovations and Performance*. The main body of questionnaire has 30 items, where each six items refers to one indicator. A scale of zero as minimum value to 10 as maximum value was given to each item. Each indicator could, therefore, hold a maximum of 10, and a maximum of 100000 for the multiplication of all five indicators in the model. The Persian translation of the questionnaire was handed to professors and experts in the field to make sure the validity of items. Based on feedbacks received from experts, minor corrections were made on the instrument. By use of the Alpha Cronbach Test, internal reliability of the indicators in questionnaire showed a degree of 92% for leadership with visions, 84% for standards, 79% for knowledge acquisitions, 74% for innovations, and 77% for performance.

Data Analysis:

This survey research used a descriptive method to explain the status of the indicators of the model in the university for the study. The research, then, is a case study. For analysis of data, central tendency measures, as well as Friedman and U Test, were used.

Results:

Tables 1 and 2 shows a demographic analysis of the sample population. As it is observed, 55.6% of the population are males and 44.4 are females(table 1). In terms of level of education of the personnel, 67% of the personnel hold a university degree, being either 2 year associate degree, 4year bachelor degree, or masters' and doctorate degree (table 2).

Table 1: Frequency distribution of sample population at Kh. U.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	76	44.4
Male	95	55.6
Total	171	100

Table 2: Distribution of Level of Education in sample population at Kh. U.

Education	Frequency	percentage
Less high school dip.	6	3.5
High school diploma	51	29.8
Associate degree	12	7
Bachelor's degree	77	45
Master's degree	24	14
Doctorate	1	0.6
Total	171	99.9

Questions 1. How do Kharazmi University personnel evaluate the university for each indicators of Learning Organization? Vision holds the lowest mean with 1.69 and performance is highest with 4.10 among the indicators as shown in table 3. Based on a range of 0 - 10 scale on the questionnaire, three sets of value were selected as not desired (0-3.33), relatively desired (3.34-6.66), and desired (6.67-10). Therefore, data from table 3 could be distributed in table 4 according to the value determined. As data reveals in table 4, the first three indicators (visions, standards, and knowledge acquisitions) stand low and not desired from the perspective of

the university administrative personnel. The next two indicators (innovations and performance) stand relatively desired according to the views of the personnel of the university.

Table 3: Description of the Indicators of Learning Organization at Kh. U.

Indicators	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Visions	1	8.33	1.69	1.26
Standards	1	8.17	2.52	1.47
Knowledge acquisition	1	8.33	2.87	1.65
Innovations	1	8.83	3.66	1.74
Performance	1	8.50	4.10	1.91
Total	30	202	89.66	37.93

Table 4: Degree of desirability for each indicator at Kh. U.

Research Question	Not desired 0 - 3.33	Relatively desired 3.34 - 6.66	Desired 6.67 - 10
Visions	1.69		
Standards	2.52		
Knowledge acquisitions	2.87		
Innovations		3.66	
Performance		4.10	

Question 2. Do respondent have different values for indicators? To answer to this question, Friedman' test was run and result was shown in table 5. Accordingly, respondents understood the meaning of all items of indicators in the questionnaire and responded differently.

Table 5: Results of Freidman Test

X square	1124.532
Degree of freedom	29
Meaningfulness level	0.000

Question 3. How different is the total value of the status quo and the highest expected situation at university level ? According to formula, values for learning organization are as follows:

$$\text{Observed} = (1.69) \cdot (2.52) \cdot (2.87) \cdot (3.66) \cdot (4.10) = 183.41$$

$$\text{Expected} = (10) \cdot (10) \cdot (10) \cdot (10) \cdot (10) = 100000$$

As the formula reveals, there is a great difference between the values staff have given for the present situation of the university based on learning organization model and what is expected.

Question 4. What is the perception difference of male and female personnel? To respond to this question, the U Man Test was run and results revealed that perceptions of male and female personnel are the same and no meaningful difference could be seen between genders in the study (table 6).

Table 6: Results of U Man Test between genders at Kh. U.

N	Mean	P value	UM V
Male:95	71.59	0.76	2477.5
Female: 76	73.67		

P<0.05

Question 5. What is the perception difference among the personnel with different education background? Result of U Man Test revealed that Kh.U. personnel have the same perception no matter what the level of their educational background is (table7). No meaningful difference was observed in this respect.

