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Organizational Learning Practices in Public Higher Education Institutions of Ethiopia

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Abstract. *In this study, quantitative research design was employed to examine the relationship between organizational learning practices and institutional performance in Public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Ethiopia. The study investigated: individual, group and organizational level learning practice and their relationship with institutional performance. Data gathered from a 69 item survey questionnaire administrated to 461 academic staff randomly chosen from seven sample public universities from three generations. The finding of the study revealed that individual level learning practice is low, instructors (M=3.67: SD= .562) and academic leaders (M=3.80: SD= .652); group level learning practice is low, instructors (M=3.07, SD=.567) and academic leaders (M = 3.28, SD =.661) and organization level learning is poorly practiced, instructors (M=3.34, SD=.519) and academic leaders (M = 3.58, SD =.670), in public HEIs. In general, it was found that organization learning practice is insufficient, weak and poorly practiced in HEIs as agreed by instructors (M=3.35, SD=.427) and academic leaders (M = 3.56, SD =.581) . It was also concluded that the institutional ability of HEIs to learn from past experiences was insufficient and HEIs were not capable in sharing and utilizing the existing knowledge to create new knowledge to improve institutional practices. Besides, the existing leadership practices, learning infrastructures and technologies could not sufficiently support in transforming HEIs into learning organizations. Therefore, it was suggested that HEIs have to encourage shared and participatory decision-making process; create efficient system and work culture which promote cooperation, trust , team sprit among academic staff and across different disciplines, create long term strategic partnerships with external institutions and facilitate academic mobility and experience sharing activities. Furthermore, learning efforts and outcomes have to be valued and rewarded; technologies and learning infrastructures have be sufficiently developed to support organization wide learning and institutional performance.*

Key words: organizational learning practices, levels of learning, performance

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1. Background of the Study

These days, organizations all over the world regardless of their size and type, operate in a very competitive, complex, rapidly changing and knowledge driven environment (World Bank, 2009). The social, economic, political and technological changes at global and national levels put a great pressure on day to day operations, competiveness and survival of all organizations throughout the world (Marquardt, 2002). The increasingly dynamic nature of the work environments demands organisations to become more flexible, responsive and capable of adapting the changes (Swanson & Holton, 2001).

The success of an organization in this dynamic environment, thus, largely depends on its ability to remain a strong learning organization (Marquardt, 2002). Learning plays a critical role in developing competent and committed labor force of an organization which can respond to the dynamic changes (Marquardt, 2002; Serrat, 2009). In today's knowledge intensive society, it is imperative to develop competent manpower who can effectively cope up with changes to achieve organizational goals (Serrat, 2009; World Bank, 2009). Thus, organizations found in developed as well as developing countries irrespective to their size and type, need to facilitate continuous learning opportunities for all of their employees to develop their knowledge capacity that enable them to effectively respond to dynamic changes in the environments in which they are working.

Organizational learning is conceptualized as a dynamic process and a deliberate effort to increase an organization's capacity to acquire, innovate and structure learning into all organizational processes that enable the organization adapt to the environment (Marquardt, 2002). It is a process of knowledge acquisition through which members of an organization develop shared values, cognitive knowledge and skills which occur at individual, group and organizational levels to enhance organizational performance (Marquardt, 2002; Yang, Watkins & Marsick, 2004). It is also, a social process that results in changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors, and takes place at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Marsick & Watkins, 2003).

The concept of organizational learning goes beyond introducing planned changes within organizations and focuses on creating a learning environment where members of the organization continuously and collectively learn throughout their lives to cope with existing and emerging changes. Scholars in the field (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2011; Lawler & Sillitoe, 2013; Suryadi, 2007) indicate that organizational learning emphasizes on processes of learning that enable organizations to strive towards continual renewal, performance improvement and career long learning processes. It also implies that organizational learning is not limited to individual's or collection of individuals' learning; rather, it considers the synergetic learning process where learning occurs throughout the entire organization (Marsick &Watkins, 2003).

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A number of scholars (e.g., Cohen, 1996; Dogson, 1993; Kim, 1993; Senge, 1990) indicate that individual learning is the foundation for organization wide learning. Senge (1990), for instance, states that organizational learning does not take place without individual learning and organizations learn only through individuals who continuously learn. Cohen (1996), however, argues that individual learning is linked to organization wide teaching, and the effectiveness of team and organization wide learning partly rests on quality of learning occurring at individual level.

Basically, improving organizational performance is not limited to individual learning. It also demands developing team learning and working capacity to deal with complex issues that enable them address existing and emerging stakeholders' needs. Marquardt (2002, p.41) notes "teams learn to generate knowledge by analyzing complex issues, taking innovative action, and solving problems collectively" to achieve organizational goals. In other words, organizations need to create conducive learning environments where new learning goes beyond individual learning and becomes the collective property of groups as well as the entire organization.

Organization wide learning also facilitates the development of organizational knowledge capacity which enables organizations to grow and remain competent in changing work environment (Marquardt, 2002). Organizations develop their knowledge capacity through experimenting and scanning their internal and external environment (March, 1991). Scanning the environment enables organizations to learn from their own and other experiences or best practices (Khan, 1999; March, 1991; Serrat, 2009). It also provides an opportunity to acquire, generate and effectively utilize the knowledge to improve performance (Kim, 1993; Marquardt, 2002; Sampe, 2012). This demands organizations to create conditions and systems which promote continuous learning and performance improvement for their members.

