

# A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND CHANGES FOR THE SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITY

Eva Nicoleta, BURDUȘEL<sup>1</sup> and Camelia, OPREAN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Letters and Arts, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania, e-mail eva.burdusel@ulbsibiu.ro

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Economic Sciences, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania, e-mail camelia.oprean@ulbsibiu.ro

**ABSTRACT:** The present paper aims to examine the new role and status of higher education institutions as they are subject to ongoing challenges and changes entailed by the global information society. An accurate understanding of the current context – cultural, technological / scientific, social and economic – is the prerequisite for designing a new vision of the higher education process and university mission. There is a paradigm shift from elitist education – in terms of access and status – to mass education; accompanied by an acute awareness of the relevance of the Humboldtian university nowadays.

**KEY WORDS:** higher education: changes and challenges; sustainable university; elitist vs. mass education

## 1. THE CURRENT STATUS OF TERTIARY EDUCATION – PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Before embarking on any approach to higher education nowadays, a prerequisite is looking at the interaction between HEIs and their vision, on one hand, and the international, economic, technological, socio-political as well as political and legal contexts (figure 1). Universities are open systems and dynamic organizations, connecting and interacting with external stakeholders, and whose mission, role, relevance – both for its members and the society at large – and evolution can only be grasped from the vantage point of a holistic approach to such institutions. Mention should be made that we consider the term interaction as more comprehensive than influence, since it reflects a two-way relation. At a time when people should be more alert than ever to the challenges of the world, it is essential for academics and scholars to re-consider and re-design the status of universities, with open minds and unbiased perspective to be able to learn the lesson of the future.

Thus an accurate understanding and thorough analysis of the multiple and complex factors that make up the global reality is the foundation for our research whose goal is to highlight the ongoing challenges and changes that universities have to cope with in their attempt to become competitive and sustainable organizations. Special focus is given on redefining the notion of leadership and applying total quality management to HEIs.

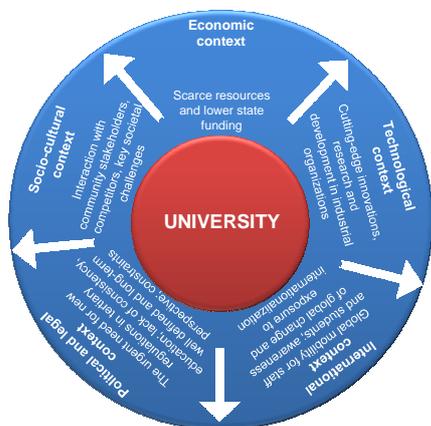


Figure 1. The university and its external context

„Experience has shown that an organization is the result of maintaining balance in the context of major turbulences triggered by internal and external constraints in pursuit of profit – the output of organizational process that justifies survival. In this context, organizations are able to improve their managerial strategies so that all efforts are focused on meeting client needs and requirement, provided that trust in product accomplishment is testified by quality assurance.” [1]

HEIs endeavor to accomplish excellence in keeping with the knowledge triad and in order to become entrepreneurial by providing services and consultancy to society:

- promoting the advancement of scientific knowledge;
- undertaking research promoting innovation;
- fostering innovation and creativity in view of academic differentiation

At the same time, HEIs are coping with complex and challenging tasks as they are expected:

- to be more visibly useful for economy and society;
- to generate unpredictable innovation
- to prepare students to be highly skilled professionals in specific areas of knowledge and cope with indeterminate job tasks; as well as to challenge constantly in a critical way conventional wisdom and established practices [6]

## 2. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Organizational culture accompanied by strategic vision represent essential components for the attainment of excellence in any organization. „The organizational culture is made up of a set of values, traditions, myths, slogans that help its members to understand the situation of the organization, the way the latter is carrying out its tasks and what is considered important for it.” [2]

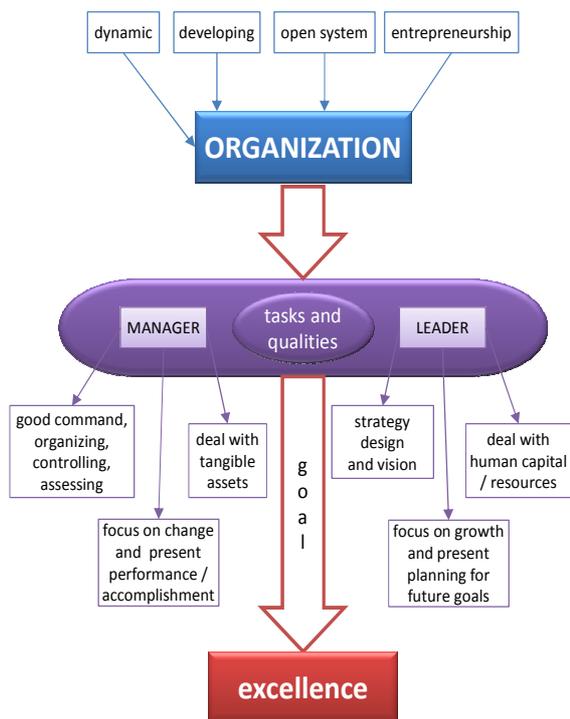
Universities need to focus internally in order to create and disseminate knowledge that further leads to innovation, as well as externally by alertness and adjustment to societal changes at all levels. Thus HEIs should be both responsive and receptive to what society expects from them, and responsible i.e. able to guide reflection and policymaking in society. Thus traditional institutions are being challenged by the powerful forces characterizing the global economy: hypercompetitive markets,

demographic change, increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, disruptive technologies, etc. [3]

