Higher Education Scenario from a Cross-Cultural Perspective:
eLearning Implications

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are crucial in the present. Universities play a role that varies with time and evolves with society. Globalization is changing the world and affecting higher education institutions in all their intrinsic characteristics: personnel, programs, infrastructures and students. Analyzed is the relevant research on cultural dimensions and applies it to higher education institutions focusing the analysis of the impact on eLearning setups. To do so, variables related to organizational strategy, design of curricula and teaching tools are proposed and analyzed from a set of cultural dimensions. Results show that higher education institutions are facing big challenges in their adaptation to multi-cultural arrangements.

Keywords: Cultural Dimensions, Culture, eLearning, Higher Education, Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Universities are organizations that changes with their environments. Different objectives and standards in teaching, research, and service as well as lack of agreement on guidelines for goal achievement result in an ambiguous decision-making process. Universities are vulnerable to their environment. Changes in political, economic, social, and technological conditions can affect the situation of universities strongly and should be used for strategic activity planning in higher education (Sporn, 1996).

Because of the changes on the demand, a large shift in the field of education has produced. Not in vain, between 1960 and 2000, the number of tertiary students per capita increased seven-fold in 15 industrialized Western countries. In Western democracies, it is nowadays common that more than half of the younger cohorts obtain higher education (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). With rapid socio-economic changes, 21st century higher education faces major challenges to its governance systems, curriculum, mission focus,

external relations, research, and financing (Shin & Harman, 2009).

Converge on the one hand public and private universities, which from a traditional view based on a specific location and its image and reputation as a student recruitment, but differ in their sources of funding, on the other hand, schools businesses, which are essentially private and provide training on the same terms as the previous group, although highly specialized terms and business needs, and a basically private funding. A third group is made up of universities that offer their services through internet or other means and do not require a specific location of their students.

Organizational culture, its analysis, change, development and evolution, and especially its relationship to strategy, is an essential element in the current university institutions face the continuous change. They are not different from studies considered classics in the field of culture, as for instance, Peters and Waterman (1982) or Deal and Kennedy (1982).

The increased interest in the application of organizational culture to universities derives from almost the same problems business companies are facing. A new, more competitive environment, less public funding, changes in the role of the state, or the claim for more academic management, accountability, and autonomy let universities encounter problems like adaptation, coordination, communication, evaluation or effectiveness (Dill & Sporn, 1995)

An "ideal culture" can facilitate the following questions (Kotther & Heskett, 1992):

- Identification (who are we?);
- Motivation, legitimization (why do we do the work?);
- Communication (to whom do we talk?);
- Coordination (with whom do we work?);
- Development (what are the perspectives?).

The existence of a strong corporate culture means that there are certain values that are shared by the organization at all levels. The consequence is that employees have a certain attitude and behaviours, showing a course of action that increases the likelihood of achieving the proposed objectives. In a way, the culture is the most immutable of organizations, ensuring that in certain cases, provide the desired stability.

Kotter and Heskett (1992) in their famous study of the corporate culture of American companies revealed that the simple existence of a strong culture was not sufficient to explain differences in results between companies, and that as a conclusion was necessary a shared culture and an alignment between the culture, values and behaviours of people with the company strategy.

Sporn (1996) defines strength as "the degree of fit between cultural values, structural arrangements and strategic plans within the university." The assumptions made are:

- The strong cultures are more successful in adapting to weak cultures;
- The externally oriented cultures are more able to adapt to environmental changes that internally oriented cultures.

The combination of the two variables: strong and weak culture, on one hand and external and internal guidance on the other, gives rise to four types of university culture.

A framework of Organizational Culture is studied by Tierney (1988) and is based on the following elements: Environment, Socialization, Information, Strategy and Leadership. And present them as essential concepts to be studied at a college or university.

CROSS-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

In this section, two recognized cross-cultural models are depicted: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and The GLOBE Project.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

One of most widely used frameworks for studying cross-cultural communications

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