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Corporate Universities and Adult Education: Implications for Theory and Practice

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Keywords: corporate universities, adult education, workplace learning, partnership/collaboration model

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore characteristics of corporate universities (CUs) from the adult education (AdEd) perspective in order to identify implications for AdEd theory and practice. Through an integrative literature review of CUs, the differences among CUs, human resource development centers, and traditional universities are investigated. Considering the AdEd characteristics of CUs, such as individuals' learning and qualifications/certifications of higher education, the partnership/collaboration model of CU is suggested in terms of workplace learning, which is the overlapping field of HRD and AdEd. Ultimately, to promote participatory AdEd in the workplace, nations should play crucial roles in providing administrative and financial support to CUs.

Introduction

Corporate universities (CUs) are one of the progressive approaches organizations use in today's business world to train and educate their employees. Such universities are owned by corporations, and which are called CUs. CU movement has been spreading across North America, Europe, and Asia (Andersen & Lichtenberger, 2007; Gordon, 2009) often in collaboration with traditional universities (TUs) in many countries (Blass, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2002; Nixon & Helms, 2002). Many CU studies have been conducted focusing on organizational aspects as advanced in-house training facilities (Andersen & Lichtenberger, 2007) from the perspective of strategic human resource development (HRD). CUs also have characteristics overlapping with those of adult education (AdEd) institutions in the workplace, focusing on individual aspects such as employee learning needs. In particular, CU partnerships/collaborations with TUs (Ryan, 2007) in applied practice can be interpreted as a crucial attempt to combine HRD and AdEd characteristics for the development of CUs (Oh & Park, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to analyze CU literature in order to apply the CU field to AdEd for new insights. The purposes of this paper are, (a) to explore characteristics of CUs from the AdEd perspective and (b) identify implications for AdEd theory and practice.

Literature Review of Corporate Universities

Historically, the concept of CU is rooted in the General Motors Institute (GMI), which was established in the 1920s to improve employee engineering and management skills (Morin & Renaud, 2004; Nixon & Helms, 2002). In the 1950s, GMI, the first CU, was followed by General Electric's Crotonville Management Development Institute (Tichy & Sherman, 1994) and the

Disney University (Solomon, 1989). Since the 1990s, CUs have begun to grow rapidly in North America, Europe, and Asia with various purposes, focuses, and forms depending on the organization (Holland & Pyman, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2002; Nixon & Helms, 2002; Rademakers, 2005; Tichy & Sherman, 1994), and many CUs have formed partnerships with TUs in order to make use of external expertise (Ryan, 2007). Because there are many variables affecting the characteristics of CU, the definition of CU also varies (Andersen & Lichtenberger, 2007; Blass, 2005; Morin & Renaud, 2004). Among various definitions of CU, Meister's (1998) definition that this paper embraces shows a comprehensive view of CU (Oh & Park, 2011):

Corporate universities are essentially the 'in-house' training facilities that have sprung up because of the frustration of business with the quality and content of post-secondary education on the one hand, and the need for life-long learning on the other. They have evolved at many organizations into strategic umbrellas for educating not only employees, but also secondary customers and suppliers. (Meister, 1998, p. 29)

While the basic role of CUs is to train and develop employees, it can be expanded to include organizational culture and change (Prince & Beaver, 2001); knowledge management (Blass, 2001); organizational learning (Morin & Renaud, 2004) and learning organization (Prince & Stewart, 2002); continuous learning of employees (El-Tannir, 2002); and lifelong learning (Fulmer & Gibbs, 1998; Gould, 2005). As described above, CU originated to overcome limitations of traditional HRD centers and have formed partnerships with TUs to access external expertise. The comparison among CUs, traditional HRD centers, and TUs is shown in Table 1 because it is critical to understand the difference among these three (Oh & Park, 2011).

