

## NEW APPROACHES TO AN INTEGRATIVE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR IMPROVED UNIVERSITY EFFORTS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

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### **Abstract:**

The objective aimed with this paper is to present a management approach through which universities may improve their efforts towards sustainability, heavily based on comprehensively capitalizing of all resources, including of the potentials represented by their alumni. The research methodology used is based on literature survey, web-sites data and case studies review regarding organizational resources management, with application to the university's specificity. The conclusion is built on the idea that learning organizations and those which can most effectively capitalize on all their resources may have better chances to sustainability. Thus, to rely on and further develop management concepts and means applied in other sectors and cultures is just a matter of leadership excellence, for which universities should set example. Particularly in the globalization era, such an approach can offer universities even broader resources and much more diversified competitive advantages. This way, universities may also become much stronger drivers of the society in its pathway towards sustainable development, by being able to much more effectively supporting the creation of necessary human and the knowledge capital for it.

*Keywords: university sustainability, university integrative management, university social responsibility, intellectual capital for global development*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The key feature of Planet Earth (also known as Terra, Gaea/ Gaia, Mother Earth, or the Blue Planet, The Planet of Life) is biodiversity. Due to the specific features of the human species, we can, however, distinguish between natural and human resources. Interaction of the two generates the knowledge gained by humankind and the realization of all other resources that define our existence as a species: financial, informational, technological, cultural, material, as well as the impact caused by humans on the natural balance. Hence the three major differentiations in: social needs (of evolution), economic development (to meet these needs) and the environment (providing the raw materials for the two). While social needs and drive for power and domination (be it economic, political, financial, technological etc), may exacerbate indefinitely, natural resources are, however, limited. And they are the very living environment of the human species, in the context of a viable and perennial biodiversity. Hence, the global problems facing humankind and the need to set it on the path of sustainable development (Brundtland, 1987) have become an imperative condition for maintaining life on Earth.

This being so, what are the most important coordinates of life and resources that should concern humankind with utmost priority? It is the investing in human capacities – through education, and maintaining the balance of life on Earth – through a sustainable development process. Therefore, in essence, it all is about *education*, in the spirit of principles, knowledge and developing the mindset and skills *for sustainable development*. This should be accomplished by everyone, at any level and in any field, starting with individuals, organizations, communities, nations, and encompassing human society as a whole.

Sustainable development is based on *sustainable organizations* (Candea, 2006). The definition thereof aims to provide efficient investment for the shareholders for an unlimited time, with corporate responsibility. In more detail, it regards “providing benefits to the investors, customers and employees; improved living standards to the employees and the community; best use of natural resources; and fairness to all” (Cramer and Karabell, 2010).

Sustainable organizations merge a number of capabilities, including that of being learning organizations (Oncica-Stanislaw and Candea, 2012), managing to always ensure a competitive advantage, making best use of all the available resources they have (Candea, 2007), or may create and/or attract.

However, no organization can be more capable than the sum of the capacities of its members. *In extenso*, no human community (nation, humankind as a whole) can be better than the value of its constituent members. Hence, again, the conclusion that *education is the drive of human evolution and that the future of mankind depends on how this is materialized and on the values it can convey and base the shaping of personalities on*.

In this context, as universities are both the higher educational level for human individuals and the shaper of humankind's future, in its research activities, we believe that *universities* have, on the one hand, the obligation to be an example of sustainable organizations and, on the other hand, that of responsibly taking on the mission of a *leader of the development of human society* (Stefanescu *et al.*, 2010a). Therefore, the way university management engages it on the way toward sustainability and the way in which it capitalizes on its (available, potentially generated and potentially attracted) human resources in the act of education and involvement in other scientific and civic pursuits, including in the generation and efficient use of all the other resources, will determine the quality of life and the society that universities will be able to shape.