Now a day, better performance is a concern of all organizations as it determines the success and survival of the organization. However, defining and measuring performance resulting from organizational learning is difficult because of the multidimensional nature performance (Kocoglu et al., 2011; Swanson, & Holton, 2001). To this end, scholars (e.g., Bredrup, 1994; Cardy, 2004; Swanson & Holton, 2001) define performance in different ways. Bredrup, for instance, defines performance in terms of "the efficiency, effectiveness and adaptability of an organization" (1994, p.173). The definition implies that organizational performance consists of the efficiency of its internal operations or processes, effectiveness in achieving the intended results (goals) as well as organizational capacity to adapt to the emerging change in the environment. The concept implicitly recognizes the importance of developing institutional capacity which could happen through learning to enhance organizational performance. Performance is also seen in terms of change on behavior and results achieved at individual and organizational levels in relation to the stated goals of the organization (Cardy, 2004; Swanson, & Holton, 2001). Mackie (2008) also define performance in terms of the effectiveness of the organization achieving its goals. Thus, performance deals with the qualitative and quantitative aspects in terms of the means (process) and end (results) achieved in relation to the stated goals of the organization.

2. Problem Formulation

In today's competitive knowledge based economy, the contribution of higher education in promoting economic , social, political and technological developments is well recognized (UNESCO, 2014; World Bank, 2004). In such a globalized world, it is imperative for HEIs to be

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innovative and responsive to national development and requirements of a global competitive knowledge economy. HEIs need to acquire, and generate new ideas, and apply them to improve their performance (Bauman, 2005). Besides, they need to enhance their competitiveness, and flexibility, and become responsive to demands of the knowledge economy as well as to the growing emphasis on national development (World Bank, 2009).

In developing nations, especially in sub Saharan African counties, the contribution of HEIs to national development is not significant (Materu, 2007). In such countries, HEIs lack the autonomy to make decisions related to internal operations and flexibility to adapt to changing customer demands (World Bank, 2009). This in turn affects institutional performance and commitment to initiate learning oriented changes which enables them to effectively adapt and address the existing and emerging demands and continuously improve their performance. Like other organizations working in information driven society, HEIs, need to continuously and collaboratively learn to update themselves with emerging knowledge, skills and technologies to satisfy their stakeholders' needs and play crucial roles in the overall development of the nation.

Studies indicate that organizational learning has also a strong relationship with organizational performance (Akhtar et al., 2011; Khandekar & Sharma, 2006). Organizations which create learning environments where everyone in the organizations continuously engages in learning improves work related skills, knowledge and attitude (Akhtar et al., 2011). Other studies (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2011; Crossan, Lane & White, 1999; Sampe, 2012) also show that organizational learning increases institutional knowledge, facilitates institutional reform initiatives, and creates efficient systems, structures, culture, policies and procedures .Moreover, it was recognized that continuous learning is essential for the survival and success of organizations (Marquardt, 2002), and organizations' survival largely depends on their learning ability to meet the emerging stakeholders' demands (Senge, 1990).

In Ethiopia, the higher education system was established in 1950s (MoE, 2010). Since then, HEIs have been contributing a lot to the overall development of the nation. However, HEIs have been experiencing a lot of performance related challenges. Some reports indicate that higher education system in Ethiopia is less developed and conservative, and has inefficient management system (HESO, 2004; MoE, 2010). Besides, the system is not responsive to the needs of the society, and exercises limited autonomy, and structural changes (Ashcroft, 2004; Saint, 2004; World Bank, 2004), and is influenced by western ideologies (King, 2011).

Moreover, HEIs in the country are characterized by a number of interrelated problems: the quality of service and education have been declining (Solomon et al., 2014; World Bank, 2004); there has been low motivation, commitment and dedication of academic staff (World Bank, 2004; Zelalem & Jabessa,2015); the academic staff professional development effort has been reported to be low and unsystematic (Aytaged,2012); lack of supportive professional culture and low motivation to share professional knowledge (Rahel & Ermiyas, 2011); and resistance to change, traditional teaching methods and low level of research skills (Deuren et al., 2013).

The problems identified in Ethiopia HEIs indicate that there is a need for new perspectives to bring a change in practices and improvements in higher education system of the country. A learning oriented performance improvement initiative is one of the alternatives, believed to bring organization wide performance improvement. The approach provides learning opportunities to

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all members of an organization irrespective of their positions and experiences to continuously and collectively learn from their own and others experiences, and develop, share, generate and apply organizational knowledge to improve institutional performance (Swanson & Holton, 2001).

This study is grounded on the assumption that effective performance improvement efforts need a comprehensive approach and learning focused perspective where members at all levels of a high learning institution individually and collectively learn to continuously enhance their performance. Thus, learning has to be the central task, day to day activity and the main instrument to continuously improve the performance in higher education institutions.

There are also several specific reasons which have initiated me to conduct this study. One of the major reasons is that organizational learning has been an area of ongoing debate in the field which is characterized by lack of conceptual clarity; controversies on theories, constructs and models, nature and outcome of learning (e.g., Crossan et al., 1999; Huber, 1991; Kim, 1993; Leavitt, 2011; March, 1991; Yang, Watkins & Marsick, 2004). The relationship between learning processes, constructs and performance improvements at various levels of an the organization is not still clear and point of debate among scholars in the field (Ponnuswamy & Manohar, 2014 ; Tseng, 2010). Thus, it is believed that the study will have its own contribution in the ongoing debate.

The other reason is that organizational learning has been much discussed in the context of economically developed nations and in business organizations. However, there is shortage of studies in developing countries and in educational institutions. Organizational learning in relation to organizational performance in HEIs is not well researched and documented both internationally and in Ethiopia. Even in international contexts, most of the studies in the area were conducted on business organizations (e.g., Kocoglu et al., 2011; Sampe, 2012; Salim & Sulaiman, 2011; Tseng, 2010), and studies conducted on educational institutions (Akhtar, et al., 2011; Hussein et al., 2013; Lawler & Sillitoe, 2013; Veisi, 2010) are very few. In the Ethiopian context, there has been very few published studies (Atkinson & Mekonnen, 2012) and limited unpublished studies (Menbere, 2014; Samuel, 2013; Woyita, 2013). This shows there is a scarcity of studies in the area. To this end, the following basic questions were developed to guide the study:

1.What are the perceptions of academic staff towards organizational leaning practice in Pubic HEIs of Ethiopia?

