Building institutional capacity for student competencies: An organizational perspective

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Abstract
One of the key ambitions of universities around the world is to improve the educational design and delivery to the benefit of their students. Many universities acknowledge that they need to educate students for a future characterised by high levels of uncertainty in which individuals need to possess substantial confidence and competencies to navigate. While much attention has been given to the need for innovation in educational design, this paper focuses more on the organizational conditions needed to realize the necessary changes. Based on a review of current organizational developments and characteristics of universities, it is argued that a number of tasks, areas and practices need to be better integrated if higher education is to fulfil their ambition to equip students with the competencies needed for the future.

Keywords
Institutional capacity, student competencies, education reform, organizational change

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Introduction
Observers of current developments in higher education can hardly miss the increasing interest in enhancing student experiences, improving the skill-sets of graduates, building stronger partnerships with students, and demonstrating that specified learning outcomes are both relevant and delivered according to expectations (Quaye & Harper, 2014). The implications Covid-19 has had on higher education delivery around the world only underline this interest.

We are currently witnessing increasing societal expectations that universities could and should do more to educate the next generation of citizens capable of taking leadership in a world characterised by increasing uncertainty and the need for both creativity, entrepreneurship, and sustainability (Brew, 2009; Gibbs, 2013).
Trilling and Fadel (2009) has specified key student competencies – often labelled as 21st century skills – as including learning and innovation skills, critical thinking and problem solving, communications and collaboration, creativity and innovation, digital literacy skills, career and life skills such as self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction, and leadership and responsibility. These competencies include, but go beyond the disciplinary or professional expertise students acquire from specific programs. As such, helping students to develop such skills challenge higher education institutions to re-think not only their educational offerings but also the services and extra-curricular activities students can engage in during their studies. In essence, the challenge is also about stimulating students to self-organize and to take initiatives beyond what their alma mater offers (Quaye & Harper, 2014). In the shadow of Covid-19 it can also be argued that skills such as self-direction and self-organizing have become even more important as digital modes of learning and interaction place more responsibility on the individual student.

In many countries, societal expectations related to developing student competencies have manifested themselves into new demands for accountability resulting in a rather complex web of requirements and responsibilities at the institutional level. Combined with increasing external expectations in the areas of research, innovation and sustainable development of our societies, it could be argued that many universities are facing a situation of demand overload and challenges as to how they should respond to the high hopes directed at higher education from the society (Brew & Boud, 1995; Clark, 2004; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Greenberg, 2008).

The aim of the current paper is to 1) argue for the significance of an organizational perspective for addressing and realizing student competencies – in light of the current demand overload in universities, 2) illustrate the relevance of an organizational perspective by providing examples of how current developments drive fragmentation, compartmentalization and de-coupling in areas important to the build-up of student competencies. It is concluded that achievements in educational designs are highly conditioned by matching organizational designs, and that the high ambitions currently found in the educational area can only be realized if the contextual factors surrounding educational delivery are functioning in a coherent way.

**The significance of an organizational perspective for fostering student competencies**

Many scholars argue that educational delivery is a matter of identifying key learning outcomes, building a coherent curriculum, specifying the relevant teaching activities, boosting student learning through formative feedback, and testing student achievements through appropriate forms of examination. Through concepts such as constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) there is a growing recognition that coherent educational design is important and key for delivering educational quality (Holt et al., 2011; Knapper, 2016). The forced digitalization of educational delivery that we have recently witnessed has only highlighted the need for integration of available learning resources.

However, acknowledging that specific academic curricula may have limitations as to build the many facets of student competencies, the need for better integration of curriculum and extra-curriculum activities has been underlined (Fung, 2017). While acknowledging the need for a more coherent educational design, less attention has unfortunately, been directed to the organizational context providing the infrastructure and necessary support stimulating a more ‘connected curriculum’ (Fung, 2017). Translating the ambitions for 21st century student
competencies is highly dependent on a number of organizational factors, not least due to many technological, administrative and infra-structural dimensions involved in the educational delivery process. Examples may include how students could be more involved in ongoing research activities, development of the competencies of teachers to facilitate broader learning activities, alignment of digital resources, coupling of external partnerships and various student projects, student innovation and entrepreneurship, alumni activities, etc.

Hence, delivering education that build student competencies is not only conditioned by an integrated pedagogical design, but also how the whole organization is coordinated and governed (cf. Egeberg et al., 2016; Hwang & Colyvas, 2011). Following Egeberg et al. (2016), an organizational perspective highlight three factors that enable alignment between organizational objectives and their realization: organizational capacity, the degree of specialization (vertically/horizontally), and the degree of coupling between specialized tasks/units/structures within the organization.