Table 1

Comparison of Corporate Universities, HRD Centers, and Traditional Universities

| Categories | HRD Centers | Corporate Universities | Traditional Universities |
|-----------------|--|--|--|
| Objective (Aim) | To increase individual job performance | To increase individual and organizational performance; to help succession planning; to attract and retain employees; to develop a common culture across employees, suppliers, and customer; to expand the knowledge base of their companies, adding to the competitiveness, acting as catalyst for change. | To provide liberal and/or professional education at a higher level to the public |
| Outcome | Job-specific competencies | Raised horizons on what can be achieved, conveys the ethics, values & history of company. | Qualification (degrees, professional qualifications) & research |
| User | Employees | Employees, suppliers, customers | Public who graduate from secondary education or who have the same level of education background. |
| Trainer | Subject-matter | Internal management team and | Experts who are |

| | | | |
|----------------------|--|---|--|
| | experts, internal or external | external experts. Partnerships with traditional universities are very common | appointed professors of university. |
| Ownership & Control | Human resource department | CEO and management team | The State in terms of funding. Reports publicly and is accountable to state organizations. |
| Knowledge generation | No publication | Research shared with partner organizations, in-house publication. Not publicly published. | Published for public consumption, peer reviewed. |
| Structure | Decentralized; activities are fragmented into categories of skills | Centralized; activities are integrated into a global learning strategy. | Decentralized; activities are fragmented into categories of majors to improve theoretical knowledge of each major. |

Note. Adapted from “Participation in Corporate University Training: Its Effect on Individual Job Performance,” by L. Morin and S. Renaud, 2004, *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 21, p. 298 and “What’s in a Name? A Comparative Study of the Traditional Public University and the Corporate University,” by E. Blass, 2001, *Human Resource Development International*, 4, p. 168.

Characteristics of Corporate Universities from the Perspective of Adult Education

Meister (1998) noted “the frustration of business with the quality and content of post-secondary education” in her definition of CUs, which highlights the AdEd aspect of CU (Oh & Park, 2011). Since CU is not restricted to just an entity of in-house training, but also encompass some characteristics of higher education institutions (Andresen & Lichtenberger, 2007), CUs can be understood as another form of AdEd institutions in the workplace. From the AdEd perspective, the primary feature of CU is to improve learning for the benefit of the learner, which also coincides with one of the purposes of workplace learning (Boud & Garrick, 1999). The difference between the CUs from perspectives of HRD and AdEd is that whereas the former is rooted in organizational strategies for business competitiveness in the market, the latter focus on individual needs for continuing education of adult learners in the workplace (Lee, Jeong, Oh, Hwang, & Yoon, 1999). The secondary feature is qualifications/certifications of higher education, such as college/university credits, certificates, and degrees (Nixon & Helms, 2002). Many CUs pursue collaboration with TUs and have to partner with established TUs to offer transferable higher education credits toward degrees (Ryan, 2007). There are many examples of the AdEd characteristics within CUs in the U. S., Australia, Germany, the U. K., South Korea, and so on (Andresen & Lichtenberger, 2007). Furthermore, some CUs in South Korea, for example, are certified to award higher education degrees without partnerships with TUs (Lee et al., 1999; Kim & Kim, 2002). Therefore, AdEd characteristics of CUs in comparison with HRD characteristics are categorized and shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Comparison of Corporate Universities Characteristics

