

# **LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CASES OF NORTHERN IRAQ UNIVERSITIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study proposed and examined a learning organization in higher education within a regional context cases of universities in Kurdistan region. Using a sample of 773 university staff; academicians and administrators in the region, I evaluated capability of higher education institutions to become learning organization by using Dimension of Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) scale. Findings shows that higher education institutions have great potentials to become learning organization. Public universities have to work on empowerment dimension to improve. Whereas private universities dialogue and inquiry dimensions were strongest areas among learning organization qualities. I also found out that public universities may adapt their organization structure to be more decentralized to allow lower level staff to be more involved in the decision making processes.*

**Key Words: Learning Organization, Higher Education Institutions, Kurdistan Universities, DLOQ**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Breakthrough changes and advancement in the technology and society lays hurdles on the job of managers and leaders. They have to satisfy endless expectations of many stakeholders to be successful. Sailing their organizations into safer waters becomes more important than ever in this global and turbulent world. Leaders try to create better organizations to adapt or even anticipate new environmental situations. The challenge of flexible and adaptive organization becomes more distressful and difficult as people struggle to find better ways to lead their organizations forward and institute the changes necessary for success.

In order to survive in this uncertain environment individuals and organizations must develop necessary skills to learn. The concept of organizational learning and developing may hold the key to help facilitate the future by improving organizational learning capabilities through effective leadership behaviours. Learning becomes the key for the future of organizations by using organizational learning to transform a group of people into a learning organization. The concept of learning that creates new capabilities for a learning organization to have a broad analytical value to adapt and create a new future. (Dodgson, 1993) A learning organization as an organization that “has woven a continuous and enhanced capacity to learn, adapt, and change. (O’Brien, 1994) These views coincide with Argyris’ viewpoint and present a causal relation between learning behaviours, organizational learning, and a learning organization. Argyris articulates that organizational learning is, consequently, significant not only for the people who want to create an effective organization, but for the people

who work in an excellent organization. (Argyris, 1999).

Organizational learning is a well-established and growing area within the wider area of management and organizational studies. However, there is an ongoing debate about units/levels of analysis of learning organization. Learning is a core part of all operations. Learning organization process challenges employees and communities to use their collective intelligence, ability to learn, creativity to transform the existing system. (Bierema, 1999) it helps individuals to link with each other, their community and organizations. It is a process for understanding and learning together.

As Senge defined; organizations 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 how to learn together. Learning organizations consist of five disciplines; personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. (Senge, 1990)

After Senge's theoretical development of Learning Organizations many other researchers developed different scales practically. Watkins and Marsick developed DLOQ (Dimension of Learning Organization Questionnaire) scale to measure Learning organizations.

### **The Dimensions of Learning Organizations Questionnaire (DLOQ)**

According to them they developed seven dimensions and distributed them based on three levels of organization, the first level of organization is individual level which contain two dimensions, the continuous learning and dialogue and inquiry. The second level is the group levels which contain team learning and collaboration and the third level is organization level which contains embedded system, system connections, empowerment and providing strategic leadership for learning. Based on their research they emphasized that enterprise have to work with people in the individual level and group level in the beginning, in other words, individual learn first as individuals, but as they join together in organizational change, they learn as clusters, team, networks and increasingly larger unit. (Watkins and Marsick, 1996).

1-Continuous learning	Learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job; opportunities are provided for ongoing education and growth.
2-inquiry and dialogue	People gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others; the culture is changed to support questioning, feedback, and experimentation.
3-collaboration and team learning	Work is designed to use groups to access different modes of thinking; groups are expected to learn together and work together; collaboration is valued by the culture and rewarded.
4-Create systems to capture and shared learning	Both high- and low-technology systems to share learning are created and integrated with work; access is provided; systems are maintained.

