Some issues in the strategic management in a fast growing academic Institution: The case of University of Yazd

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Abstract

The University of Yazd is a government owned institution, which was established 10 years ago. In many aspects such as the number of students and faculties and infrastructure capacity, it has been experiencing high growth rates during the first decade of its development. The focus of administration of the university has been on enhancement of the quality of education and, as a result, it has received a good reputation among the students and other universities in the country. However, to achieve a sustainable growth, the management needs a shift of attention from education to research while preserving the quality of schooling. This paper discusses some growing concern of top management in making such shift to happen and describes how system thinking can help in developing a shared vision within the university for the new mission.

Introduction

In the first decade of its life, the University of Yazd has grown very fast in various aspects. It has achieved a good reputation among higher education institutions in the country. The number of students has raised to about 6,000. Managing such a rapid growth in education has, however, consume all the time of management and prevented policy makers to pay enough attention to research and development. In the next decade, our success will depend on creating sufficient capacity for research activity without losing the quality of schooling. We are facing many obstacles in the way. This paper aims at investigating the current situation and attempt to find appropriate policies to achieve the sustainable development.

Overview of the University of Yazd

The University of Yazd was established in February 1989, with one course in Civil Engineering and 40 students. Currently, it has grown to 6000 students, 295 academic staff and 450 working staff in 45 different courses at the undergraduate level and 7 courses at postgraduate level.

Figure 1 shows the rapid growth of the university in terms of the number of students, and faculty members. Despite its rapid growth, the University of Yazd has achieved a good reputation among other universities, especially in presenting a high quality of schooling. One of the criteria, which one may refer to, is the acceptance of students for graduate studies, for which a national exam is taken.
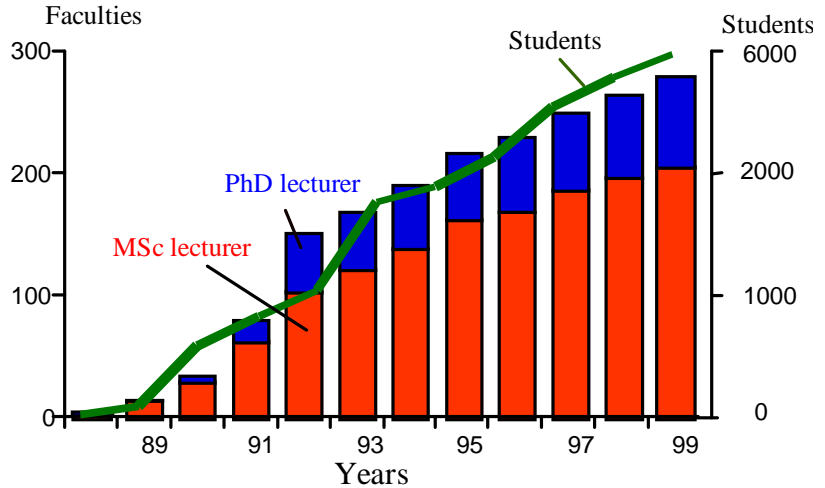

Figure 1: The number of students, faculty members.

According to the formal reports, the success of the University of Yazd graduates in getting admitted to graduate studies, has taken forth place among all universities in the country. Specifically, the university has had the highest percentage of acceptance in humanity and agriculture, the second in Fine Art and the third in Engineering. Most of the university graduates have been successful in obtaining jobs and according to some reports, it is believed, they have a good performance at work.

Since in the first decade, the university management concern was establishing and running undergraduate courses therefore has had less success in research activities. Nonetheless, the initial 10 million Rials research budget has increased to 330 million Rials, which is only 2 percent of university annual current budget. In addition, research projects done for various organizations have brought some financial resources into the university, and for the last year, it was over 600 million Rials. While the number of on going project is 39, the number of completed projects are over 40. During the first decade, faculty members have published 114 paper in national and international journals and 168 papers have presented in various conferences.

