Organizational Characteristics that are Antecedents to Organizational Learning: A Case of Maseno University, Kenya

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Abstract

This paper sought to establish the existing Organizational characteristics that are antecedent to organizational learning in public Universities, a case of Maseno University, Kenya. The study adopted a survey design. The population of study comprised 384 employees of the university. A sample of 70 respondents was selected using stratified sampling technique. Data was collected through self-administered questionnaires and analyzed by descriptive statistics. The study findings revealed that organizational characteristics are indicated by leadership commitment, an incentive system and staff interaction and that the persisting organizational characteristics do not generally lend themselves to supporting organizational learning. Indeed, those that are typically antecedent to organizational learning are lacking. The study recommends that Universities needs to deliberately create and install characteristics that support organizational learning with a special emphasis on leadership commitment. These results will make a small contribution of information to support managerial decisions pertaining to the level of attention to pay to organizational learning activities, given its potential outcomes, and also, as general reference to academicians pursuing the subject of organizational learning.

Key words*: Organizational learning, Organizational characteristics, Maseno University.

Introduction

In the past, management perspectives have evolved from classical viewpoint, to humanistic perspective, through a management science perspective, systems theory, contingency approaches, total quality management and is culminating with the learning organization paradigm (Daft,2000). Garvin (1993) says that a learning organization is one that "is skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.

Organizational learning as a means of achieving organizational success came to the fore in 1990s. However, Argyris (1992) notes that he has been writing about the concept of organizational learning since 1950s. Organizations that are committed to continuous improvement in their processes and products must of necessity seek to establish an ability to translate a commitment to individual learning into organizational learning. Strata (1998), asserts that the rate at which individuals and organizations learn may become the only sustainable competitive advantage. Most scholars agree with Drucker's (1993) assertion that 'value is created through productivity and innovation' and organizations must acquire knowledge as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. Obviously, this new management paradigm focuses on continuous improvement and innovation in the way work is done. Efficient use of resources requires ability and capacities to accumulate and exploit experiences by organizations over time, and in the absence of learning, organizations and individuals simply repeat old practices (Garvin, 1993).

Organizational learning prioritizes the creation and acquisition of new knowledge and emphasizes the role of people in the creation and utilization of that knowledge. It thus, presents an important route to performance, success and competitive advantage for the organizations (Sharma and Khandekar, 2004). Learning institutions need to realize that developing a critical mass of employees who are knowledgeable or skilled in a particular technology may constitute a potential source of competitive advantage in the long run. Concretizing this individual knowledge mass through group and organizational learning may hasten the level of efficiency with which organizational results are realized. It thus becomes part of the mandate for institutions of higher learning to facilitate on-going organizational development interventions, which will ensure that everyone who belongs to the institutions is able to develop their skills and contribute to the fullest.

Forest (2002), asserts that "colleges and universities can and must grow smarter. In the same sense that we apply ourselves to instilling intellectual curiosity amongst students, we must encourage and reward learning at the organizational level". The inability to apply knowledge in dealing with the unprecedented and continuing changing education industry environment of this 21st century hinders the institutions of higher learning from becoming learning organizations. As a result, the development of a learning culture is impaired, thus impeding the institutions knowledge performance which is the key object of any such institution (Kumar and Idris, 2006).

Globally, the environment of higher education is facing relentless and rapid change. These circumstances underscore the crucial role of leadership and management in maintaining morale, enhancing productivity, and helping staff at all institutional levels cope with momentous and rapid change. Those in higher education management and leadership positions are finding it essential that they understand shifting demographics, new technologies and the commercialization of higher education, the changing relationships between institutions and governments and the move from an industrial to an information economy. Particularly in the developing world, higher education institutions must be poised to create the human capital necessary to keep pace with the knowledge revolution (Chacha, 2004).

According to UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998), there are numerous challenges facing institutions of higher learning in Kenya, including Maseno University. These include inadequate funding from the exchequer, increased enrolment without commensurate improvement of facilities, limited access compared to qualifying population, gender inequality, and a low research capacity that have resulted in a constant rise in unit costs, declining academic achievement, reduced quality of education and an overstretched physical facilities. This compounds the problem of extremely low levels of transition from secondary to tertiary or university levels as evidenced by 1,081,709 students graduating from form four against a total of 194,757 students being admitted into universities and technical institutions between 2004 and 2008 (GoK,2008). Further, the duplication of traditional courses across these institutions raises questions about their creativity and innovation. There is also visible decay of the good facilities that existed in the early 1970s and early 1980s when such institutions enjoyed significant budget allocations from the government (Mutula, 2002).