Considering these premises, i.e. the internal and external environment with an impact on academic organization, LBUS has undertaken the task of:

- promoting teaching and research in keeping with the requirements of a society based on knowledge and continuous learning, integrated in a European and global context;
- contributing to local, regional and national development from a social, economic, cultural and political perspective by means of active participation to the environment and community;
- systematic knowledge and providing original contribution to major fields of science and technology at the dawn of the 21st century, associated with flexible, comprehensive, interactive and continuous learning;
- promoting and supporting, in its capacity as public institution, within the local, regional, national and international community, the development of a culture of proactive and participatory attitude, of personal development and of integration to diversity and globalization;
- openness to the interaction with the economic, social and academic communities at local, national and international levels. [4]

In order to illustrate the authors of the present paper have designed a pattern for a high performing organization in view of attaining effective leadership, with special reference to a non-industrial – i.e. academic - organization (figure 2).



**Figure 2.** High performing organization and effective leadership

### 3. TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Total quality management is a concept that focuses on customer satisfaction, continuous improvement, management involvement and staff commitment and excellence in all dimensions of the process. As regards quality in higher

education institutions there are several sources that might be capitalized:

- outstanding academic staff;
- high moral values;
- excellent examination results;
- the support of business and local community;
- plentiful resources;
- the application of the latest technology;
- strong and purposeful leadership;
- the care and concern for students;
- a well-balanced and challenging curriculum [7].

Nowadays, universities compete not only for staff and students, but also for funding given the radical changes in recent economy development, financial and political crises that have triggered a scarcity of available resources. Nevertheless, high performing organizations striving for excellence in order to gain competitive edge have to focus increasingly on the 20% that matters in order to accomplish the 80% that makes a difference in the higher education system. Therefore, it is precisely the ability of universities to skilfully use entrepreneurship in order to better adapt to the new environment and requirements. Hence we can apply the Pareto principle to the current situation of public HEIs: scarce resources and research funds, on the one hand, however quality assurance standards and criteria are ever more demanding.

According to the Presidential Strategy called Education and Research for the Knowledge-Based Society: “Universities that choose to promote entrepreneurial culture and practices have increased chances for adaptivity in a lightly competitive and globalized world. Encouragement of academic intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship should become a major objective for Romanian universities in the near future.” [5]

It becomes increasingly important that universities are concerned with quality attainment both in the advancement of science and creation of knowledge, as well as in the transmission of learning. There are four imperatives that „reflect the complex environment in which educational institutions operate. They are the drivers and motivating forces that challenge any institutions to take a proactive stance on quality:

- the moral imperative;
- the professional imperative;
- the competitive imperative;
- the accountability imperative [7].

### 4. ORGANIZATIONAL PARADIGM SHIFT IN UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT AND VISION

The expansion of higher education in recent decades has entailed implications for all members of society:

- economic impact and benefit for the society;
- social equity and mobility of labour force;
- social cohesion and integration of individual community members

hence the acknowledgement and governmental urge that academics should contribute to society. In his seminal essay „What are universities for?” Keith Thomas competently discusses a highly relevant and topical issue, now more than ever, i.e. the relation of universities and higher education to the needs of society, in view of attaining economic success and technological advance. The most visible aspect here is the urgency that higher education institutions should contribute to the „knowledge economy”. „All publicly funded research at universities should have an identifiable ‚impact’ on our economy and society.” [8] Furthermore, it is imperative nowadays that universities help „individuals to develop their capabilities to their highest potential”, focus on increasing knowledge and understanding, both at individual and community level; as well as contribute to shaping „a democratic, civilized, inclusive society.” [8] In this context, the relationship between universities and governmental policies has changed radically.

Another significant issue for the interdependence between university and society in view of an enhanced correlation of knowledge creation and knowledge capitalization is a focus on competencies rather than degree (e.g. entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and interaction, learning to learn, information literacy, soft skills, etc.) as well as an emphasis on continuing professional and personal development. The pattern of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is no longer viable, instead the utilitarian expectations from society at large seem to prevail. It is here that the above-mentioned essay refers to the „threat posed to the humanities by funding cuts” and „education for profit”. Hence „academic subjects which do not attract numerous students and large research grants are vulnerable ... In practice, this means the humanities.” [8]

Since the market reacts in a much quicker and more unexpected manner, therefore change management shall make the difference for high performing organizations and gaining sustainable competitive advantage. The change from elite to

mass higher education has entailed another challenge: i.e. university management should dare to shift from a quantitative emphasis (on the number of graduates - short-term institutional benefit) towards a qualitative approach (on study programs and curricula design in keeping with society demands – sustainable development).

Universities worldwide have readjusted their patterns, mission and academic culture in order to cope with the demands of changing societies. Nowadays, higher education institutions have to compete for resources (experienced and well qualified staff; research funding) as well as addressability (students; employability market).

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