Table 7: Results of U Man Test between different Educational Background

N	Mean	P value	UM V
Low Education: 57	68.52	0.080	2295.5
High Education:111	81.21		

P<0.05

Discussion and Conclusion:

KharazmiUniversity (Kh. U.) is one of the oldest universities in Iran. Yet, neither Kh.U. nor other Iranian universities have a remarkable rank among the world 100 top universities. University of Tehran holds 1373 and Sharif Technical University stands in 2255 in the world rank. While Saudi stands the first, Iranian universities as a whole stand the second, and Lebanon and United Arab Emirates are the 3rd and 4th respectively in Middle East. Change and innovation should be taken serious if Kh.U. is willing to move upward and to achieve higher ranks.

Universities as learning organizations should implement strategic goals. Leadership in the universities should have clear vision. Flow of systematic knowledge acquisition should facilitate transaction of vision to the lowest level of the organization. While the young colleges and universities concentrate on taught courses, most of the old universities lead research. A leading research university then should be open to change and innovations. Change may be responses to inner calls or community partnerships. Empowering the human resources of universities is one way of pushing them toward a learning organization. Kh.U. seems to be in a normal situation in terms of the supporting staff. While in some organization females are in minimum side of the equation, a normal distribution of almost equal gender of staff is a positive sign of coexistence among personnel. With 70% of staff holding a degree of higher education one can say that personnel stands in a good level of understanding basic principles of learning organization. They do have prerequisites for the acquisition of knowledge. Most personnel have taken courses in computer skills (IDSL). Yet personnel requires leadership support for innovation and change.

Hult et al. (2004) pointed out that if a firm is to be innovative, management must devise organizational features that embody a clear learning orientation. Specifically, some cultural factors such as decentralization in decision making, error tolerance or social relations have been shown to affect knowledge and innovation outcomes through organizational learning. Alegre, J. & Chiva, R. (2008) found a positive and significant link between organizational learning capability and innovation in industry. In their study, Organizational Learning Capability was determined by five essential facilitating factors: *experimentation, risk taking, interaction with the external environment, dialogue and participative decision making*. Innovation is conceived as an individual and collective learning process that aims to find new ways of solving problems. As a result, innovation seems to depend on the company's capability to learn through which new knowledge is developed, distributed and used. Assuming that innovation and performance in the model taken for the present research need visions, standards/planning and release of knowledge of university leadership as well as management's admiring of an open system to communicate with outside the university, one may conclude that low observed mean of the data on the first three indicators would then lead to low innovation and performance. An innovative and risk management seems to be implemented in Kh.U. to facilitate change and to improve the learning capability.

In a comparative analysis of the organizational learning process in Slovenia, Croatia, and Malaysia, Vlado, et.al. (2008) found that when acquiring information, Slovenian and Croatian companies rely more on internal sources (own employees, past decisions, etc.), and informal team meeting while Malaysian companies tend to rely more on external sources and more often have employees dedicated to searching for external information, formal decision making and written communication. Kh.U. has similarities with Slovenia and Croatia in terms of decision making process, depending on internal sources and informal communication system. In the era of globalization of education, Kh.U. requires a more open system, a more decentralized decision making and participation of lower levels of administrative staff in order to make an active and creative university.

Knowledge acquisition and knowledge distribution play important roles in organizational learning. According to Daft and Huber (1987), organizational learning occurs along two dimensions: the systems-structural dimension, which focuses on the acquisition and distribution of information, and the interpretive dimension, which involves the interpretation of that information. Interpretation and understanding of information by institutional actors are associated with knowledge. Daft and Huber observed that both activities contribute to organizational learning. The results of present study revealed that while staff in Kh.U. are willing to participate in knowledge gathering, very little they are involved in. Not too much of information is fluently distributed from top to bottom level of the university structure. The more contribution of personnel in knowledge acquisition, the stronger the structural links and more accurate will be the decisions made. One suggestion for Kh.U. would be establishment of an active planning and evaluating center. Another suggestion could be to conduct a study to identify what factors support or inhibit personnel and administration affairs in their efforts to work collaboratively to improve personnel learning and increase institutional effectiveness. Institutions of higher learning are expected to provide opportunities for economic and social advancement by producing highly skilled manpower who should be able to participate in a highly competitive global economy. Institutions of higher education are *learning organizations* and they should implement lifelong learning.

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