

University transformation: New demands and coping strategies

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Introduction

Universities have had their own cultural belief systems that may now be threatened by need to transform themselves to match the new demands. This paper is presented with the view of a university as an open system and in constant interaction with its environments (Kekale, 2003). Such environments can be internal or external. With this perception of a university, the challenges that universities may face require them to assess and scan the environment and respond appropriately. Situations may require an exercise of flexibility and appropriate response to tackle challenges. Emphasis shall be put on strategies that can assist universities to transform themselves and tackle the challenges.

Some facts about universities

The facts about universities (also referred to as higher education institutions) may find themselves demanded to deliver on new possibilities such as incorporating research to teaching obligations. Few academics may be involved in fundamental research activities of international calibre. Apparently HEIs have always survived on state funding of their funding needs from the state through the responsible ministries to cover their teaching and operational costs. In many universities the budgetary supports from central governments have in recent years taken a nosedive due to the plethora of economic challenges.

Strategies to tackle some of the key areas

In light of the challenges that HEIs may face, the institutions need to redefine their positions in the future (vision) as well as their purpose as organizations (mission). The institutions need to respond and adapt so that they are able to compete with the regional institutions and beyond (Amaral, Jones & Karseth, 2002) as required by the demands. They have to come up with master plans to tackle the challenges, and the following recommendations are appropriate with a focus on only three of the critical areas namely: their institutional profiles, organizational structures and work integration, research activities, and funding.

Institutional profiles

Self analysis

To address issues regarding profile universities, HEIs need to scrutinize their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). This will enable the institutions to compare their internal potentials, their current strengths and weaknesses as well threats that may emerge from the internal and external environments (Zechlin, 2010). HEIs may have their traditional deep-rooted belief in their 'history, unique accomplishment, and sentiment' (Clark, 1972) all of which need change rather than stick to their historical traditions (Amaral, Jones & Karseth, 2002). Thus each institution's path dependency analysis is imperative.

Universities have to go regional and of course global and obtain more opportunities. Their legitimacy cannot just remain regional or just national but has to be in tandem with all the environmental constituencies that now include the international. To free themselves from the national enslavement one option is for the institutions to include foreign or international or exchange students and staff partly for the sake of uplifting their reputation and global status as 'those who have persisted together for some years in one place will have ... stream of shared experience, which they elaborate into a plausible account of group uniqueness' (Clark, 1972:179).

Some universities may have staff used to only teaching roles. Currently, the academic staff may now realize they also have to add research obligations to the traditional teaching roles as university institutions. Some academic staff members may have every reason to resist the research roles. Some will prefer remaining good teachers than become poor researchers. Some academic staff members may have to retire soon so may resist the new research task. Staff development programmes must be held to sensitize such staff that research is another institutional priority area that should be put high on the institutional agenda. Such programmes may assist academic staff to readjust on the perception of their job description. Staff development programmes can assist to remove the notion that the institutions could only stick to the traditional role (teaching).

The mission statement

To realize any change in the university profile, it is vital that the institutions' mission statements are revisited as this provides the internal and external definition of the universities (Holttä & Karjalainen, 1997:230). A redefinition of the mission statements will assist the

academic profession to rededicate itself to the new missions and type of work. The new missions will redefine the purpose of the universities and their new goals while this shall give the institutions direction on how those goals are going can be met. This will also help improve the performance of different sub-units, units and the institution as a whole.

Organizational structure and work integration

University leadership

Institutional leadership plays a major role for an organization to adjust and meet demands. Every university has to ensure that it has a leadership that is capable to ensure the institution adjusts and adapts according to the new requirements. When a university faces challenges, it may require an institutional leadership that is strategic and has a clear vision of the future. That said, there has to be changes if need be for institutional leaders with capacity to diagnose accurately what is needed for the HEI to move forward. There has to be academic leaders at all levels from the basic unit to institutional level that are able to ‘develop cohesive strategies and policies’ (Amaral, Jones & Karseth, 2002:289). Such leaders have to be individuals who can contribute more to the achievement of set objectives and goals even at the lowest level of the university. It is important that such leaders be reputable academic leaders in both teaching and research for their influence to have meaningful impact in the university.

