

Chapter 7

The Role of Social Capital in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the role of social capital in higher education institutions, thus explaining the concept of social capital, the dimension of social capital in higher education institutions (i.e., structural social capital and communication, relational social capital and social integration, and cognitive social capital and coordination), and the application of social capital in higher education institutions in terms of social networks, social norms, social trust, and institutional trust. Social networks, high institutional trust, social trust, and a tendency to comply with regulations are the important social characteristics that facilitate the application of environmental initiatives in higher education institutions. The enforcement of social capital will be accompanied by successful higher education institution initiatives combined with significant change in the culture of higher education institutions, thus leading to the achievement of sustainability in higher education institutions. Understanding the role of social capital will significantly enhance the educational performance and achieve educational goals in higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Social capital is a central concept in most fields of social science (Puntscher, Hauser, Pichler, & Tappeiner, 2014). Social capital has been considered as the glue that combines institutions to enable economic factors to work toward the prosperity of societies (Geleta, 2014), thus referring to relations with colleagues, acquaintances or contacts which can provide opportunities to access financial and human resources (Wu, Wang, Tseng, & Wu, 2009; Tihula & Huovinen, 2010; Wagener, Gorgievski,

& Rijdsdijk, 2010) among persons generating productive results (Szreter, 2000; Ramirez, Orejuela, & Vargas, 2010) analyzed as a parameter of sustainability (Ramirez, 2006; Kuitz, 2007) through the functioning of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Georgieva, 1999). Social capital serves three important functions (Monavvarian, Asgari, Akhavan, & Ashena, 2013). First, social capital represents a structure of obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness (Monavvarian et al., 2013). Social systems with high trustworthiness are ones in which expect social obligations to be repaid somewhere down the line (Monavvarian et al.,

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2013). As such, individuals in social structures with higher level of obligations outstanding have more social capital to draw on (Monavvarian et al., 2013). Second, social capital serves as information channels (Monavvarian et al., 2013). As information may be costly to acquire because it requires attention, which is scarce, social relations constitute a form of social capital that provides access to information which facilitates action (Monavvarian et al., 2013). Finally, social capital serves as a system of norms and effective sanctions, that is, effective norms which constrain people from socially undesirable actions (Monavvarian et al., 2013). For example, one prescriptive norm within a collectivity that constitutes an especially important form of social capital is the norm that one should forgo one's self-interest to act in the collectivity's interest (Lang, 2004). In addition, social capital resources provide firms with the key social assets, including solidarity and norms of cooperation that are essential for the creation, sharing and management of knowledge (Manning, 2010). This chapter introduces the role of social capital in HEIs, thus explaining the concept of social capital, the dimension of social capital in HEIs (i.e., structural social capital and communication, relational social capital and social integration, and cognitive social capital and coordination), and the application of social capital in HEIs in terms of social networks, social norms, social trust, and institutional trust.

BACKGROUND

In the context of HEIs, this subject is combined with their dual role of producing knowledge and providing education both for their members and society in general (Evangelinos & Jones, 2009). When emphasizing the environmental dimension of sustainability within HEIs (Wright, 2002), two main means are underlined for its achievement: environmental management of their internal operations (Price, 2005; Sammalisto & Arvidsson,

2005; Nicolaides, 2006) and the opportunity of transmitting knowledge related to sustainability through their curriculum (Thomas, 2004; Allen-Gil, Walker, Thomas, Shevory, & Elan, 2005; Ramirez, 2006; Ramos, Cecilio, & De Melo, 2008). Lack of commitment from all members of the community (Thomas, 2004; Moore, Pagani, Quayle, Robinson, Sawada, Spiegelman, & Van Wynsberghe, 2005), inadequate decision-making processes and organizational problems (Barnes & Jerman, 2002; Moore et al., 2005; Velazquez, Munguia, & Sanchez, 2005; Nicolaides, 2006; Richardson & Lynes, 2007), confusion regarding the definition and goals of sustainability (Leal Filho, 2000; Moore et al., 2005), strong resistance and difficulty in adapting to change (Thomas, 2004; Moore et al., 2005; Velazquez et al., 2005), the inability to clearly identify the environmental consequences connected with the functioning of HEIs (Barnes & Jerman, 2002), high incidents of turnover among its members (Barnes & Jerman, 2002) and limited funding (Dahle & Neumayer, 2001; Sammalisto & Arvidsson, 2005; Velazquez et al., 2005).

Social capital is introduced as a moderator in the group performance model to improve the group processes of communication, social integration, and coordination (Evans & Carson, 2005). Social capital offers promise for understanding and improving the performance of functionally diverse groups (Evans & Carson, 2005). Social capital refers to social characteristics, such as social and institutional trust, social networks, and social norms (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993). Social capital may be regarded as one of the most influential terms of contemporary sociology (Portes, 1998) due to the recognition of its consequences for individuals and communities. A general assumption in the relevant literature is that higher stocks of social capital (i.e., dense social networks and high social and institutional trust) promote collective activity for the achievement of the common good and contribute to individual well-being (Bourdieu,

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