In the current education sector in Kenya, a tremendous growth is being realized at all levels right from primary through to post secondary levels. By 1984, enrolment in public universities stood at 8,400. This skyrocketed to 20,000 in 1989/90, 41,000 by 1991and by 2004/2005, overall university enrolment had risen to 91,541 (Commission for Higher Education (CHE), 2006).This can be attributed to a number of factors including the population growth. The resulting pressure for society to provide university education opportunities for those graduating from secondary schools is therefore tremendous.

Kenya has six public and thirteen private universities with an enrolment of over 90,000 students. Of these, roughly 80% are enrolled in public universities (Ngome 2004). Most public universities are overstaffed with Maseno University having a teaching staff- to- student ratio of 1:12 as compared to the acceptable commonwealth average of 1:18. For the support staff- to- student ratio, Maseno University stands at 1: 3 as compared to the commonwealth average of 1:6 (CHE, 2006). This is an indication of some of the inefficiencies that are manifest in the university administration that may be addressed by good organizational learning practices. Public universities are headed by University councils that are charged with the responsibility of policy formulation, creation of faculties and departments, and approval of the appointment of university staff. The university senate is responsible to the council for academic affairs, financial, and administrative management of the university. Senates are presided over by vice-chancellors and are dominated by heads of departments/faculties/schools who are potential vice-chancellors. Under the senate, faculty boards and departments oversee instruction and also administer examinations. Except for the faculty deans, staff, and student representatives on university councils, all the other officers are appointed. Maseno University is no different and is structured into units, departments, sections, faculties and divisions that characterize all other public universities in Kenya.

Maseno University currently comprises three campuses and a university college: Siriba and Maseno GTI are both in Maseno Township 25km from Kisumu city on Busia road. The two campuses were as a result of the merging of the then Maseno Government Training Institute (GTI) and Siriba Teachers' College to form Maseno University College, a constituent of Moi University and its subsequent gazetting in October 1990. It became a fully fledged university 11 years later in 2001. Rapid growth has since seen a third

campus being opened in the heart of Kisumu city: the city campus comprising the Maseno Information technology Centre (MITC), the Kisumu Hotel and the Varsity Plaza. Bondo University College (former Bondo Teachers Training College) became a Constituent College of Maseno University in December 2008 following a presidential decree. Programs offered at Maseno University include certificate, diploma, undergraduate and post-graduate studies which are done through flexible study schemes such as full-time, sandwich and evening programs.

The problem statement

There are numerous challenges facing institutions of higher learning in Kenya today. These include inadequacy of financial resources despite a notable increase in funding from the exchequer, increased enrolment without commensurate improvement of facilities, limited access compared to qualifying population, gender inequality, and a low research capacity that have resulted in a constant rise in unit costs, declining academic achievement, reduced quality of education and an overstretched physical facilities. This compounds the problem of extremely low levels of transition from secondary to tertiary or university levels as evidenced by 1,081,709 students graduating from form four against a total of 194,757 students being admitted into universities and technical institutions between 2004 and 2008. Further, the duplication of traditional courses across these institutions raises questions about their creativity and innovation.

Organizational learning as a strategic management approach tries to ensure organizations derive incremental benefits from the experiences gained over time, thereby realizing higher efficiency levels, resulting in better organizational performance. It is expected that higher learning institutions, by the very nature of their mandate, should be trailblazing the organizational learning track. However, it is not clear whether Kenyan public universities engage in organizational learning practices or to what extent. A review of the literature reveals no evidence to show that research has been carried out on the Kenyan front to demonstrate the extent to which organizational learning is being practiced in institutions of higher learning, its potential outcomes or the prerequisites for it to persist.

This study therefore set out to bridge this gap by striving to establish the extent to which public universities in Kenya use organizational learning practices, and their effects on performance.

