Transformational approaches to knowledge sharing: The case of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) Business School

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Abstract

(198 words)

This paper examines a unique approach to knowledge sharing and program development. In the last decade, the Ghanaian economy has experienced tremendous expansion (34% in the second quarter of 2011). The related increase in business activities has generated locally-owned enterprises, many with international partners. Further, multinational and transnational corporations have also expanded their business operations or established new ventures in Ghana. The advent of technology has also opened up the whole world as a market to any enterprise that wishes to compete in the global village. These phenomena have called for workers with a global outlook, a requirement that most Ghanaian students cannot gain by traveling abroad to acquire education with a global outlook.

One Ghanaian institution, GIMPA, has responded to the challenge in an innovative way by improving the educational experiences of students while expanding their knowledge base and understanding of the global environment. Specifically, it is argued that incorporating experiential learning exercises and international experiences enhance the quality of educational experiences for graduate students. Here, we look at a unique approach adopted by an institution in a developing country to enhance the educational experiences of its graduate students, particularly given their historical exposure to rote learning.

Experiential Learning, globalization, education
The challenges confronting the higher education system today, particularly in developed societies, have resulted in a number of approaches to reforming education. These range from well-established exchange programs to curriculum redesign. These efforts have called into question the efficiency and capabilities of academic institutions to deal with the demands of employers and provide graduate students with the educational experiences that enhance their career prospects. Recent research suggests that, among other things, recruiters consider an understanding of the global complexities they must confront to be a vital quality for their prospective employees. In effect, students must be creative and innovative in their thinking, demonstrate strong critical-thinking skills, and knowledge of the different challenges that come with global competition.

While much of the focus has been on providing the tools needed by students studying in Developed Countries, not much attention has been paid on the approaches employed by schools in Developing Countries. Here, we look at a unique approach adopted by one institution to provide its students with experiential learning opportunities. The approach helps students to develop their critical thinking skills and a global perspective of business, using modular programs and international faculty.

This paper is important for several reasons. One, in many instances, multinational corporations (MNCs) have major operations in other countries. While in the past the approach to management has often been relying on expatriates, there is increased reliance on local managers (Almeida & Phene, 2004; Ghemawat, 2010; Ghemawat & Ghadar, 2006; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). If this reliance is to be fulfilled without any major limits on the quality of decision-making, then it is important that they be exposed to similar educational opportunities. Two,
recent studies have found that significant growth opportunities exist in under-developed countries and many firms in these countries are positioned to make major inroads into the economies of developed countries (Grant, 2008). These growth opportunities come with serious constraints on the ability of firms to use the traditional approach of transferring personnel between headquarters and subsidiaries. Local governments are demanding that significant use be made of local personnel in management areas. In addition, there is a significant amount of political resistance to this old model. Accordingly, it is important for their management to have the knowledge base critical to competing successfully.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Education is an important factor in the development of a populace, particularly in a society where access to opportunities is closely linked to educational attainment. The rapid rate of population growth also has implications for the kinds of investments made in education, especially since recent trends suggest that access to such opportunities may be seriously constrained for young people (Boadu, 2011).

In order for employees to effectively do their jobs, they must be provided with the necessary resources. One way of understanding the importance of resources is to take a critical look at capacity. Cohen and Levinthal (1990) introduced the concept of absorptive capacity which they define as the ability to acquire, absorb, and assimilate new knowledge, and argued that it is directly related to prior knowledge. Following this logic, research has shown that high absorptive capacity among recipients facilitate what organizations can do better (Jensen & Szulanski, 2004; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Szulanski, 1996; Zahra & George, 2002). A high
absorptive capacity suggests that the recipients have: (1) devoted the resources to acquiring the necessary capabilities in preparation for doing things differently, and (2) focused on pursuing activities that help to build on what they already know. Thus, an effective development of capacity for doing things differently within the organization requires a focus not only on acquisition and assimilation, but also on transformation and exploitation.