The rapid growth of the university calls for appropriate increase in financial resources. However, the financial resources have not gone up much. Figure 2 shows, the proposed budget versus allocated budget during the last 10 years. It should be noted that the university proposes the annual budget but the Ministry of Science makes final decisions about the actual budget. While the proposed budget seems to be based on the growing needs of the university, the decision rules in the Ministry of Science appears to be business as usual; a few percent of increase each year.
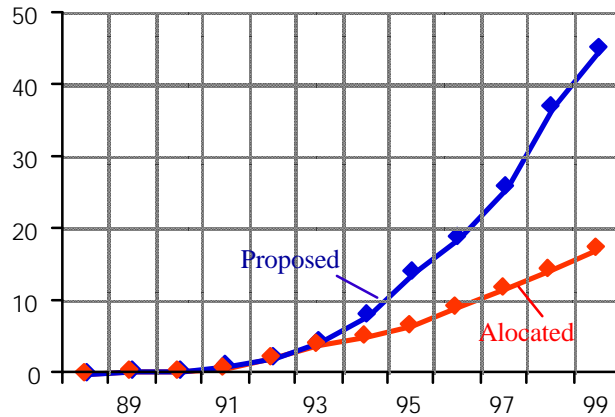
Figure 2: Proposed budget versus allocated budget over the last decade

Despite the tight current budget, the financial resources for expansion of physical infrastructure have been relatively more responsive. Not only local government has contributed to the development of the infrastructure, industries and individuals have voluntarily provided financial support for the university. As a result, 135K square meters of building has been constructed 50K square meters are in progress in a 350 hectare land.

A Blueprint for the Future of the University

During the first decade of its life, the University of Yazd has experienced a high growth. The continuous growth of a higher educational institution in the long run will, however, depend on the research and development. Whereas the equality of schooling and its continuous improvement are critical for any educational institution, it is the quantity and quality of researchers that provides the necessary capacity for further growth. Research makes education more effective; it also brings money for capacity expansion. A university without the research capability has little success in attracting high quality and energetic faculty members. It is in fact the publication of the research that best satisfy the faculties and is the research outcomes that gives the faculty members the opportunity for their tenure. Consequently, in the next decade the University of Yazd must focus in expanding its capability in research while maintaining and improving the quality of schooling.

Creating additional capacity in research and development requires a relatively large amount of financial resources to be invested up front. Without an aggressive and sufficiently rapid investment, the capacity for research and development never get made. For most universities in Iran, the government through the Ministry of Science mainly provides financial resources. As described in the first part of the paper, each year the university proposes a budget for the next fiscal year and the Ministry of Science makes the final decision about the actual budget. The proposed budget is based on the vision for the future and the actual budget depends on the allocated budget in the past. When the allocated budget is not responsive to the needs, the resources for investing in performance will remain insufficient.

A continuous gap between the proposed and the actual budget could lead to investing in activities with more short term visibility such as schooling at the under graduate level. As a result, education capacity grows rapidly and research and development capacity stays deficient. This gap

between the proposed and actual budget means that decision-makers do not share their vision for the future. Decision-makers at various levels have different set of goals and they never learn from each other to harmonize their vision. In such environment, morale in the organization busts and decision-makers at the lower level tend to hide their goal and have a hidden agenda. What happens at the faculty level is that they do not spend their productive time at school as they pursue their own goals outside the university. This indicates that current capacity is an over estimation of the actual capacity in both education and research.

