# A study to explore higher educational institutions and application of organizational learning concepts

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## ABSTRACT

Organizational Learning is the core concept embedded in the functioning of an organization. In today's time much emphasis has been put in to make organization a learning place. This aspect has been conceptualized in the current paper in context of higher education institutions. Since, core area of activity for any University or college is not only to educate and impart knowledge, but also to research and find out new concepts and modalities in the area of imparting education, and ultimate benefits for the student and society at large. As today's challenges could only be undertaken in light of innovating, learning, and imbibing technology and up-gradation both for the Education Institutions as well as for the learning participants, i.e. the teaching fraternity and the students. This paper explores the factors and concepts of Organizational Learning into the education arena and finds out the determinants which are significant in the current times with respect to learning and academic development and also proposes a conceptual model for the same.

**Keywords:** Learning Organization, Knowledge, Higher Education, Acquisition, Dissemination, Culture

## INTRODUCTION

In today's time organizations can only survive if they learn. These learning efforts are some time consciously made and at other times it may be learnt subtly. The core concept of Organizational Learning is based on activities and process that eventually evolve itself into a learning organization Finger & Brandt (1999). Maintaining an inventory of relevant knowledge requires constant effort, strategic vision and adequate planning for an organization.

## **1.2 Learning Organization**

The concept of learning organization really started with Peter Senge's book "The art and practice of learning organization", 1990, which became very popular book to savor for the corporate people as an innovative concept to manage their organization. However, the concept was further taken ahead by many author, but the concept was far more abstract for most of the people to understand, but with the passing years and more pragmatic results from corporate success stories imbibing the concept, thus giving this concept a worldwide acceptance, and especially in America, where a whole Institute is dedicated towards furthering research in the field of Learning Organization.

The concept however has been much popular and gained significance in Europe and America and

other places too, but in India is still to catch up with the concept of Learning Organization. However, there have been few learned researcher and scholars from our country who have done significant research on the topic and given their consultancy also to the corporate in this regards. Therefore, to write on Organizational Learning in relation to Higher Education Institution may not be the maiden attempt but very less explored in our country.

## 2.0 Literature Review

## 2.1 Organizational Learning - Definitions and Explanation

For a better understanding of Organizational Learning through which it becomes a Learning Organization, let us first understand what is learning organization in simpler terms, by extracting the concepts given by prominent authors and exponents worldwide.

Following explanations and concepts were put forward in this regards by various authors; Senge (1990) conceptualizes that 'Learning Organization are those, where people are building up their abilities to achieve those goals which they really want to explore and because of their enhanced ability they are able to get it. People are continuously thinking about new ideas and ways of doing things, and they are able to utilize their original thinking in their day to day working in an organization. He also says that this learning is not limiting to self, rather, it is shared with other organizational members to build up a collective and collaborative strength of knowledge and ability.

**Pedler et.al (1991)** deduces that Organizational Learning cannot be brought only by training persons in an organization rather learning should take place at the organizational level

**Arshad M.A.(2007)** once the organization absorbs the knowledge which is required by it, and keeps on developing self renewing capabilities to meet any future challenge, and surges ahead by dislodging all obstacles to achieve success, such is the nature of learning organization.

**Daniel H. Kim(1993)** Individuals in an organization are the building block of an organization so each individual is important, his development and capability building is important, in order to make any organization a learning organization; as each brick contributes in making the whole wall so is the case with an organization, serves as an apt example to justify the concept of Organizational Learning.

**Hedberg(1981)** an old proponent of an earlier concept of Knowledge management said that people come and go in an organization but the learning of an organization is retained through its culture and value system so the learning is retained and keep on transferring to a new comer and the organization keeps on surging ahead.

Organization we know are non living things but it comes alive through he manifestation of its work culture and the ways of doing things in an organization, i.e. the belief system, values and the strategies to achieve success and preparing the personnel through collaborative and shared learning do make a learning organization for what it is.