The significance of an organizational perspective for understanding and for supporting and stimulating student competencies is not least related to how other societal expectations also affect university functioning and priorities. Building 21st century skills of students are far from the only expectation directed at universities, often resulting in strained capacity, an overemphasis of organizational specialization and a reduction of couplings of important tasks and processes (Frolich et al., 2013; Seeber et al., 2015). The more generic societal expectations leading to such dysfunctionalities include, but are not limited to legal requirements, technological advancements, administrative rules and regulations, and infra-structural developments in the higher education sector.

The legal aspects of educational delivery has received increased attention in the recent decade as rules and regulations have multiplied in admission processes, as ways to secure equality in student affairs, as means to obtain fairness in educational assessments, and to formalize the rights and obligations of students. The fact that many students throughout the world pay tuition is often an additional driver of legal requirements affecting both educational design and delivery (Ling et al., 2013; Wilkins et al., 2013). Other driving forces of increased legalization of educational delivery are stemming from new accountability demands from a range of external stakeholders. Such accountability demands sometimes require higher education institutions to develop systems for ensuring the internal quality of educational delivery (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Dill & Beerkens, 2010; Mårtensson et al., 2014), or creating internal rules and regulations ensuring compliance with national qualification frameworks (Elken, 2016).

As technological advancements – further boosted by Covid-19 – are rapidly changing both modes of delivery and possibilities for re-thinking educational design, there is also a growing recognition that technology needs to be better integrated with instruction and student learning (Mangaroska & Giannakos, 2018). This drive for integration is partly based on the fact that technological developments in higher education are supply-driven – where private companies play key roles driving innovations that not always are easily integrated with the educational design ambitions of individual higher education institutions. The situation is complicated by the fact that students also are using technologies outside what their alma mater is providing them. It is not easy to facilitate good communication and smooth interactions between students, their teachers and various learning resources when technology drive fragmentation as well as innovation.

Educational delivery is, of course, also highly dependent on the number and qualifications of the academic staff associated with a particular educational provision. Coordinating staff involvement is nevertheless not a trivial task (Quinn, 2012) – especially in institutions where academic staff enjoys considerable autonomy. Coordinating the personnel involved in
educational delivery becomes even more complex when taking into account that also a high number of administrative staff is tightly involved in program delivery, providing information to students, receiving feedback on the student experience, facilitating communication between the stakeholders involved, following up students that have particular problems, and making sure that things run smoothly (Whitchurch, 2012).

Infra-structural issues are increasingly recognised as an important dimension for realizing educational ambitions. Such infra-structural issues include the availability of learning spaces enabling the interactions, dialogues and peer learning activities often wanted in modern educational designs (Mangaroska & Giannakos, 2018). Creating learning environments that are able to facilitate hybrid modes of learning where face-to-face situations are combined with technology-based activities also requires organizational attention where those responsible for architectural and infra-structural development need to be coupled to those responsible for educational designs.

Legalization, external accountability, technology developments, administration and infra-structural characteristics all signify the relevance of an organizational perspective if improved educational designs are to be realized. In this respect concerns about universities becoming ‘de-coupled bureaucracies’ due to lack of horizontal interaction between internal units and areas of responsibility need to be taken into account (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019). Furthermore, it could be argued that universities also need to pay more attention to ‘quality work’ (Elken & Stensaker, 2018) – routines and practices not captured and controlled through existing quality management systems, or sufficiently embedded in the cultures and traditions in individual institutions. In both cases may an organizational perspective provide a better understanding of the current problems and assisting in realizing the future ambitions in the educational area.

Some empirical examples illustrating the relevance of an organizational perspective for developing student competencies

The organizational perspective outlined above identified three areas conditioning the potential for integration and coherence important for stimulating broader student competencies: organizational capacity, the degree of vertical and horizontal specialization, and the degree of coupling. In this section, some illustrations are given as to how these areas currently impact educational design and delivery with a particular focus on student competencies.

Organizational capacity

In an historical perspective, higher education has been through a remarkable period of expansion, both in the number of institutions and in the size of the institutions (Cantwell et al., 2018). While the sector continues its expansion towards mass and universal higher education in some parts of the world, especially in countries such as China and India, other countries which have already reached high levels of participation currently experiences a period of consolidation (Cantwell et al., 2018). As growth in student numbers are reduced, budgets allocated to the higher education also tend to be cut, and efficiency issues tend to rise on the political agenda (Shattock, 2014). In the educational area, such reduction in public budgets may imply cuts in the number of educational offerings, but have more often a direct impact on the organizational capacity associated with educational delivery.