Conceptual framework

The study was guided by the conceptual framework adapted from Ngoc and Frederick (2006). The framework gives a relationship where organizational characteristics and organizational learning practices interact to determine the extent to which organizational learning takes place, resulting in certain outcomes. Organizational characteristics are indicated by leadership commitment, an incentive system and staff interaction. Commitment includes an organization's vision that emphasizes learning and knowledge development, resources to support learning, active involvement in educational programs, and rewarding successful learning. The presence and practice of these commitment variables in adequate quantities and quality would provide an enabling environment for the organizational learning practices to be successfully installed and sustained. An incentive system includes the rewards the firm provides to its members for innovation, learning and knowledge related activities. A good incentive system would help develop and sustain appropriate attitudes, motivations and morale amongst staff to provide a fertile ground to implant and grow organizational learning practices. Interaction emphasizes the extent and ease of communication, problem solving in the workplace, accessibility of information, and the level of cooperation and team-work among members. The organizational learning process, if applied within an organizational environment of appropriate characteristics would interact with the environmental variables to result in outcomes that comprise high level performance and a good organizational climate. The learning outcomes are a direct consequence of the synergy resulting from the interaction between the organizational characteristics and the organizational learning process. They are indicated by performance improvement and organizational climate.

The foregoing interrelationships are summarized in Figure 1 below:

Figure1: Conceptual Framework
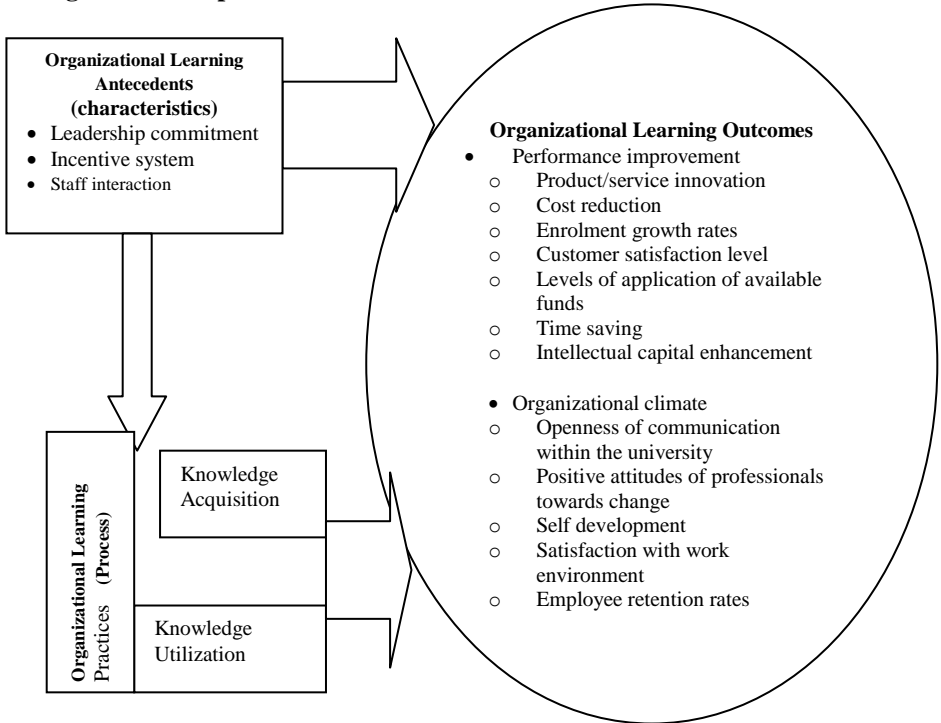
Adapted from Ngoc T.P and Frederick W.S; *Facilitators of organizational learning in design*; the learning organization, vol. 13 no.2; Emerald group, 2006.

Methodology

This study adopted a field survey focusing on Maseno University. The reasons for choosing this approach are several. First, qualitative studies are necessary where organizational processes, such as the interplay between organizational learning processes and organizational characteristics are involved, resulting in outcomes while all the variables do not lend themselves easily to quantitative measurement. The subject may be viewed as new since there is hardly any literature on works done on organizational learning in Kenya, and in particular in institutions of higher learning. Second , in view of the subject under study, there is need to 'get inside' the organization in order

to observe how the dynamics of the relationships between organizational characteristics and learning practices interact to result in desired outcomes. Third, distinguishing the effects of one set of organizational characteristics and learning practices requires a level of analysis that demands a focus on one case through the survey method. Finally, the use of case research enables ideas and propositions to be developed for further study (Ngoc and Frederick, 2006).

