Improving the performance of universities in transitional economies

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Abstract

The Participatory Strategic Planning method, developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs can be enhanced so that it allows, in addition to defining the strategic directions for an organization, to prioritize them according to the opinions of the stakeholders of the organization. A practical example – improving the performance of universities in transition economies – is presented. The results of the planning exercise suggest several directions for improving the home universities of the participants. The suggestions include internal reorganization, introduction of new university structures and services, increasing the efficiency of faculty, staff and students, and influencing the external environment. Using a Quality Improvement Priority Matrix and introducing a new method of priorities ranking, the authors conclude: a) the external environment has a great influence on university performance and can make considerable improvements in a relatively short period of time; and b) small but permanent quality improvements receive more support from faculty and are easier for management to implement than large, rapid changes.

1 Introduction

Universities in the former Soviet Union and Southeast Europe are well developed. They have good facilities, experienced faculty, and a tradition of excellence in education. But the future is not clear. The transition period that started in the economy in the early 1990s recently reached academia. Presently large changes are occurring in the system of higher education in these countries. The changes are motivated in part by the transition toward a market economy, which requires changes in the labor market and education.

Some of the trends causing change in higher education in all countries are the following:

1. The Internet enables faculty members to exchange ideas and to work on papers together more easily than ever before. Faculty members can now co-author papers with colleagues located in other countries. The World Wide Web makes vast amounts of information quickly available.
2. Low cost international travel enables students and faculty members to experience different countries, to study at other universities, and to attend conferences almost anywhere in the world.
3. Political changes in once closed societies are making new ideas available.
4. A shortage of funds for higher education in many countries is leading universities to charge tuition and to establish endowments. Both of these trends will make universities more sensitive to the concerns and opinions of students.
5. The Bologna process in Europe, which is spreading to other countries, is causing universities to establish common procedures for courses and degrees to make it easier to transfer credits and for students and faculty members to study or teach at other universities.
6. Increasing use of English as an international language is facilitating the sharing of ideas.
7. Quality improvement methods, which have been successful in business and government, are increasingly being used to improve the management of universities.
8. Participatory teaching methods are becoming increasingly common. These methods encourage initiative and critical thinking rather than memorization.
9. Service learning as a type of education makes universities more helpful to their surrounding communities and acquaints students with practical problems in organizations and society.
10. The trend toward a knowledge society and economy is sending increasing numbers of people back to universities for further education.
11. Distance education technologies make higher education available to people in their homes or workplaces.

2 Method

To help us understand the processes we are facing at our universities and how we might be able to help each other in improving them, we conducted a Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) activity from October to December 2003. Two groups of people were involved. The first, ‘face-to-face’ group consisted of fourteen
visiting scholars from the countries of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia together with some George Washington University (GWU) faculty members and some staff members of The World Bank. The second, ‘distance’ group consisted of about 140 Junior Faculty Development Program (JFDP) scholars then in the U.S. on other campuses, and about 100 JFDP alumni who had studied at GWU.

The method we used to guide our discussions is called Participatory Strategic Planning [ICA, 1996]. It is part of the Technology of Participation, a set of group facilitation methods developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs [Umpleby, et al., 2003]. These methods can be used with any group of people who share a common interest. They may be residents in a community, employees of a business or a government agency, residents of an apartment building, members of an association, volunteers working with a non-governmental organization, or members of a university department [Umpleby, 1989]. A facilitated problem-solving or planning activity involves people in identifying problems as they see them and in devising solutions that they believe will work [Umpleby, 1994].

We had five group discussions on the following topics:
1. “The Focus Question,” the point of reference for all subsequent discussions.
2. "Practical Vision," a picture of the desired future in five to ten years.
3. "Underlying Contradictions," the obstacles preventing realization of the vision.
4. "Strategic Directions," strategies for removing the obstacles to achieving the vision.
5. "Implementation Timeline," the schedule of actions needed to carry out the strategies.

Each step of the PSP process uses the Consensus Workshop method. This method entails five steps:
1. Context -- The facilitator provides background on the task and the method to be used.
2. Brainstorm -- The participants write their ideas on cards.
3. Cluster -- The facilitator and participants group the cards according to similar ideas.
4. Name -- The key idea in each cluster is identified.
5. Resolve -- The facilitator asks if the ideas generated are complete and represent a good description.