5-Empower people toward a collective vision	People are involved in setting, owning, and implementing a joint vision; responsibility is distributed close to decision making so that people are motivated to learn toward what they are held accountable to do.
6-Connect the organization to its environment	People are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire enterprise; people scan the environment and use information to adjust work practices; the organization is linked to its communities.
7-Provide strategic leadership for learning	Leaders model, champion, and support learning; leadership uses learning strategically for business results

Table adapted from Marsick and Watkins, 2003

Dimension of Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) meets the criteria of comprehensiveness, depth, and validity and also integrates important attributes of the learning organization. (Moilanen, 2001). DLOQ is designed to measure learning culture in organizations and intends to capture the employee's perception regarding the seven dimensions in order to help the organization get a clearer picture on where they are versus where they need to be. The seven dimensions are of the positive nature and cultural aspects of a supportive learning organization, which encourages dynamic organizational learning process.

As in any other sector, the Higher Education is under increasing pressure to improve its competitiveness. The competition in Higher Education is getting more severe within and across national borders. (Marginson, 2007). This phenomenon can be observed as "brain drain" and "brain circulation" movement of highly educated people from/to countries particularly within a global open labor market. (Bui and Baruch, 2011). Management should cope with fast-paced social, economic, political transitions that place extensive demand on the system and its employees. The western higher education functioning lucrative market but east and other higher education entities catching up and increasing their high quality of services and offerings. This study provides examples from east Iraq higher education cases. Many higher education institutions have adapted learning organization models to facilitate progress and advancement in line with economic changes and technological development. (Duke, 1992; Patterson, 1999).

There are currently two versions of the DLOQ, one full version with 43 measurement items, the second version is abbreviated form that contains 21 of the original 43 items but still possesses construct validity and reliability. (Yang, Watkins and Marsick, 2004) This version is also better suited for scholars that want to use the DLOQ as a research instrument.

The aim of this study is to evaluate capabilities of higher education institutions using DLOQ in Northern Iraq universities in Iraq.

## II METHODS

### 2.1 Sample and Data Collection

To measure the capability of organizations to be learning organizations DLOQ implemented on university staff ; academicians and administrators. In northern region of Iraq, as Kurdistan has about 32 higher education institutions, 14 of them public universities and the rest is private universities and other higher education institutions (MHE-KRG, 2016) . Academicians mostly aware of the concept of learning organization. Additional

information sheet is provided with questionnaire to explain the concept of learning organization.

For this study, the shorter version of the DLOQ with 21 items was considered most appropriate. The dimensions were measured on a 6-point Likert scale (1- almost never, 6-almost always: Table 2). As pilot testing of modified DLOQ showed that academicians English language was not sufficient for a proper understanding, translation of DLOQ into Kurdish, Arabic and Turkish language performed by different independent translators and academicians. The back-translation was then assessed in terms of conceptual equivalence, clarity and language and cultural adequacy by the researcher. Apart from 21 items, additional demographic variables of gender, profession, and title, experience included.

All the academicians and administrators of the universities were delivered DLOQ to respond. The form was distributed to the university staff to fill out anonymously and was later collected by researcher.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics as per DLOQ**

	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Normality P Value
<b>Dimension 1. Continuous Learning</b>					
People help each other to learn	771	1-6	3.55	1.528	.000
people are given time to support learning	773	1-6	3.67	1.452	.000
people are rewarded for learning	773	1-6	3.64	1.484	.000
<b>Dimension 2. Dialogue and Inquiry</b>					
People give open and honest feedback each other	770	1-6	3.74	1.412	.000
whenever people state their view, they also ask what others think	773	1-6	3.68	1.390	.000
people spend time building trust with each other	773	1-6	3.75	1.432	.000
<b>Dimension 3. Team Learning and Collaboration</b>					
teams/groups have freedom to adapt their goals as needed	773	1-6	3.45	1.464	.000
teams/groups revise their thinking as a result of group discussions of information collected	773	1-6	3.63	1.366	.000
teams/groups are confident that the organization will act as their recommendations	772	1-6	3.49	1.374	.000
<b>Dimension 4. Embedded System</b>					
My organization creates systems to measure gaps between current and expected performance	773	1-6	3.59	1.365	.000
My organization makes its lessons learned available to all employees.	773	1-6	3.54	1.412	.000
My organization measures the results of the time and resources spent on training.	773	1-6	3.58	1.402	.000
<b>Dimension 5. Empowerment</b>					
My organization recognizes people for taking initiatives.	773	1-6	3.47	1.272	.000
My organization gives people control over the resources they need to accomplish their work	773	1-6	3.49	1.288	.000

