Chapter 5

KM in Higher Learning Institutions:
The Construction and Application of Tacit Knowledge among Malaysian Academicians

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study reports the findings from an interpretive exploration of tacit knowledge construction and application among the Malaysian academicians. In the knowledge era, higher learning institutions are increasingly exposed to marketplace pressures similar to other business. Therefore, it is pertinent for higher learning institutions to leverage on their knowledge for sustainability. However, efforts to leverage on tacit knowledge faced difficulties due to lack of understanding of tacit knowledge within its contextual boundary. The ambiguities surrounding tacit knowledge require deeper understanding of its construction and application to manage it as an important resource for academic institutions. The study discovered that tacit knowledge is constructed through implicit learning from the accumulated past experiences. Tacit knowledge is applied by the academicians as their adaptation strategies in appropriate job situation to fulfil the academic excellence norm.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning have long been connected with the production of knowledge. In the knowledge era, higher learning institutions expanded their scope of activities in the creation and dissemination of knowledge to include teaching in preparing students to become life-long learners, research to expand human knowledge and creativity and service to universities, national and international community (Metaxiotis and Psarras, 2003). Moreover, as mentioned by Goddard (1998) and Khurana (2007), universities and other higher institutions are recognized to be in the knowledge business and increasingly they are exposed to marketplace pressures in a similar way to other business. In the context of
Malaysia, the government is seriously pursuing knowledge-based economy. A K-based Economy Strategic Plan is launched and one of the thrust is to develop the public sector into a knowledge-based civil service, which directly affected public institutions of higher learning. It is expected that institutions of higher learning produce quality manpower with a first class mentality. Therefore, to become a knowledge-driven university, higher academic institutions must fulfill the needs of Knowledge Management (KM) which focused on managing their knowledge assets (Mohd Ridzuan Nordin, 2001). However, a study conducted on the implementation of KM in Malaysian higher institutions revealed that KM initiatives are still at the moderate level (Mohd Ghazali Mohayidin et. al, 2007).

The Malaysian government is seriously pursuing knowledge-based economy by laying out seven strategic thrust in its K-based Economy Strategic Plan. One of the thrust is to develop the public sector into a knowledge-based civil service, which directly affected Public Institutions of Higher Learning (PIHL). Therefore, being the producers of human capital, public universities must be prepared to become a knowledge-driven university to face the challenges in the knowledge era.

Tacit knowledge has been credited with the successes of organizations. However, it is an ambiguous construct and has been appropriated diversely in research. The difficulties in managing tacit knowledge for an organization’s competitive advantage are due to the lack of understanding of tacit knowledge within its contextual boundary and this is reflected through a survey research by Hijazi and Kelly (2003) that showed that higher learning institutions have some difficulty in understanding the implication of managing knowledge to support business processes.

The study is concerned with the understanding of the tacit knowledge construct among Malaysian academicians. Research on tacit knowledge has been predominantly done in through the knowledge-as-object approach. However, tacit knowledge is a dynamic knowledge that resulted from the ongoing social process of construction and collective action in an organization of an ongoing social accomplishment (Orlikowski, 2002; Aadne, 1996). Therefore, there is a need to explore tacit knowledge through the socially-constructed perspective.

Interpretive inquiry is chosen as it is in-line with the objective of the study which is to understand tacit knowledge, a socially-constructed and contextual knowledge which necessitate subjective method of inquiry to unveil the substance and realities of the research problem. The empirical work was conducted using qualitative strategy of inquiry with Grounded Theory (GT) as the primary overarching approach for data gathering and analysis from a case site.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To describe tacit knowledge construct among the Malaysian academicians.
2. To describe the construction and application of tacit knowledge in the context of Malaysian higher academic institutions.

BACKGROUND

The information age, facilitated by the development of Information Communication Technology, leads to an emergence of a new type of economy called knowledge economy (K-economy). In this era, organizations have to convert themselves into organization of knowledge-specialist in order to survive and remain competitive (Drucker, 1993). Together with globalization, K-economy pushes knowledge to be the main agenda in business survival (Kermally, 1988). Knowledge resides in people and organizations must make more effective use of the knowledge and expertise available within their existing employee base (Hellstrom and Husted, 2004).

Knowledge in people is tacit knowledge, which is the background knowledge of all understand-
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