The Participatory Strategic Planning exercise began with an introductory conversation among the participants. The main goal of our first session was to define a Focus Question to provide direction to the other steps of the planning process. The focus question that emerged from our conversation was, “How can we implement lifelong learning in our societies by improving the performance of university faculty members?"
The focus of the third session was finding the contradictions underlying the vision. Hence, if that is the vision that people desire, what is preventing it from happening? What are the obstacles or contradictions? (See Figure 3.) The fourth step was to define strategies to remove the obstacles to achieving the vision. (See Figure 4.) In the last step we created an “implementation timeline.” We defined four quarters in the year 2004. During the first two quarters the participants would still be at universities in the U.S. In the second two quarters they would implement the plans at their home universities. Due to lack of space we do not include the implementation timeline here. One may find it at www.gwu.edu/~umpleby/recent_papers/2004_AUDEM_Prytula.pdf, which contains the full report.

### Use of a ‘distance’ group

We held meetings every two weeks to allow the ‘distance’ group to be involved. Only a few people sent suggestions for the next step in the process. There were about six suggestions for each step from people outside Washington. Nevertheless, several people who did not send suggestions said that they found the exercise interesting and thought-provoking and thanked us for including them in the process. We believe that
these comments indicate that a Participatory Strategic Planning exercise that seeks to involve other participants via email can, without much trouble, have a positive effect beyond the immediate group.

### 2.2 Prioritizing actions

We also investigated the relative importance of the Strategic Directions. Since universities in transitional economies have very limited financial, human and management resources, the wise use of these resources is crucial for achieving the results we desire.

We used a Quality Improvement Priority Matrix [Umpleby and Melnychenko, 2002; Umpleby and Karapetyan, 2003] to find the Strategic Directions that are considered most urgent now. Using the same group of local and distant people we made an Internet survey (QIPM Web Survey Tool, www.qipm.com) asking them to evaluate the importance and performance of the Strategic Directions for their home universities using a scale from 0 to 10 (see Tables 1 and 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic directions</th>
<th>Importance value</th>
<th>Performance value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Improve curriculum and teaching methods</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Increase proposal writing</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Start fundraising</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>5.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Implement standardization and quality improvement</td>
<td>7.57</td>
<td>5.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Make structural changes within a university</td>
<td>6.79</td>
<td>5.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Improve value added for students</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>5.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Create oversight bodies</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Influence external stakeholders</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To achieve the most significant social effect, it is desirable to implement first the strategy that is very important and at the same time does not show good performance. To find such a strategy we calculated the relative importance of the Strategic Directions using the ratios of average Importance to average Performance. The values of the IP ratios are given in Table 3.
Table 3. Strategic Directions ranked according to IP ratios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Direction</th>
<th>IP ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Start fundraising</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Create oversight bodies</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Increase proposal writing</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Influence external stakeholders</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Implement standardization and quality improvement</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Improve curriculum and teaching methods</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Make structural changes within a university</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Improve value added for students</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 implies that it is desirable to start implementing the Strategic Directions with those that relate to obtaining external resources for a university. The less urgent Strategic Directions, according to those surveyed, are the internal improvements and reorganizations. It is worth mentioning that almost all current efforts of governments, local authorities and Western organizations tend to focus on those strategies that are at the bottom of Table 3. Instead, the participants in this planning activity feel that there is a great need for more projects linking academic institutions in transitional countries with their local communities, with alumni, with central and local governments, and with international academic institutions.

Our results are marginally robust. The null hypothesis that all IP ratios are equal returns an F statistic of 1.77 and the hypothesis could be rejected only at the 11% level. Figure 5 shows the IP ratios +/- one standard deviation for each Strategic Direction. Interestingly, the standard deviations are higher for the issues rated more important. This could be explained by the relative novelty of these concepts for this group of people. The concepts that are known for the group (because of government and Western programs) have much less variance. This implies the need for faculty members from transition countries to be more aware of such matters as fundraising, oversight bodies, standardization and quality improvement.

3. Conclusions

The benefits of group facilitation methods, as noted by Rosabeth Moss Kanter are:

1. The specific plans themselves – strategies, solutions, action plans;
2. Greater commitment – ability to implement decisions and strategies;
3. More innovation – a larger portfolio of ideas;
4. A common framework for decision making, communication, planning, and problem solving;
5. Encouragement of initiative and responsibility. [Spencer, 1989]

We have demonstrated the combination of two methods – Participatory Strategic Planning and Quality Improvement Priority Matrices – that we believe can be helpful in improving universities and other organizations. We believe they can be particularly helpful for universities in transitional societies, since they emphasize participation and data-driven decision-making. Consequently, they stimulate and support local initiative and improve accountability. A software package which makes it easy to create a survey that results in a quality improvement priority matrix is now available. See www.qipm.com.

![Figure 5. Strategic Directions with IP ratios and standard deviations](image-url)
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References