2.Are There Differences on Organizational Learning Practices among Pubic HEIs of Ethiopia?

3. Conceptual Framework for the Study

As learning organizations, HEIs need to continuously and collaboratively learn to improve their performance. However, organizational learning which leads to performance improvement is a complex and difficult activity as it deals with the cognitive aspect of acquiring , generating , processing and storing information , and the socio- cultural aspect of learning and sharing of values, beliefs and experiences (e.g., Crossan, Lane & White, 1999; Leavitt, 2011; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Senge,1990). Thus, a contingency theory (Bess & Dee , 2008) which suggests and recognizes appropriate theories of organizational learning process cognitive, socio-cultural and experiential dimensions (e.g., Chiva, Grandio & Alegre, 2010; Cook & Yannow, 2001; Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Leavitt, 2011; March, 1991; Senge, 1990) ; which incorporate a

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performance improvement strategy (Swanson & Holton, 2001); which considers multiple perspective of performance improvement; and which integrates core performance dimensions related to organizational mission at various levels of an organization was used as a conceptual framework to guide the study.

An examination of extensive organizational learning studies (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2011; Hussein et al., 2013; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004) and organizational learning literature (e.g., Marquardt, 2002; Senge, 1990) showed inconsistency of variables in studying organizational learning processes and outcomes. However, most of the scholars use five or seven variables to study organizational learning practices in various business and educational organizations. For instance, Hamza et al. (2011), Moloi (2010) and Senge (1990) identified five organizational learning variables. Some scholars (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2011; Hussein et al., 2013; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004) identified seven variables to study organizational learning practices in various contexts.

An extensive review of empirical studies on organizational learning (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2011; Hussein et al., 2013; Leithwood et al., 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Yang, et al., 2004 and review of organizational learning and performance improvement literature (e.g., Marquardt, 2002; Senge, 1990; Swanson & Holton, 2001) revealed that the role of continuous professional development, resource and technology is significant in facilitating organizational learning and performance improvement efforts of the organization. However, most organizational learning studies underemphasized these dimensions of learning and its impact on organizational performance. As a result, dimensions related to continuous professional development efforts of academic staff, and availability and utilization of organizational resources and technology were included in the study.

In this study, nine independent organizational learning dimensions : 1) continuous professional development, 2) dialogue and inquiry; 3) shared vision and goal, 4) collaborative learning, 5) leadership, 6) system thinking , 7) culture, 8) structure and 9) learning resources and technologies, and performance as dependent variables were identified to develop the following conceptual framework to guide the study.

The framework shows an intricate and multidimensional construct and relationship between organizational learning dimensions and institutional performance in HEIs. Organizational learning practice consists of nine independent learning dimensions which independently or collectively affect institutional performance which take place at individual, group and organizational levels.

Learning at an individual level occurs through continuous professional development, and dialogue and inquiry. Continuous professional development enables academic staff to keep up with best practices, and new skills, knowledge and attitude to work individually and collaboratively (Aslam, 2011; Guskey & Huberman, 1995). It also provides academic staff with the opportunities to learn and develop professional knowledge and skills, and enables them to implement the knowledge and skills to improve their own and institutional performance. Academic staff also learn through dialogue and inquiry practices. The practices enables academic staff learn by engaging in discovering new ideas, discussing, debating, reflecting and

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sharing professional knowledge and skills to improve performance (Marquardt, 2002; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Senge, 1990).

Learning also takes place at a group level through developing shared vision and goal, and collaborative thinking and action. Having shared vision, mission and goals facilitates learning core competencies required to efficiently and effectively perform activities. It enhances shared understandings of academic staff on organizational directions, mission, goals, strategies, and priorities of the university (Chiva & Alegre, 2005; Senge, 1990). It also motivates academic staff to learn relevant knowledge and skills, taking responsibility to implement collective decisions and commitment to achieve shared goals to improve group and institutional performance. Collaborative (team) learning also facilitates the interaction, relationship and cooperation among group members to develop collective thinking and action to achieve common goals (Senge, 1990). It encourages academic staff to learn how to work together; support each other, engage and value group decision , develop sense of ownership , trust and mutual respect, share experience, and openly discuss on strengths and weaknesses to improve performance.

At an institutional level, the learning process also takes place through leadership, system thinking, culture, structure, learning resource and technologies, and institutional performance will be continuously improved. In an organization wide learning, leadership facilitates the development of individual and team capabilities to work effectively. Leadership encourages academic staff to engage individually and collectively in experimentation and in acquiring and sharing experiences to enhance performance at various level of the organization. At an institutional level, leadership facilitates learning through developing shared direction, common goals and strategies. It also enables staff to engage in new learning initiatives, innovation and change to bring an intended performance improvements. It further creates and maintains partnership with external stakeholders; and uses best practices to ensure continuous performance improvement (Mohrman & Mohrman, 1995; Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Developing systems thinking among academic staff facilitates organization wide learning, which leads to improved institutional performance. Having system perspectives enables academic staff to understand the complex interaction and interdependence of activities to achieve institutional goals (Senge, 1990). It also enables them to recognize the interaction and interdependence of different colleges, departments, and units and their connection to external community to enhance institutional performance. It further enables empowers them to integrate efforts, and resources, and align their decision with institutional goals.

The way work is structured within an institution and the amount of internal control granted to the academic staff also facilitate organization wide learning. In the organization learning process, work and performance monitoring structure , lines of communication, power relationship, and autonomy and decision making processes affect organization wide learning and institutional performance (Lucas & Kline, 2008; Marquardt, 2002) . Organization wide learning is more facilitated, and institutional performance is continuously improved when the structure is flexible, less ridged and adapted to emerging needs.

The underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations of academic staff also affect the organization learning process and institutional performance (Marquardt, 2002; Ponnuswamy & Manohar, 2014). Organizational learning is more facilitated when the culture of an organization

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promotes receiving and providing feedback, promotes respect, diversity, trust and collegiality among academic staff, and encourages collective thinking and action.

Learning resources and technologies, which provide learning opportunities for academic staff (Marquardt, 2002), also have a crucial role in promoting organization wide leaning and performance improvement initiatives of an organization. It is apparent that the availability and adequacy of human and non-human resources affects the effectiveness of learning process and performance. The availability and effective utilization of resources, enables academic staff to acquire, generate , share, store and retrieve information to enhance organization wide learning and institutional performance .

The framework, used for this study, also consists of two routes (feed forward and feed backward) and information (or knowledge) flows in both directions. Feed forward represents the flow of information (or knowledge) acquired or generated at an individual level shared (or flow) to group then move to the organization. Alternatively, organizational knowledge embedded in structure, culture, and system of an organization, and information acquired from external environment flows back to groups and individuals, and facilitate learning and improvement of performance at various levels of the organization.

In this study, performance is a dependent variable which is affected by the interaction among organizational learning practices. Learning dimensions enable academic staff to develop their capacity, and accomplish specific tasks and produce specific outcomes (Swanson & Halton, 2001). They also enable them to provide better services to their stakeholders and achieve better results from time to time at individual, group and institutional level. The way tasks are accomplished and the results achieved at individual, group and institutional levels is affected by the organizational learning dimensions. The learning dimensions at individual, group and institutional levels, affect the achievement of organizational goals, satisfaction of stakeholders and the overall success of the institution.

4. Literature Review

The idea of organizational learning has received an increased recognition as an alternative approach to change (Swanson & Holton, 2001). It has been the focus of considerable attention in various academic disciplines and various types of organizations since its inception (Huber, 1991; Leithwood et al., 1998; Levitt & March, 1988; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Because of the multidiscipline nature and interest of scholars from various fields, various organizational learning concepts, theories and models were developed at different times (Dibbon, 1999; Easterby-Smith, 1997; Easterby-Smith, Crossan & Nicolini, 2000).

In the organizational learning literature, the concepts, theories and models of organizational learning have been influenced by cognitive and behavioral schools of thoughts (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). The cognitive school of thought emphasizes on thinking (or information processing) aspect of organizational learning (Leavitt, 2011). It assumes that learning occurs through individual's mental models and structures which enable individuals to understand and interpret events and situations to respond to the changing environments (Leavitt, 2011). On the other hand, the behavioral school focuses on action aspects of learning in organization. The school emphasizes on relatively permanent change on individuals and on organizational behavior resulted from insights and understandings gained from experience through experimentation, observation, analysis and examination of outcomes (Azmi, 2008; Leavitt, 2011).

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Organizational learning is a multilevel learning process, in terms of both how learning occurs and how outcome is achieved at the various levels of the organization (Akhtar et al., 2011; Dibbon, 1999; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Scholars(e.g., Inkpen & Crossan, 1995; Levitt & March, 1988) indicate that effective organizational learning takes place when learning brings change in individual's cognition and behavior (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000) as well as change in organizational system, culture, and work procedures that enable them effectively cope with the dynamic changes in work environments (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Moreover, organizational learning process effectively takes place when there is a balance between cognitive and behavioral aspects which combine patterns of thinking and action (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Inkpen & Crossan, 1995; Senge, 1990). It could thus be argued that organizational learning is a comprehensive learning process which improves performance through integrating changes on the ways of thinking and action throughout the entire organization.

The concept of organizational learning remains elusive because of the various definitions and multiple perspectives of scholars in the field (Garvin, 1993). Argyris & Schon (1978), for instance, conceptualized organizational learning from knowledge development perspective which emphasizes on the result produced by learning. They developed single loop learning and double loop learning model where organizations learn through reflection and action.

Single-loop learning is a kind of learning where organizations identify errors and mistakes in their work practices and take actions to correct the problems that would bring some improvements in their routine activities. In single-loop learning, individuals adjust their action strategies to achieve different outcomes without questioning the underlying assumptions of the organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Argyris & Schon, 1996). In double-loop learning, on the other hand , organizations engage in questioning and changing the underlying assumptions, policies, strategies and values of the organizations to correct the root causes of the problems that affects their performance or success (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Argyris & Schon, 1996). Thus, organizational learning takes place when organizations learn through single loop and double loop learning and acquire knowledge, understandings, know-how, techniques and procedures that enable them to address constantly their problems (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

Organizational learning is understood as a process where knowledge about action which leads to the desired outcome is created, and relationships between the organization and the environment is developed (Daft & Weick, 1984). Levitt and March (1988) advanced the idea of organizational learning as encoding of knowledge in routines. They state that through encoding knowledge in routines, organizations can retain, share, and re-use solutions found in the past. Huber (1991) also understood organizational learning as a process of knowledge acquisition by organizational members through knowledge creation, information distribution, information interpretation and organizational memory development (Huber, 1991). The concept is also seen from management strategy perspective, which helps organizations implement appropriate management practices, structures and procedures to facilitate and encourage continuous learning (Goh & Richards, 1997). It is, thus, considered as an interactive process that creates and recreates a shared knowledge which guides behavior, shapes meaning and experience and institutionalizes learning that occurs at all levels of the organization (Crossan et al., 1999).