Teamwork and goal setting

Strategic objectives have to be discussed with various subunits such as departments, faculties and so forth before they are adopted as binding (Zechlin, 2010). There has to be non imposition of solutions to challenges that the university faces as doing so may result in some stakeholders resisting to implement the ideas. It is vital that the university considers quantifying output. This will help the performance results of different sub-units, units, and the institution to become more visible. For instance a number of graduates the institution or department shall produce in a given year can help the institution to remain focused. The institution can also emphasize on short-term tangible outputs as these may be achieved much sooner while they have motivational effect. For instance, any faculty may quantify the number of research papers that shall be published in a particular period. However, setting unrealistic quantified objectives has to be avoided as this may have a negative impact after a failure to achieve the set objective.

Periodical evaluation at all levels should be considered. This can be done through feedback on outcomes at all levels even at basic subunit levels. The university must allow open discussions with academics and stakeholders so as to allow constructive criticism. This would assist the institution to amend its goals or even adjust accordingly while this brings about a democratic assessment of a department and institution at large. This is imperative for the institution to know how it is performing. Feedback can be an effective self evaluation mechanism.

Loose coupling

The way university units relate to each other can assist the institution move forward. It is recommended that there be loose coupling in an institution - a situation where its units such as departments only become partially connected to each other but able to work independently. Holtta & Karjalainen (1997:230) refer to loose coupling as organized anarchy when subunits 'become reactive to external impulses at the basic unit level'. Loose coupling gives the academics opportunities to discuss and plan meetings at department level (Holtta & Karjalainen, 1997). With loose coupling, 'if there is a breakdown in one portion...then this breakdown is sealed off and does not affect other portions' of the HEI (Weick, 1976). For instance, if one programme fails to attract applicants, it can be suspended or even be closed without the other programmes being affected. Units will therefore be protected from harmful effects of other units. Loose coupling will therefore enhance the chances for individual sub-units of the university to survive independently.

Loosely coupled units will also easily screen the environment properly and adjust without affecting other units and the whole system. Units will therefore quickly adapt as they quickly get appropriate feedback from the internal and external environment. For instance when the engineering faculty has been providing engineers in the country or region, if there is no more need to churn out graduates from the discipline, the recruitment must quickly be reduced or even stopped. Therefore with loose coupling, there will be quick response to environmental demands while units may seize opportunities more easily. This means different basic units such as departments will be able to address the key issues in the way they see fit to achieve the set objectives of the institution thereby emphasizing on the self regulating mechanism. Another feature of loose coupling is full freedom to allocate duties among the faculty members (Holtta & Karjalainen, 1997) thereby ensuring rapid response to a stimuli without being caught up in the institutional red tape. At low levels is the ability to know strengths and

weaknesses of the subunit better than those that are outside it. However, inasmuch as loose coupling is recommended, this should not mean the university management abdicates its duty but will need to get involved on strategic issues (Holttä & Pulliainen, 1996 in Holttä, 2003).

Programmes and curriculum

To achieve their organizational goals and objectives, it is imperative that universities reconsider their degrees and curriculum. The institution has to review programs and courses. In fact, universities have to be flexible in offering programs and courses. They have to design courses that are market oriented. Laredo (2007) advocates the pursuance and/or introduction of degree programmes that enhance the employability of the alumni. Thus degree programmes have to be relevant to the economy. It follows that programmes have to be scrapped if they become irrelevant. Alternatively, universities can combine some programmes to strengthen them other than phasing them out altogether. The programme relevance can also be quantified to create some indicators. For instance a reasonable number of alumni absorbed in the labour market may be an indication of the programme relevance. This is so as the university environment boundaries have become permeable with growing importance to the environment while departments have to be committed to the institutional mission and goals, and produce or maintain degree programmes as per requirements of the environment (Holttä & Karjalainen, 1997).

Curriculum is one of the most important products that universities can offer to their customers (the students). The institutions should carry out curriculum evaluations in terms of their content, purpose, sequence, instructional activities and evaluation to mention a few. Literally universities have to ensure that their institutional curricula meet the demands of the current and impending situations. This will give the departments the ability to plan and develop the activities at their subunit levels. However, this should not mean that central administration must not intervene in order to ensure a proper balance. Thus in their institutional curricula, the program missions, purposes and content of what is important for the university students to learn must be clear. Where necessary, programmes and/or courses have to be changed, maintained or even dropped.

