

## Universities as Learning Organizations in the Knowledge Economy

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**Abstract.** *Through the present paper, we want to emphasize a set of managerial strategies to be applied in order to improve the operational functioning of a university up to the status of a learning organization. The objectives of this research paper are first to present several different perspectives about the concept of a 'learning organization'; second to substantiate the (still) fuzzy paradigm of universities as learning organizations both from a scientific and pragmatic perspective; and third to argue a set of strategies to be applied for the transformation into a 'learning organization'. The relevance of the research theme is evidenced by the interest manifested by the academic community towards the issues that universities (as Higher Education Institutions) are confronting with especially during the last decades. This fact is reflected by the great number of publications in specialized journals and participation to thematic conferences and debates. The first section presents various perspectives on learning organization and organizational learning. The second section is focusing on universities as learning organizations aiming at continuous adaptation to the changing external business environment. The third section of the paper presents the most relevant strategies of the learning organization for the academic context and provides the necessary argumentation for universities to develop as a learning organization.*

**Keywords:** *learning organization, organizational learning, knowledge creation, leadership, organizational culture, strategies, universities.*

### Introduction

More than ever knowledge is perceived today as a strategic resource for organizations that seek to develop the best products and services on the market, to obtain the best market share, to collaborate with the best in the field. In this scope, organizations have to constantly adapt their competitive advantage to the market (stakeholders') requirements in order to generate initiatives that lead them to create their own future. Literature reveals

broad debates on the issue of knowledge as a basic resource in the new economy (Bratianu, 2015a; Godin, 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; O'Dell & Hubert, 2011; Senge, 1990). However, the concept of knowledge can be understood only in the context of the basic metaphor used for defining it. That means that knowledge may have different interpretations, considering different entities used in the source domain of the metaphors from objects, to iceberg or stocks and flows, or to energy as in the vision promoted by Bratianu (2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2016).

Metaphorical thinking has been used also for defining organizational learning and the learning organization (Argote, 2013; Argyris, 1999; Dierkes, Bertoin Antal, Child & Nonaka, 2003; Örtenblad, 2004). Many authors consider that learning is a specific process for individuals not for organizations, and from this perspective, it is suitable to extend these concepts to organizations. However, we adopt the view that *organizational learning* and *learning organization* are two semantic constructs that are very useful in analyzing the organizational behavior, especially in the emergent knowledge society. If we consider that each organization can be described by certain states of organizational knowledge, then any change in the state of knowledge for an organization is by definition a result of an organizational learning process. "It stems from an analogy, namely, the idea that a goal-oriented social structure, such as an organization, is able to learn like an organism" (Maier, Prange & Von Rosenstiel, 2003, p.14).

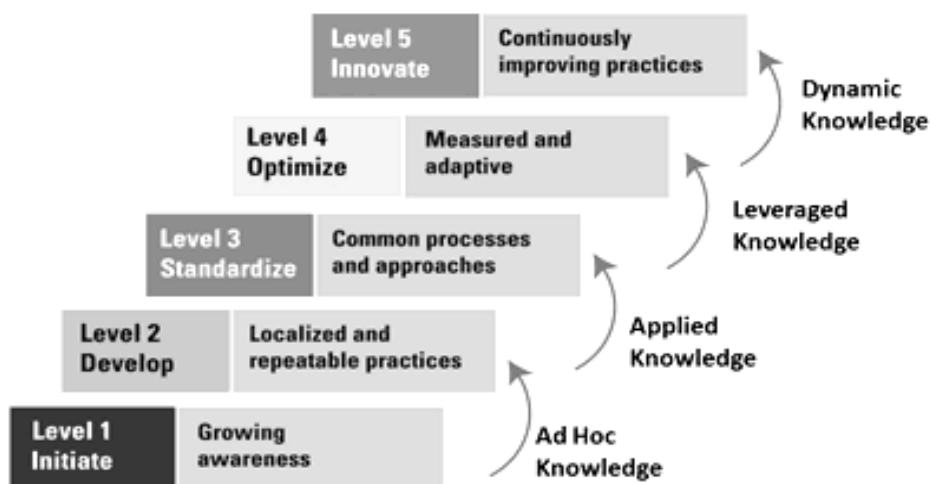
The purpose of this paper is to perform a conceptual analysis of the organizational learning processes, learning organizations and then to show how universities which are focusing on teaching and learning can become learning organizations. The structure of the paper is as follows: in the next section we present different perspectives on the basic concepts of organizational learning and learning organization and a maturity model to help us understand the progress of any organization toward the status of becoming a learning one. Then, we present how organizational learning processes work in universities and which strategies would be successful in transforming them into learning organizations. Finally, we open a discussion about how to implement these strategies in universities.

