

## ARTICLE

# Identifying the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity of universities

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## Abstract

In order to improve university government and management, in this article we propose a tool for identifying the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity of a university. It consists of a questionnaire about the main factors affecting learning in a university as a whole, or in any of its units (faculties, departments, etc.). An analysis of the results will enable us to act upon them and make improvements.

## Keywords

organisational learning, stages of learning capacity, learning universities

## *Cómo conocer el estado del aprendizaje organizativo en las universidades*

### **Resumen**

*Para mejorar el gobierno y la gestión de las universidades, en este artículo proponemos un instrumento para conocer el estado del aprendizaje organizativo en una universidad. Se trata de un cuestionario en torno a los principales factores que influyen en el aprendizaje de la universidad en su conjunto, o de cualquiera de sus unidades (facultades, departamentos). El estudio de los resultados nos permitirá actuar sobre ellos y mejorarlos.*

### **Palabras clave**

*aprendizaje organizativo, estadio de aprendizaje, universidades que aprenden*

## 1. Introduction

For any innovation or improvements in the government of an organisation to be brought about, first it is necessary to identify the stage that the institution is at in order to be able to take the correct measures. In this article we propose a tool for identifying the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity of a university, based on a study of each of the faculties or of the institution as a whole.

It consists of a questionnaire about the main factors affecting learning in a university, thus this study is framed within the topic of organisations that learn or 'learning organisations'.

## 2. How can a university become a learning organisation?

For an educational institution to become a learning organisation, firstly there needs to be an analysis of the current stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity. Any barriers to learning need to be identified, and the level of development of factors that facilitate learning must be measured, especially organisational culture, leadership and teamwork. It is also necessary to establish the situation of the organisation's members with regard to learning, and the extent to which the vision and mission of the organisation encourages the organisation to become a learning organisation.

Secondly, we must draw up a plan in order to overcome the barriers that are blocking learning on an individual, group and organisational level. Thirdly, or concurrently with the second phase, the factors that facilitate learning will need to be maximised. The institution will need to put a learning support structure in place, not so much with formal training, but more by means of its day-to-day activities by bringing theory and practice closer together (Bolívar, 2000).

It is a matter of creating learning at all levels of the organisation: from individual learning to learning from other organisations, including the different groups within the organisation and the organisation as a whole (see Figure 1). Thus, universities can become what Elaine Martin (1999) calls 'learning universities'.

The image that probably best encapsulates a learning university is that of a professional learning community with a common vision and mission, a commitment among professionals and a well-established culture of collaboration and shared leadership. In order to achieve that objective, we may need to go through a series of steps or stages (Gairín, 2000, 2007; Leithwood, 2000). This is what we have to aim for and therefore it is important to start by finding out about the current situation of each faculty or university.

### 3. Deciding what tool to use to identify the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity of a university

At the risk of oversimplification, and based on an extensive literature review,<sup>1</sup> the minimum requirements for an educational institution to become a learning organisation are shown in Figure 1.

The question is, how can we find out whether factors that ensure learning are present?

We chose to use a questionnaire to find out about those factors, as we considered it to be a tool that lends itself to widespread use while enabling results to be compared. Furthermore, questionnaires are a relatively economical tool, the questions are the same for all the respondents, they ensure anonymity, are usually easy to score and give the respondents time to think about their answers.

However, drafting this questionnaire was no easy task, not only because of the complexity of evaluating the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity in terms of teamwork, leadership or culture, but also because of the added difficulty of measuring intangible factors such as commitment, reliability or trust among the members of an institution.

The questionnaire had to be designed in such a way as to identify how developed the learning facilitators in a specific institution are and what kind of barriers exist, in order to determine the disposition towards learning in that institution and the level of development of the people within the organisation and of the organisation itself.\*\*\*

The responses to the questionnaire have to allow for descriptions of the current situation of learning in a specific educational institution, that is to say, to obtain a clear picture of what has already taken place with a view to taking action in the future and making improvements.