The organization wide learning process is also viewed as a means of acquiring and sustaining inter subjective meanings and instrument of expression among organizational members through collective actions of the group (Cook & Yannow, 2001); as a process which needs continuous

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efforts to change organizational behavior (Ortenblad, 2002); as a dynamic process and deliberate effort to increase organization's capacity to acquire, innovate and structure learning into all organizational processes (Marquardt , 2002); as a social process that results in changes in knowledge, beliefs and behaviors, and takes place at the individual, group and organizational levels (Marquardt, 2002; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Yang et al., 2004).

From knowledge management and change perspectives, learning is associated with the acquisition, creation, transfer and integration of knowledge to continuously adjust (or change) organizational behavior to improve organizational performance in dynamic environment (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005). It is viewed as adaptive process that occurs in response to changes in internal and external environments of the organization (Cayla, 2008). Cayla considers organizational learning as a guided organizational change or planned change which occurs due to managerial decisions to improve some functions or to achieve specific goals of the organization.

In a nut shell, organizational learning is a holistic and lifelong learning through collaborative process of acquiring, creating, sharing and applying knowledge to continuously and collectively improve performance at individual, group and institutional levels. It is a learning oriented performance improvement efforts where members of the organization develop cognitive knowledge, shared behavior, values and skills based on their own and other experiences.

Dimensions of Organizational Learning

Scholars (e.g., Leithwood et al., 1998; Marquardt, 2002; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993) have identified various organizational learning dimensions. Watkins and Marsick (1993) for instance, identified seven distinct but interrelated dimensions of a learning organization. Continuous learning is the first dimension which deals with the effort of the organization to create continuous learning opportunities for all of its members. The second dimension is inquiry and dialogue. It represents the effort of the organization in creating a culture of questioning, providing feedback and experimentation. Team learning is the third dimension which reflects collective and collaborative efforts of organizational members. The fourth dimension refers to empowerment and represents organization's effort in creating and sharing a collective vision. Embedded system deals with organizations' effort to establish systems that capture and share learning, is the fifth dimension. System connection is the sixth dimension and represents organization's effort to connect to its internal and external environments to have global thinking and actions. Finally, strategic leadership is the seventh dimension and represents the extent to which leaders think strategically to create change and move the organization in new directions (Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Yang et al., 2004).

Senge (1990) also identified five learning disciplines which describe the dimensions of learning organizations. Personal mastery is a discipline which refers to what individuals within the organization aspire to achieve. The discipline gives individuals the responsibility for their own learning and promotes them to acquire necessary knowledge, skill and attitude to achieve organizational goals. Senge's mental model, which promotes constant refinement of thinking and development of awareness, correspond to the dimension of inquiry and dialogue. Creating shared vision represents the commitment of individual members to a common sense of purpose and actions to achieve organizational goals. Team learning, one of Senge's disciplines, deals with the interaction among group members to develop collective thinking and action to achieve

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common goals. System thinking is the other learning discipline which deals with understanding the interdependency and complexity of interaction, activities and the role of feedback to achieve organizational goals.

Other scholars (e.g., Garvin, Edmondson & Gino, 2008; Leithwood et al., 1998; Marquardt, 2002) also identified various organizational learning dimensions such as leadership, shared vision and mission, culture, structure, system thinking, dialogue and inquiry, continuous learning, team learning, technology and resource.

Jyothibabu et al. (2010) investigated a causal relationship between organizational learning and organizational performance. The study revealed that organizational learning has direct relationship and positive influence on performance of the organization (Jyothibabu et al., 2010). Similarly, scholars (e.g., Dimovski & Skerlavaj, 2005; Hussein, et al., 2013; Iman, 2013; Salim & Sulaiman, 2011; Sampe, 2012; Skerlavaj et al., 2007) also supported the idea that the existence of organizational learning practices leads to better organizational performance.

Moreover, studies (e.g., Kocoglu, Imamoglu & Ince, 2011) conducted in business organizations also found that there is a positive effect of organizational learning on business performance measured in terms of profit. However, organizational performance is more than financial gains, and includes improvements made on non financial aspects such as changes and improvements on values and assumptions, skills and core competencies, systems and structures, organizational innovativeness and competitiveness and employee satisfaction (Bontis, Crossan & Hulland, 2002; Levitt & March, 1988). The findings of the studies revealed that organizational learning practices contribute to improved organizational performance both in terms of financial and nonfinancial terms (Dimovski & Skerlavaj, 2005; Skerlavaj et al., 2007).

With regards to levels of learning, scholars (e.g., Bontis et al., 2002; Salim, & Sulaiman, 2011) found that learning at individual, group and organizational levels has a direct relationship with organizational performance. Besides, it was found that positive behavioral and cognitive change on the way people perceive their internal and external environments have a positive impact on organizational performance (Egan et al., 2004). Employee commitment and job satisfaction were also stated as important predictors of organizational performance (Brown & Michell, 1993).

A study conducted by Skerlavaj and Dimovski (2006) also revealed positive and strong impact of organizational learning on organizational performance from the employee perspective. The findings of the study further revealed that employees' measures, more than financial measures, are strongly related to learning capability of an organisation. Skerlavaj and Dimovski also found that organizations which exert systematic efforts on organizational learning benefit a lot in terms of increased level of employee trust in the leadership, improved efficiency of work organisation, a more committed workforce, decreased costs of work per employee, increased employee satisfaction and increased employee flexibility (Skerlavaj & Dimovski, 2006).

Organizational performance is largely influenced by shared assumptions, values, beliefs and attitudes held by members of the organization (Fukuyama, 1995). In a knowledge intensive organization, it has been recognized that tacit knowledge, which is codified and shared among organizational members has profound impact on institutional performance (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). It is also argued that performance related behaviors of organization are also affected by organizational ability to develop the knowledge and skills that enable them to adapt and apply new technological innovations to specific conditions.