The study area was Maseno University. It is situated about 15km west of Kisumu city, which is the provincial headquarters of Nyanza province in the western region of the republic of Kenya. It has a student population of approximately 6,000 and currently has three campuses and one college.

The target population for this study was the entire staff of Maseno University. Maseno University has about 1169 employees. Out of these, about 384 comprise managers, supervisors, and teaching staff. Gay (1981) suggests that for an in-depth case research, 30 cases or more are required for a normal distribution. Israel (2006) states Yamane's simplified formula for calculating sample size as:

$$n = N / 1 + N (e)^2$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the level of precision.

Thus, for this study, assuming a confidence level of 95%, p = 0.1 and a precision level of +/-10%, a sample size of 70 respondents was used. The distribution of respondents amongst the various levels of organization structure depended on the establishment at that level. Stratified sampling, as indicated under, was used to identify the said 70 respondents.

Table 1: Population and Sample size

Level	No. of employees	Sample of respondents
1. Top Management Team	4	1
2. Middle Managers		
• Heads of non academic Departments	15	3
• Deans of Faculties/Schools	7	2
• Chairmen of academic Departments	25	5
3. Heads of sections	19	4
4. Lecturers	314	55
Total Sample Size		70

Data Collection and analysis

An in-depth study was done on this institution; hence a triangulation of tools including interview schedule and structured questionnaires were used to collect primary data. The secondary data were accessed through thematic document analysis, including any relevant historical records of performance data. Pre-testing of the tools was applied on 5 respondents who did not form part of the sample for final data analysis. The results from this pre-test of tools were used to fine-tune the instruments. The instruments included items that assessed organizational characteristics, organizational learning process, and Organizational learning outcomes. The variables that were measured are as indicated in the conceptual maps. The results were analyzed using standard qualitative. The data was collated and summarized and detailed written descriptions prepared for each interviewee under the subheadings indicated in the tools. Interview data was cross-referenced with other data sources. This form of triangulation enhanced the internal validity and reliability of the case study material. General descriptive statistics and standard measures of central tendency were used to present the results of the analysis.

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Results and discussions

Organizational Characteristics

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1. Incentive System

The first question sought to establish whether staffs are rewarded for contribution towards organization's learning, innovation and knowledge related activities. The findings in respect of this are presented in table 1 below:

Table 2: Results of Organizational characteristics that are antecedents to Organizational Learning in Maseno University, Kenya

	1	2	3	4	5	SDEV	Mean
Staffs are rewarded for contribution towards organization's learning, Innovation and knowledge related activities	31	1	19	13	6	2.457	*0.317*
	(44.3%)	*(1.4%)*	*27.1%*	*18.6%*	*8.6%*		
The organization has a strategic vision and mission which emphasize Learning and knowledge development	13	1	19	31	6	3.229	*0.046*
	18.6%	*1.4%*	*27.1%*	*44.3%*	*8.6%*		
Reasonable amounts of resources are always availed to support learning within university	13	20	11	20	6	2.8	*0.24*
	18.6%	*28.6%*	*15.7%*	*28.6%*	*8.6%*		
Learning is built into the organization through the development of systems, operational procedures & other ways of sharing the lessons gained from individual experience	1	27	13	25	4	3.357	*0.044*
	1.4%	*38.6%*	*18.6%*	*35.7%*	*5.7%*		
Systems of planning, accounting, budgeting, financial reporting and other processes are organized to assist learning	11	6	25	18	10	3.143	*0.145*
	15.%	*8.6%*	*35.7%*	*25.7%*	*14.3%*		
The organization regularly identifies a theme of work and draws conclusion based on an analysis of all its practice experience & an understanding of the 'Current state of the art'	9	39	8	10	4	2.443	0.039
	12.9%	*55.%*	*11.4%*	*14.3%*	*5.7%*		
Resources & facilities for individual development are made available to all members of the organization	7	25	34	4		2.56	*0.036*
	10.0%	*35.7%*	*48.6%*	*5.7%*	*0.0*		