Moreover, for learning to be successful, the recipient must also acquire and retain the appropriate skills that permit the effective application of what has been transferred. In much of the current literature, the acquisition and retention of skills has been separated into absorptive and retentive capacity. Retentive capacity is the ability of a recipient to institutionalize the new knowledge (Szulanski, 1996). It involves the efforts to manage resistance to change and ensures that employees do not resort to doing things ‘the old-fashioned way.’

We argue that what one needs to focus on is the broader concept of capacity, since acquisition and retention really cannot be separated. This capacity we define as the ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and retain knowledge (Jensen & Szulanski, 2004; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Zahra & George, 2002). These four elements are at the heart of any successful learning effort. For these efforts to be successful, individuals must have the necessary skills to apply what they are learning, and be motivated to change their modus operandi (Almeida & Phene, 2004; Jensen & Szulanski, 2004; Zahra & George, 2002). Prior related knowledge provides individuals with the ability to recognize the value of what they are learning and facilitates the creation of linkages between what they already know and this new learning.
GIMPA Business School Model (GBS)

GIMPA considers itself capable of significantly transforming the educational landscape of the country by exposing students and faculty to unique approaches to pedagogy and learning. It recognizes that building capacity to do so requires the availability of vital resources. These resources, which primarily come in the form of human capital, can either be sourced locally or internationally.

Locally sourced resources suffer from several limitations. Among them are scarcity and, by extension, an over-commitment of those with the capacity inside the country. Scarcity results in high demand for these resources. Moreover, increasing the commitment of these local resources may seriously impact the quality of education that the institution seeks to provide. Consequently, the goals of fostering a new approach to instruction and pedagogy, and providing a superior quality education may not be achieved.

Acknowledging the constraints imposed by scarcity and over-commitment, the model adopted by the GIMPA Business School (GBS) focuses on building capacity through internationalization. In essence, the GBS (1) developed modular programs that allow participants to enroll without interrupting their work schedules unduly; (2) identified international faculty with significant teaching and research experience, and with a commitment to excellence; (3) utilized international faculty to teach in these modular programs; and (4) ensured that faculty are from AACSB-Accredited or similar institutions in the US, Europe and Australia.

The model is based on the assumption that much of what is needed in order to enhance the institution’s ability to deliver high quality programs is often unavailable in-house. Thus, in-house faculty resources are supplemented with international lecturers. The modular sessions are
run twice a year for three weeks each at four month intervals and require students to take classes for eight hours a day. Major class assignments are completed during the inter-session period.

**Outcomes/Results**

The main objective for establishing the GBS model is to provide students with a unique and valuable experience that provides value-added benefits to their learning and employment prospects. To date, we have concluded that the results have been overwhelmingly positive. Here, we focus on what we consider to be the most important outcomes under the broad categories of (1) best practices; (2) reputation; (3) research impact and faculty development; and (4) curriculum development.

*Best Practices*

In contrast to traditional teaching approaches that emphasize rote learning, this model adopts the experiential learning approach. As such, students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge level by regurgitating what has been provided to them in class, and not question the instructor’s knowledge.

One alternative approach to learning is experiential, which emphasizes building on information presented, such that answers are based on a combination of theory and practice. As such, it emphasizes that there is a process through which one makes meaning of what has been presented. This approach to learning has been emphasized throughout the model adopted by the GBS with the introduction of the case method. This model emphasizes to students that learning is
a process involving an exchange of ideas between fellow students and faculty to arrive at answers to problems posed. As such, students are exposed to international best practices of teaching.

Reputation

One area in which a positive reputation has been demonstrated is in the enhanced global image of GBS. This is reflected in a significant increase in the number of institutions seeking to establish working relationships with GBS. Some of these relationship requests include organizing one-week programs at their institutions for our students as part of their international experience.