### **Perspectives on the concept of the learning organization**

The conceptual design of the 'learning organization' has emerged at pace with the evolution of 'the learning society'. A defining contribution had Schön (1983) who provided a theoretical framework linking the experience of living in a situation of an increasing change with the urgent need for learning (Ngesu, Wambua, Ndiku & Mwaka, 2008). The prospect of a

learning organization began to take shape at the same time with acknowledgment of organizational learning importance. The reference model in terms of the learning organization is the one of Senge (1990) but so far have been highlighted other significant approaches. The learning organization requires first employed learners, which mean that each employee must develop thinking and behavior focused on learning. Transforming the organization into a learning organization is permanent, thus a prerequisite to maintaining and developing its portfolio of knowledge to the required level of competitive activities, on short, medium or long term. Chinowsky and Carillo (2007) show how can be achieved the status as a learning organization going through a maturity model and March (1991, p.72) shows how to trade-off between *exploitation* and *exploration* of knowledge: "In studies or organizational learning, the problem of balancing exploration and exploitation is exhibited in distinctions made between refinement of an existing technology and invention of a new one. It is clear that exploration of new alternatives reduces the speed with which skills at existing ones are improved. It is also clear that improvements of competence at existing procedures make experimentation with others less attractive".

Serrat (2009) expresses the essentials about the learning organization in one simple but the profound phrase: a learning organization, values the role that learning can play in developing organizational effectiveness. In an economic environment characterized by globalism, labor processes and macro-scale systems, organizations must strengthen integrated systems to support the work of employees around the world (Friedman, 2005). A key component to building a solid global organization is the ability to manage to learn. Iandoli and Zollo (2007) propose innovative theories about organizational learning, which focus on memory, experience, and practice. The approach is bidding for anyone wanting to understand more closely the dynamics of the learning organization. Research on intergenerational learning is of great interest at present for experts from academia and business. Promoting intergenerational learning in the organization delivers benefits on several fronts and a critical aspect is that it will lead to a reduction of knowledge losses when employees leave the organization (Ropes, 2013). In figure 1 we show five levels of the knowledge management maturity model developed by APQC and used for evaluating the level of a given organization in its progress toward becoming a learning organization.



*Figure 1. Stages of KM Maturity Model (APQC, 2016)*

Regardless of how it is defined, this type of organization is always able to foresee, innovate and find more effective means to achieve its objectives. The key expressions of these definitions, as adaptation and innovation to increase efficiency through individual and collective learning, are relevant to what is understood today through the 'learning organization'. A learning organization analyzes external factors on their learning and adapts its internal organizational framework to match the opportunities that arise. Continuously reconsidering its objectives and improving its capacity to change the culture or work structure in order to gain as many benefits as possible. A learning organization is an entity that anticipates changes in its environment and reacts accordingly based on learning at a strategic level. On a superior perspective, a learning organization is a goal, a value system, or a collection of disciplines and practices (Hapenciuc, Bratianu, Roman & Bejinaru, 2014).

A learning organization facilitates learning of all program staff by grooming a positive and safe learning environment (we learn as much from mistakes than from successes), while openness to new ideas and different approaches is key and systematic reflection stimulates a conscious adaptation and transformation of its own organization both to external and internal context. Ali (2012, p.56) remarks that 'a learning organization' is an organization that possesses continuous learning characteristics or mechanisms to meet its ever-changing needs. Though we have identified mainly benefits from its definitions, there have been arising several doubts about the usefulness of the 'learning organization' as a way of creating and sustaining competitiveness (Eijkman, 2011). Due to its complexity and difficulty in assessing the progress of organizational learning, some authors question even the effort of searching for learning organizations. For

instance, Grievies (2008) suggested that the idea of the 'learning organization' should be abandoned.

However, even if there are so many supportive ideas that the evolution towards the 'learning organization' status is a must there are many gaps through the guidelines on how to develop the process of creating a 'learning organization'. The seldom approaches that try to provide a step-by-step guideline for becoming a 'learning organization' are more related to the process of organizational change. We question whether the missing guidelines might be a result of the diverse opinions which frequently overlap and produce confusion rather than a convergence towards a single approach that would better help to build an 'learning organization'. Not eventually, each approach should be customized by using the methods that best work for the company; be developed by the existing structures and processes; and make sense of past successes that support the 'learning organization' philosophy (Redding, 1997). Enlarging the perspective and action framework Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991) states that the development of the 'learning organization' can start from different points and may have several pathways. The organization can follow one, a combination or all of them.

Although they are well known and have been largely discussed in many papers, we consider we have a more relevant argumentation for the essential ideas about the five dimensions of the learning organization designed by Peter Senge (1990):

1. Systems thinking - as the foundation of a learning organization, allows understanding the behavior of the entire interaction of components considered in turn as a whole, allows transition from reacting to the present reality in defining strategy and goals for the future. We live in the present, but based on the past we build the future.
2. Personal mastery - approaching creative personal development, desiring it and granting enough effort to achieve it, discovering opportunities and challenges in the inevitable changes that occur, the employees will be able to learn, develop skills, to perform, to preserve uniqueness, to remain continuously connected to the community. "The principle of creative tension is the central principle of personal mastery, integrating all elements of the discipline" (Senge, 1990, p.151).
3. Mental models - defined as simple generalizations or complex theories, influence how people perceive reality and thus, decide and act. The management is very important to understand these mental models, putting them into question and changing them if the surrounding reality requires.
4. Shared vision - a vision shared by all its members, the organization becomes more efficient in learning. By overlaying the employee mindset

across the organization, it can identify differences can accept the perspective of the organization. Shared vision generates employee commitment to the strategic objectives of the company but under the freedom of choice - freedom of choice.

