

Is the higher education institution a learning organization (or can it become one)?

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In this issue of *The Learning Organization*, the articles focus on answering the ominous questions behind determining if or how higher education institutions can be conceptualized as learning organizations. On the surface, a higher education institution may appear as the perfect incubator for a learning organization; however, as readers can learn from the articles, the deeper one delves into the topic, the more obscure the linkage between higher education institutions and learning organizations becomes. Practitioners in higher education will find these articles particularly appealing as all contain very specific examples and offer solutions for instant application. Practitioners outside higher education will similarly uncover outstanding insights. In particular, organizations replete with deep individual expertise that are loosely coupled and lack learning flow from the individual to the group and then the organization will find these articles insightful because in general that brief description applies to many of the situations described by the authors in this issue of *The Learning Organization Journal*.

The articles start with [Lauer and Wilkesmann \(2017\)](#) in *The Governance of Organizational Learning – empirical evidence from best-practice universities in Germany*, and they advance the leadership recommendation through governance approaches. The authors review transactional and transformational governance models through 21 semi-structured interviews across members of rectorate, teaching practitioners and higher education management. Through the interviews and exploration of transactional and transformational governance models, the authors show that organization learning, and more importantly double-loop learning, can occur with guidance by both governance forms. The authors conclude that the transformational governance model enable learning more fluidly than transactional most likely as a result of academic resistance to the top-down approach. The guidance to practice equates to focusing on the governance model and vision of change, which is applicable beyond higher education institutions.

[Gentle and Clifton \(2017\)](#), in *How does Leadership Development help Universities Become Learning Organizations*, explore the leadership discussion through evaluating the impact of leadership development course participation and learning organization improvements. The authors find that the learning climate and structure are key characteristics to expand the linkage toward building learning organizations. Specifically, the authors recommend that higher education institutions enhance the learning climate through a more systematic-embedded mentoring and action learning that magnify the wider workforce in developing shared vision. The recommendations by [Gentle and Clifton \(2017\)](#) can effortlessly apply in practice beyond the scope of their study.



Friedman and Kass-Shraibmann (2017) discuss what it takes to become a superior college president in their article, *What it takes to be a Superior College President: transform your institution into a learning organization*. The authors assert that the “old ways of running an institution of higher learning need to be overhauled”. Friedman and Kass-Shraibmann (2017) base the assertion on the advances of the Forth Industrial Revolution, which has adjusted toward technology and learning to transform corporations through flattening, adaptability and agility. They recommend very similar progression to higher education institutions and suggest a new leadership paradigm. Whether the reader sits within the higher education context or outside, the authors’ recommendations are useful to all. Particularly the focus on silo busting and flowing of knowledge from those trying to hoard their specialization at the detriment to the benefit of the entire system. But this is just one example from an article rich in recommendations for leaders everywhere.

In *Leading Entrepreneurial e-learning Development in Legal Education: a longitudinal case study of ‘universities as learning organizations’*, the authors expand to a longitudinal study supporting many leadership points brought forth in the earlier articles. The authors outline two broad waves of development and key aspects relevant throughout. The findings illuminate how learning organization behaviors appear as collaboration expands. Throughout the article the authors expand on four key areas that all practitioners can employ in developing a learning organization and focusing on building collaboration in the system.

Next is a review of Dr Stephen Watson’s 2000 article explaining why management academics rarely advise their own institutions. In this interview with the author, Nguyen and Hansen (2017) create a framework based upon the original hypotheses and offer suggestions for future research. For practitioners in higher education, the question remains – why do not management academics on the staff at the institution act as advisors or consultants to the institution? To practitioners the same question applies for those individual experts on staff. Are you utilizing your team as widely as possible?

Next, Leisyte *et al.* (2017) explore a three-year study to answer if learning organizations counterbalance the processes for enhancing academic excellence and market-oriented process orientation. In *Balancing Countervailing Processes at a Lithuanian University*, the authors validate why different results originate across different schools. Specifically, the authors demonstrate how new rules and regulations performed solely by the administration did not promote learning and were overly met with resistance. The case offers an example of how management with support of multi-stakeholders successfully rebalances the organization toward success. And a point most likely applicable both inside and out of higher education, the case discussed the adoption factors leading toward institutionalization of performance-based systems.

For those familiar with Watkins and Marsick’s DLOQ, Voolaid and Ehrlich (2017) utilize the instrument to analyze the learning structures of two higher education institutions in Estonia. The authors of *Organizational Learning of Higher Education Institutions: the case of Estonia* find that the two organizations are learning organizations per the DLOQ scoring of 84 respondents. In addition, the research uncovers which characteristics the organizations’ learning depends upon. For practitioners in higher education settings, the article offers points of consideration when evaluating the organization.

Dee and Leisyte (2017) explore knowledge transformation across group boundaries. In *Knowledge Sharing and Organizational Change in Higher Education*, the authors examine the ability of managers and academics to maintain the flow of knowledge. They provide a table useful for practitioners through outlining the relationship of boundary condition and organization knowledge flows. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that institutions can

foster knowledge creation and sharing during change, which supports practical implication in converting any organizational change into a learning process.

For a deeper analysis of knowledge creation, sharing and transfer in the higher education context, Rowley and Veer Ramjeawon (2017) outline the barriers and enablers in their article *Knowledge Management in Higher Education Institutions: enablers and barriers in Mauritius*. In this final article of the issue, the authors interview 11 senior academics and create a table outlining key enablers and barriers that may apply more broadly. The table is useful to leaders in any context.

The articles throughout this issue of *The Learning Organization* are explicitly designed for higher education, and, in all cases, the articles elucidate the question of whether a higher education institution is a learning organization. The articles point to barriers in moving toward a learning organization, and, in many instances, the article provide methods for leaders to act. Other articles point toward areas of focus in the evolution toward becoming a learning organization. As organizations continue to flatten, dissolve silos and expand learning, many of the points from the articles in this issue become increasing important to practitioners across all industries.

References

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- Voolaid, K. and Ehrlich, U. (2017), "Organization learning of higher education institutions: the case of Estonia", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 5.

Further reading

- Trevitt, C., Steed, A., du Moulin, L. and Foley, T. (2017), "Leading entrepreneurial e-learning development in legal education: a longitudinal case study of universities of learning organizations", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 5.

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