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5. Research Methodology

Quantitative research design was employed to conduct the study. Primary data were collected from sample academic staff (both instructors and academic leaders) of sample universities through questionnaire. Stratified proportionate sampling technique was employed to select sample universities from first, second and third generation universities. For the study, out of 29 public universities governed by MoE, 7 (24 %) universities were randomly selected from each generation. Besides, out of six academic programs (Bands), three (50%) of them were randomly selected using simple random sampling technique. In the seven sample universities, there are 5, 608 academic staff, out of which, 521 (303 instructors and 218 academic leaders) were proportionally selected and included in the study.

To obtain quantitative data, 514 copies of a questionnaire (303 for instructors & 211 for academic leaders) were distributed, and 461(89.7%) of them were appropriately filled and returned for analysis. Pilot test was also conducted on one of the non-sample second generation universities. The reliability of the instrument for each of the organizational learning variables and performance constructs was checked using SPSS version 20 and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient before the questionnaire was distributed. The analysis of the pilot study data indicated that the sub-scales of the questionnaire have items with good internal consistency which also measures the variables. The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient obtained from the pilot test ranged from 0.754 to 0.846, showing strong consistency between items (Funk, 2007). The data collected at the individual level were aggregated and analyzed, independently for instructors and academic leaders, using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentage, mean, standard deviation and inferential statistics (independent t-test, Pearson correlation and multiple regression) were used to analyze the quantitative data. The results from the correlation matrix on relationships were interpreted as follows. Correlation values between .10 and .39 are referred as weak positive relationships; between .40 and .69 as moderate positive relationships; and .70 and above as high positive relationships (Gliner &Morgan, 2000; Tian & Wilding, 2008). Besides, throughout the study, 0.5 alpha (or level of significance) was used to determine whether statistically significant differences exist between instructors and academic leaders as well as among the generations.

6. Results and Discussions

This section deals with presentation, analysis and interpretation of data gathered from sample respondents of public higher education institutions of Ethiopia. It presents and discusses quantitative data gathered through questionnaire.

Background Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents and analyzes the background information of academic staff. It describes the sex, age, work experiences, academic background and academic rank in relation to organizational learning practices, and analyses using frequency counts and percentages.

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Table 1: Background Information of Respondents

Items	Category	Respondents	
		count	%
Sex	M	409	88.7
	F	52	11.3
Age	20-25	65	14.1
	26-30	232	50.3
	31-35	84	18.2
	36-40	41	8.9
	>40	39	8.8
Work Experience	< 5	163	35.4
	5-10	239	51.8
	11-15	30	6.5
	16-20	7	1.5
	>20	22	4.8
Educational Background	BA/BSC	81	17.6
	MA/MSC	344	74.6
	PhD	36	7.8
Academic Rank	Grad. Assistant	79	17.1
	Lecturer	326	70.7
	Assistant Prof	54	11.7
	Associate Prof	1	0.2
	Professor	1	0.2

As can be seen from Table 1, 409 (88.7%) of the respondents were male and the remaining 52 (11.3%) were female, implying that females are underrepresented both at instructor and leadership positions in public HEIs of Ethiopia. In terms of age, the data show majority of the respondents, 396 (85.9 %), are above 26 years of age. Similarly, in terms of work experience of respondents, the data revel that the majority of academic staff, 298 (64.6 %) , served more than five years in HEIs, demonstrating that they have adequate experiences to understand the organizational learning practices in their universities, and are believed to provide relevant information for the study.

Regarding educational background of the respondents, Table, 1 depicts that 344 (74.6 %) of academic staff, the great proportion, hold second degree, 36 (7.8%) of academic staff have a terminal degree and 81(17.6 %) of academic staff hold first degree. In terms of rank , the data on Table 1 shows the majority of academic staff, 326 (70.7), sampled for this study are lecturers, and 54 (11.7%) are assistant professors. This shows that faculty members have the required academic profile. In other words, faculty appear to have the required qualification and academic rank that would enable them to analyze the interdependent nature of

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organizational learning process, challenges, opportunities as well as changes occurred as a result of learning in their universities.

Organizational Learning Practice

Individual Level Learning Practice

Individual level learning, as argued earlier, is considered to be a basis for team and organizational level learning (Senge, 1990). It also allows academic staff to constantly renew, widen and improve their knowledge and skills; open their mind towards new and innovative ideas and provide flexible solutions to institutional problems (Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005). Having this in mind, I aggregated continuous professional development and dialogue and inquiry data together to assess the extent to which individual level learning is effectively practiced in HEIs. The result is presented in Table 2 as follows

Table 2: Independent T-test for the Mean Ratings of Respondents Regarding Individual Level Learning Practice

Variable	Independent sample t-test						
	Current position	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig (2 tail)	Mean difference
Individual level learning	Inst.	3.67	.562	-2.2.2	344	.028	-.13006
	AcL	3.80	.652				

As indicated in Table 4.6 above, both instructors (M = 3.67: SD = .562) and academic leaders (M =3.80: SD = .652) rated the practice of individual level learning low in HEIs. However, it was found that statistically significant difference exists between perceptions of instructors and academic leaders regarding individual level learning, t (344) = -2.22, p =.028) in public HEIs. This shows academic leaders rated high as compared to instructors , and probably this is because of academic leaders exposures and opportunities to participate in different professional development programs , workshops, meetings , seminars and conferences .

The above data imply that continuous learning opportunities are not created to develop academic staff competence and commitment through engaging them in different professional development programs. It also shows academic staff are not provided consistent support to investigate, generate and share new and innovated ideas to improve institutional practices.

