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RELATIONAL RESOURCES OF A UNIVERSITY AS A SOURCE OF EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE

Abstract

This paper considers high quality educational services provided by a university being the highest priority and assumes relational resources as valuable sources that can facilitate and enhance quality assurance. Each university with a unique resource base is connected with a variety of entities – other universities, non-profit and for-profit organizations through relations. Basing on the new views on organisational resources borrowed from the strategic management the authors treat relational resources and make an attempt to prove the positive influence of relational resources strengthening on the increase of university's effectiveness and competitive advantage. The aim of the article is to focus on the positive relationship of quality level of educational services and relational resources of the university and to present preliminary results of the research on partnerships and relations of the Masters in Management and Economics at the Institute of Business Process Management and Economics of Siberian Federal University.

Key words: relational resources, quality assurance, university education, educational services

Introduction

Paraphrasing famous words of the English poet John Donne 'No man is an island' one can say that in the global world no educational institution is an island (Hakansson & Snelota, 2006). Each university with a unique resource base is connected with a variety of entities – other universities, non-profit and for-profit organizations through relations.

There are a number of definitions for relational resources (RR). In the context of this article RR are defined as opportunities to create a competitive advantage which cannot be formed in isolation but in connection with different organizations and ensures knowledge sharing and complimentary resources provision.

In compliance with the resource-based theory (RBT) borrowed by the authors of the article from strategic management, relational resources are an inseparable part of everything the organization has and knows and which it can use to create strategies that affect the final results of its activities. The better organization utilizes and employs all its resources the higher level of success it can achieve.

Modern views on resources as everything that makes organizations' strengths or weaknesses (Otola & Grabovska, 2014) expand this idea: effectiveness of the organization results from properly developed and employed resources configured in competences.

Thus, adapting the mentioned above ideas any University can be treated as a set of resources which are to be properly converted into competences of university management, faculty and students, being the source for the organizational success and competitive advantage (Otola, 2013).

With two large groups of resources – material (tangible), including finance, buildings and staff, and non-material (intangible), including knowledge, know-how, patents, etc; relational resources evidently form a part of intangible resources, the latter being regarded as the determinant of the university competitiveness especially in the times of change or crisis, influencing both external environment and internal order in the organisation.

Intangible resources of a university represent a bank of knowledge resulted from different types of investment (in education, innovation, R&D, human capital). Relational resources (RR), being intangible, reflect organization's opportunities that arise from contacts with partners, while competences, also being intangible resources, represent abilities for successful operation. Both relational resources and competences in the process of a university involvement in intangible resources of other organizations enrich their value and can make a driver for its success in the future.

RR theoretical framework in application to educational context

The major assumption in RR theory is that most organizations have limited internal resources, not enough for their successful development. Thus, they need relationships to get access to necessary resources, as exchange of knowledge, know-how etc. may offer mutual benefits and extend each organisation's opportunities.

Each organisation has a unique resource base and in combination with other organisation's resources may develop both resources and relationships. The result of successful cooperation can be increased in all parties' resources and consequently in the value of these organizations.

Another assumption of RR theory that is well applicable to educational institutions is that relational resources produce a potential derived from other intangible resources like reputation, brand, customer loyalty, long-term relations with employers.

Set of RR of a university can include the following relationships:

- Vertical relationships – with branches and representatives of the university in other towns and countries;
- Horizontal relationships – with employers, customers (students, parents), graduates;
- Industry relationships – with competitor universities, partner universities, professional associations;
- Expert relationships – with accreditation agencies, consultants, training and professional development companies, academics;
- Personal relationships – with long-term partners, friends, former colleagues.

As it is seen from this classification, relational resources can involve two or more organizations or a person and organization (e.g. a visiting professor invited to conduct open lectures for faculty and students can be in personal relations with a faculty member and at the same time represent expert relations in terms of knowledge sharing).