#### 2.2 Learning Organization into Higher Education System

Universities and HEIs have been shown as the kind of organization which does not put much

emphasis on organizational learning (**Dill 1999, Garvin 1993**). Although the main work of the HEIs is learning still they do not give much importance to the concept of learning organization Garvin (**1993**). Garvin has further contented that although Universities are there to create knowledge, but they themselves do not apply it in their own work context, in a way we can say they do not apply for what they create

The concept of Learning Organization when embedded in the higher education institutes creates an organization that benefits both the teaching as well the student's community. For this various ideas have been suggested by many authors like; **Dill (1999)** gave five characteristics of academic learning organization; **Watkins (2005)** nine implications for institutions of higher education becoming learning organizations.

Angelo(2000) seven "transformative ideas". Senge (1990) gave the "Disciplines" that demonstrate as to what should a learning organization have. All these conceptual frameworks describe the various concepts of learning organization, their associated factors and structures, components etc.

**Kezar** (2006) outlines that universities which are very collaborative ultimately form formal and informal setups which are inter disciplinary and are highly collaborative in imbibing and assimilating novel concepts and strategies, it is also contended that the inter organizational collaboration further unravels newer concepts of learning and helps to facilitate development of both the teaching community as well as the learners (students).

So, far applying organizational learning to education system is concern, there has been disagreement earlier in this regard, and many authors have raised questions that, whether organizational learning concepts can be applied to an higher education institution or not, in order to make it a Learning Organization.

We know from Learning organization literature that in order to make any organization as learning organization we need to have focus on its basic ingredients like; creativity, innovativeness, new ways to think, collaborative learning, cooperation and coordination of all the branches and department in unison with a common identified vision and mission to take the organization to pinnacle of success.

**Birnbaum (2000),** has contended that business organization and university are two different entities, which are functioning on two different operational platforms. Businesses are to make profits, where as the universities have different point of view in the sense that, they are there because of certain set principle, which may not match with the business models our corporate function. He also contented the end product in case of business obviously is tangible where as in case of a university it may be abstruse. So, he argues that the criterion of assessment for these two different entities has to be different.

There has been much debate in this regards between authors that universities are there to make the students capable enough to apply their knowledge, and gainfully apply their knowledge in their

career."Can universities become true learning organizations?" (White & Weathersby, 2005).

**Harman** (2005) put forth that with the change in the policy on education by Australian government the Australian universities transformed itself into more "entrepreneurial, commercial and managerial character". As there is pressure on these universities "to produce more efficient and skilled work force", which may result in universities adopting business model in their operation"

Some authors are of the opinion that business facing crisis do focus on adopting techniques to stay competitive and make profits for themselves and their stake holder, so the question is should universities also adopt the same strategies and work with same kind of zeal as the corporate do?

The answer to this may be diabolical to some and acceptable to others, however, whatever may be the perspective and question being raised, the higher education institution have always an options to choose, but with caution, because it is universally accepted that education institution are for imparting knowledge, making careers, building characters of the students. So they are also expected to be socially, morally and judgmentally right, but it does not mean that higher education institution cannot enter the domain of being called Learning Organization.

**Birnbaum (2000)** has contended that application of business model for trudging on the path to become learning organization may not be applied or adopted directly, but with a different analogy and purpose, so that the very core values of being an education institute are preserved, and the sanctity it maintained with its purpose and cherished values of yore.

**Kezar** (2006) has given forth his views as, that the faculty being a participant has the will to work and excel in his area by his own will and inner motivation, rather than getting trained through some formal structured routine schedule, as academics has the leverage to be independent and self propelled area of working.

**Birnbaum** (2000), has further contended that because of the conventional nature of the universities, it becomes difficult for them to change and adopt the concept of learning organization. Despite these, now most of the authors are of the opinion that universities can adopt being Learning Organization in spite of all skepticism and doubts figured earlier.