This positive reputation is also reflected in the significant increase in applications and enrollment. Over the past six years, GBS has experienced significant increases in the number of persons seeking admission to the modular programs. This has also allowed the school to raise its admission standards for the modular programs. By so doing, the school guarantees that a highly talented pool of students can benefit from the international exposure.

Another positive reputation is also reflected in the high levels of student and employee satisfaction reported. Anecdotal evidence suggests that employers are anxious to recruit our GBS graduates because of the international exposure they receive in their academic training and what such exposure means for the development of their critical thinking and problem solving skills. From the student perspective, surveys conducted suggest that they not only are pleased with the content and quality of their experiences here at GBS, but also that their participation significantly alters their employment prospects. Several graduates have reported promotions with their current employers or with new firms, based on their attendance and graduation from GBS.
Research Impact & Faculty Development

Research plays a vital role in the development of an academic institution. Through research, faculty develop additional knowledge but also acquire new skills needed to enhance their teaching abilities. Within this context, GBS has increased its emphasis on research, and established systems that link research productivity to rewards, including promotion, tenure, and salary increases. Consequently, the Business School has experienced a marked increase in the research productivity of faculty.

One other contributing factor to this marked increase in research productivity is the exposure of local faculty to their international colleagues for whom research is essential to their academic success. Many of the international faculty not only conduct seminars on research methods but also formally and informally emphasize the need for research to be undertaken. In addition, international faculty actively engage local faculty to conduct joint research projects, leading to conference papers and journal publications.

Another approach adopted is the seminar series. International faculty are asked to present some of their research work while at the institution, thereby gaining feedback from a new audience while exposing the resident faculty to some interesting research ideas. In addition, faculty seeking employment with GBS are expected to present their own research to the resident and international faculty as part of the recruitment process. This latter approach is fairly unique, since prior forms of recruitment have focused on formal panel interviews to assess fit.

Curriculum Development
As the world changes, so must the experiences of students, if they are to be prepared for successful careers. Such changes require not only that the content but also the manner in which material is presented to be adapted to current trends. Accordingly, and in keeping with the intense focus on faculty development, curriculum changes have also been implemented within GBS. One such change has been the introduction of new courses that emphasize ground-breaking topics, including ethics and corporate governance, multiculturalism, and change management. These courses, many of which are electives, are intended to provide students with greater exposure, an enhanced educational experience, and the opportunity to craft some of their studies to focus on topics of critical interest to their fields and future careers.

Another aspect of curriculum development emphasized in GBS relates to material presentation. There is an increased focus on using experiential exercises coupled with case studies and field work. This approach allows students to blend theory with practice and gain a better understanding of the applicability of concepts learned in the classroom.

Conclusions

Educational reform is not about changing courses and following the ‘flavor of the day.’ It is about identifying unique approaches to accelerating the quality of instruction and working to ensure that the benefits of incorporating new pedagogical methodologies yield positive results. At the heart of educational reform activities is the recognition that current approaches fail to provide students with the experience and value-added skills necessary for success. Consequently, institutions of higher learning must find new approaches to meet the needs of a changing world faced with global dynamic competition.
At the heart of every educational reform effort are two questions: One, based on what is known, what can we do to provide students with a more rewarding academic experience; two, can the necessary changes be successfully implemented, given our resource constraints? From the study, we conclude that the answers to such questions are not simple. They involve finding ways to garner resources and a commitment from faculty that moves beyond the norm. The study suggests that finding ways to build capacity while creating unique programmatic approaches to pedagogy is essential to success. It appears that institutions of higher learning, their faculty, and other stakeholders must find a way to not only transform the manner in which instruction is delivered but also change the way students see their roles in the classroom. As this process evolves, one may encounter resistance to such changes but must find ways to manage that resistance. Also emerging from these findings is a general recognition that altering the pedagogical approach can also have implications for an institution’s research productivity, its profile, and be mutually beneficial to other stakeholders.
References


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