

# **The Application of Learning Organization Idea at Malaysian University: A Case Study of University Malaysia Pahang (UMP)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the implementation of learning organization idea in one of the public universities in Malaysia, the Universiti Malaysia Pahang. The objective of this paper is to identify components that support the development and maintenance of the idea. The study analyses four understanding of learning organization based on Ortenblad (2002) that are organizational learning, learning at work, learning climate and learning structure against learning organization initiatives at the university. This paper provides some examples on the application of learning organization idea into Malaysian public university context.

**Keywords:** learning organization, higher education, Malaysian universities,

## **Introduction**

‘Learning organization’ is an inspiring concept in management and has been widely talked about since early 90s. The concept exists as a response to an increasingly unpredictable and dynamic business environment, particularly during that time. The learning-organization concept has been of interest to companies operating in both the private and public sectors (Bak, 2012). It is claimed to be able to promote continuous improvement and make organizations more flexible and responsive, therefore all organizations should become learning organizations. Academics and practitioners authors have different views and understanding about the idea. However, its significance, and the likelihood of it being an important agenda item in today’s world that will be retained in the future, is very strong. There is considerable evidence showing how ‘learning organizations’ are able to promote continuous improvement. Learning organization and level of performance is shown by Deane & Clark (1997). It can also promote innovation and creativity, as in the examples publicized by Argyris (1999) and Senge (2006).

The interest into examining the concept of learning organization in different contexts has increased in recent years. The adoption of learning organization theory in different nations and cultural settings has been studied in such places as China (Elkin *et al.*, 2009), Hong Kong (Snell & Hui, 2000), Singapore (Retna & Jones, 2003). There are also studies on the learning organization concept in different sectors such as school (Agaoglu, 2006), university (Dill, 1999), public sector (Brown and Brudney, 2003; Sta Maria, 2003), academic libraries (Abdullah and Kassim, 2008), bureaucratic organizations (Jamali *et al.*, 2006), industrial organizations (Khadra and Rawabdeh, 2006) and banking (Jamali *et al.*, 2009).

The learning organization concept is not an unfamiliar concept in Malaysia. The idea is spread out, discussed and implemented in many organizations. It is practiced in multinational companies (Zahidul Islam *et al.*, 2008) as well as public (Jassa, 2000; Sta Maria, 2003; Yusoff, 2005) and private

companies (Ng, 2008). Abd Hadi (2001), for example, discusses the approach needed to implement the knowledge management and learning organization concepts in public organization in Malaysia.

### **Learning organization in higher education**

There are multiple studies done on the application of learning organization idea in higher education. Some of the studies are characteristics of LO in a higher learning institution (Ali, 2012; Bak, 2012; Bui & Baruch, 2010), architecture of an academic learning organization (Dill, 1999), universities as learning organization (Franklin et al., 1998), transforming universities into a learning organization (Hung, 2007; Friedman et al., 2005), application of Learning organization in Jordan higher institution, with reference to its human resource development (Khasawneh, 2011). One of the most recent studies in this area is a study by Ortenblad and Koris (2014). They systematically reviewed 73 works on the idea of learning organization in higher learning institution.

### **The understanding of learning organization**

There are various definitions of learning organization from diverse and explicit stakeholder perspective. The word ‘learning organization’ itself is sometimes means different thing to different people. Watkins & Marsick (1993) proposed that the critical characteristics of a learning organization are learning at all levels, and that learning transforms the organization. They are in agreement with Senge in emphasizing the use of dialogue to boost organizational learning, promote systemic thinking and the recognition of the aspect of mental models. Garvin (1993) defines a learning organization as “an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights”. In his view, there are five main activities needed to be skilled at being a learning organization: systematic problem solving, experimentation, learning from past experience, learning from others and transferring knowledge.

Likewise, Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991) define learning organization as “an organization which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself and its context”. They also propose eleven characteristics that are essential in building a learning organization. From these definitions, it can be seen that the variations are only in the matter of description and approach. There are no contradicting meanings among the definitions since they emphasize the same elements; importance of learning to progress and apply new knowledge for organizational success.

Having been faced by many descriptions and understanding of the learning organization concept, Ortenblad (2002) inductively creates four types of understanding of learning organization: a) organizational learning; b) learning at work; c) earning climate; and d) earning structure. This study use the typology proposed by Ortenblad (2002) because it is one of the most interesting and practical since it is inductively created based on how the term ‘learning organization’ is used in the literatures and by practitioners. It comprehensively covers all characteristics of learning organization proposed by all major authors and it is the most recent compared to other approaches.

