Chapter 1

Knowledge Management and Higher-Educational Institutions: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of Knowledge Management (KM) activities is in large part dependent upon employees’ attitudes toward knowledge in general and to KM processes in particular. This chapter reports the results of a small-scale (N = 10) interview study of the “ways of knowing and knowledge sharing” of academics in three Slovene universities. The chapter presents an analysis of the responses from in depth, semi-structured interviews concerning the understanding of knowledge, KM processes, required social ecology, and attitude of academics. Responses were classified and tabulated in relation to theories of epistemology and KM and the findings analysed in relation to how they might be used for development of a conceptual KM framework within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The conclusion can be drawn that the KM framework within HEIs needs to take into account the bureaucratic and at the same time competitive and individualistic culture of academia.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) operate in a dynamic environment characterized by challenges, which require a rapid and possibly “different” response. HEIs, both public and private, do not compete for students and research budget only within their national boundaries, but also with foreign educational organisations, due to the increasing trend of the internationalization of higher education (de Wit, 2002). Within such a competitive environment, successful HEIs are those who have some kind of competitive advantage. The main source of competitive advantage of HEIs are their staff, their knowledge, and the ability to generate new knowledge, which has to be properly stored and made available through education and publication to the society (Marquardt, 1996).

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According to a resource-based view of organisations, which argues that the diversity, quality, and inimitability of internal resources provides a better and more enduring basis for defining strategy than the products or services these resources bring about (Barney, 1991; Conner, 1991), knowledge is the critical resource and source of competitive advantage (Grant, 1996). Therefore, it is of crucial importance for HEIs to identify the available knowledge, and to appropriately use it in order to contribute to the development of the organisation, of the individuals within who are the knowledge carriers and of the larger society. On the other hand, creating, acquiring, storing, and applying knowledge represent the main areas of Knowledge Management (KM).

KM has now become an integral part of the overall management process which takes place in an organisation, even though it was just fifteen years ago that KM began to make great headway as a management discourse (Swan & Scarbrough, 2001). There are different definitions of KM in the literature, describing it as a systematic, explicit, and deliberate collection, storage, and application of knowledge to enhance an organisation’s performance and recover its investments in intellectual capital (Wiig, 1997); or as a formal process which ensures that staff, technology and business processes together efficiently utilise knowledge and transfer it to the right people at the right time (Duffy, 2001); or as an action in accordance with the strategy of managing human capital (Brooking, 1998). Therefore, it seems that KM implies knowledge itself as well as the management of people who have this knowledge. If the definition of KM is still fluid and open to different concepts, knowledge as a concept is even more loose, ambiguous, and rich (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001).

KM in HEIs can be considered as a deliberate process through which organisations identify internal knowledge (employees’ knowledge) and knowledge existing outside of theirs boundaries (Firestone, 2001) to employ them in generating new knowledge. Geng et al. (2005) argue that within HEIs, academic and operational knowledge are present, where the former is expressed through teaching, research, documentation, publications, conferences, and patents. Operational knowledge, on the other hand, belongs to the employees who perform supportive or other activities in these institutions.

Knowledge management authors and practitioners have put considerable effort into designing a broad range of interventions, both organizational and technological, that are aimed at promoting the effectiveness of KM (e.g., Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Probst, Raub, & Romhardt, 2000). However, in the literature few models of KM related to HEIs can be found while many generic models of KM within for-profit organisations exist (see Butler, et al., 2007; Dufour & Steane, 2007; Kulkarni, et al., 2007; Moffet, et al., 2002; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Syed-Ikhsan & Rowland, 2004; Xu & Quaddus, 2005). Based on this fact, it can be concluded that KM within the context of HEIs remains an under-researched area.

Previous studies on KM in HEIs mainly dealt with the field of organisational culture (see Gomezelj Omerzel, Biloslavo, & Trnavčevič, 2010; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002), organisational structure, the role of ICT (Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2000; Numprasertchai & Poovarawan, 2008) and the relationship between a supervisor and a PhD student (Ugrin, Odum, & Pearson, 2008). However, they did not address the issue of the attitude and understanding teachers and researchers have about KM and its processes. We believe the knowledge of this issue is a prerequisite for the development of a holistic model of KM in HEIs, which would cover the critical factors for success and provide a basis for the creation of appropriate measures and guidelines for future action. This is the main goal that we want to achieve—through our research, and present in this contribution.
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