5. Team learning - the idea is that the results of two people who think independently, taken together / summed up, are lower than the results of the two thinking, communicating and acting together as a team. Why? Because of the amount of talent, skills, and abilities of the two employees taken separately, are less than the talent, skills and abilities of the compact group. Thinking, communication, and stimulation within the team bring more value than thinking of its members separately. Team learning is valuable. The expressions through which Senge (1990, p.151) describes, not defines, 'the learning organization are numerous and compelling, so we remember one of them. A learning organization is any organization within which you cannot but learn because learning is so insinuated in the very life of the organization'.

In the context of a 'learning organization', the learning methodology is closely linked to sharing knowledge methodology. Considering sharing a strategic approach to learning we refer to the need of an increasing development in the personal, the collective and intellectual capital. According to Marsick and Watkins (2003) learning and knowledge sharing in an organization take place on four levels, first as individuals learn on their own; afterwards due to the fact that individuals integrate into an organization and become involved in its development process, they transfer to team learning level, respectively to organization learning level; we consider that the development of methods of learning is based on an individual's willingness to learn and evolve. Later they develop the methods and techniques of group learning. At this point, we discover other four levels of learning. For the first level, the individuals acknowledge significations of their skills and gain knowledge. The next level, the peer learning is achieved when employees work together to create knowledge and develop the collaborative ability. At the organizational level learning is reflected in the organization's culture, policies, operating procedures, and / or information systems. When the organizational level is exceeded then we reach the- thinking globally level (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2016).

At this point, we might agree on a certain perspective, that a learning organization is characterized by continuous learning for continuous improvement and by the capacity to transform itself. In this sense we following present seven dimensions considered as priorities in the becoming of a 'learning organization': (1) *continuous learning* - the organization generates numerous situations for learning to all individuals while accomplishing their work duties; (2) *inquiry and dialogue* - the

organization implements strategies to promote the culture of free speech like asking questions and expressing contradictory opinions, receiving feedback and developing experiments; (3) *team learning* - encouraging collaboration, learning and working together and a teamwork culture based on mutual trust and respect in the organization; (4) *embedded system* - vibrant systems are built to capture and share learning in the organization; (5) *empowerment* - people in the organization must feel free and powerful being involved in setting, owning and implementing the collective vision of the organization, and held accountable for different decisions in the organization; (6) *system connection* - the organization shows that is capable of scanning and connecting with its internal and external environment, and (7) *strategic leadership* - the organization has a strategic leadership for learning to meet changes (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). This integrative model provides a conceptual framework for understanding learning organization and an instrument to measure the construct (Yang, Watkins & Marsick, 2004).

Much is known about private organizations as learning organizations and less about the public institutions, mainly higher education institutions or universities (Bui & Baruch, 2012). There has been awarded a lot of attention towards the conceptualization of the learning organization construct but much more research is needed for examining the evidence and applicability of this concept in various organizations (Rus, Chirica, Ratiu & Baban, 2016).

### **Substantiating the paradigm of universities as learning organization**

Within the present unpredictable business environment and the accelerated knowledge economy development, the universities need to increase their knowledge generation and knowledge transfer toward the society. Universities should strive to become learning organizations, in the sense, explained by Peter Senge (1990). Thus the scientific motivation for this research work has been generated both by a scientific and pragmatic necessity.

Nowadays higher education it is strongly linked with research and innovation and thus plays a crucial role not only in individual and societal development but also in the process of delivering the European Union's 2020 Strategy, to drive forward and maintain growth.

Universities are the main actors responsible for providing the highly skilled human capital that Europe needs in order to create jobs, economic growth,

and prosperity. Since 26 years ago the Romanian Higher Education System represents a testing laboratory for various international processes, norms, and institutions that have contributed at many attempts of reformation during the transition to democracy. Even if the Romanian Higher Education System has been defined as a national and European priority, reforms in the field have rarely been coherent and with a positive impact on this domain development. Romanian universities have very low positions in international rankings but there are some better positions obtained on disciplines, which demonstrates that there are some isolated nucleuses (as more compact research teams) that generate performance (Deca, 2015). The desire to have world-class universities has its roots not just in rational considerations, but also in the symbolic role of such universities. The rankings made the competition between the states very visible and thus are most commonly recognized as an indicator of success, of excellence-driven policies (Sadlak & Cai, 2007).

In this sense, Romanian National Ministry for Education and Scientific Research developed and published the results of a Metaranking for national universities. The goal of 2016 University Metaranking was to evaluate the positioning in specific international rankings of Romanian universities. The analysis took into account the nine relevant international rankings that provide a global score, which mainly includes academic criteria / indicators. The analysis results reveal both Romanian universities that pass a minimum threshold of international visibility (a number of 15 Romanian universities are visible at international level) and 'potentially world-class' universities, potential competitive in the area of international education and research (5 Romanian universities with potential for excellence, with international visibility and impact). The final conclusion, as a recommendation, was that in addition to the classic mode of funding for universities, a fund of competitiveness should support Romanian universities which are internationally visible and an excellence fund must support the Romanian universities with potential for excellence, with international visibility and impact (Andronești et al., 2016). We have to point that the discussions about the funding shortage of Romanian universities in comparison to the expected results are not new and we consider they were born due to chronic underfunding of higher education. The idea of investing in universities with the potential to enter the international rankings is welcome, provided not to be done to the detriment of other universities. In other words, the solution is to grow the entire budget allocated to higher education significantly and enable universities to step over the survival zone.