RR can be analysed from the qualitative and quantitative viewpoints. In terms of quantitative approach RR are measured in a number of relations with other

organizations. Qualitative approach is characterized by a number of parameters like types of partnerships, functions and objectives of relations, relationship dynamics.

For universities relational resources can be analyzed in the

- technological dimension meaning functions of partners aimed at innovation of teaching and scientific research and response to student's and employer's needs;
- human-related dimension dependent on the competences of faculty and university at the local level and aimed at mutual learning and knowledge exchange;
- managerial dimension based on the information and decision systems and aimed at making common decisions and close interpretation of results;
- cultural dimension which forms cooperation between partners from different spheres of life (employers, graduates, sponsors, investors) and different countries and aimed at mutually acceptable behavior, cross-cultural understanding (Otolá & Grabovska, 2014).

Thus, any university operates in relational perspective and in the global world, it cannot be independent depending on the activities of other organizations, those being in cooperation and competition.

The general purpose of building relations is to generate additional value through the use of all types of resources which is impossible to be done independently.

First and foremost relational resources of universities can benefit from educational services being their core activities by building strong and reliable relations of the faculty and students with employers and graduates especially at highly competitive markets.

Not less essential is the benefit to scientific research and know-how. Relational resources benefit the process of knowledge building and exchange and positively affect innovativeness (new technologies and products, courses and programs) and optimization of university internal resources.

Another important benefit is a positive influence on staff and faculty including satisfaction from established relations, respect for the staff and reputation growth.

The source of competitive advantage for a university is in relations that are able to integrate relations and competences involved in these relations. Relations open access to resources and competences of other universities including foreign ones and other interested parties (professional associations, employers, etc).

Quality assurance issues at the university

One of the highest priorities of the university activity is high quality of educational services.

According to Bologna principles quality assurance in an educational institution includes a number of dimensions. In terms of human resource dimension, faculty members are to have high professional competences and relevant qualifications to deliver study programs. It is advisable for some of them to have some managerial experiences in the relevant field and at the government bodies at the local and wider level.

Faculty members should strive for life-long-learning that is participating in different grant schemes and personal development programs both vertical (deeper in the subject field) and horizontal, e.g. building on competences in information

technologies or foreign language proficiency for non-linguistic academics. These procedures stay true for international and local activities. Induction programs for young (new) teachers are aimed at knowledge and skills sharing including observation of more experienced colleagues and learning from them under mentor's/supervisor's guidance.

In managerial dimension the university is to have a handbook on quality assurance and Quality Committee that consists of director, heads of departments and head of academic methodical council. Establishing formal link with the student community by including the student member onto the committee is advisable.

Quality monitoring procedures should be focused on the content, namely on the results of the analysis, implemented changes and analysis of improvements – the closing of the quality loop is usually not monitored. The procedure of data gathering regarding the satisfaction of students: at the end of semester the center prepares questionnaires. The head on quality is responsible for distribution and collection of questionnaires from students and teachers. The results of the analysis of questionnaires are given back to the Institute. The results are then analyzed within the Institute and the suggestions for improvement are offered.

In the inter-organisational dimension cooperation with employers and alumni is a part of educational process by making-part-time teachers and members of examination committees, supervisors of on-site training for students and internships for faculty.

Employment rate for graduates is to be monitored by having a data base of potential employers assessing the graduates' competencies and market demands analyses and forecasts.

Strong orientation at internationalization: cooperation with foreign institutions and teachers in order to provide foreign language education for management and staff; promotion of publishing in international journals and attraction of foreign students, including double-degree arrangements and training of teachers and lecturers abroad; enhancement of the number of visiting teachers; motivation of students to use the open courses in international learning resources.

Research dimension includes a system of stimulating factors for teachers to be active in the scientific research (defending PhD, articles in respected journals, articles with foreign co-authors etc.), motivating students to participate in research and extra-curriculum activities (competitions etc.); encouraging both faculty and students to participate in developing innovative products and technologies, taking part in projects at the local and international levels.