**Watkins, K. E. (2005)** The changes to be brought about in the universities in order to transform them into learning organization shall depend majorly upon the leadership of the higher education institutes, as they can give the momentum as well as necessary corrective policies, by mustering adequate resources that can lead towards it becoming a learning organization. In this process it can be expected that there will be resistance to this transformative move, but with adequate resources at disposal and leadership giving the required thrust to propel the change effort, shall overcome any resistance and rudiments for the proposed initiative of transformation in to learning organization.

## 2.3 Structure and orientation of Higher Education Institutes

Organizations comprises of group called team, these team works at all level of the organization, each department of an organization may also be called a team. There can specialized teams also to

execute various specific works of an organization. In higher education Institutions each individual person contributes as part of team as any other organization, which may comprise of first the executive body of people those who are from the teaching fraternity like Vice Chancellor, Pro Chancellor, Registrar etc, can be taken as the key leader or players.

Similarly, there are various department of studies which are working as unit, headed by individual leader, who manages academic as well as certain non academic works as well, and the individual faculties those work as part of the departmental team, besides the administrative and support staff, they also contribute in specific task and responsibilities assigned to them by the Head from time to time, besides their routine academic work assignments. A group may be called by variety of names like academic team, task force, committee, council etc., as per the need they may comprise of these and called by these names.

**Cutscher- Gershenfeld and others (1998)** defined teams as "complex amalgams of tangible practices and intangible elements such as interpersonal interactions" that promote "the creation of knowledge within the firm", this same simile may be found in Higher education Institutes as well, so a parallel can be drawn both in business as well in education institutions as well, only the purpose may be different in execution.

In business world team comprises of situation based work group executing specific assignment and are more dynamic in nature in comparison to same analogy with higher education institutions, (Sormunen-Jones, Chalupa, and Charles, 2000) has described it as "parallel to the emphasis on cooperative learning in schools, colleges, and continuing education through which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning". In higher education institutes a variety of works are executed by committees comprises of people source from various categories, levels besides the teaching fraternity, which operates in business or corporate also. There are various kinds of committees working in a higher education institute, curriculum committees within departments, promotion and tenure committees, planning and enrollment management committee, disciplinary committee and hosts of other sub committees to further divide the work.

**Ewell (1997)** contends that data is of crucial importance for any organization, and the interpretation of this data into logical and usable knowledge is the main aspect of a Learning Organization, which should be imbibed by any organization and more so in case of of an higher education institute that trudges on path of transforming itself into a Learning Organization.

Now these working group in higher education institutes, as further **Cutscher- Gershenfeld and others (1998)** has described, can create knowledge out of the data that they access as part of their working as team members of committee, because if the team do not discuss the data as a team and analyze it, then they cannot transform this data into knowledge, and creation of knowledge is the core value of a Learning Organization.

Thus, we can conclude that whatever be the team or group structure and their work orientation, ultimately, it would depend on crucial aspect of transposing the data gathered into reliable knowledge in order to occupy the esteemed position of being called a Learning Organization. So, it can conclusively derive through the literature and its review exposition that the structure and

orientation of the Higher Education Institute is a significant factor to be considered as a determinant of Learning Organization in this study context.

## 2.4 Assimilation of knowledge into the system

Learning something that is novel, whether it is acquisition of unexplored knowledge or any proposition is the beginning of Learning (Garvin, 1993; Huber, 1991). It is affirmed that although acquiring and knowing some things new is appreciable, but it may not result into learning and unless learning takes place it cannot become the repository of knowledge which is supposed to be ahead of learning. However these new concept can be acquired by a person by his own incident, or vicariously when a person visualizes or observes someone else doing something and the resultant outcomes of it, or even trying out something of own which may result in some positive outcome or otherwise and lead to learning and ultimately gaining knowledge of it (Garvin, 1993; Huber, 1991;

#### Levitt and March, 1988).

The way you explore data from different point of view also lead to unraveling some new aspect of the same data, and it can lead to discovery of some novel aspects of the data. **Garvin (1993)** has asserted that although the academicians in higher education institution delve in lots of research work and apply their research ability in their academic work relating to research, but they fail to apply the same skills of research into improving the institutional system for developing it to more efficient and effective organization.