## **Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) as learning organization**

The analysis of UMP as learning organization is mainly based on the data taken during some few years from its inception as a public technical university in year 2002. The Kolej Universiti Kejuruteraan & Teknologi Malaysia (KUKTEM) was the name given to the institution before it was rename as Universiti Malaysia Pahang in 2006. It was set up as a technical university, specializing in engineering and technology. This study analyses initiatives by UMP during its early years against the learning organization principles as categorized by Ortenblad (2002).

### **Organizational learning**

The focus of organizational learning is more on the knowledge storage of the organization and that the knowledge stored can be used and by its members. Each individual learns and store the information and knowledge in the organizational memory to be used later and shared with all members. This will eventually lead to organizational change as a whole because individual development is definitely not enough to produce organizational change.

UMP has developed the e-management system that incorporates all administrative application into single-sign-on system in a single common database. The Integrated Management System (IMS) used at UMP is one of the best university management systems in Malaysia, and the world over. This claim is supported by several awards conferred since 2003 – among them were Information Technology Prime Award, e-Asia Finalist Award and Pikom Award. The system has also successfully wins second place in APICTA Awards 2003 in Best Education and Training Application.

IMS Education, integrated financial system, Human Resource and Payroll functions are among other applications making KUKTEM at that time become the nation's first university to adopt a purely integrated campus and knowledge management system solution. The solution is a combination of IMS Education suite of applications, consultancy and system integration services to address concerns regarding access and security, integration of the library system and smart card management, as well as identifying management's needs and areas of improvements (IKCM, 2008). The staff e-community portal served as one stop center where staff retrieve information, store information, share documents and ideas, discuss in online forum and so on. Learning takes place in the university in seamless way and informal. The e-management concept has five main attributes such as first; integrated database management system, where all data from all application reside in one database. This ensures no redundancies and information is always updated in real-time. Second is automation, where all applications were developed through re-engineering process that reduces manpower needs and manual operation. 'Alert' and 'trigger' were activated and use of smart card and barcode reader were also utilized. Third; the e-management system also applies artificial intelligence which means all formulas, procedures, policies and limitation are integrated in the system. Fourth; the system also promotes paperless environment where online application is highly utilized. Memos, meeting, circular, announcement to name few are all online thus reduce operational cost. Finally, it is very dynamic in a way that it can be enhanced from time to time.

Organizational learning also refers to an organization with an awareness of the need for different levels of learning that are single loop learning and double loop learning. Single loop learning or adaptive learning involves improving incrementally through learning new skills and capabilities while double loop learning or generative learning means the learner must study their workplace and understand the

underlying causes of the problem instead of merely jumping to the solution. It involves other governing variables such as goals, values, beliefs and conceptual frameworks. This aspect was also materialized as UMP staff experience more than problem solving but frequently reevaluates and reframe decisions according to goals, values etc.

### **Learning at work**

Learning at work implies the continuous learning of the employees at their workplace apart from the formal courses and trainings. It is integrated with the daily working activities.

Supported by the e-management system, employees are connected and always exchange information. Files and documents of all types are stored in Files Bank in e-community portal for easy access among employees. In certain cases, users can choose to assign authorization for any file if they need to do so. For public files, users can easily retrieve them at anytime and anywhere. The system records the details of the retrieved documents. There is also an e-forum platform in which staff can discuss things. The e-forum does not limit discussion around working activities but can be about anything. Through this facilities, staff are encouraged to learn, share and improve their knowledge as knowledge is not necessarily comes from working related discussion. This is clearly practised by Google Inc. by creating an office for work and play. They want people to think creatively and push the boundaries of what's possible, so their workplaces are not like normal office. They design and innovative, fun and wacky design in office space to promote productivity, collaboration and inspiration.

Apart from that, a knowledge sharing session was made compulsory for all staff to attend. When KUKTEM was first established, all staff including top the top management gathered every Monday morning for short knowledge sharing session and the culture has actually produce many dedicated and committed workers. Work-related information is updated weekly from the person in charge and every member can voice out any issues right to the top management.