### 4. Questionnaire drafting process

Firstly, we looked for other questionnaires that might be able to satisfy our requirements, and although we found three very good examples, from which we took many good ideas,<sup>2</sup> we decided

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1. For the literature review, see Tintoré (2010).

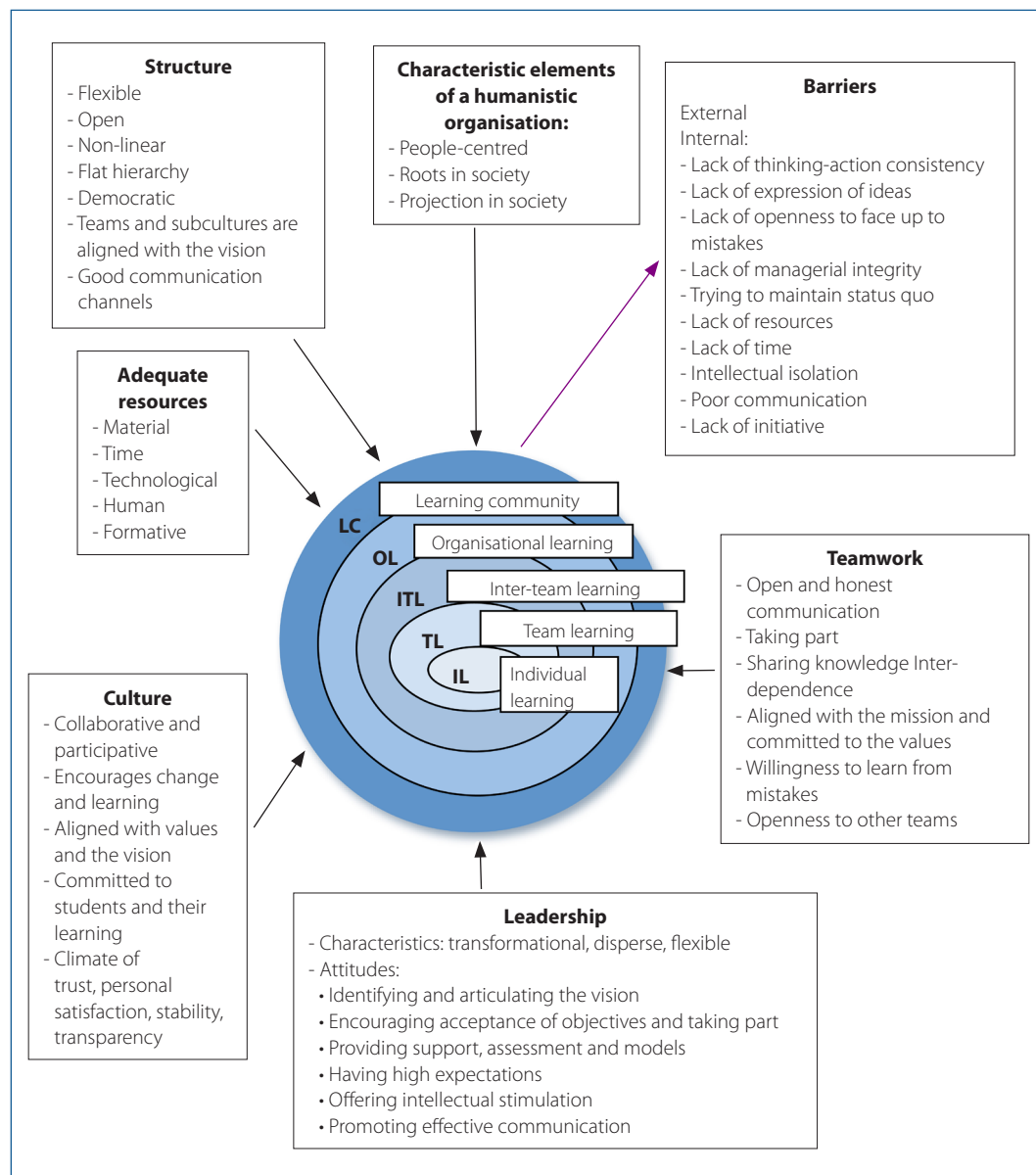
2. A questionnaire presented by Dibbon (1999); a questionnaire produced by Rodríguez Antón and Trujillo Reyes (2007) for the Faculty of Economics and Business Sciences at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM); and a questionnaire presented in the *Harvard Business Review* by Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008).

that it would be better to draft our own questionnaire based on those factors that facilitate or impede organisational learning in a university.