The Knight Higher Education Collaborative (2000), is composed of academic leaders and exponents in education, asserts that an higher education institution should ask that "what is to be learnt? What will be the outcome of this learning and what purpose would it fulfill or would it lead to any kind of knowledge enhancement?"

Therefore, it is contended out of these discourse that, it is of prime importance that we know about importance of data with respect to an education institution ,because then only we can elucidate new ideas and novel aspect by adequate interpretation and evaluation, in order to enhance our knowledge and thereby the performance and effectiveness of a higher education institution.

## 2.5 Dissemination of knowledge

Knowledge is carried forward and passed on to other Organizational members , through collaborative learning which is one of the important element of learning organization, then the higher learning organization can transform itself into Learning Organization , by dissemination of knowledge and sharing it with other organizational participants. However, this aspect is already covered in academic via; seminars, workshops and symposium, the same can be applied in sharing knowledge relating to organizational functioning, both academic and non academic, with the objective to make overall education system more effective, reliable and development oriented which ultimately transforms it into a learning organization.

Data and knowledge are the basic ingredients of any organizational development, thus these are the basic elements for building a Learning Organization also. **Daft and Huber (1987)**, have stated that there are two basic lines on which organizational learning takes place i.e. the system-structural determinants, which say that in order to develop an organization towards becoming a Learning Organization effective acquisition of relevant information and its dissemination to appropriate

groups and individuals is essentially needed. Further **Daft and Huber** (1987), have contended that deduction and absorption of information into logical sequence next depends upon participants own knowledge and understanding, **Daft and Huber** observe that further deduction and absorption of information are the basis on which actual learning takes place and organization moves towards becoming a learning organization.

**Davenport and Prusak** (1998), contend that data is a distinct and equitable factual about certain occurrences. Kock (1999) say that information and knowledge is carried and displayed on the fore by data, it therefore can be conferred that data somehow displays the information as well as the knowledge of the person concern.

**Brown and Duguid** (2000) have a different point of view regarding data and information, according to them knowledge is different from data or information, according to them the data or information may be stored anywhere, but knowledge is inherent, something which is imbibed into one self. Inversely, it says that you may have the data or information, yet you may not have the knowledge because you have not interpreted the data or information, or you have wrongly deduced it, so in either case you are not having the knowledge or even if you have it, it is misplaced because of its wrong interpretation. Further, **Brown and Duguid** (2000) have argued that even having large quantity of data stored in databases or physical file is of no good, unless it is imbibed and interoperated into logical deduction to be called knowledge, so they have clearly made this distinction.

Knowledge is "broader, deeper, and richer than data or information **Davenport and Prusak** (1998), it simply means that knowledge is something which a person gains out of his experiences, his own disposition towards things, his own value system, and his own perception towards a particular situation or context. Out of all these cognitive process a person may be inclined to interpret a particular thing uniquely, and thereby whatever he learns is an amalgamation of all these things put together, and to arrive at a final discourse and inference out of an item or peace of information.

In order to improve the organization it is therefore vey essential that the knowledge is disseminated in the whole of the organization, more so in case of higher education institutes, where especially the teaching fraternity and others are academically inclined and intellectually enlightened to appreciate this important aspect of dissemination of knowledge, and thus an important determinant of moving towards becoming a Learning Organization. As being contended repeatedly by (**Daft and Huber**, **1987; Garvin, 1993; Huber, 1991; Levitt and March, 1988**) that transfer of knowledge is the most important aspect of becoming a Learning Organization.

## 2.6 Students active participation

In learning organization literature there are many occurrences where the boundaries within a University or between Universities to collaborate together in order reap mutual benefits in situation has been emphasized upon. One of the prime stakeholders in this study is the student and this study would not be complete without talking about the students, ultimately universities exist because of this important stakeholder.