Group Level Learning Practice

Learning and working collectively, as mentioned earlier, are the foundation of organizational wide learning and growth (Garvin, 1993; Senge, 1990). It is believed that collaboration fosters team learning and working through developing team spirit, trust and develops collective capacity to effectively address institutional problems. It also promotes the alignment of institutional resources, programs and goals; harmonization of individual efforts, actions, and creates consensus over the future direction of the institution. The result is presented in table 3 as follows:

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Table 3: Independent Sample T-test for the Mean Ratings of Respondents Regarding Group Level Learning Practice

Variable	Independent sample t-test						
	Current position	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig (2 tail)	Mean difference
Group Level Learning	Inst.	3.07	.567	-.3.539	345	.000	-.21121
	AcL	3.28	.661				

As can be seen in Table 3, both instructors (M=3.07, SD=.567) and academic leaders (M = 3.28, SD =.661) show low level of agreement on group level learning implying that the practice is generally low and insufficient in HEIs. The above data clearly demonstrate that group level learning was not effectively practiced to support institutional capacity development efforts of the university. It also understood that team work, team spirit and team learning were not created and valued in HEIs.

Organizational Level Learning Practice

Organizational level learning, as argued earlier, is also called system level learning is more than the sum of learning at the level of individual members (Nevis, DiBella & Gould, 1995; Swanson & Holton, 2001). Scholars (e.g., Crossan et al., 1999; Swanson & Holton, 2001) indicate the significance of aligning learning with one another in a coherent and consistent ways so that the culture, systems, structures and procedures support the entire learning process and promote the achievement of organizational goals. The result is presented in Table 4 as follows:

Table 4: Independent T-test for the Mean Ratings of Respondents Regarding Organizational Level Learning Practice

Variable	Independent sample t-test						
	Current position	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig (2 tail)	Mean difference
Organizational Level Learning	Inst.	3.34	.519	-.4.030	309	.000	-.23909
	AcL	3.58	.670				

As shown in Table 4 , both instructors (M =3.34, SD=.519) and academic leaders (M = 3.58, SD =.670) agreed that organizational level learning practice is weak in HEIs demonstrating that culture, structure, system, leadership and learning resources and technologies of HEIs are insufficiently and inefficiently practiced . The data also show that the overall systems, structure, culture, leadership practice and available learning resources and technologies in HEIs are not sufficiently supporting , facilitating and encouraging academic staff to develop individual, team and institutional knowledge to effectively respond to the needs of the society. Thus, as opposed to the suggestion of Suryadi (2007), learning is not embedded into the day-

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to-day operations of HEIs to develop institutional knowledge stock and continuously improve institutional performance.

Organizational Learning Practice

An independent sample t-test was carried out to examine the extent to which organizational learning is adequately practiced in HEIs. As stated above, nine organizational learning variables which measure individual, group and organizational level leaning and one variable which measures feed forward and feed backward information flow routes were aggregated for analysis. These ten variables, consisting of sixty one items, are aggregated to measure organizational learning practice in HEIs.

Table 5: Independent Sample T-test for the Mean Ratings of Respondents Regarding Organizational Learning Practice

Variable	Independent sample t-test Current position	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig (2 tail)	Mean difference
Organizational learning practices	Inst.	3.35	.427	-3.964	295	.000	-.20181
	AcL	3.56	.581				

As can be seen in Table 5, both instructors (M=3.35, SD=.427) and academic leaders (M = 3.56, SD =.581) agreed that organization learning is poorly practiced in HEIs. This implies that organizational learning practices are weak and insufficient in HEIs in supporting the development of individual, group and organizational knowledge capacity and performance improvement efforts. Even though the overall organizational learning practice is low , statistically significant difference exists between perception of instructors and academic leaders regarding organizational learning practices, t (295) = -3.964, p=.000) in HEIs implying that academic leaders, as compared to instructors, relatively rated high.

The findings of the study also demonstrate that organizational learning practices in public HEIs are weak in facilitating and promoting the sharing , acquiring , utilizing and generating of new knowledge to develop individual, team and institutional knowledge capacity to continuously improve their working practices and performance . As a result , the contribution of organizational learning practices in initiating learning oriented change, challenging and changing existing status quo, and introducing new and innovative work process is weak to effectively respond to institutional, societal and national needs. Thus, the existing organization learning practices in HEIs are weak in creating learning communities which enable public HEIs to transform them into learning organizations.

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Table 6: One way ANOVA on the Perception Differences of Respondents Regarding Organizational Learning Practices across Generations

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	47.355	2	23.677	160.242	.000
Within Groups	65.901	446	.148		
Total	113.256	448			

One way ANOVA was carried out to examine the extent to which organizational learning practice differs across generations in public HEIs. It was found that significant differences exist among the three generations as perceived by the academic staff, F (2,446) = 160.242, p =.000). The results of Post hoc analysis also revealed that there exist differences between the third generation (M = 3.02, SD=.268) universities and the second generation (M= 3.32, SD =.351) universities; between the third generation (M = 3.02, SD=.268) and the first generation (M =3.83, SD = .474) universities and between the second generation (M= 3.32, SD =.351) & the first generation (M =3.83, SD = .474) universities. Even though the practice in general is low in public HEIs, data show that organizational learning practice is extremely weak in third generation universities followed by second and first generation universities respectively.

In general, the findings of the study reveal that academic staff in pubic HEIs are not encouraged, motivated and committed to learn individually from their own and others experiences , continuously to improve institutional practices and performance. As a result, institutional knowledge capacity is not well developed to bring structural change, which in turn contributes to social transformation and overall development of the nation. In short, public HEIs lack learning organizations' characteristics, and are weak in creating learning communities, which are capable of transforming the institutions into the desired future.

7. Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

The findings of the study revealed that organizational learning in public HEIs is ineffective and poorly practiced. The findings also reveal that public HEIs in Ethiopia lack adequate organization learning characteristics which enable them to transform into a learning organizations. The findings further show that HEIs are incapable of creating institution wide cooperative learning culture, and the existing institutional policies , strategies and mechanisms are not effective in creating continuous learning opportunities to enhance collective institutional capacity to continuously respond to societal and national development needs. The findings, furthermore, reveal the existence of moderate and direct relationship between organizational learning practice and institutional performance in HEIs. Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn.