Case of the Institute of Business Process Management and Economics (IBPME) at Siberian Federal University

The IBPME mission is developing graduates' modern thinking and behavior in solving the problems of efficient business management at the local, national and international markets based on high-quality professional education ready to work in the promising labor markets for the countries well-being and innovation development.

High quality of educational services is the priority and is realized by the following means:

- using innovative technologies in education;

- developing professional competencies of the academic staff;
- expanding and strengthening of mutually beneficial partnership with business environment;
- integration of education, research and innovation on the basis of research laboratories and information networks;
- orientation on the demands of regional and international labour markets identified by monitoring of employers requirements for graduates' qualification level and professional competences.

Each of the mentioned points includes employing relational resources.

The authors of the article made a research based on the secondary and primary sources to make a conclusion about the value of relation resources to education. The secondary source for the research was the data presented in the article by Manolo L. Anto from Bahrain (Anto, 2014) who made the analyses of trends on international partnerships in business education based on the institutional information from 12 countries. Our own research involved 7 institutions from 4 countries, including Russia, China, UK and Germany. In questionnaires respondents were asked to name the primary objectives and purposes of cooperation with partner institutions. The authors of the article analysed the responses by putting them in order of priority and were surprised by similarity of ordering from both sources. More than that respondents ordered the objectives of cooperation with partner institutions and potential employers in a similar way and put the following in the order of importance:

1. Facilitating learning and skill's development.
2. Improving education setting through learning opportunities.
3. Improving and developing the curriculum.
4. Offering workplace opportunities.
5. Offering career development opportunities.
6. Developing accessible learning environment that connects students and educators with their community.
7. Offering new learning experiences.

Primary activities in business-education partnerships appeared to be different.

In relation to universities respondents included learning events (workshops, seminars, open lectures of guest speakers, classroom visits) and scientific events (conferences, video and online conferences, forums, science fairs) as well as curriculum support and coordination as first priorities with consequent offer of work experience programmes (internships, mentoring, apprenticeship; full-time and part-time job opportunities, skills training); teacher training and development and events combining learning and cultural objectives (summer schools, tours, exhibitions and fairs).

Links with the companies are represented through several different forms. They conduct research and consultancy on the inquiries of companies and municipal bodies. Representatives of the companies participate in final examination committees and as supervisors of master thesis works etc. Employers are a very good source of suggestions for improvements within the study process, they participate in curricula developments. They have suggestions regarding the internship period and practice of teachers within companies with the purpose to prepare real-life study cases and other materials. Employers regularly communicate

their suggestions with the Management of the Institute (Vasylieva & Almabekova, 2013).

A very valuable relational resource is a membership in professional associations and accreditation agencies.

After joining European Council for Business Education (ECBE) IBPME received the opportunities to improve the education quality level by participating in annual conferences where teachers and educational managers exchange knowledge and research results thus providing opportunities for professional development, inviting ECBE members as visit professors, helping the IBMPE to organise seminar on QA issues awareness thus involving not only Institute authorities but all teaches into the QA process. Finding partners for joint project participation was favourable for successful grant application. And the results of the latest accreditation visit were very satisfactory in terms of the directions of quality assurance.

Conclusion

Rising the quality of educational services in university education cannot occur without relational resources. Gaining competitive position by the isolated institution is impossible in the global world. On the other hand, business-education community partnerships are aimed at the enhancement of learning strategies, innovations in research and training, staff professional development activities etc. The relations allow participants to configure the resources in the way they can become beneficial not only to themselves in terms of competence development but to their partners.

Development of relations depends on the objectives each institution wants to achieve. The data from the case show that universities are becoming aware of the benefits of relational resources and are already involved in them. The future of partnerships both at the local and international level remains strong. To set the basis upon which mutual benefits are enjoyed in partnership the relations should be stable based on trust and thus positively affect the quality of both educational services and business associated results based on graduates' high professional competences.

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