The learning at work also happens evidently in Process Team meeting. The Process Team was formed based on the categories in Critical Success Factor. They were divided into three team i.e Business, Associates and Customer. The fortnightly meeting of Business, Associates and Customer team facilitates learning at all levels. Each team consists of staff from various job scope and different level ranging from the top management i.e the registrar to the front liner i.e the clerk. The task of all team is to develop a process flow charts based on certain criteria. For example, Associates team develops a staff recruitment process, Business team develops purchasing process, and Customer team develops student registration process. Each process will be developed and will be presented to all other team for comments and improvements. Hundreds of processes were developed and this exercise gives abundant opportunities for staff from different job scope to learn, get clarification, and give suggestion about certain process before it is implemented.

### **Learning climate**

The learning climate suggests that the learning organization facilitates the learning of all its members. The learning organization is where the learning activities are always encouraged, promoted as well as rewarded. Members of the organization are encouraged to talk to each other, learn from each other and

have positive attitude toward learning. Learning becomes easy and natural with more space and time for experimenting and reflection, and tolerates failure (Ortenblad & Koris, 2014).

In its conception, UMP has adopted the Total Quality Management System to develop all administration processes. The visionary leadership has made a great impact to the whole organization. Along with proper planning and development of university philosophy, vision, mission and core values, the learning climate is promoted across the organization.

The top management involve actively in all Process Team meeting, making it viable to all staff to talk with each other, contribute ideas and suggest solutions to problems. Their efforts were encouraged and recognized. They were given space and time to experiment their ideas and at the end, lesson learned were to be shared with all staff. Learning was highly promoted and supported and the idea of learning organization was communicated to staff at all levels. Finger & Woolis (1994) argue that the learning organization idea would not have been possible without the movement towards Total Quality Management (TQM) during the 1980s. They reason that, due to the shift of attention from the stable organization to unstable markets and unpredictable customers, it is necessary for organizations to learn, thus the idea of learning organization was born. Love *et al.* (2000) argue that organizational learning can be realized by adopting and implementing TQM in its totality. UMP experience can be one example of utilizing the TQM approach in the process of becoming a learning organization.

### **Learning structure**

The learning organization is also understood as a flexible organization. The learning structure here refers to the organic structure which refers to the flexibility of a specific kind of structure. Decentralized structure and empowered workers are preferable in this aspect where the individuals need to make their own decisions quickly (Ortenblad, 2002). Apart from that, it is important that each person in the organization has a holistic approach. Every team member specializes in a task but at the same time learn how to perform the task of others, so enabling them to replace each other if needed.

At UMP, staff are equip with the understanding of university's core values that are; Strong bond with the Creator, Steadfast in upholding shared principles, Creative in making wise decisions, Resolute in facing challenges and Proactive in taking actions. From its first inception, the university has made it as routine task that staff needs to attend a knowledge sharing session on every Monday morning where each core values are discussed and detailed out.

University management promotes empowerment where every cost centre was to identify certain decisions that can be done by lower level staff. Creative in making wise decision and Proactive in taking action are both related to learning structure. Staff are expected to be able to take over each other's task. This was possible due to the implementation of TQO where a group of staff develop together a process flow chart and together they redesign and improve the process during a series of presentation session. Comments, remarks and suggestion were received from all staff category from various departments.

However, as public university, there are certain limitations to fully practice the aspect of learning structure. This is true to many other universities around the world, as bureaucracies become one of major block to flexibility in certain extent.

## **Conclusion**

The idea of learning organization was communicated to the staff of Universiti Malaysia Pahang during the first few years beginning from its inception in 2002. Since then, many initiatives have been taken to ensure that learning takes place in its most conducive environment. Although there was no obvious reference to which understanding of learning organization that the university was using, all programs and activities were mainly stressed on the promotion of learning. This paper divides and categorizes programs and activities into four understanding of learning organization i.e organizational learning, learning climate, learning at work and learning structure and proposed by Ortenblad (2002). Examples can be found easily for the former three but for learning structure, there was some limitation due to the bureaucratic nature of the university as public organization.

People can be rewarded in term of recognition but in term of promotion and even financial compensation, there are some limitations in term of policies and procedures in public agency. Becoming a learning organization requires lots of work and dedication. Time, energy and resources are to be considered as well. Inability to preserve, unable to cope with daily working commitment, lack of support from the top and unwillingness to fully commit to the idea can become a hindrance in the journey to be a true learning organization.



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**BIODATA**



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