However, is the 'learning organization' both a desirable and achievable goal? Several authors (Zucker, Darby & Armstrong, 1998) supported the



idea that very good scientists are also successful in generating commercial benefits while maintaining the excellence of their academic research thus, according to them, scientific success and economic benefits are not incompatible. The theme proposed for research is grounded on the previous scientific works which lead to the fact that only highly competitive universities can contribute to the development of the knowledge economy. Universities as learning organizations continue to be a topical subject among researchers and government decision makers. Since its debut (Senge, 1990) the concept gained more and more ground in research and increased its credibility in business as systematically has been demonstrated by good practice examples. Many authors (Bratianu, 2015; Bui & Baruch, 2012; Jeffrey, 2015; Örtenblad, 2015) say that universities would greatly benefit if they succeed to become learning organizations. This growth potential resides in transforming their theoretical knowledge into practice and also the individual knowledge of its staff into organizational knowledge. Of major importance is the aspect of universities' adaptation to the features of this new economic and social environment which means continuous change and increasing competition. Nowadays the challenge is to prepare students for jobs that are not known at the time of their training and to teach them to solve problems that have not even been recognized (Bharath, 2015). Thus achieving the functional status of a learning organization will enable universities (and implicitly their stakeholders) to strategically adapt and survive to any possible futures. Sustainable competitive advantage is crucial for universities also. On one hand, companies strive to obtain growing profits and are stimulated to continuously adapt to the changing environment and to consumers' tastes. On the other hand, universities are motivated by a core set of principles in order to preserve the significance of their social role (Jeffrey, 2015).

As Bratianu (2014, 2015a) emphasizes there are a set of integrators which contribute greatly to the creation of a learning organization. The author describes the interactions within the organization generated by five types of integrators: technologies and processes, management, leadership, vision and mission and organizational culture. Actually, there is a considerable difference between management and leadership which should not be missed. In essence, management ensures the objectives undertaken by an organization in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and control. By this management is considered as an operational process that ensures the organization's status quo. Managers are those who have been invested with institutional authority to perform the functions of planning, organizing, leading and control. Although management is not a standardized process, it requires compliance with the organizational requirements. Unlike management, leadership is the process by which the organization is

proposing a series of changes, either for the need to adapt to today's dynamic external business environment, to achieve a competitive advantage or as a result of the business vision. In this perspective, leadership must define the vision for change, set directions for change and to motivate people to achieve the objectives of change. "Leadership is thus the process by which a person can influence a group of others in order to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2007, p.3). Leaders have the ability to resonate with emotional states of people around them and with their requirements. While management supports the process of integrating individual knowledge and intelligence, leadership focuses particular emphasis on the integration of individual intelligence and values of individuals. That makes leadership a very powerful integrator, with a greater impact on generating the desired outcomes.

Additionally, literature prevails of specifications about the idea that 'learning organizations' managers have to carry on further roles:

- *Supporter*, who models learning, supports information exchange (Giesecke & McNeil, 2004), provides a conceptual framework (Nonaka, 1991), coaches (Goh, 1998; Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994), does not control (Snell, 2001), supports staff's attempts to grow and develop (Bennett & O'Brien, 1994), balances inquiry and advocacy (Senge, 1992), links the organization horizontally (James, 2003) and the employees and top management (Nonaka, 1991), facilitates learning (Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994) and distinguishes effective from ineffective practice (Garvin, 2000).
- *Promoter*, who promotes constructive dissent (Senge, 1992), continuous improvement (Giesecke & McNeil, 2004; Goh, 1998), personally leads the process of discussion by framing the debate, poses questions, listens attentively and provides feedback and closure (Garvin, 2000).
- *Encourager*, who encourages work-related learning (Giesecke & McNeil, 2004), tries new ideas (Goh, 1998), experiments, and acknowledges failures (Senge, 1992).

In compliance with the thorough literature analysis, Santa (2015) has drawn insightful conclusions. Even more, senior managers should give direction by personal example (Farrell, 2000; Garvin, 2000; Nonaka, 1991). It is essential that the top management emphasizes the importance of being learning oriented (Farrell, 2000), by having an openness to new perspectives, awareness of personal biases, immersion in unfiltered data, and growing sense of humility (Garvin, 2000).

