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Learning organization and social responsibility in Romanian higher education institutions

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between learning organization and university social responsibility. This relationship was studied in three groups of internal stakeholders: students, staff with leadership, monitoring, evaluation and control roles, and staff involved in the development of the study programs. 536 members of two public Romanian universities filled in the 21-item Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (Watkins & Marsick, 1997) and a scale of university social responsibility developed by the authors of this study. Different dimensions of learning organization presented various degrees of association with university social responsibility. These relationships varied according to formal organizational membership.

1. Introduction

In delivering their products and services, all organizations are under an obligation to their stakeholders to express high level of performance (Armstrong, 2012). Organizations face the increasing pressure not only to learn, change, adapt, but also to act wisely, in an ethically acceptable way in meeting the expectations of their multiple stakeholders (Rowley & Gibbs, 2008), and to place greater emphasis on system-wide solutions (Watkins & Dirani, 2013). Thus, many organizations strive to become a learning organization (Senge, 1990). Several studies shown that members' perceptions on learning organization had an impact on their job performance (Joo, 2012), job satisfaction (Goh,

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2001; Kiedrowski, 2006), organizational commitment (Balay, 2012), and health (Hasson, Tafvelin & von Thiele Schwartz, 2013). Also, learning organization has been linked to innovation, team learning, continuous learning, and organizational performance (Goh, Elliott & Quon, 2012; Jashapara, 2003; López, Peón, & Ordás, 2005; Watkins & Marsick, 1999).

Although the concept of learning organization proved to be valuable in understanding organizations, it has been conceptualized in different ways (Ali, 2012). Learning in an organization takes place at three main interrelated levels: individual, team and organizational (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). A learning organization is characterized by continuous learning for continuous improvement and by the capacity to transform itself. It presents the following seven dimensions: (1). *continuous learning* - the organization creates vast opportunities for learning to all individuals while they are carrying out their jobs; (2). *inquiry and dialogue* - the organization designs strategies to promote the culture of questioning and raising views, receiving feedback and conducting experimentations; (3). *team learning* - encouraging collaboration, learning and working together and a teamwork culture in the organization; (4). *embedded system* - vibrant systems are built to capture and share learning in the organization; (5). *empowerment* - people in the organization are involved in setting, owning and implementing the collective vision of the organization, and held accountable for different decisions in the organization; (6). *system connection* - the organization shows that is capable to scan and connect with its internal and external environment, and (7). *strategic leadership* - the organization has a strategic leadership for learning to meet changes (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). This integrative model provides a conceptual framework for understanding learning organization and an instrument to measure the construct (Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004).

While much effort has been invested in the conceptualization of the learning organization construct, there is still a need of research on examining the existence and practicality of this concept in various organizations (Ali, 2012). Much is known about private organizations as learning organizations and less about the public institutions, mainly higher education institutions or universities (Bui & Baruch, 2012). Usually, the organizations from this sector are viewed by their external stakeholders and consider themselves as places where the instruction and formal learning take place rather than organizations endowed with learning capabilities (White & Weathersby, 2005). These capabilities enable higher education institutions to adapt to their internal and external environment by facilitating the required changes or transformations and development in organizations. In this process, the actions of these organizations cannot be of any kind. They must act as social responsible agents. The concept of social responsibility is not new, but it became more relevant for today organizations, regardless of their type (private, public or non-governmental organizations) (Brammer, Williams, & Zinkin, 2007; Smith, 2003). Through their educational models, universities form professionals capable of social responsibility in the corporations and public institutions in which they will work, and *"effectively teach students to be democratic citizens, creative, attentive and builders of a democratic society"* (Harkavy, 2006, p. 5). Although, literature revealed associations between learning organization and several outcomes (Song, Chermack, & Kim, 2013), less is known about the association between members' perceptions on learning organization and corporate/ university social responsibility. Recently, several authors considered learning and unlearning as critical in the effective implementation of corporate social responsibility in an organization (Blackman et al., 2013). Furthermore, it was highlighted the need to consider diversity of stakeholders which exists within many large organizations, when investigating the characteristics of the learning organization (Stothard, Talbot, Drobnjak, & Fischer, 2013).

Few studies were dedicated to these two concepts applied to Romanian organizations (Ghiura, 2012), mainly to university. Thus, the present study had two objectives. First, the relationship between members' perceptions of the learning organization and social responsibility in two Romanian universities was investigated. Second, this relationship was studied in three groups of different internal stakeholders: (1). students, (2). staff with leadership, monitoring, evaluation and control roles, and (3). staff involved in the development of the study programs. We expected that different dimensions of learning organization will present different associations with university social responsibility. These associations will vary according to organizational status.

2. Method

2.1. Participants