Figure 3 describes how research projects grow over time. Faculty members invest their time on prospecting new projects and their effectiveness depends on the reputation of the university in doing research projects. The university reputation, in turn, depends on the past executed projects as well as the on time delivery of the projects. Projects are executed by the research team that made of faculty members and graduate students. Figure 3 makes the point that the minimum requirements for a sustainable growth in research and development are:
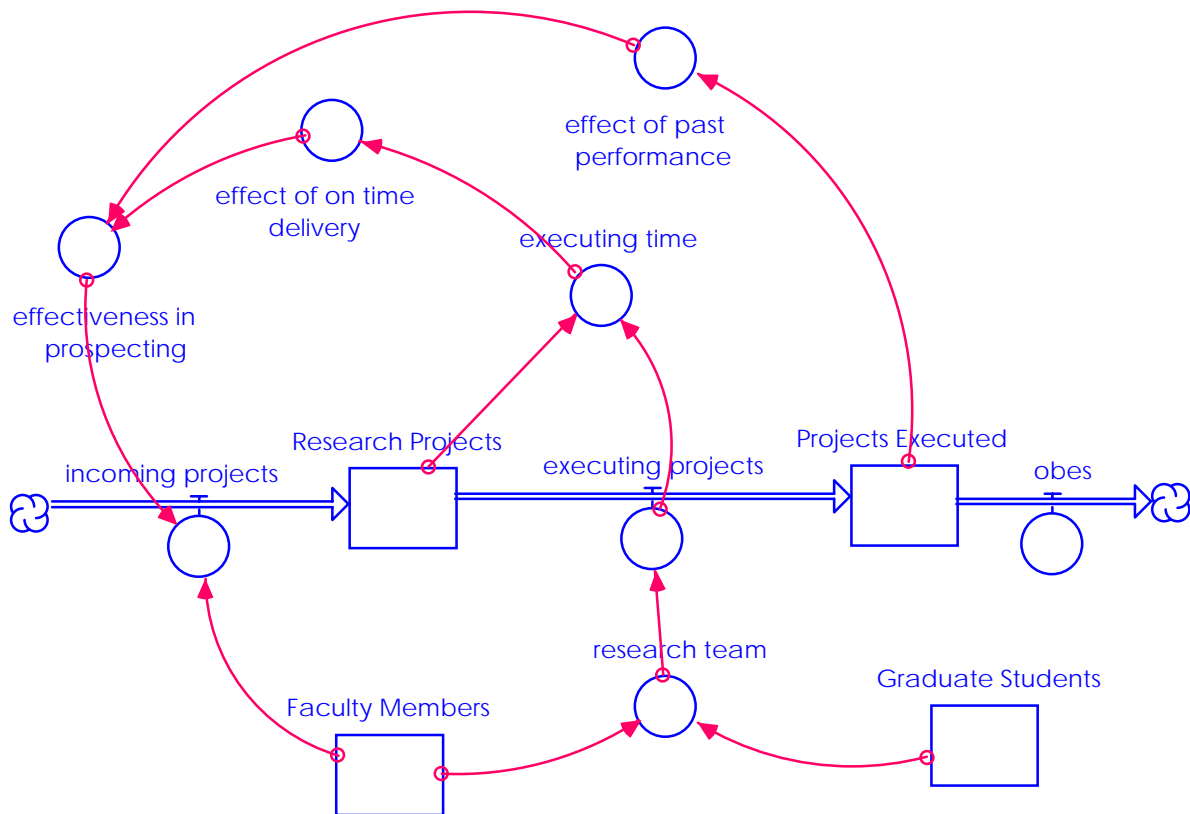

Figure 3: A structure for the growth of research and development in a university

1. High quality faculty members
The University of Yazd has currently 300 faculty members. Only 70 of them hold a PhD and the rest have Masters degrees. Obviously, the current capacity is not sufficient for research and development. Unfortunately, those 70 faculties with PhDs have spent their time in education and although they have become very good at teaching, they need to learn and gain experience in research as well. Thus, the first step is to hire more faculty members with more focus in research. To hire new faculty members the university must be attractive enough, thus it must have sufficient

resources, and it must have permission to hire new faculties from the government. Decisions for budget allocation and hiring new faculties are made by different organizations and policy makers without much coordination.

2. Expansion of education capacity at the graduate level
The schooling of the university must be promoted from undergraduate level to post graduate level. Graduate studies create a larger capacity for research activities and provide the university with the opportunity to contribute to new facets of science and technology. This would also provide enough motivation for existing lecturer, while obliged some other to start more research work.

3. Strong thighs between the university and various industries
The university link to industry has to be tied up, for which one must build up a mutual confidence between them. The industries should trust the university as place, which understands, and is capable of handling their problems. This can happen by introducing the university capabilities through seminars, short courses for various levels of industry managers, and providing the students with the opportunity to experience the actual work environment.

Conclusions and Remarks
The in progress research presented in this paper prompted by the limitations of current educational and schooling system in the university of Yazd. It is argued that for a sustainable growth a shift of attention from education to research must happen. In order to achieve this goal a number of activities have to be carried out simultaneously.

- The university research center must be established. This in turn needs enough resources for equipment and physical infrastructure and also employment of more researchers. The design of such center, of course, has to be with regard to the potential research abilities of the university, the regional capabilities, and foreseeing the future needs. Development of graduate programs could also substantially improve the research capability at the university.

- The university has to have the authority to decide on the expansion of its academic courses and research activities based on the university strategic plans, limitations, and capabilities. This would not happen without decentralization of decision-making in the government bodies (i.e. the Ministry of Science, the Budget and Planning Organization, and the Organization for Recruiting).

- The new mission of the university needs substantial resources to be allocated for research work and postgraduate courses. There are three way of producing such a money:
    - ✓ The Ministry of Science has to change the usual way of budget allocation from a few percent increase of the previous year budget to allocation on the bases of needs, performance and the expansions.
    - ✓ The university has to put more money from its annual budget to the new goals defined.
    - ✓ The university must think of earning money from private sectors and industries by carrying out more project and research work for them.

- The last and the most important factor in order to succeed the program is the commitment of top-management in pursuing the new mission.

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