

An Investigation into the challenges of Knowledge Management in Zimbabwean higher education.

Abstract

Knowledge is the icon of the new paradigm. It is now the most likely source of competitive advantage in all spheres of business. Knowledge management is seen as an innovation with the potential to transform the entire business organisation. This study examines the applicability and relevance of the concepts of knowledge management in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. It also considers the challenges associated with the creation of a knowledge environment in higher education, and further explores the opportunities offered by viewing knowledge as an intellectual asset. It also navigates the importance of culture and indigenous knowledge systems and their relevance to higher education. It will further navigate through the culture of learning as a tool for national development. It concludes by noting that, effective knowledge management may require significant change in culture, attitudes, perceptions, values, leadership styles, organisational structures and reward systems.

Keywords: Knowledge, Knowledge Management, indigenous knowledge, innovation, creativity, Learning Organisations, and community of practice.

Introduction

What is Tertiary Education and why is it important?

As Nyerere (1968:28) observed “...Its (education) purpose is the liberation of Man from the restraints and limitations of ignorance and dependency. Education has to increase men’s physical and mental freedom to increase their control over themselves, their own lives, and the environment in which they live.” Zimbabwe higher education systems appear to be stagnant due to disoriented curricula, poor financial support and human resources incapacitation.

Social Issues of Knowledge Management

Drucker points out that the knowledge society is one in which the quality of life is dependent upon the primary production of knowledge as a resource instead of capital and labour as was the case in the industrial economies. The relevance of higher education is dependent upon the rate at which it produces and dispenses knowledge to solve and advance

community and nation needs. This calls for a deeper philosophy of education grounded in Zimbabwe paradigm so as to address nation challenges.

Muganda (2000) argues that issues of knowledge development are also issues of technological development and the effective utilisation of technology. Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) assert that to sustain competitive advantage, an organisation must give people incentives to transfer their knowledge into realisable goals. Technology has become pivotal in that platforms of e-learning, e-library and e-commerce have drastically transformed the modus operandi of acquisition of knowledge and the way of transacting business..

Political implications To Knowledge Management

Woolfrey (2009; 22) notes that, ‘empirical social research can support government accountability by providing the raw materials for the development and monitoring of evidence based policies’. Afrocentric Knowledge management philosophy is key to the African politician, economist, scientist and educationist in that it helps them to plan, formulate economic, educational, security, recruitment, resource mobilisation, developmental, budgetary and both micro and macro fundamentals.

The Economic Factors in Knowledge Management

Ruggles, 1999, states that “In an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge. Higher education must be pivotal in the harnessing, generation and harvesting of knowledge. The current higher education systems in Africa are dependent upon foreign resources of information and knowledge. **Gosh (2000) emphasises** the fact that in the post industrial society, knowledge has now succeeded all raw materials and natural resources as a commodity “...the world is getting tuned to the knowledge movement. Now we have realised that new wealth is neither money nor power but information and knowledge....” Zimbabwe higher education must see beyond tomorrow in order to validate and justify its relevance.

Knowledge is increasingly being recognized as a vital organisational weapon that provides competitive advantage. In an economy when everything is uncertain, the sure source of sustaining competitive advantage is knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The Zimbabwean higher education systems must move away from the banker-depositor type of curricula. The system does not benefit the student or community. It is void of addressing social challenges and national challenges which dents the relevance of higher education.

Higher education curricula must be grounded in the ethos that address social concern. Knowledge management through higher education processes should be there to act as a compass that provides bearing and early warning systems to the nation's challenges. It requires thoughtful creation.

Evolution of the Concept

Denning (1995) states that, the concept of knowledge management has been with us since time immemorial as human beings grappled to control nature rather than live at its mercy. The author further argues that every traditional society relied on its own living repositories of distilled experiences (wisdom) in the form of the elders, the traditional healers, midwives and griots who helped to sustain the society's corporate memory.

Africa higher education and Zimbabwe in particular should move away from the aspect of copying and pasting but must cope and innovate in order to realise the benefits of investment in higher education. Indigenous African knowledge systems also involve the tacit knowledge which is received through intercession by spirits during ritual ceremonies like *bira*, dreams and vision.