The information function/library is given sufficient prominence and is resourced adequately to enable the organization to keep its information and records up to date	17	12	32	9		2.47	*0.035*
	24.3%	*17.1%*	*45.7%*	*12.9%*	*0.0*		
The University has an extensive and fully integrated information system that affords easy communication for all staff	12	17	31	10		2.56	*0.037*
	17.1%	*24.3%*	*44.3%*	*14.3%*	*0.0*		
Information flows freely throughout the organization, crossing teams, sections & divisions without hindrance	12	17	31	10		2.56	*0.037*
	17.1%	*24.3%*	*44.3%*	*14.3%*	*0.0*		
The organization has a systematic data base of all its projects and program work which can enable staff & outsiders to identify where expertise resides	17	19	30	4		2.3	*0.033*
	24.3%	*27.1%*	*42.9%*	*5.7%*	*0.0*		
Individuals, groups and sections operate as working partners and constantly strive to find out and meet each other's' expectations and needs	12	30	17	7	4	2.44	*0.035*
	17.1%	*42.9%*	*24.3%*	*10.0%*	*5.7%*		

1=Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree
Source: survey data, 2010

44.3% strongly disagreed with the statement, 27.1% somewhat agreed that this was the case, 18.6% agreed without qualifying while 8.6% strongly supported the assertion. This shows there is a strong feeling amongst staff that there is no appreciation of organizational learning and innovation related activities at the university. However, a good proportion (54.3%) feels there is at least some rewards in this respect.

2. Leadership Commitment

The second through to eighth questions sought to establish the status of leadership commitment to organizational learning within the university. The results are presented in table 2.

According to the respondents, 18.6% strongly disagreed that there exist strategic vision and mission who emphasize organizational learning, 27.1% somewhat disagreed while 44.3% agreed. Only 8.6% strongly agreed that this is the case. This finding is interesting as it contradicts the reality on the ground. As has been indicated in the background section of this report, the university has a documented 5-year strategic plan whose term is ending as this study is being undertaken, and which stipulates very clear vision and mission statements. Further perusal of the document reveals a commitment to core values and prioritized strategic goals and objectives that should lend very good leadership along the lines of organizational learning. Indeed, a new strategic framework is already being worked out through a highly participatory approach as this study progresses. This finding therefore may imply an inefficient mechanism of cascading down the university structure strategic information or a lack of commitment to the documented intentions ion the implementation process.

When asked whether reasonable amounts of resources are always availed in support of learning within the university, only 8.6% only strongly agreed that reasonable amounts of resources are always availed to support learning within university, 15.7% agreed somewhat while 28.6% agreed. This is despite 18.6% strongly disagreeing and 28.6% disagreeing. From the cumulative column, it is evident that slightly over half (52.9%) agree at different conviction levels that there is adequate resource support towards organizational learning within the university.

About organizational learning being built through the development of systems, operational procedures and other ways of sharing lessons gained from individual experience, only 5.7% strongly agreed while 35.7% agreed with 18.6% somewhat agreeing. Further, 38.6% disagreed with 1.4% strongly disagreeing. Cumulatively, at least 60% agree at different degrees that operational systems are built into the university structure that facilitate knowledge sharing between and amongst individuals, a very critical ingredient in organizational learning.

Respondents were also requested to give their view on the extent staff felt that Systems of planning, accounting, budgeting, financial reporting and other processes are organized to assist learning within the university. The results presented in table 1 indicate that 15.7% of the respondents strongly disagreed, 8.6% disagreed, 35.7% agreed somewhat, 25.7% agreed while

14.3% % strongly agreed. At least 75.7% agreed at different degrees that these processes are organized to support learning.

The study also inquired if the university regularly identifies a theme of work and draws conclusions based on an analysis of all its practice experience & an understanding of the 'current state of the art'. 12.9% strongly disagreed, with a notable 55.7% disagreeing. 11.4% agreed somewhat and 14.3% agreed unequivocally. However, only 5.7% strongly agreed. Cumulatively, only 31.4% agreed at different levels of conviction with this statement.