As the accountability demands directed at higher education tend to be upheld despite the cuts in the budgets allocated to higher education, a typical effect is that the administrative capacity directly involved in educational delivery is reduced as the administration gives
priority to the tasks of accountability reporting (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010). In many countries the level and scope of such reporting is quite extensive (Burnes et al., 2014). Typical activities and tasks that could tie up organizational capacity include external and internal quality assurance, surveys and analysis of student satisfaction, graduation, and employability.

While these activities indeed could be significant of understanding how the competencies of students are developed, there is still the danger of a reduction in the operational organizational capacity for facilitating the development of student competencies. For example, if a closer relationship is to be established between the working life and teaching, or between teaching and research, there is a need for capacity in the form of a support structure for making this happen.

Interestingly, the digital modes of delivery may have opened up new avenues for strengthening organizational capacity as new possibilities for data collection and analysis have opened up in the area of learning analytics (Teece, 2018). Thanks to digitalization of education, there is now a possibility for merging accountability related activities with the up-building of learning management systems and other digital modes of delivery that are directly related to the competence building of students – not only in the area of digital skill sets, but also related to the ways students collaborate, self-organize and solve specific tasks (Mangaroska & Giannakos, 2018). In many higher education institutions, investments are being made to explore and exploit this opportunity to go beyond self-reported data from students into much more accurate and large-scale analysis of student behaviour and the various skill sets that they acquire in their learning processes.

However, there is quite a number of studies indicating that – despite the ambition of improving student learning, student experience and student competencies – the organizational capacity devoted to accountability tend to have priority over the former ambitions (Manatos et al., 2017; Teichler & Hohle, 2013). While there indeed could be huge mutual benefits of linking institutional efforts to better understand the functioning of the educational ‘machine room’ with reform and change in the educational design, such links are not always easy to establish due to problems associated with vertical and horizontal specialisation within institutional borders (Whitchurch, 2012).

**Degree of vertical and horizontal specialisation**

As higher education has expanded globally, many universities and colleges have become quite large and complex organizations. Vertically, it is not unusual for large universities to establish four to five vertical levels of governance, which is combined with extensive horizontal specialisation, both academically reflecting disciplinary scope, and administratively reflecting professionalization in tasks and responsibilities (Shatock, 2014).

As governmental reforms have been implemented in a range of countries throughout the world, it has been well documented that the vertical command lines within universities have been strengthened as a consequence of delegation of responsibility from governments to higher education institutions (Seeber et al., 2015). In short, delegation and decentralization from state to institutions has resulted in stronger centralization and more control within the institutions. This development has also impacted educational design and delivery. Following the introduction of national qualification frameworks and requirements that institutions design their educational offerings in line with the learning outcomes structures defined within such frameworks (Elken, 2016), universities and colleges in many countries have developed systems of quality assurance overseeing and controlling that education designs meet formal requirements (Burnes et al., 2014; Martensson et al., 2014).
Moreover, in higher education systems more characterised by consolidation rather than further expansion, efficiency measured have often been implemented at institutional level aiming at streamlining organizational effectiveness. A typical feature in this respect is to move responsibility for some administrative functions, for example in personnel issues, budgeting and financial matters, upwards in the organization (Stensaker & Vabø, 2013). The effect is that formal decision-making authority on educational matters may be found at different governance levels in institutions.

This kind of vertical and horizontal specialisation may have several consequences for the organizational effort to facilitate and strengthen student competencies. To provide some examples; as the pedagogical development of teachers is becoming more professionalised in the form of specific courses and formal requirements, this kind of academic development work run the risk of being less relevant for supporting student skill sets (Holt et al., 2011). Instead of enhancing student competencies, attention may instead be devoted to issues such as student completion or how to avoid student drop-out (Ling et al., 2013). Another challenge, especially related to the digital transformation currently witnessing, is the implementation of overarching university-wide and quite standardised learning technologies (Teece, 2018) and the danger that such generic technologies may actually have less impact on developing new student skill sets that generally believed (Fischer et al., 2018).

Being aware of such challenges may not necessarily imply that something will be done about them. A well-known effect of increased professionalization and specialisation is that the formal organizational structure over time will reflect this up-building of expertise where new and more specialised responsibilities and units are developed in the organization. The end result is a more complex organization where decision-making are spread across many vertical levels, and where administrative functions are becoming increasingly specialised. In this situation, which could trigger both fragmentation and internal tension at institutional level, a key challenge is to create both vertical and horizontal links enabling better organizational coordination (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019).

**Degree of coupling**

Higher education institutions have often been characterised as ‘loosely coupled’ due to a lack of vertical and horizontal coordination (Weick, 1976). While this term has often been associated with dis-order and sometimes even chaos, it is important to note that ‘loose coupling’ also may carry organizational benefits related to innovation and informal coordination (Egeberg et al., 2016). While the many reforms implemented in higher education, not least within the institutions, have had as a key objective to increase the level of ‘tight coupling’ in higher education institutions; it is important to underline what Orton and Weick (1990) pointed out in their reflection on the original term; the opposite of ‘tight coupling’ is ‘decoupling’, and where ‘loose coupling actually is an in-between position balancing control and creativity.