Community

Knowledge management makes it possible to preserve, retrieve, improve and develop communities or institutions. Knowledge management forms the epitome of national identity and national building. It is suicidal to relegate indigenous knowledge systems to the periphery as knowledge is now a protected and critical resource for institutional and national development. The question to ask is "how relevant is higher education in Zimbabwe?" Professor Kingo Mchombu (2000) advocates for a revolution which will see Africans being able to define their own knowledge rather than depend on foreign thinkers.

Problem Definition/Statement

The present study, within the context of a work environment will be concerned with the following research questions:

Is Zimbabwe higher education knowledge management relevant to the nation?

Why is knowledge management critical in higher and tertiary education?

Primary Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate and understand the relevance of higher education in Zimbabwe. Ford (2005) is of the opinion that open access has transferred the profile of academic institutions by creating opportunities for collaboration, networking and resource

sharing. It has also helped institutions to break free from academic insularity and bondage through engaging in collaborative efforts with other institutions beyond national boundaries. Is this happening now?

Research Philosophy

The selected methodology for the study is the phenomenological approach. According to Denscombe (1998) the phenomenological method creates a platform that preserves the voice of the research participants while maintaining sufficient objective analysis of the process. It is an alternative to positivism. The phenomenological approach provides a qualitative descriptive and interpretive psychology which bares the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and emotions wherein the veracity of its results will be subjected to review by other scholars and readers.

Learning institutions

Learning organisations are organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (Senge 1990: 3). Most African nations are suffering because of poor and obsolete learning and knowledge management systems. Knowledge workers are inadequately prepared for the 21st century higher education challenges. Knowledge is doubling every two to three years to which they are ill prepared. Shoshanna Zuboff (1988, p. 395) argues that, “One of its principal purposes will have to be the expansion of knowledge, not knowledge for its own sake (as academic pursuit), but knowledge that comes to reside at the core of what it means to be productive. To put it simply, learning is the new form of labour.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is the process of identifying, stratifying, understanding, adapting and implementing unique practices from organisations, including your own, anywhere in the world. Benchmarking teams are created to scrutinize the current state of the organisation on a particular process, identify gaps and problems, and then search for best practices outside the company. Zimbabwe higher education is predisposed with economic challenges and gives little relevance to what is given to the students.

Community of practice

Education in its deepest sense, and at whatever age and level it takes place, concerns the opening of identities, exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state. Training

aims to create targeted competence in a specific practice. Community of practice open avenues upon which sharing and networking in the process of learning creates much needed solutions and new insights. Training is inward looking for it concentrates on the past. Education must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self-and-culture. Education is life.

Management, Leadership or Social, Economic transformation

Transformational leadership requires specialised knowledge to bear on organisational problems and challenges. Many a time in higher education there is little relevance to ensure that those who are trusted to run the institutions of higher learning are adequately prepared and equipped to meet the challenges. H.G Wells (19 May 2010) predicted many years ago (in The Outline of History) that “human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe’. Critical issues require not only decisiveness but creagement; not only managerial control but visionary leadership; not only the technical skills necessary to achieve the institutional mission but integrity to resolve the value of conflicts inherent in sharing that mission, Henry, J. (1991).The foregoing statement challenges higher education to continuously and constantly remain relevant by producing appropriate guidance and solutions to the nation.

Summary

It is noted that knowledge management plays a crucial role in the economic, political, social, technological, environment and legal system of a nation.

Knowledge management shapes the cultural well being of a nation for in it is embedded the norms, values, attitudes, perspectives and beliefs.

Knowledge management is a representative of a nation’s heritage in terms of intellectual assets or capital. It is portable wealth.

Knowledge management shapes the national standing in respect of comparative, dependence and world system theories.

A nation without knowledge management systems can be abused by other nations as it can merely be treated as a satellite state.

The obligation of higher education is to ensure consistency and provide sufficient relevant information and knowledge to the community and nations to facilitate positive development.

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