Research activities

The traditional role vis-à-vis new demands

Some universities may have the path dependency of being teaching universities but a new challenge that regards addition of research to the traditional role of just teaching may now exist as HEIs. Universities have to gear themselves up as central actors in the new knowledge production through research (Laredo, 2007). Outlining the new task (of research) may be one thing while putting into practice can be quite another. Some academics may be required to alter their deep rooted perceptions that they have always been mere teachers. Intervention is required to change the perception. Staff development programmes can act as a consultative active instead of imposing the extra institutional focus. Consultation will make the academics part of the change processes. Universities need the goodwill of all staff members if the change is to be successful while the ‘change will not succeed unless there is satisfaction with the new task at hand’ (McCaffery, 2004:237). So consulting the academic staff can raise their concerns particularly on how best they can be prepared to tackle the challenge of research. McCaffery (2004) suggest consultation as a vital strategy to transform the academics to accept the challenge (of research). McCaffery (2004) advises the change agents (e.g. the dean) to treat the past for instance of being mere teachers with respect. Thus while the new task (research) at hand may be stressed, importance of the traditional task (teaching) needs to be focused on too. Convincing the staff of the importance of research as part of the institutional agenda should be stressed with other university expectations highlighted too. The academic staff needs to be aware that research and teaching are complimentary; therefore the research aspect should be strengthened while academic excellence can be raised through research.

Change agents

Individual differences in the academic staff have to be tolerated. The change from being only teachers to become researchers also may be accepted at different rates by the academics and that has to be accepted. To quicken the pace of change on the new focus (of research), Kirkland (2010) suggests the formation of academic research teams. This can allow brainstorming at lowest levels so that the academics develop and sharpen research skills while this can add credibility of the research. Through the use of research teams, good working relationships can also be cultivated. Alternatively there has to be professional research support with funding bodies ‘allocating research grants on competitive basis’ (Kirkland,

2010). This can quicken the change of the academics to realize the research task.

Alternatively, teaching time can be reduced for academics with research projects. This can motivate many academics to carry out research.

Prestige and research

Universities need to realize the importance of a place on the global map, prestige that can only be achieved through international ranking (such as in the Shanghai ranking) which cannot be done through teaching as it is not part of the considerations. Research can bring the prestige. University academics can lift the institution's prestige through the international rankings of universities through publications. Beside prestige, international ranking can also enhance chances for institutions to successfully compete for talented students and reputable academics not only from the region but from the global community, individuals who can carry out reputable research projects for the institution while that shall also be a reflection of how the institution is performing as an organization.

The socio-economic role and research

Universities have a key role to play as catalysts for social and economic development (Kirkland, 2010) through the dissemination of their knowledge transfer to the private sector in addition to teaching and research. Thus interaction with knowledge users, the industry, is vital. Laredo (2007) suggests that firms 'develop strong connections with academic labs...to master new knowledge. Thus universities have to contribute to the socio-economic development through transfer of research skills or knowledge gained. This enables the carrying out of research relevant to the requirements of the country and even international needs. Also, facilitating hands-on experience can be vital to assist the institutions' academics to sharpen their research skills while knowledge is circulated to interested economic actors thereby contributing to the economic development. The institutions should pursue and expand their areas (e.g. ICT) while other avenues must be explored based on the environmental needs. Thus the national and the international environment have to be considered. The institutions can do this through the creation of international research networks and collaborations without despising interdisciplinary research (Kirkland, 2010). Although loose coupling can be critical among the institutional basic units, research collaboration among themselves and even foreign teams can improve quality of research while bringing financial benefits. Alternatively university research teams have to consider teaming up with the private sector research teams effective ways of responding to the environmental research needs. This can create some working relationships between the academic community and the external society.

This can also improve the resource inflow through possible increased industrial funding of the institutions.

Resources and research

Research opportunities at universities need resource availability (Holttä & Karjalainen, 1997). The issue of time for research activities has to be looked into too because the academics have to teach (which is usually considered as the primary task) and at the same time carry out research. To realize purposeful focus on research, academics with research projects can have their teaching time reduced. The academic staff can alternate their focuses on research and teaching so that none of the two suffers. Financial and material resources are also required for research to succeed.

Funding

Universities have to find ways to expand revenues to compensate for decreasing resource inflows that may be needed. Universities are institutions that are expected to do ‘more’ with ‘less’ (McCaffery, 2004). Universities are required to fulfil all expectations namely teaching, research and transfer of the knowledge with reduced amount of resources. For state universities, resource support may have fallen with stiff competition emerging universities for the same resources support. Still they may be expected to play remarkable roles with decreased funding (Holttä & Karjalainen, 1997). That state universities may face diminished resource inflows means that the few resources that are at the institutions’ disposal have to be allocated and used wisely. It is advisable for universities to use a reward system to allocate required resources depending on the quality and/or quantity done at any level of the university. Jongbloed & van der Knoop (1999) refer to this as performance based funding. For instance for a certain guaranteed resource support, Zechlin (2010) suggests that output be given in quantity (e.g. number of graduates in a year) and quality (e.g. required qualifications for enrolment). With a decline in funding universities have to show creativity in securing other funding avenues.