## **Strategies to upgrade universities as learning organizations**

It is very well grounded the fact that a university is both explicitly and implicitly built on notions relating to the importance of learning at an individual level and the idea of learning as the basis for and the driver of development is well recognized within universities. Due to the specific of their profession academics should easily embrace the idea of organizational learning in order to produce a learning organization (Ngesu et al., 2008) but even in this situation, there are many gaps to bridge. There are always gaps when connecting theory and practice. Especially managerial/ leadership aspects which are difficult to be exactly quantified in figures and rigorous procedures. The difficulty resides also in the idea that, since a couple of decades, we know the conceptual benefits, we discovered the basic steps, we acknowledge their importance but we do not make any consistent progress. A world-class university should contribute to the international competitiveness of a country/ a culture with direct impact on the life-level and life-quality of its citizens. To develop such a university we have to restore everything and start from scratch.

In the adaptation process, universities focus on their traditional mission of teaching, learning, and research. Today, society asks much more from universities in terms of their contribution. In this regard universities have to pay attention to the needs of different categories of stakeholders, like the students and their families; private firms and public institutions; the State and all the national and local governments; and not least, the community. Thus, universities should switch from creating adaptation knowledge to produce generative knowledge, and to become learning organizations (Bratianu et al, 2011; Bratianu, 2015a, 2015b; Senge, 1990). That means for governance to become a strategic driving force of the university and a powerful integrator able to transform efficiently the potential intellectual capital into operational intellectual capital.

Nowadays, perhaps more than ever it is necessary for learning to become the background of change. Organizations that fail to create and implement a culture of learning will not be able to adapt quickly enough, they will not meet evolving operating environment and will be certainly endangered to disappear from the market. According to Kline and Saunders (2010), there are ten steps that an organization needs to make in order to become a "Learning Organization". Among them: learning to assess their own culture; to give everyone a chance to think; reward risk taking; help everyone to become a learning resource for others and put the power of learning in action. Successful completion of these steps requires, according to the same authors: leaders of learning ("learning leaders") well trained and selected

according to a set of skills among which the most important are: empathy towards cultural differences, to the values of other cultures; ability to justify that good training can be an important investment; good knowledge of the economic objectives of the organization; ability to adapt to context; ability to take/accept well-founded criticism; paradox tolerance and the capacity to anticipate problems and solve them before they appear, etc. (Kline & Saunders, 2010). This approach of management regards the integration of learning in the organizational system, process that refers to the orientation of the organization for learning and can open the way to significant competitive advantages.

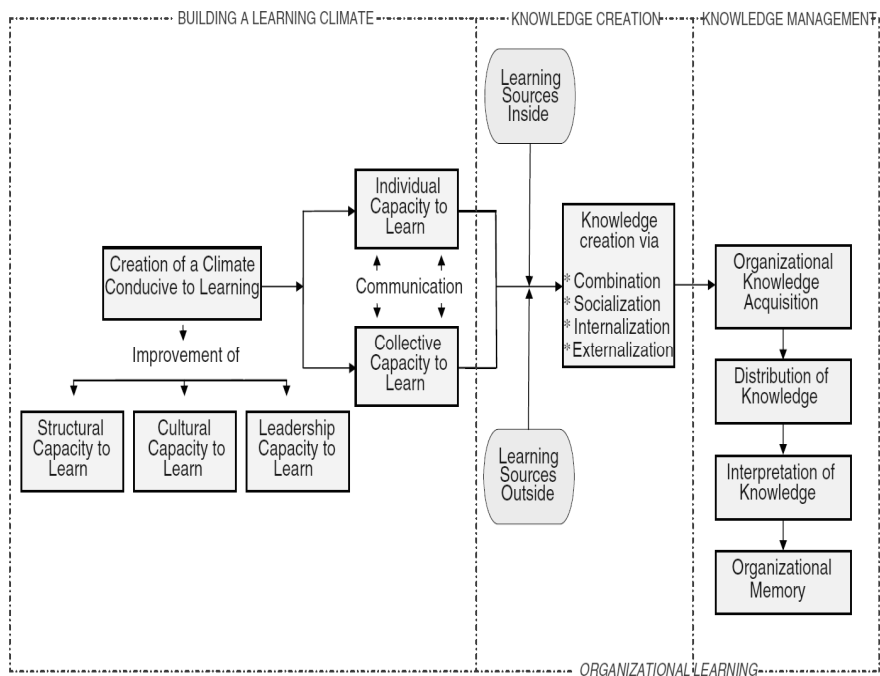
Driving the transition towards the learning organization leaders may encounter some barriers. The obstacles for implementing such transformation strategies, as we envision it, refer to a) low level of collaboration (openness) of the academic environment towards reflecting the reality of the system, whether speaking of successful practices or pitfalls; b) the scholarly skepticism towards updating from the traditional perspective, based on teaching performances, to the dynamic perspective, based on learning competences; c) departmentalization and tenure – in contradictory sense to the concept of ‘systems thinking’ (Senge, 1990).

A primary step that should be made (by university leaders) in order to ensure the premises of success for such a transformation process is to put a major emphasis on creating a “learning climate”. As an immediate effect, this will facilitate the organizational learning. The next step is the implementation of sound knowledge management processes which base on knowledge dynamic processes both inwards and outwards the organization, like creation, acquisition, dissemination, interpretation, and storage. Summarizing the above ideas we present in Figure 2 an illustration of the key building blocks of the transformation model proposed by Maden (2012).