The overall aim is to analyse the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity in a specific faculty or university, at a particular moment in time, with a view to establishing actions that will lead to improvements.

The questionnaire is divided into two main parts: the first one concerns individual learning and the second one concerns organisational learning. The following aspects were selected: first, personal and professional details; second, individual learning; and third, in the organisational learning section, a set of seven aspects or factors, as shown in Figure 1. The different items or variables were then drafted to correspond to each aspect.

Figure 1. Factors that facilitate or impede organisational learning



Source: Own elaboration

The overall format of the items is based on a Likert-type scale scoring from one to four to prevent respondents from giving a middle response of three. This makes the answers as meaningful as possible and avoids central tendency bias.

After drafting the questionnaire, the content was validated by a panel of experts, who assessed its capacity to effectively measure all the aspects that we wanted to measure.

The eight external experts were Dr Joaquim Pèlach (University of Girona), Dr José Tejada (Autonomous University of Barcelona), Dr José Daniel Barquero (ESERP Business School), Dr Isabel Parés and Dr Claudia Ortega (Panamerican University of Mexico), Dr Pere Puig (University of Istmo, Guatemala), Dr José Antonio Liébana (University of Granada) and Dr Juan Milá (University of the Republic, Montevideo).

The validation consisted in asking the experts whether they thought that there were any missing or superfluous items, and whether the drafting of the items was correct. After all the data had been collected, the questionnaire was revised to take into account the suggestions made by the panel of experts.

The definitive questionnaire, translated from its original in Spanish, is shown below. In our view, one advantage of this questionnaire is that it can be used to analyse the stage of growth in the learning capacity of both a faculty and a university. It can also be used to analyse departments and to carry out comparative studies between different units.

## QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING IN UNIVERSITIES

### General information about the respondent

1. Higher education courses completed
2. Master's degrees or other lifelong learning courses completed
3. University, faculty and department where you work
4. Age
  - 4.1. 24 - 30
  - 4.2. 31 - 40
  - 4.3. 41 - 50
  - 4.4. 51 - 60
  - 4.5. over 60
5. Sex :
6. Number of years worked
  - 6.1. Of these, how many in teaching?
  - 6.2. Of these, how many in the university/faculty?

- 7. Job category
  - 7.1. Tenured lecturer
  - 7.2. Associate lecturer
  - 7.3. Administrative and service staff
- 8. Hours worked per week in the centre
  - 8.1. More than 12
  - 8.2. Fewer than 12

### Questions relating to individual learning

These questions intend to find out how individual learning takes place in the faculty. Please select the response that most accurately applies to your individual case.

Score the following statements from 1 to 4 (1 = Disagree completely, never, none/nothing; 2 = Partly agree, sometimes, not much; 3 = Quite agree, almost always, quite a lot; 4 = Agree completely, always, a lot).

		1	2	3	4
AI 0	As a result of my work in this centre, I have improved on a professional level				
AI 00	As a result of my work in this centre, I have improved on a personal level				
	Observations				

### 1.- How has learning taken place? (evaluate each item by scoring 1-4, where 1 is the least significant for you and 4 is the most significant for you)

		1	2	3	4
AI 1	Teamwork in the department				
AI 2	Attending seminars, conferences				
AI 3	Writing presentations for conferences and seminars				
AI 4	Writing and publishing articles in specialist journals				
AI 5	Reading professional literature				
AI 6	Preparing classes individually				
AI 7	Preparing classes with colleagues in the department				
AI 8	Learning at work, which takes place with students in class				
AI 9	Interacting with students in tutorials				
AI 10	Mentoring (personal advice to help with settling into the workplace)				
AI 11	Coaching (personal training to improve positive aspects and overcome less positive aspects)				