The ‘third’ mission

Universities have to consider the ‘Third’ mission which is a beneficial relationship of the community and the university (Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008) as a way to improve university revenue. With healthy relationships with the environment, the universities may be able to tap external revenue while the community stakeholders also benefits. A good chain

links between universities and the outside environment through university-private partnerships for purposes of revenue creation is required. Universities must create and strengthen relations with large firms and other sectors through commercial research, relations that normally produce contractual and financial flow into the institutions (Laredo, 2007; Slaughter, 2010) while also promoting further innovation (Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008). As the environment has to be expanded beyond the region, universities can emphasize and establish strong international research collaborations to solve problems of research funding and support. While this can be a viable option, universities have steadfast and not be swayed in the plan to achieve the institutional goals as some external assistance may come with strings attached.

Contracting

Clark (1972) proposes a diversified funding base for an organization. Contract activities can be a viable source of funding of any university. Various forms of contracting can be considered. Signing contracts with the university or HE ministry can be an option for allocation of funds. Such funding has to be a product of negotiation. For instance production of a specific number of published research papers can result in a certain amount of funding into the department, faculty or institution depending on who the contractee shall be. Such contracts shall be binding. This could also have a motivational effect to achieve set objectives while enabling a march towards adjustment. This can also assist in the adoption of effective budgeting approaches to meet the sub-unit objectives while working within the available resources. But how to get the academics committed to the implementation of the contract can be another challenge that needs to be taken care of.

Tuition fees

Introduction of tuition fees can another option available for a university to augment dwindling financial resource inflows. The tuition fees can be justified as ‘those who benefit should at least share in the costs’ (Johnstone, 2003:4) while costs of higher education should be shared between taxpayer and recipient (Eicher & Chevailier, 2002). The tuition fees can be some sort of cost sharing. However, for any university to opt for tuition fees the institution has to be aware of government policy and regulations have regarding tuition fees. It must also be noted that tuition fees as a source of revenue can be counterproductive. High tuition fees may lead to bottlenecks in enrolment where only those with rich economic backgrounds may end up enrolling on the basis of their ability to pay. That tuition may lead to a decline in the youth

cohort and ultimately meaning less attraction of the institution's targeted student population must not be underestimated. So should tuition fees be considered, the amounts have to be affordable to the students.

Other fund raising options

Besides securing some funding assistance through research relationships, universities must also consider fund-raising options. Contract teaching and company training (particularly of short courses) can be a way of exchanging educational and research services for resources from the community (Jongblood & van der Knoop, 1999). The institution have to consider offering consulting services for a fee to entrepreneurs who may wish to start small businesses in the region, country and even beyond as Pennsylvania State University does (Breznitz & Feldman, 2010). While such consultations will improve the available resources at the institution, it will connect the university with businesses through faculty advice. Universities can collaborate with enterprises by providing internship. While this broadens opportunities for graduating students' market, universities can also benefit financially. Soliciting donations and sponsoring to get income can be other options that universities can utilise. The institutions can also augment their resource inflows through letting out their institutional and faculty infrastructures such as halls and sports arenas for a fee.

Decentralised budgeting

With loose coupling recommended for universities, so is decentralised budgeting system (Jongblood & van der Knoop, 1999). Sub-units such as departments have to use their financial allocations according to their needs. This is justifiable as sub-units heads such as department chairpersons stand closer to professionals on the working floor and know better how best allocated funds can be used for the purposes of teaching and research. However, a laissez-faire policy on this issue should be avoided lest funds can be abused. Thus audit committees have to be formed to put some checks and balances in the use of funds thereby assuring efficiency in the process. Undue expenditures have to be avoided while the resource recipient (e.g. department) should be flexible with changing circumstances for financial resource usage. Available resources have to be used wisely. Therefore universities have to create accountability mechanisms to ensure better use of the allocated resources

Conclusion

The paper put forward recommendations on only a few key areas that require strategies to address the challenges that universities may face. Focus was on the institutional profile, organizational structure and work integration, research activities, and funding among other areas that have to be attended to. Admittedly, these areas are critical for the transformation of universities to meet the current demands. However, other areas have to be looked into too for expectations and transformation of universities to be achieved.

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