Exploring the Impact of Undesirable Student and Staff Experiences on the Performance of a Business School in Kenya

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The focus of this study is to examine how the quality of teaching and learning (T&L) experiences in higher education impacts on the performance of the T&L system relative to its stated goal(s), and particularly the role those undesirable experiences play in the achievement of the goal. We used Goldratt’s “theory of constraints thinking process” (TOC-TP) (Dettmer, 2007) to map the interrelationships between student and staff experiences and goal achievement.

The literature on the quality of T&L in undergraduate programmes in higher education (HE) indicates limitations in two fundamental areas: the T&L experiences and the achievement of T&L system goals. First, in relation to T&L experiences, most studies have focused on a few aspects of T&L: exploring whether the T&L approaches are deep or surface (Prosser et al., 2003), or exploring the nature of online learning activities and induction experiences, but not the wider T&L environment. Few studies have attempted to understand both the students’ and teachers’ experiences within an HE environment. A number of studies looked into students’ perceptions, but were largely focused on measurement of service quality using service quality models (Gamage et al., 2008; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1998), which are largely satisfaction based, and which failed to consider dissatisfaction or undesirable experiences. Moreover, none of the identified studies sought to understand the reasons for such experiences. This study addresses these gaps by applying a systems approach to understand the T&L system from the perspective of three major stakeholders (namely the students, teachers, and administrative staff) and mapping the interrelationships of the factors that affect T&L experiences. Second, none of the identified studies explicitly considered the T&L system goal. This study therefore also investigates how undesirable experiences impact on the performance of the T&L system and on the achievement of its goal.

Methodology

The theory of constraints (TOC) was identified as a methodology that could not only provide a suitable systemic approach to identify the T&L system goal, but also map the cause-effect relationships between the factors that impact on the quality of T&L experiences; and then identify the root causes of the undesirable experiences as a basis for identifying potential improvements.

This study applies the TOC tools to: (1) identify the undergraduate T&L system goal(s) with a view to identifying the critical success factors and necessary conditions for goal achievement; (2) identify the factors that affect the quality of HE T&L experiences with a view to identifying the critical root causes of less than desirable T&L experiences; (3) determine the impact of HE T&L experiences on the performance of HE T&L systems with a view to understanding what currently limits the HE T&L system’s performance; and (4) propose improvements to enhance the quality of T&L experiences and the performance of T&L systems.

Two case studies of business schools were used, one in Kenya and one in New Zealand, allowing differences as well as similarities to be identified. This paper discusses the Kenyan case study. The data collection phase involved individual face-to-face interviews with senior administrative staff and academic staff, together with focus group interviews conducted among the students.

Findings

Identifying the T&L goal

The analysis of the goals described by the students, academic and administrative staff indicated some similarities. For example, whilst academic staff goals included ‘imparting students with knowledge and skills’, students’ goals included a need for ‘acquiring or getting business knowledge and skills’. Similarly, some aspects of the students’ goals and those of the administrative staff tended to emphasise the need to develop a ‘whole, well-rounded’ person. These have been combined into one T&L goal tree, also known as an Intermediate Objectives Map (Dettmer, 2007, 2011) as below.
The T&L goal tree also provides a synthesis of the critical success factors (CSFs) together with some necessary conditions (NC) needed to meet those CSFs identified by the three groups of stakeholders.

**Identification of the Root Causes of the Undesirable T&L Situations**

The analysis of the current realities as described by the student, academic and administrative staff identified a number of undesirable effects which were then traced to root causes. Some of the root causes seemed to be outside the span of control or the sphere of influence of the business school. Other root causes were perceived to be conflicts that could be framed and resolved using an evaporating cloud (EC) conflict resolution process as described by Dettmer (2007).

For example, the varied admission criteria employed in the school were thought to cause shortfalls in the performance of students in two different modules (1 & 2). Inadequacies associated with the admission system were identified as undesirable by all three groups. Academic and administrative staff opined that most Module 2 students were weak academically and attributed this to the varied admission criteria (or to the inconsistent application of the admission criteria) that were used to admit the Module 2 students. Using an EC led us to identify several ways of resolving this long-standing and seemingly unsolvable problem.
Summary

The analysis of the views of the three stakeholders of the Kenyan business school depicts a complex and dynamic subsystem whose T&L processes have a goal of ‘imparting students with knowledge and skills’. However, these goals and desires were apparently not sufficiently met. Despite their best intentions, the Kenyan business school appeared to experience many undesirable effects (UDEs) that made an impact on its desired goal achievement. The UDEs for each stakeholder have been summarised using cause-effect logic to form what has been described as current reality trees (CRT) which together depict the unfavourable side of the T&L system. The analysis using the CRTs depicts how the UDEs are logically connected to a few root causes of all the undesirable issues within the T&L system, and the root causes are then explored further using the EC process to identify what needs to change within the system.

Conclusion

The paper illustrates how TOC methodology can be usefully employed to tackle longstanding issues in a higher education establishment, providing a constructive case example that can be used elsewhere within the tertiary system.

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References