The development of the students and their participation to upgrade the academic institution is essential, their feedbacks are very essential to improve the academic system, and their important role in making the higher education institute a Learning Organization. So, inclusion of student as participant in this model under study also has a role to play to propel an academic institution towards becoming a Learning Organization.

**Borzsony and Hunter (1996)** have asserted that if we really want to make our university a learning organization then in this pursuit we cannot leave the students, who have an important role to play towards becoming a Learning Organization. They have even emphasized that student should become an equal decision making partner to manage the academic system. For this we are already aware of students unions in universities, however being politicized to some extent they take a different form which is not the requirement of becoming a learning organization. However, there are many good universities of the world where student participation has really lead it towards development and improvement of its systems.

One of such university to be quoted to be part of this current study is **Portfelt I.S** (2006) Kalstad University, Sweden study by which has a system where student's participation has been given prominence. The university scans all the internal and the external factors that effects its functioning and feedback from the students is taken to improve the systems and their sub-systems, the action is taken on the previous feedback, and system information is shared with the students, so that they acknowledge that actions are taken on their feedback. Similarly, students also participate to upgrade the academics systems also, especially the Ph. D scholar, who are already into research and they also undertake research related to their own university and the result are matched and suggestions are implement accordingly

In another study from a **Kenyan University** is has been highlighted as an achievement where students participation are encouraged at all level of the university's functioning, **Sarange B.A.E** (2018) states that the students are working in close tandem with university system to develop it function and day to day working, and this aspect is highlighted by the author in her study of Universities at Kenya towards the journey of becoming a learning organization.

## 2.7 Creating culture of Learning

Ultimately it is the culture of an organization that determines its mode of functioning and through it its success or failure; nevertheless, it is an important determinant of a Learning Organization in true sense. Culture of an organization we can say is the collective reflection of how people behave in their work context or setting , or in simpler term how the work is done in an organization i.e. as we say the 'the way we do it here'.

Wergin (1994) asserts that if the universities act as a singular unit, then their work is of teaching, supervising, controlling, encouraging, and that they should take collective responsibility towards the institution's success or otherwise. It means that the working players in the institution both academic and non academic together build up an institution, and all of them taken together comprises of the culture of the organization.

It has been further emphasizes that an efficacious cooperation lead to overall building of a culture in

a way that all the organizational participants are working in unison, and people are sharing the recognitions and values together, so in a way we can say that this is reflection of unified culture for an organization, and such an culture, we know is one of the important building block of making it a Learning Organization.

Kline and Saunders (2010), contend that out of the ten steps suggested to become a learning organization, one of the important one is the culture of the organization, that gives opportunity to an organizational participant to be thoughtful, risk taker, become a resourceful person to share knowledge with other participants, and is able to use learning an effective means to execute all the work, i.e. he or she is learning centric in approach in discharging or executing their work.

**Maden** (2012) suggests that the culture is propagated by the leaders, so comparatively in higher education institutes we can say the executive body of an University as the leader can show the path to others to follow and emulate the action that are put in to use by the so called leaders.

**Ortenblad and Koris (2014)** have suggested that if a welcoming and positive atmosphere is created in the work environment the it will make the organizational environment work friendly, and people will contribute their best without any pressure to work, rather under these condition everybody contributes his best by his own volition, and not because he is being instructed and forced to work. Under these condition a person is also motivated to try new things, innovate or tryout newer aspect to excel in his or her work setting. The aspect is very important for an organization, if at all it wants to become a Learning Organization were we talk of giving some liberty to experiment and space to work people are going to give their best contribution.

## 2.8 Expected Outcome (Performance -Academic and Economic)

For any scientific study to conclude, it must have some quantifiable output, which should be derived in order to prove the research, in the current study two expected outcomes which can be quantified are ;

## **Expected Outcomes:**

1) **Result Output**---Result outcome of the students and the research output of the academician in a Higher Education Institute.

2) **Economic benefit**-- Economic Benefit in terms of employability of students and research grant to an HEI are the two indicative economic outputs taken here in this study.