As the author underlines, within the proposed model for transforming public sector organizations to learning organizations, the first and the foremost phase is the development of a “learning climate”. Serving to this aim, organizational leaders should primarily focus on improving structural, cultural, and leadership capacities to learn which will, in turn, lead to the creation of a climate conducive to both individual and collective learning. For each organizational dimension, the author suggests some improvement options or basic strategies. For enhancing structural capacity to learn, leaders of public sector organizations should capitalize on the benefits of decentralized structures allowing for more participation, flattened hierarchies, small units, or cross-functional teams as well as the integration of central functions into the line. In addition, what we consider of strategic

importance for the case of universities, the structure should allow for the information sharing between different units and networks of experts outside the organization (Maden, 2012). Any new knowledge should be transmitted to key decision makers both quickly and accurately (Garvin, Edmonson & Gino, 2008). The employees' feelings of comfort, safety and trust are stimulating for idea creation and expression. Within a supportive organizational culture, individual/group new ideas and arguments should be valued and mistakes should be allowed without applying any punishments. Also in such an organizational culture employees should allow themselves time for a pause in the action in order to stimulate an analytical review of organizational processes (Garvin et al., 2008), and thus individual and collective capacities to learn are expected to improve considerably.

An interesting component that is independently presented, in the creation of a favorable learning climate is the improvement of leadership capacity to learn. The authors emphasize what is widely acknowledged that the power of the personal example is continuously working. Thus employees will be mostly encouraged to generate new ideas and opinions if they observe this behavior applied by their leaders (Maden, 2012).



**Figure 2. Transformation of public organizations to learning organizations (Maden, 2012, p.80)**

Knowledge creation is considered the most difficult process within the knowledge dynamics-continuum (Nonaka, 1991). The basic idea is that individuals transform their tacit (inner) knowledge into explicit (codified) knowledge through the use of metaphors and analogies or through gestures and body language. As soon as knowledge becomes explicit it can be shared, disseminated and transferred to others through different means of communication. Of the four knowledge dynamics processes, externalization is considered key to knowledge creation, as it leads to new concepts, the explicit expression of tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Knowledge creation is a process of reasoning and efficient conversion success depends on the ability to use metaphors, analogies, and cognitive models.

Certainly, that knowledge creation should be complemented in public organizations like universities by another prominent process, which is 'knowledge management', to ensure the effective management of "what is learned". In the case of this transformation model, the first process that knowledge management starts with is knowledge acquisition which refers to exploiting the created/acquired knowledge throughout the organization by methods like single-loop, double-loop, and deuteron-learning. The process of distributing the acquired knowledge follows as number two in the framework and may be obtained throughout formal and informal knowledge sharing mechanisms within the organization. Knowledge interpretation is the third step and will generate a common vision and a coordinated decision making in public organizations. The last step in the model refers to organizational memory which means the storing of knowledge for future use, either on organizational systems designated for this purpose or via formal rules, procedures, and systems (Maden, 2012). According to this model of transformation into a learning organization there are proposed three main stages: organizations are primarily advised to develop a learning climate through the creation of a favorable atmosphere for individual and collective learning; and subsequently invest in organizational learning through higher knowledge creation and better knowledge management processes (Maden, 2012).

We consider relevant to present other significant approaches to building a learning organization. For example Bratianu (2015a) offers us more insights on the ideas developed by Garvin et al. (2008) in their work on the building blocks of a learning organization. The three building blocks constitute parts of an assessment tool in order for organizations to measure the depth of organizational learning. Garvin et al. (2008) consider that here are three building blocks of the learning organization: 1) a supportive learning climate, 2) concrete learning processes and practices, and 3)

leadership that reinforces learning. Each of the building blocks has been clearly defined and given specifications.

The critical aspect to be accomplished for building block no.1 – supportive learning climate is psychological safety. This feature of the organizational climate gives the employees freedom to act, to learn from their mistakes and more than that to feel comfortable when doing so. The second characteristic of this environment is the appreciation of differences, like contradictory opinions. Employees must feel free and react, according to their own perspective, to any person in the company no matter the hierarchical differences. Another feature of the supportive learning climate is the openness to new ideas. This unfolds a great opportunity for new solutions to organizational issues. The final characteristic described for being necessary within a supportive learning climate is awarding to employees some time for reflection. This behavior improves decision making as it grants the opportunity to look deeper into the problem (Bratianu, 2015a; Garvin et al., 2008).

*Building block no.2 is called – concrete learning processes and practices.* The processes included as part of this building block are ‘experimentation to develop and test new products and service; intelligence gathering to keep track of competition, customer and technological trends; disciplined analysis and interpretation to identify and solve problems; and education and training to develop both new and established employees’ (Garvin et al., 2008, p.4). In addition, Bratianu (2015a) emphasizes that all of these activities imply knowledge sharing among individual, groups and the whole organization. Another supplementary argument is that knowledge sharing should consider all fields or types of knowledge, as cognitive, emotional, and spiritual since learning is not exclusive a cognitive process. Intergenerational learning is also critical as it prevents knowledge losses at the moment of retirements.

