

## **V6 Cardiff Friday 7 December 12.00-12.30**

### ***Attaining a sustainable future for higher education: Can we do it all? (0237)***

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The world of today's higher education is characterized by rapid change, economic and political turbulence, and increasing global interdependence. At the same time, universities are expected to provide graduates who will be able to compete in a global, knowledge-based economy. While governments continue disinvestments in higher education, they still expect colleges and universities to participate in solving social and economic problems facing today's society (Clark, 1998). The question becomes whether today's universities are capable of fulfilling what is asked of them and how can they achieve a balance between being more responsive to the competing demands and preserving their intrinsic values. In other words, the question becomes: Can we do it all?

The complex environment in which higher education institutions operate is partly due to a need to serve and accommodate multiple internal and external constituencies with their often-competing demands, including demands for an increased access, lower cost, improved quality, and increased effectiveness (Gumport & Pusser, 1999). Clark (1998) suggested that there is an imbalance between environmental demands and institutional capacity to meet them and this imbalance creates institutional insufficiency.

Clark's statements imply that universities are not as effective as they should be in responding to the challenge. Yet there is little agreement among researchers and practitioners about what constitutes effectiveness in higher education. This lack of definition and criteria contributed to the lack of research in the area of organizational effectiveness. However, if higher education intends to continue its role as a major participant in the society, the issue of organizational effectiveness will need to be addressed in a more systematic manner.

The purpose of this study was to examine organizational effectiveness and its measurement in higher education environment. Effectiveness in this research serves as a proxy for sustainability and is defined as an "effort to maintain the living triangle" (Cooper & Vargas, 2004, p. 17) between the social and economic spheres of a university and the environment in which it operates. More specifically, effectiveness is defined as creating and maintaining a balance between the economic, social, and environmental factors affecting colleges and universities while meeting the needs of their constituencies. The research question used to investigate this tenet was: To what extent is organizational effectiveness defined by environmental, social, and economic factors as they relate to public colleges and universities?

This research tested the applicability of the sustainability framework as a model of effectiveness in higher education. It suggested modification of the elements of sustainability and extended the use of the concept of environment as defined in the sustainability framework to the concept of environment as defined in organizational theory sense of the term. The sustainability framework has not been tested in this way before. The use of the sustainability framework with its interlocking circles suggests that institutional effectiveness should be addressed as a system with fully integrated components rather than addressing the individual components separately.

Since this study aimed to provide more insight into the environmental, social, and economic factors affecting higher education institutions and their relationship to effectiveness, the literature review, methodology, and analysis were organized accordingly. We also considered a history of the sustainability framework and its utility as a conceptual basis for the current research. Due to space constraint, we do not cite specific research here, however we provide some of the relevant research used in this study in the reference section.

To examine research question, we used a model where eleven dependent variables, which demonstrate dimensions of effectiveness in higher education, were examined first separately and then clustered in three groups, domains: environmental, social, and economic. The eleven dimensions grouped in three domains formed a basis for the theoretical model.

A quantitative approach was employed using data collected from major university constituencies through a survey. The purpose of the survey was to gather information regarding participants' perceptions about educational outcomes, processes, and environment in higher education. The survey consisted of a questionnaire reflecting in part the methodology developed by Cameron (1978, 1982). It was supplemented with questions from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (Krakower & Niwa, 1985). Additional questions were developed by the researcher with the intent to strengthen Cameron's instrument, particularly in the dimensions of financial effectiveness and interaction with environment.

Public four-year institutions of higher education were recruited for this study and two agreed to participate. For each of the institutions, four groups of constituencies, comprising six distinct constituencies, were surveyed. The selected internal constituencies included administrators, faculty, and professional staff. The category of major external constituencies consisted of students, government members, and employers.

The results indicate that there is promise in using the sustainability framework in this modified form and suggest that this concept is worthy of further exploration. The results suggest that environmental, social, and economic factors grouped in three domains were strong contributors to organizational effectiveness in higher education. The findings also indicate that there are significant differences in perceptions of effectiveness among the groups of constituencies examined in the study.

The findings of this study contribute to the field of organizational effectiveness and organizational theory more generally. On a more practical level, knowledge about institutional effectiveness positions higher education leaders to respond to challenges and make informed decisions regarding changes needed to ensure their sustainability as institutions contributing to the society in both public and private arena. To do that, universities will have to look both inward and outward when formulating strategies and making decisions. Developing capacity to assess both internal and external indicators of excellence will enhance institutional ability to engage its constituencies and have more control over its existence.

Can we do it all? Viewing institutions of higher education through the lens of sustainability framework does give us an opportunity to balance competing demands, while preserving our intrinsic values. Are we there yet? It depends, some more than others. Wherever we are in the process, we need to keep moving forward and having a framework can help us with that.

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