		1	2	3	4
AI 12	Conversations with colleagues				
AI 13	Interviews with directors of the faculty				
AI 14	Interviews with my direct boss (head of department)				
AI 15	Attending a colleague's classes				
AI 16	Having colleagues attend my classes				
AI 17	Taking part in in-house training programmes				
AI 18	Taking part in external training programmes				
AI 19	Taking part in in-house evaluation programmes				
AI 20	Taking part in external evaluation programmes				
AI 21	Self-assessment				
AI 22	Studying				
AI 23	Other ways (indicate which ones)				

**Please briefly answer the following open questions.**

1. Indicate which five elements, from the previous list, have most encouraged your sustained growth on a personal and professional level (even though you may not usually use them).
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
  - e.
2. What is a distinguishing characteristic of your centre in relation to professional learning?
3. What is missing from the faculty in relation to professional learning?
4. What kind of training would you suggest for the faculty in general?
5. What professional aspect would you like to improve on a personal level?
6. Who have you learnt most from in your work at this university?
7. Who has helped you most in this university?
8. Have you taken part in any professional development activities in the last three years?
9. Have you received support from the faculty to carry out those activities?

**Questions relating to organisational learning**

The following questions are aimed at evaluating the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity in the Faculty of Education. Please select the response that most accurately applies to your

perception of the situation of this organisation in general. This is not an evaluation of your personal experience, but rather an analysis of the institution.

Organisational learning is understood to be the ability of organisations to learn new skills and gain knowledge which leads to ongoing improvements, together with the ongoing development of the people that work in them.

Firstly, score the items in Section 0 from 1-4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 is the highest score.

## Section 0

		1	2	3	4
0	The level of organisational learning in the university				
00	The level of organisational learning in the faculty				

Score the next set of statements from 1 to 4 (1 = Disagree completely, never, none/nothing; 2 = Partly agree, sometimes, not much; 3 = Quite agree, almost always, quite a lot; 4 = Agree completely, always, a lot).

## Section 1 Teamwork

**In this faculty/university...**

		1	2	3	4
B1	Teams in the department hold regular meetings				
B2	In the teams, ideas can be expressed freely				
B3	Mistakes are more easily detected thanks to the teams				
B4	In the teams, mistakes are corrected				
B5	Working in a team creates knowledge				
B6	In the teams, topics are studied in depth				
B7	In the teams, innovative ideas are put into practice				
B8	In the teams, problems are sorted out jointly				
B9	The teams usually make good decisions				
B10	The team leaders have autonomy to work and make decisions				
B11	In the teams, everybody takes part				
B12	In the teams, the opinions of all the members are taken into account				
B13	In the teams, tasks are assigned				
B14	In the teams, results are usually produced				



		1	2	3	4
B15	Work meetings are organised between different departments				
B16	Everybody receives training about how to work in a team				
B17	Decisions made by the teams are taken into account				
B18	Knowledge is shared between different work teams				
B19	There is a climate of collaboration in the work teams				
B20	Teamwork is regarded as important because it generates greater organisational learning				
B21	Individually acquired knowledge is shared with the teams				
B22	Individually acquired knowledge is shared with the faculty				

## Section 2 Leadership and vision

In this faculty/university...