My organization supports employees who take calculated risks	773	1-6	3.50	1.322	.000
<b>Dimension 6. Systems Connections</b>					
My organization encourages people to think from a global perspective	773	1-6	3.63	1.375	.000
My organization works together with the outside community to meet mutual needs	773	1-6	3.66	1.386	.000
My organization encourages people to get answers from across the organization when solving problems.	773	1-6	3.52	1.338	.000
<b>Dimension 7. Strategic Leadership</b>					
In my organization, leaders mentor and coach those they lead	773	1-6	3.58	1.401	.000
In my organization, leaders continually look for opportunities to learn	773	1-6	3.69	1.402	.000
In my organization, leaders ensure that the organization's actions are consistent with its values.	767	1-6	3.60	1.373	.000

P>0.05, normally distributed data; P<0.05, non-normally distributed data.

## 2.2 Data Analysis

The collected data was subjected to quantitative, descriptive analysis using SPSS (version 23). Non-parametric tests were also used for further analysis of the data. The Kruskal-Wallis test used to test for significant differences between the different group of private and public universities.

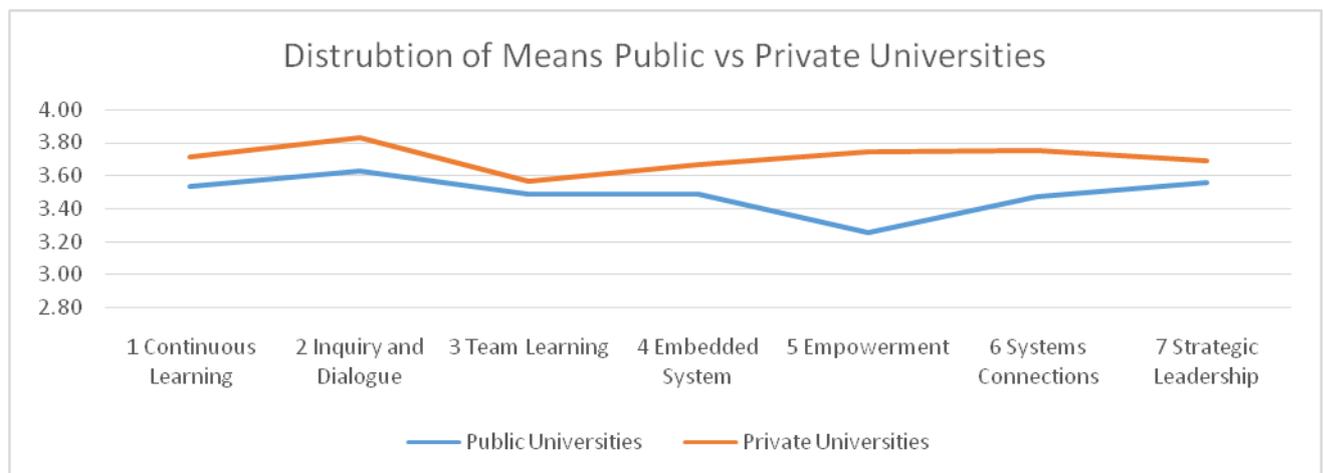
## III RESULTS

Out of 1200 forms distributed, 773 were collected, corresponding to a response rate of about 65%. Out of the respondents 54% (414) were from public universities, 46% (359) from private. Out of 773 questionnaires 28% (216) were English, 42% (327) Kurdish and 30% (230) were in Arabic. 53%(406) of the respondents were Asistant Lecturer, 29% (228) were Lecturer, 13% (101) were Assistant Professors and 5%(38) of them were Professors.