*The third building block – leadership that reinforces learning* synthesizes the idea that leaders should encourage organizational learning through all their thinking, decision making, and personal behavior. According to this vision, leaders are responsible for creating and sustaining a supportive learning climate and for stimulating concrete learning processes and practices. Consequently, employees will copy their leaders’ behavior and make it a routine of the organizational culture.

According to a recent complex research starting from Senge’s five disciplines model of the learning organization developed by Bui and Baruch (2010) the authors present us a series of new approaches. As a major result

of their research Bui and Baruch (2010) propose a new theoretical framework which actually enlarges the map of the five disciplines. The authors have identified and discussed in detail three sets of new *operational perspectives: antecedents, moderators, and outcomes*. These new constructs are espoused from both a logical and a dynamic point of view with the five disciplines of Senge's model. Antecedents act like a mix of factors that may enhance or not the strategic learning capability. As we deduce, without having an explicit definition from the authors, the dynamic interplay of antecedents generates some effects which are called the outcomes. Even if we do not have too many studies regarding the antecedents within a learning organization, from the literature we may observe that there is an interest for identifying what factors are conducive to organizational learning. In general, the literature explores the antecedents as grouped in five key dimensions: organizational structure, leadership, organizational culture, human resources development, and knowledge management practices. Frequently these are converted into hypothesis and investigated at the organizational level.

The work of Bui and Baruch (2010) is significantly relevant, as they have explored the *antecedents, moderators and outcomes* as innovative constructs of the learning organization in the context of higher education institutions. The authors associate by cross-linking for each discipline a set of core competencies so, on the whole, they provide nine antecedents. To start with, the discipline of *personal mastery* has five antecedents: personal values, motivation, individual learning, personal vision, and development and training. In general, academics develop an individualistic work and aspire to be the ones that generate new knowledge in order to publish it and share it with the peers. This personal value of eagerness to widen the boundaries of knowledge is critical for academic scholars. For example, the individual learning works as an antecedent for personal mastery. It is well known that academic scholars are highly qualified in terms of formal education; however, much of their post-degree learning is informal (Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006) and may occur via conferences, working with Ph.D. students, self-learning, learning at work and learning through peers. All these sub-components are highly influencing the level of personal mastery of each employee (Bui & Baruch, 2010).

The discipline of *mental models* is divided in distinct organizational constructs like organizational commitment, leadership, and organizational culture. With respect to organizational commitment, there might be a risk regarding loyalty in HE. The case is that once being granted tenure, many employees are more likely to act independently rather than interdependently and are usually less mobile (Freed, 2001, p.18 cited in Bui & Baruch, 2010, p.230). The discipline of *team learning* seems to be a



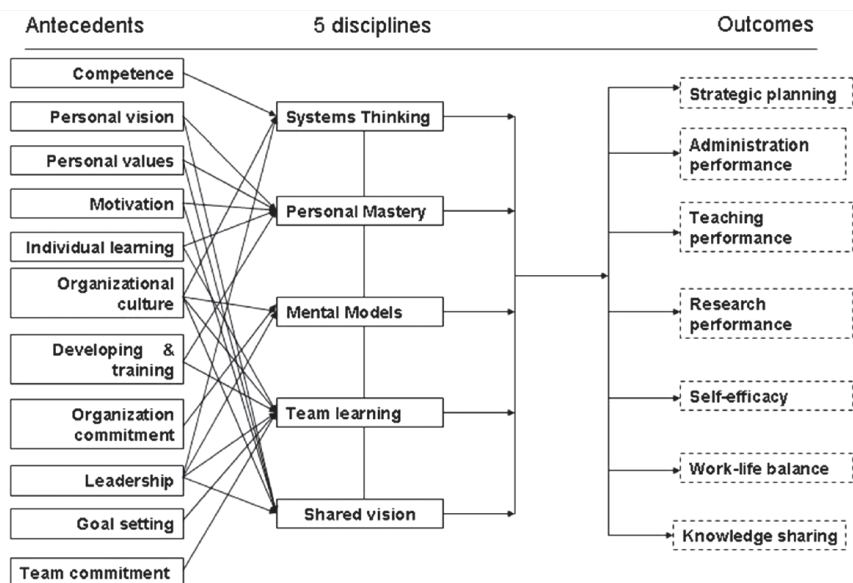
complex one and needs the following antecedents: team commitment, leadership, goal setting, development and training, organizational culture and individual learning. The case of the organizational culture of universities is very different to other sectors, due to the fact that academics are very individualistic in their work (White & Weathersby, 2005 cited in Bui & Baruch, 2010, p.232) Today this negative reputation of team learning and working is starting to change rapidly especially within research-oriented universities.

Antecedents that strongly relate to *shared vision* are personal vision, personal values, leadership, and organizational culture. Employees' personal vision is a critical factor in developing the learning organization, as it must be supported by the organization and converge towards its goals. The shared vision discipline works better in organizations from high societal collectivism and future orientation culture (Alavi & McCormick, 2004). The discipline of *systems thinking* was found to be the most successful one in universities and is linked to constructs like competence, leadership, and organizational culture. The basic idea is that individual competence makes people in the organization step out of the rest by being successful and strongly committed to great changes in themselves and in their organization. Leadership abilities are a must for system thinking in order to envision the effects of decision making and to recognize valuable people. Systems thinking is about having a dynamic and integrant part of the pieces and not a fragmented one.