		1	2	3	4
B23	The faculty board (FB) sets up participatory processes to shape the future of the faculty				
B24	The FB transmits its vision <sup>3</sup>				
B25	The FB gives full support to the middle managers (heads of department)				
B26	The heads of department provide adequate leadership				
B27	The heads of department have a spirit of service				
B28	The heads of department encourage open and continuous communication				
B29	Leadership is spread across the faculty				
B30	The leaders share their experiences (successes and failures) with the others				
B31	The bosses are trainers and contribute to the learning of their colleagues				
B32	Innovation emerges from a process of reflection and discussion				
B33	The teaching staff leads new initiatives				
B34	Performance is evaluated at different levels (teaching, tutorials, research, management, etc.)				
B35	There are adequate channels for giving feedback for all the members of the organisation				
B36	The successes of the teaching staff and of the administration and services staff are recognised and valued				
B37	Decision-making is adequately decentralised				

3. The vision is about situating the firm in future situations. It is more than a dream, since it must be viable, realistic and measurable in time. It is a clear image of the desired state, which motivates the members of the organisation to make it a reality. ("Nociones básicas de planificación empresarial". [Accessed: 1 June 2009]). <<http://www.coninpyme.org>>

### Section 3 Culture and values

In this faculty/university...

		1	2	3	4
B38	There is a culture favourable to learning				
B39	The mission <sup>4</sup> of the university is known and it is taken into account in day-to-day practice				
B40	Everybody shares the same mission and vision of the university and feels responsible for them				
B41	The annual objectives of the faculty are known				
B42	People are motivated to meet the faculty's objectives				
B43	Collaboration is encouraged				
B44	Innovative experiences are carried out				
B45	Members of the teaching staff support each other				
B46	Relationships are trusting				
B47	There are high expectations of the people				
B48	There is great commitment to the students' learning				
B49	Reflection upon learning itself is encouraged				
B50	When a better practice is identified in one department, it is shared and used in the rest of the faculty				
B51	People who take risks and fail are encouraged to try again				
B52	Professional dialogues are based on how to do things better and how to better share knowledge				
B53	Professional dialogues are open to discussing contentious issues				

### Section 4 Structures

In this faculty/university...

		1	2	3	4
B54	The structures are flexible				
B55	The teams and departments are aligned with the mission and vision of the university				
B56	The structures are democratic and encourage people to take part and collaborate				

4. Mission: the real needs of the students and the professionals that the organisation strives to satisfy by means of the service it provides to society (Pérez López, 1997). In this case, it may be the same as an ideology.

		1	2	3	4
B57	The organisational structure aids the sharing of knowledge gained by the members				
B58	Effective communication channels are set up with the students to find out their needs and expectations				
B59	The opinions of students are taken into account when decisions are made in the faculty				
B60	The channels for sharing information are adequate				
B61	There is sufficient exchange of information				
B62	Lecturers are encouraged to attend courses or seminars for ongoing training				
B63	Strategies for development and learning are based on individual learning				
B64	Strategies for development and learning are based on team learning				
B65	Strategies for development and learning are based on whole organisation learning				

## Section 5 Resources

### In this faculty/university...

		1	2	3	4
B66	Meetings are held to share experiences and information				
B67	When innovation or new initiatives are introduced, they are backed up by all the necessary time, material and human resources				
B68	New technologies have driven the development of new forms of learning				
B69	Members of the organisation are continuously looking for new ways to apply technologies to their teaching and learning				
B70	Members are encouraged to use computer applications to work more effectively				
B71	Information found on the internal website is continuously updated				
B72	The resources necessary to implement new initiatives are always sought				
B73	Services are quickly adapted to the new needs of students				
B74	Material resources for teaching-learning are adequate				
B75	Material resources for teaching-learning are used efficiently				
B76	When someone leaves the organisation, their experiences and knowledge are still available to the rest of the members				
B77	The faculty has mechanisms in place to gather, store and transfer knowledge				

## Section 6 Openness to the environment

In this faculty/university...

		1	2	3	4
B78	Relationships exist with other teaching institutions of a similar level as a means for learning				
B79	Relationships exist with other infant and primary schools as a means for learning				
B80	Solid relationships are created with the university community				
B81	Opportunities offered by the environment (new laws, new needs, social change, etc.) are used as stimuli for making improvements				
B82	Relationships are kept up with former students to evaluate the quality of the education given				
B83	Changes in the environment are an opportunity for organisational learning				
B84	The faculty is proactive, that is to say, it anticipates changes in the environment				
B85	The students are satisfied				
B86	The employers that take on students from the faculty are satisfied				

## Section 7 Barriers to learning

In this faculty/university...