| Categories | HRD Perspective | Adult Education Perspective |
|---|---|---|
| Fundamental characteristic | Strategic HRD in-house training facilities | Adult Education institutions in the workplace |
| Key words in Meister's (1998) definition | - 'In-house' training facilities - Strategic umbrellas for educating | Frustration of business with the quality and content of post-secondary education |
| Focus | Organizational strategies for business competitiveness | Individual needs for adult learning |
| Purpose | Performance | Learning |
| Partnership/ Collaboration | None | Traditional Universities |
| Main feature(s) | Strategic HRD | - Individuals' learning - Qualifications/certifications of higher education (e.g., curriculums, faculty, credits, certificates, and degrees) |
| Functions / Roles | - Organizational culture and change - Knowledge management - Organizational learning / Learning organization | - Continuous learning - Higher education - Workplace learning - Learning organization |
| Degrees awarded | None | Available (Degrees awarded by partner TUs) |
| Time | Short and/or Long term | Long term |
| Levels of learning organization in Watkins & Marsick's (1992) model | Organization level: Establish systems to capture and share learning and empower people toward a collective vision | Individual level: Create continuous learning opportunities and promote inquiry and dialogue |
| Purposes of workplace learning in Boud & Garrick's (1999) model | Improving performance for the benefit of the organization through contributing to production, effectiveness, and innovation | Improving learning for the benefit of the learner through contributing to knowledge, skills and capacity to further their own learning |

Implications for the Development of Adult Education

Implications for Theory: The Partnership/Collaboration Model of Corporate Universities

Based on characteristics of CUs from the perspective of AdEd, the partnership/collaboration model can be suggested as a balanced model of CUs. As shown in *Figure 1*, the CU partnership/collaboration model can be regarded as a solution to the dilemma regarding the credibility of programs and degrees. Therefore, the traditional CUs can be replaced by this model in the event that an organization chooses to pursue the balance between HRD and AdEd by partnering with TUs.

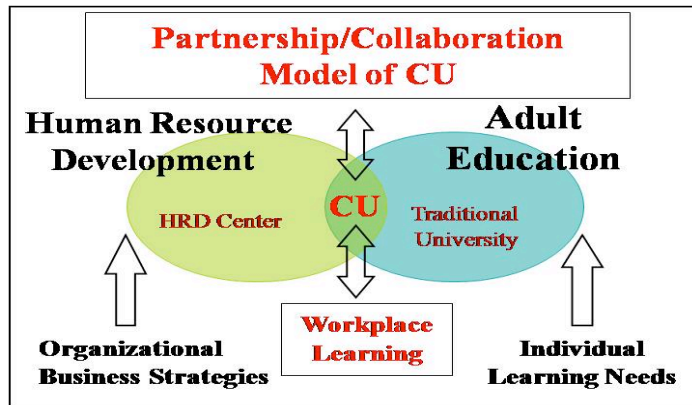


Figure 1. Partnership/Collaboration Model of Corporate University.

Peterson and Provo (2000) claimed that AdEd and HRD share some common goals related to improving individuals, as well as organizational development, namely team building, empowerment, action learning, motivation, and goal alignment. Also, Wiesenberg and Peterson (2004) suggested that the alliance between HRD and AdEd is important in facilitating workplace learning. Therefore, when CUs perform their roles as catalysts of workplace learning from the HRD perspective and effectively collaborate with AdEd, workplace learning in organizations will thrive. This relationship is represented in *Figure 1*, where the CU partnership/collaboration model is located within the field of workplace learning, overlapping area between AdEd and HRD.

Implications for Practice: Nations' Roles in Supporting Corporate Universities

For the development of AdEd practice, the nation should provide CUs engaged in partnerships/collaborations with TUs with appropriate national support. Some national policies and systems related to CU exist in several countries, such as South Korea and the U. K. (Blass, 2005). For example, some types of CUs in South Korea are supported by the government through administration and finance (Kim & Kim, 2002). Generally, however, national support for CUs for the development of AdEd remains insufficient and needs to be improved to secure the individuals' opportunities to learn in the workplace throughout their employment (Lee et al., 1999). In particular, allowing not only partner TUs but also CUs themselves to award degrees is recommended as a crucial qualification/certification of higher education, because it can be an effective method to enhance individual interests and motivation (Kim & Kim, 2002). Therefore, it is critically important for nations to promote the development of CUs in order to balance organizational business strategies, individual learning needs, and, furthermore, national political goals. Ultimately, through appropriate national support, CU partnership/collaboration model would contribute to the realization of participatory AdEd in the workplace by promoting industrial democracy through humanization of work and educational welfare through humanization of education.

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