Leadership – both academically and administratively – has been the key mechanism intended to improve organizational coordination in the many reform processes initiated in higher education institutions. Efforts have been made to improve the selection and training of leadership at all levels (Stensaker & Vabø, 2013), including in the educational area. However, although there are not a lot of studies as to how educational leaders manage to improve coordination, evidence suggests that many educational leaders have limited influence due to a mismatch between their formal responsibilities and the means available at their disposal (Stensaker et al., 2019). For example, many leaders responsible for educational design and delivery of educational offerings have little influence over personnel policies and over
economic issues reducing their discretion and room to manoeuvre. Hence, it could be questioned as to what extent the emphasis on leadership has been a success in facilitating improved organizational coordination (cf. also Gibbs, 2013).

However, it should also be underlined that the new leadership, which have been distributed throughout higher education institutions, has had little influence over the limitations noted above with respect to organizational capacity and the developments in vertical and horizontal specialisation. As such, one could argue that the leadership have been working more within the organizational structures developed, and not across them. A particular problem in this respect is also that access to information tends to follow organizational structures, and that developing more sophisticated analysis of current problems and challenges in the educational area becomes more difficult when data and information is de-coupled.

The students could nevertheless represent an alternative mechanism for coupling – beside that of leadership. The current interest in students as partners for educational development is of special interest here as such partnerships also could be important in developing various competencies (Matthews et al., 2019). Recent research has also suggested that many different modes of student partnerships are available allowing students to take on different roles and responsibilities in the process such as innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership (Holen et al., 2020). Such approaches also require organizational backing though as the student partnership concept is about developing a new mode of collaboration with students.

**Conclusion – Building institutional capacity through improved organizational design**

Globally, it is rather easy to identify a renewed and strengthened interest for enhancing educational quality and student learning outcomes – even within traditional research-intensive universities (Stensaker et al., 2017). This article has argued that building student competencies in higher education is highly conditioned by the organizational context surrounding curricular and extra-curricular designs. Examples provided has identified organizational factors that are significant when trying to realise ambitions for boosting student competencies, and underlined the challenges but also some of the possibilities for how an organizational approach may support the educational and pedagogical ambitions of modern universities and colleges. To recapitulate; fostering student competencies is dependent on organizational capacity, avoidance of silo thinking, improvements in areas of internal governance, and facilitating organizational coupling that drive coordination and integration. This is far from an easy issue to solve, not least as the complexity of the internal affairs of universities and colleges are not determined solely by the educational activities undertaken, but also by developments within research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

However, based on the discussion in this article, some avenues for future exploration are possible to identify. The first of these is to start to take organizational issues serious as a key contextual factor determining educational delivery. As recently noticed by Elken and Stensaker (2018), there might be something missing between the two main positions struggling for hegemony with respect to how quality in higher education could be enhanced; while much emphasis has been given to quality management and/or quality culture approaches to development, not all efforts and activities could be framed within these positions. A neglected activity is what they identify and label as ‘quality work’ (cf. Lawrence et al., 2013) – the quite mundane routines and practices associated with educational design and delivery significantly impacting student experience and student learning.
A second route forward is to start looking at how the organizational fragmentation identified in this article also impact the information and data collection and analysis in modern universities: Specialised units in universities tend to ‘own’ specific data which are analysed in separation from other possible data and information sources found in other parts of the organization. Hence, it could be argued that the limited impact we have seen of learning analytics and similar approaches is related to the limitations of data put into the analysis, and a lack of incorporating data and information which also is relevant to understand student experiences and the competencies acquired by students. As studying in universities still – even in the midst of a global pandemic – imply a combination of digital and face-to-face interaction, tracing and analysing the student learning trajectory cannot rely on real-time data alone. Perhaps more could be gained by collecting less information (and freeing capacity) – but using that information in more clever combinations with other data sources to create more insight into the overall effectiveness of educational deliveries (cf. Teece, 2018).

To be able to experiment with a ‘less is more’ approach, it is also of crucial importance to collaborate with the students, not least to improve our understanding of how they interpret ‘quality’ and what they perceive as key competencies when facing a more uncertain future (Vukasovic et al., 2015). Thus, a condition for the efforts undertaken should be that information is directed back to the students enabling them to develop their self-efficacy with respect to skills and competency development, and where students perhaps could be partners in the transformation of university education. The latter approach would indeed build institutional capacity for enhanced quality in higher education.

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