		1	2	3	4
B87	There is great resistance to change and a tendency to maintain the status quo ('better the devil you know than the devil you don't')				
B88	Failure is not considered to be part of learning				
B89	Risk-taking and experimentation are not encouraged				
B90	People only defend their own interests and personal benefit				
B91	The time scales and pace are not appropriate for learning				
B92	There is too much competition between members of the teaching staff				
B93	Bosses do not want any problems and always avoid confrontations; they do not tell staff about things that are being done badly				
B94	Planning is only short term				
B95	The same old solutions are always applied				
B96	Communication between individuals is poor				
B97	Communication between different units in the organisation is poor				
B98	The FB does not keep people sufficiently informed				

		1	2	3	4
B99	Decision-making is slow, tending towards a situation of 'analysis paralysis'				
B100	People display defensive behaviour and find it hard to recognise their mistakes				
B101	Changes are brought in too slowly				
B102	There are no opportunities to pursue ongoing training				
B103	Usually the decisions made are wrong				
B104	Learning is accidental, organisational learning is not planned				
B105	There is a lack of transparency				
B106	There is a lack of solidarity				
B107	There is a lack of self-assessment				
B108	There is a lack of job security				

**For the final section, score your university and faculty in terms of a 'learning organisation'. Score from 1-4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 is the highest score.**

		1	2	3	4
C01	Level of organised learning in your university				
C001	Level of organised learning in your faculty				

Thank you very much for taking part. Please feel free to make any observations or suggestions; we would be delighted to receive them.

## 5. Selecting the resources and the population

The material resources needed to implement this questionnaire are photocopies of the questionnaires, and stamped envelopes to facilitate a response – they can also be hand-delivered or sent by e-mail, but these methods do not guarantee anonymity. A software package to handle the statistical analysis is also required (we recommend SPSS), as is enough time to spend on analysing the results.

In terms of time, 30 minutes is estimated to be enough to gather the data from each questionnaire. On top of this, time for studying and processing the results is required.

With regard to the population, the questionnaire has been designed to be sent to the teaching staff in a particular faculty or university, though it could also be sent to the administrative and services staff and/or the students in the same institution. These decisions will, of course, be taken by the team conducting the study. The greater the number and levels of categories in the sample population, the better; this will enable the study to be more complete and comparisons to be made.

## 6. Questionnaire results and proposals for improvements

Once all the questionnaires have been collected, the next step is the systematisation and analysis of the data collected. For this purpose, we recommend creating a template with all the data from the scaled items (a double-entry table that includes the variables or items from the questionnaire in the columns and the respondents in the rows, differentiating between faculties and universities, as necessary). A summary of the responses to the open questions will also need to be written.

Statistical processing of the data can be carried out using the latest version of the software package SPSS. We recommend that the following tests be carried out:

- a. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's<sup>5</sup> alpha
- b. Frequency analysis
- c. Correlation analysis
- d. Mean analysis

This choice of tests serves a dual purpose. Cronbach's alpha is applied to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The other three tests are applied to describe the results.

Once the results have been analysed, we can get an indication of the current situation of a specific faculty, department or university. We suggest using graphics to show the attitude towards individual learning and also to indicate the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity with regard to the main indicators of learning in a specific institution. This final snapshot of the organisation (see Figure 2) will enable proposals to be made for improvements and conclusions to be reached, based on the stage of growth in the organisational learning capacity at a particular moment in time.

The example shown in Figure 2 is based on research by Dibbon (1999) and Brian Hall (2000, 2001). Dibbon identifies four stages of growth in organisational learning: from coping (level 1) to learning (level 4). According to Hall, the four stages of growth range from an autocratic organisation based on control and self-interest, where the management of knowledge is merely a transmission of data, to a global collaborative organisation based on truth, wisdom, ecology and human dignity, where knowledge is created through collaboration. In relation to these models and the results obtained, every assessor should be able to place the assessed unit in one of these levels.