It is quite obvious that if the result output of an HEI is good /excellent then it is definitely indicative of its enhanced Teaching – Learning process, and if the research publication/project are also greater in number then also it is indicative of it learning excellence.

Main aspect of education outcome has been the employability of the student and to prepare him for the future career challenges, there is a direct relation between the qualification and the employability of a student, however he may get employment which may not have a direct bearing on his qualification, but the relations between the two cannot be denied (Harvey 2001, Brown et al 2003, McQuaid and Lindsay 2005, Yorke 2006)

Similarly, if the employability of the students is good then also it can be inferred that the HEI is moving towards, being a Learning Organization, in addition to this under economic benefits, grant and project grants, special grant for research is a definite indicator of the organization moving towards to become a Learning Organization. All the key HEIs in India like IITs and IIMs and other institutions of key rankings have bigger grant and project because of their excellence in performance only.

**Knight and Yorke** (2004) assert that employability is a multi faceted aspect of an individual, where his many attributes besides his academics comes into play, because the attributes of a individual develops gradually over a number of years, however it is contended that academic institutions have an effect on employability nonetheless. In India various types University rankings are prevalent, and amongst these the most prominent being NIRF National ranking which is a key indicator of an HEI's and its overall performance on multifarious parameters of assessment. Similarly, in India NAAC accreditation by Union Grant Commission and All India Council for Technical Education is key bodies to affiliate and accredit a Higher Education Institution. Because of their excellence these institution get both monetary and other benefits too. So, the concept of being a Learning Organization has a bearing on the resultant outcomes also.

Aamodt & Havnes (2007) in a study in Norway, have asserted that there is relation between learning outcomes and the expertise over one's work, and this way it related with the academic performance of a student and also his aptness in his job, when he is employable.

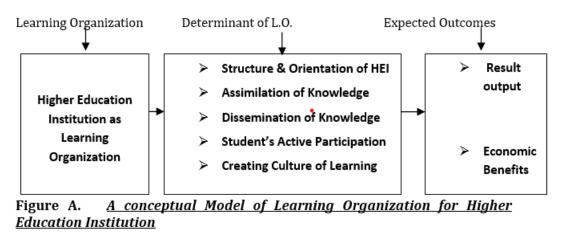
As per Toohey (2002), the knowledge and skill that are learnt by a student in his academics tenure in a HEI is obviously true, but there are other skills which are learnt by him as a result of secondary development by studying in a HEI.

#### 3.0 Methodology

This is a review paper, methodology has been review of literature comprising of prominent writings in the field of Learning Organization and couple of thesis on the subject concern. The general concept of Learning Organization is first delineated, to better understand the context of the topic, and then further literature review comprises of the exploring the concept of Learning Organization with respect to the Higher Education Institute is done. Next review of literature critically examined the learning determinant relating to Higher Education, and lastly, the expected outcome of the study, which earlier researchers has agreed is not an easy task to accomplish in academics in quantifiable terms, however for this study purpose the following Hypothesis is put forwards for testing out of this literature review. Thus, based on the estimation of the determinant of Learning Organization via this literature review, and their supposed relationship, following Hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** Higher Education Institution as Learning Organization has a positive relation with expected outcomes.

On the basis of above discourse in Literature review the important determinant of Organizational Learning are elucidated and are put forth as conceptual model to be empirically examined for future study, and test the suggested Hypothesis for the same :



## Conclusion

This study of review of Literature has given a deeper understanding of concept of Organizational Learning in (HEI) Higher Education Institution. The concept of Learning Organization has been explored deeper to deduce newer facet of the topic, and has given the opportunity to unravel certain determinants which were not explored earlier. The review of literature has also paved the way for formulating proposed Hypothesis for future study and exploration. A conceptual model of Learning Organization for Higher Education Institution has been proposed, which shall be corroborated for Hypothesis testing also.

Lastly, to conclude that, although this concept of Organizational Learning has taken its fancy for the researchers much earlier in the west, it is only in recent past that more of researchers are taking interest in this very excited and valuable field of research in India as well.

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