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What Drives Agility in Higher Education Institutions?

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Abstract: This paper is part of a doctoral research project in its early stages. The purpose of the paper is to develop a frame of reference for higher education institutions to assess their agility needs. To achieve this, it briefly defines organizational agility and highlights its importance for higher education institutions in a supra-complex, volatile and uncertain environment driven by turbulences such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper evaluates the agility drivers (i.e. environmental characteristics that require an agile response) identified in the general organizational agility literature, situates them in the higher education context by cross-referencing higher education research and adapts them where necessary. Next, it clusters the situated agility drivers by the aspect of the higher education environment they address. Lastly, it proposes a set of indicators for these agility drivers in the context of higher education to assess the agility needs of a higher education institution.

Paper: Internationalization, globalization, the financial crisis and now the COVID-19 pandemic - just to name a few - have caused substantial changes in the higher education environment. This nowadays supra-complex, volatile and deeply uncertain environment is urging higher education institutions to search for appropriate ways to maintain their competitive advantages, reputation, and relevance. (McCormack et al., 2021; Thoenig & Paradeise, 2016)

Effective higher education leadership involves the formulation and implementation of responses and solutions to the complex problems and opportunities that emerge because of this turbulent environment. To achieve this, leaders in higher education must not only exert transformational and transaction-oriented influence, but also continuously pay attention to changes in the environment and ensure that their institutions efficiently use their resources and adapt to new circumstances. In other words, they need ensure the agility of their organizations. (Antonakis & House, 2014; Thoenig & Paradeise, 2016)

Agility can be understood as a "subset of dynamic capabilities" (Overby et al., 2006, p. 121). Dynamic capabilities describe an organization's "ability to achieve new forms of competitive advantage" (Teece et al., 1997, p. 515). Agility as a subset focuses on 'the capacity of an organization to efficiently and effectively redeploy/redirect its resources to value creating and value protecting (and capturing) higher-yield activities as internal and external circumstances warrant' (Teece et al., 2016, p. 17).

However, organizational agility is not an end in itself that should be continuously pursued and without restriction. Increasing organizational agility involves costly and complex changes to the

organization and (partially) sacrificing leanness and efficiency for flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, it is a crucial managerial capability to determine how much agility is needed in a given environment. (Teece et al., 2016).

As part of my early doctoral research, this paper aims to develop a set of indicators for higher education leaders to assess the agility needs of their institutions.

According to Zhang and Sharifi (2000), for a higher education institution to "become agile" it needs to determine

1. its agility needs and its current agility level;
2. the agile capabilities required;
3. and the practices and tools which could bring about those capabilities.

Therefore, for a higher education institution to become agile it firstly has to determine its agility needs. To determine these, the institution is required to assess its agility drivers accurately.

Agility drivers are changes in an organization's dynamic environment that urges its management to redirect the organization's resources to maintain its competitive advantages and relevance. (Walter, 2021; Zhang & Sharifi, 2000)

Organizational agility research identified a wealth of such agility drivers. For example, Zhang and Sharifi (2000) identified 32 drivers for manufacturing companies, van Oosterhout et al. (2006) identified 23 for the logistics, finance, utilities and telecommunication sectors, and Walter (2021) summarized 32 general drivers.

However, as most of those drivers were originally identified for sectors other than higher education, it is necessary to evaluate and contextualize them in relation to the higher education sector. While some drivers like "increasing expectation of quality" (van Oosterhout et al., 2006, p. 135) are sector agnostic, other drivers such "manufacturing process complexity" (Zhang & Sharifi, 2000, p. 502) need to be transformed into for example "complexity of teaching/learning arrangements", while a third set of drivers such as "Industry-academia collaborations" (Menon & Suresh, 2020, p. 565) are specific to the higher education context.

Due to the number of agility drivers and their inconsistent clustering in the literature, it is necessary to re-cluster the identified drivers to facilitate their analysis. The paper proposes a clustering based on the affected aspect of the organizational environment. Firstly, the drivers can be clustered into internal and external drivers. Internal drivers include for example changes in the expectations of the academic staff; external drivers include for example an "increasing expectation of quality" by students. Next, the external environment drivers can be further divided into the competitive (micro) environment drivers (e.g. new educational offerings such as MOOCs, changes in student expectations, etc.), drivers in the general (macro) environment (e.g. new technologies such as learning analytics, increase of inclusion) and drivers in the higher education market itself (for example increase in student numbers, higher education market segmentation). Finally, the paper operationalizes the agility drivers by proposing one or more indicators for each agility driver.

The paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on higher education agility by providing higher education researchers a framework for comparing the agility needs of different higher education

institutions and higher education managers with a framework of reference to select aspects to monitor in their organizational environment to evaluate the agility needs of their organization.

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