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5. As the questionnaire is very long, we calculated its consistency in parts, taking into account each section. A greater number of items gives a greater variety of scores and so the alpha value is overinflated. The questionnaire has demonstrated a good level of internal consistency with an alpha value between 0.726 and 0.949. Most of the items give a value of around 0.8; this is considered acceptable and consistent. The average value of alpha is 0.857. These data are more realistic for a questionnaire of this size, rather than obtaining a Cronbach alpha value for the whole questionnaire, which comes out very high (0.953).

Figure 2. Level of organisational learning in a specific educational organisation

Level of organisational learning						
Description according to Dibbon		Coping	Emerging	Developing	Learning	
Description according to Hall		Autocratic Org	Bureaucratic Org	Learning Org	Partnering Org.	
Extent of learning	From	0	1	2	3	4
		----- ----- ----- -----				To
1. Individual learning	<i>Involuntary</i>					<i>Intentional</i>
2. Team learning	<i>Group thinking</i>					<i>Team thinking</i>
3. Leadership	<i>Concentrated</i>					<i>Dispersed</i>
4. Culture	<i>Individualist</i>					<i>Collaborative</i>
5. Values	<i>Control, self-interest</i>					<i>Truth, wisdom, dignity</i>
6. Structure	<i>Rigid</i>					<i>Flexible</i>
7. Resources for learning	<i>Scarce</i>					<i>Abundant</i>
8. Openness to environment	<i>Independence</i>					<i>Interdependence</i>
a. Speed of learning	<i>Slow</i>					<i>Fast</i>
b. Level of learning	<i>Adaptive</i>					<i>Generative</i>
c. Intensity of learning	<i>Knowledge</i>					<i>Behaviours</i>
d. Knowledge creation	<i>Data sharing</i>					<i>Knowledge created by collaboration</i>

Source: Own elaboration based on Dibbon (1999) and Hall (2000)

## 7. Possibility of bias in the questionnaire

As with all questionnaires, and especially ones that directly affect the work of the respondents, we are aware that there may be a certain degree of subjectivity and desirability in the responses. In effect, a respondent will very often not answer the question by stating how things are, but rather by stating how he/she thinks they are or how he/she would like them to be. If the responses are relatively similar among the respondents, then we can assume that the responses are reasonably realistic or at least that that is what the teaching staff wants for the faculty. If that is how it is perceived, then the desired learning may be achieved as a consequence of the Pygmalion effect.

As a result of the lengthiness of the questionnaire, proximity bias may also occur, which is when a respondent is more inclined to answer questions in a similar way as the previous. Logical errors can also occur, which is when a respondent considers that all related items should be scored equally. However, it is true that each section of questions is closely related and it would seem logical to expect responses be similar.

Furthermore, some respondents have commented that the questionnaire is too long, or that they do not have all the information to be able to respond because they have been working for a short time or work few hours in the organisation.

All of these comments, for which we are grateful, are valid. We can only add that the length of the questionnaire has resulted from our need to check very diverse aspects and that only one of our experts suggested shortening the questionnaire.

With regard to the other observations, it is worth mentioning that neither the length of service nor number of hours worked in the organisation are determining factors in the questionnaire; first impressions are valuable, as are those from people who spend few hours in the university.

## 8. Conclusions

When applied to higher education institutions, the 'learning organisation' model can be a good model for change, survival and renovation.

However, although nobody will doubt the importance of an organisation where learning is produced, it is far more difficult to evaluate its current organisational learning capacity and to help it develop in that respect. In order to govern, it is essential for us to know what to do and where we are going. That is the purpose of the questionnaire that we have produced.

Our questionnaire is not designed to attain the ideal organisation that includes all the characteristics that have been mentioned, but rather to study the process of learning in a specific organisation, to observe how far it has developed as a learning organisation at a particular moment in time, and to help it become a learning community.



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