The first conclusion is that there is a mismatch between the current leadership practices in HEIs and leadership approaches required for organizational learning in HEIs. As argued earlier, effective organizational learning practice demands transformational leadership in an institution which enables the institution to transform itself into a learning organization. It also requires high impact transformational leaders who possess higher level of skills and increased leadership competencies (Yukl, 2007); who are capable of changing and transforming working process; who develop collective leadership capacity and exercise exceptional influence that moves

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academic staff to accomplish beyond what is expected of them ; and who are concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards , and long-term strategic goals of the institutions . However, the findings of the study revealed that the collective leadership capacity of HEIs, and the competence and commitment of academic leaders are weak and insufficient in promoting organizational learning practice and improving institutional performance. Thus, it safe to conclude that leadership practices in the HEIs did not play crucial roles in creating learning communities and transforming higher education institutions into learning organisations.

The second conclusion of the study is that HEIs lack organizational learning characteristics (or behaviors) . Besides, learning was not incorporated in the day- to- day activities of the academic staff to enhance individual, team and institutional performance and enable them to continuously learn and proactively lead changes. The study found that learning at individual, group and institutional levels is insufficient and poorly practiced in HEIs. The findings of the study also revealed that there are weak and positive statistically significant relationships between individual level learning and institutional performance ($r=.379$, $r^2 = 0.144$, $p<0.0.05$); between group level learning and institutional performance ($r = .357$, $r^2 = 0.127$, $p < 0.05$). The study, however, found moderate and positive statistically significant relationships between organizational level learning and institutional performance ($r = .486$, $r^2 = 0.236$, $p < 0.05$) in HEIs. Thus, it is possible to conclude that institutional commitment to develop individual and collective capacity of academic staff is not satisfactory, and institutional working practices are not continuously improved and effective in responding to individual, institutional and societal development needs.

Besides, academic staff are not adequately encouraged and supported to individually and collectively learn and improve their performance. As a result, individual's potentials are not adequately developed and utilized to enhance institutional knowledge and performance. Thus, it is feasible to conclude that team work, team spirit, cooperative work culture and system wide thinking are not well developed to support learning in HEIs. In short, the organizational learning practices in HEIs are weak in supporting organization wide learning and developing institutional knowledge capacity. Besides, learning is not well incorporated into HEIs' working procedures, cultures and overall systems, and as a result, learning oriented change approach is not practiced to effectively respond to the emerging needs of the nation.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

Implications for Practices

Higher education institutions operate as part of a larger social system, including the local community in which they are functioning. As educational institutions, HEIs are expected to understand the complex environments in which they are functioning and effectively respond to the societal and national needs. It is, therefore, suggested that the nature of the relationship and partnership activities between HEIs and the larger system (including sister universities) should be reassessed to understand the extent to which HEIs are connected to external environments. Besides, HEIs need to establish strong links and partnerships with communities and organizations (private and public) at local, national and international levels.

Thus, HEIs need to exert their maximum efforts to develop socially networked and cohesive academic communities through creating collaborative working procedures, promoting team spirit, and launching partnership programs and projects. It is believed that such practices minimize mistrust, individualism and disconnections among academic staff; and reduce internal

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diversity and difference that can lead to disagreements, conflict and isolation. Therefore, it is suggested that HEIs have to continuously identify the prevalence, nature and magnitude of internal diversity, mistrust and disconnections, which might be reflected in the day-to-day work practices and social interactions among academic staff, at departmental, college and university levels. Following the identification, they need to set appropriate strategies that enhance quality of relationship, collaborative work culture and team sprite throughout the institutions.

Moreover, participatory and democratic decision making process has to be practiced and encouraged in HEIs. HEIs need to encourage academic staff to participate actively in the formulation of institutional vision, mission and strategic goals, and also ensure that the strategies are connected to individual, team and organizational performances. Similarly, HEIs have to establish efficient and effective working systems which promote cooperation among different disciplines within and outside the institutions to support institution wide learning. Furthermore, HEIs need to launch academic mobility, experience sharing programs and long term strategic partnerships to develop institutional knowledge capacity and performance.

As stated earlier, the role of leadership in creating learning opportunities; developing learning communities and transforming institutions into learning organizations. Thus, the recruitment, selection and appointment of academic leaders as well as the overall leadership preparation and development have to emphasized to develop institutional leadership capacity of HEIs. To do this, leadership development programs need to be launched and academic leaders should be consistently exposed, through workshops, seminars and on-job-trainings, to the best theories, principles and practices on transformational leadership.

In organizational learning process, the role of professional discussions, debates and dialogue is critical in developing professional knowledge and experience of academic staff. Therefore, HEIs' colleges, schools, departments and units need to organize, among other, monthly seminars, conferences and workshop to effectively and constantly share professional knowledge and experiences. To facilitate and institutionalize organization wide learning, learning technologies and infrastructures, such as computer networks, internet access, e-learning and knowledge management practices, have to be sufficiently developed in HEIs.

Implications for Further Research

This study is believed to have theoretical contributions to the existing body of knowledge, implying that there is a moderate and positive statistically significant relationship between organizational learning practices and institutional performance in HEIs. The study is also believed to have practical contributions in revealing that HEIs lack organizational learning characteristic and are weak in creating learning communities which continuously and collectively learn to improve institutional performance. In this study, however, the practice of knowledge management was poorly dealt with and the extent to which HEIs manage knowledge to support strategic change and institutional performance was not adequately addressed. Thus, the relationships between knowledge management practices and institutional performance; impact of knowledge management and strategic changes; and knowledge management and institutional capacity need further investigations. Thus, these unaddressed areas, along with organizational learning practices in private universities and colleges, need further investigations for interested researchers.

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