Dimensions	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Normality P Value
Continuous Learning (1)	771	1-6	3.62	1.270	.000
Dialogue and Inquiry (2)	770	1-6	3.72	1.202	.000
Team Learning (3)	772	1-6	3.53	1.162	.000
Embedded Systems (4)	773	1-6	3.57	1.180	.000
Empowerment (5)	773	1-6	3.48	1.047	.000
Systems Connection (6)	773	1-6	3.60	1.116	.000
Strategic Leadership (7)	767	1-6	3.62	1.167	.000

P>0.05, normally distributed data; P<0.05, non normally distributed data

The descriptive statistics for the statements and the proposed dimensions are displayed in Table 2 and Table 3. The means of Q1 to Q21 ranges between 3.45 on Q7 (“in my groups/teams have freedom to adapt their goals as needed”) to 3.75 on Q6 (“people spend time building trust with each other. In Table 3, means of the dimensions, calculated by adding all individual scores for each item, ranges between 3.48 on the dimension measuring Empowerment (5) to 3.72 on the dimension measuring Dialogue and Inquiry (2).



**Figure 1. Diagram showing the distribution of the means for type of universities as per dimensions**

Scores for the dimensions distributed by type of universities are displayed in figure. For private universities highest mean scores 3.83on dimensions of Inquiry and dialogue(2) and lowest 3.56 on dimension of team learning (3). For public universities lowest score 3.26 empowerment (5) and highest score on 3.63 dialogue and inquiry (2). The Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a significant difference between the means of the different types of universities regarding empowerment. (dimension 5)

Type of Universities	Dimensions	1 Continuous Learning	2 Inquiry and Dialogue	3 Team Learning	4 Embedded System	5 Empowerment	6 Systems Connections	7 Strategic Leadership
Public Universities	N	413	411	414	414	414	414	408
	Mean	3.54	3.63	3.49	3.49	3.26	3.47	3.56
	Std. Deviation	1.28406	1.26625	1.14689	1.18495	.92650	1.11014	1.17952
Private Universities	N	358	359	358	359	359	359	359
	Mean	3.71	3.83	3.56	3.67	3.75	3.75	3.69

	Std. Deviation	1.24943	1.11583	1.18006	1.16793	1.11711	1.10567	1.15122
	Kruskal-Wallis	1.284	1.266	1.147	1.185	0.00*	1.180	.545
	P Value							
*P <0.05, significant								

## IV DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The result indicate that the respondents scored lowest in the public universities on empowerment, with an overall score of 3.26 out of 6, showing that public universities have to work for improvement. The definition of this dimension, as proposed by (Marsick and Watkins, 2003) is “people are involved in setting, owning, and implementing a joint vision; responsibility is distributed close to decision making so that people are motivated to learn toward what they are held accountable to do.” For an higher institutions strive to be a learning organization this is a concern due to the importance placed on teamwork and empowerment in management literature and in learning models. This outcome parallels with other findings that lower level employees may have limited authority to make decisions, which leaves little or no incentive to take initiative for learning or incorporation of new ideas. (Weldy and Gillis, 2010).

Considering the region’ situation and history society lived under the rule of a dictator for a long time and it effected attitude of people and organization’ structure. Universities plays crucial roles to lead transformational changes in the societies but results show that universities are not able to take that role successfully. Generally, results indicate that both universities public and private generally have potentials to be learning organizations. Private universities having the nature of more independency and free flow of information they have better scores than public universities. Private universities mostly scored in all dimensions better than public universities which indicate that private universities have high chances of becoming learning organizations.

Iraq and Kurdistan employees come from collectivist culture where people have more positive attitude towards their organizations as well as toward the process of creating learning organization. Universities in the region have higher chances of becoming learning organization result strengthen this idea. Whereas private universities’ results higher which means higher chances to be learning organization.

The findings from this study provide useful information for the higher education institutions management regarding the areas for improvement especially for public universities. It suggests that public universities have to work on empowerment areas where they have to be changing their structure to be less centralized and give freedom and take initiation of lower level employees to be in the decision making processes and improve the communication and dialogue which will increase knowledge and participation as well.

Like any other study, there are limitations to my findings too. Especially limitations of resources and access to universities. There is another important limitation is that unwillingness of the respondents to participate in the study. There is not a study culture of participating in the social studies.

Finally, this instrument can be used in conjunction with other validated measurement tools to expand further research the realm of cultural factors which may impact organizational development. Future studies should investigate the relationship between organizational learning and other cultural factors such as ethics, justice and effect of other dimensional factors of leadership and performance.

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