The authors (Bui & Baruch, 2012) suggest through their conceptual framework that the well-functioning of Senge's five disciplines will lead to significant improvements in the organizational activities and thus to specific outcomes. For each discipline, the authors formulated and tested five hypotheses in order to prove the interdependencies with the specific outcomes. For instance, "developing appropriate mental models and team learning generates more knowledge and can consequently lead to improving job performance" (Bui & Baruch, 2012, p.521). There is also a positive connection between the level of personal mastery and self-efficacy which finally leads to higher individual performance (Bui & Baruch, 2012; Senge, 1990).

The final hypothesis tested by the academic scholars represents a mix of the other six and examines to what extent the five core disciplines mediate the relationship between the antecedents and the outcomes. (Bui & Baruch, 2012, p.521) Thus, in their vision, the five disciplines play the role of moderators in order to facilitate the interaction of antecedents and integrate their effects towards the desired outcomes. Furthermore, the

authors (Bui & Baruch, 2010, p.235) have provided a series of new sub-components of moderators, like HR policies, size (span) of the university, activity sector (private or public), communication system and supportive learning environment. HR policies are considered to play an important role in promoting personal development. The personal in research-based universities have more opportunities to learn and reflect than in teaching-based universities. The size of the university directly influences its ability to gain shared vision – the larger the organization, the more complex and difficult it is to reach and maintain a shared vision while small universities have more flexibility and ability to adjust and adapt a shared vision. Universities' sector affiliation can produce side effects, as private universities would probably have better outcomes in terms of profitability, whereas the public sector might have over administration and bureaucracy in place (Farnham, 1999 cited in Bui & Baruch, 2010, p.235). The discussions of the study concluded also that becoming a learning organization would greatly benefit the employees of universities as this kind of environment will improve their wellbeing through a better balance between work and life. Unlike other previous models, this one reflects many more components, activities and interdependencies among them which we consider an added value and a great track for new research.



**Figure 3. Three constructs for the learning organization model (Bui & Baruch, 2012, p.518)**

Örtenblad (2004) presents an integrated model of the learning organization. It is based on empirical research of the learning organization

literature, as well as on practitioners' understandings of the concept where learning organizations were often described in terms of four distinct individual aspects – no more and no less. This article argues these aspects cannot be treated as separate, and that the four aspects have to be combined in order to create a true learning organization. The four aspects are: learning at work; organizational learning; developing a learning climate, and creating learning structures. The article suggests that only those organizations that have implemented all of the aspects should be called "learning organizations", and those organizations that have implemented only one aspect should be called "partial learning organizations". Other authors also stress the importance of organizational learning. Finger and Brand (1999) conclude that there is a need to develop 'a true management system of an organization's evolving learning capacity'. This, they suggest can be achieved through defining indicators of learning (individual and collective) and by connecting them to other indicators.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

According to our study, the concept of "learning organization" is, undoubtedly gaining credibility. The argument proposed refers to the fact that universities, as providers of management education, have both opportunities and critical responsibilities to adopt practices associated with the ideal and the concept of "learning organization". Some initial suggestions are included on what this might mean in practice if trying to evolve towards the learning organization status is taken seriously (Franklin, Hodgkinson & Stewart, 1998). The "leadership role" in a learning organization must provide matches for supply and demand regarding training and research and furthermore to facilitate synergies between resources: human, technical, networking, collaboration and other. Even if the 'learning organization' appointment seems to be unreachable for many universities, there should be created a measurement instrument in order to take it step by step and always to be aware of the progress and the further required efforts. Such an instrument should be built on the developed definitions and ontologies. In this way, the instrument will be able to satisfy, both, the substantial and the statistical significance (Santa, 2015).

According to our analysis so far, the facts clearly reveal the rather unstable and fuzzy environment as during this 26 years the Romanian Higher Education System has been represented by more than 20 education ministers who had different visions and tried to implement each time new reforming strategies. This way of thinking led to fast and chaotic decision-making, heavy bureaucracy and incoherent legislation. As Galbraith (1999)

states, maybe the real challenge to the application of the learning organization's principles is in the identification and use of leverage points. If there is a hard time acknowledging the flaws and weaknesses within the system, then universities will miss the chance to push the boundaries of their potential. For now, the opportunity still exists, "but it will close quickly if forces of reification continue to promote and conceal a culture already at risk from conservative heritages underlying university traditions" (Galbraith, 1999, p.12).

Finally, the purpose of the paper was to create logical connections between the concept of the learning organization for universities in different contexts; to open up for the existence of multiple, context-adapted models of the learning organization; and to suggest a number of strategies. In nowadays context, we may say that the stage of theoretical and descriptive writings on the concept of the learning organization is somewhat outdated and efforts' progress should be achieved through education, research, implementation or training programs that lead to concrete results. What we may say is that the shape of the learning organization must be re-designed in order to become fully relevant to public organizations, safety organizations, human service organizations and knowledge-intensive organizations. Throughout the proposed strategies we do not claim having addressed all aspects of the learning organization but mainly the most influential.

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