Responding on whether resources & facilities for individual development are made available to all members of the organization, 10% strongly disagreed, 35.7% disagreed, 48.6% somewhat agreed. Only 5.7% strongly agreed that the system supports individual development with resources and facilities. The foregoing is summarized in table 1

The last question under leadership commitment sought to find out the perception levels as to whether the information function/library is given sufficient prominence and is   resourced adequately to enable the organization to keep its information and records up to date. The results indicate that 17.1% of respondents strongly disagreed, 41.4% disagreed, a notable 44.3% agreed somewhat and 14.3% agreed.

4. Staff interaction

The next four questions sought to establish the extent of staff interaction in Maseno University. The results are presented in the tables 2.

Responding on whether the university has an extensive & fully integrated information system that affords easy communication for all staff, 17.1% strongly disagreed, 24.3% disagreed, 44.3% somewhat agreed while 14.3% agreed. None felt very strongly about the extensiveness and the integrative capacity of the university information system (see Table 2).

The next question sought to establish whether information flows freely throughout the organization, crossing teams, sections & divisions without hindrance. Table 2, above shows the results: Among the respondents, 30% agreed, 35.7% somewhat agreed, 15.7% disagreed while 18.5% strongly disagreed. Cumulatively, at least 2/3 of the respondents agreed at different degree levels that information flows freely throughout the university system.

The study also sought to establish whether the University has a systematic data base of all its projects and program work which can enable staff & outsiders to identify where expertise resides. The responses are summarized in Table 2.above. According to the respondents, Maseno University does not have a systematic data base of all its projects and program work which can enable staff & outsiders to identify where expertise resides with 24.3% strongly disagreeing, 27.1% disagreeing, 42.9% somewhat agreeing while 5.7% strongly agreeing. Cumulatively, at least 51.1% believe this to be the case.

The last question under staff interaction which sought to find out whether individuals, groups & sections operate as working partners & constantly strive to find out and meet each other's' expectations and needs elicited different reactions with 17.1% strongly disagreeing, 42.9% disagreed, 24.3% somewhat agreed, 10% agreed and 5.7% strongly agreeing (see table 4.1.1.3d below). This implies that 60% of the respondents felt that there are no supportive working relationships between individuals, groups and sections of Maseno University. This implies a disjointed structure that loses out on the benefits of synergy through the 'non-fluidity' of the work processes.

Summary of organizational characteristics scores

The following table gives a summary of average percentage scores for every variable. It gives an indication as to the level at which it is perceived by employees that the university practices the tenets identified in the variables.

Table 3: Summary of Organizational Characteristics Scores

Variable	Percentage Average Score	Mean	Std Deviation
Incentive System	58%	1.3333	.35293
Leadership commitment	34%	2.6667	.75593
Staff Interaction	67%	2.3659	1.1094
AVERAGE	**53%**	**2.11966**	**0.73942**

The table indicates that the university exhibits characteristics that support organizational learning to an average level of 53% with a mean of 2.1197 and a standard deviation of 0.73942 on a scale of 1 to 5.The leadership of the university does not show much commitment to organizational learning (34%) even though a strategic plan has run its full term of five years and a good

number of staff (80%) seem to be aware of its existence and agree that the mission and vision emphasize organizational learning. Indeed, the university has already embarked on crafting a strategic plan for the next five years. In spite of all this staff interaction is reasonably practiced at a remarkable 67%.

Conclusions

The major objective of the study was to establish the existing Organizational characteristics that are antecedent to organizational learning at Maseno University. The persisting organizational characteristics do not generally lend themselves to supporting organizational learning. Indeed, those that are typically antecedent to organizational learning are lacking.

Recommendations

Public institutions like Universities need to deliberately create and install characteristics that support organizational learning. Special emphasis needs to be laid on attributes concerning Leadership Commitment. These include but not limited to strategic visioning, resource availability, development of systems to share lessons gained from individual experience, organization of various management functions to support learning, developing a reservoir for organizational experiences, emphasis on individual development through resource allocation, and adequate resourcing of the library function. In this respect, attention needs to be paid to strategic planning process with a view to achieving a wider participation amongst the cadres to achieve more acceptability of the resulting framework. Also, in implementation, more demonstration of commitment to the prescriptions of the strategic plan needs to be demonstrated to the entire system by leadership. A first step is to install an elaborate mechanism for cascading the plan and its aspirations down the entire structure. The study further recommends that Universities needs to deliberately create and install characteristics that support organizational learning with a special emphasis on leadership commitment

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