It is also worth pointing out here that, in our opinion, both individual, human being evolution, and especially that of an organization, and of the society in general, especially in the light of a sustainable development vision, may no longer be regarded in terms of a Gaussian curve. Even if – physically – individuals and products disappear, organizations, communities, society will evolve. And this happens for the very reason that, throughout their pathway, individuals, products, organizations have given something back to the community and contributed to its evolution. As long as we regard this whole process as a contribution of values to be nurtured sustainably, life – however temporary – will make sense and will help, by contributing and transcending, the positive, upward development of every organization and community that strives for sustainability and of human society on its way towards a sustainable development.

## 2. INTEGRATIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITY

Organizational development is thought to be achievable, in an integrative process, both vertically and horizontally. For universities this means that activities and concerns need to be incorporated at multiple different levels on each coordinate.

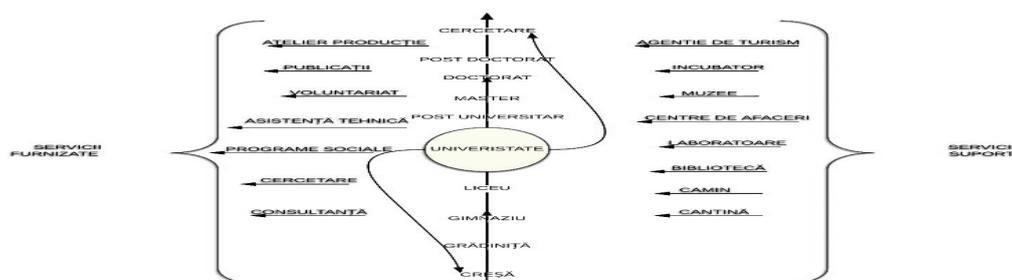
*Vertical organizational integration* reflects how many operational steps an organization integrates up and down its specific goods and services generation chain, from suppliers to buyers (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2014). As a rule, this means controlling the process flow without gaps at the highest quality, aiming for best performance in meeting objectives (preferably sustainability objectives). Obviously, such an approach leads to higher process efficiency overall, as well as in each individual link.

It is worth noting that this also regards and includes the internal organizational environment, i.e.: the employee attitudes, new equipment, strategy, work forces; the conditions, entities, events, and factors within an organization that influence its activities and choices, particularly the behavior of the employees. Factors that are frequently considered part of the internal environment also include the organization's mission statement, leadership styles, and its organizational culture (Business Dictionary, 2014).

For universities, such an approach would target gradual incorporation of educational links into the system (along its chain *in extenso*, starting from nursery, day care, preschool, primary and secondary schools and all the way to academia graduate and postgraduate levels, including training and retraining, master, doctoral, post-doctoral and research fellowships), as well as support services in its development (by link or as a whole, including utilities and related or service activities: restaurant, accommodation, sports grounds and halls, libraries, laboratories, business and research incubators, tourism agents, bank, parks, publishing house, museums, cinemas, discos, shops, bookshop, office supplies, pharmacy, hospital, car rental etc. These speak about a campus – town such as at Oxford (university web-site, 2014), or at the National University of Singapore (university web-site, 2014). Of course, all these services being integrated for the use of the local community, they are at the same time channels for integrating the university in society and vice versa. Moreover, these include all the activities in which a university could get involved, beyond the strictly educational process, in providing services to society (consulting or research contracts, technical assistance projects, civic education and awareness, participation in community events, volunteer involvement, publications etc), or economic activities generating financial capital (production and/or service workshops, fundraising event organizing, involvement in social programs, etc). In fact, vertical organizational integration merges with its horizontal integration.

We are talking, therefore, especially in regard to the institutional specifics of a university, of four levels of vertical integration: within the organization, within the educational system, in providing support services (to the institution) and all assistance services (to be provided as outreach). As any of these new potential links becomes integrated, the university evolves into a new organizational whole (Figure 1). But we should always also consider the concurrent side of the size and horizontal organizational integration links of all these levels and components (of the vertical organizational integration).

**Figure 1:** Levels of vertical organizational integration for a university



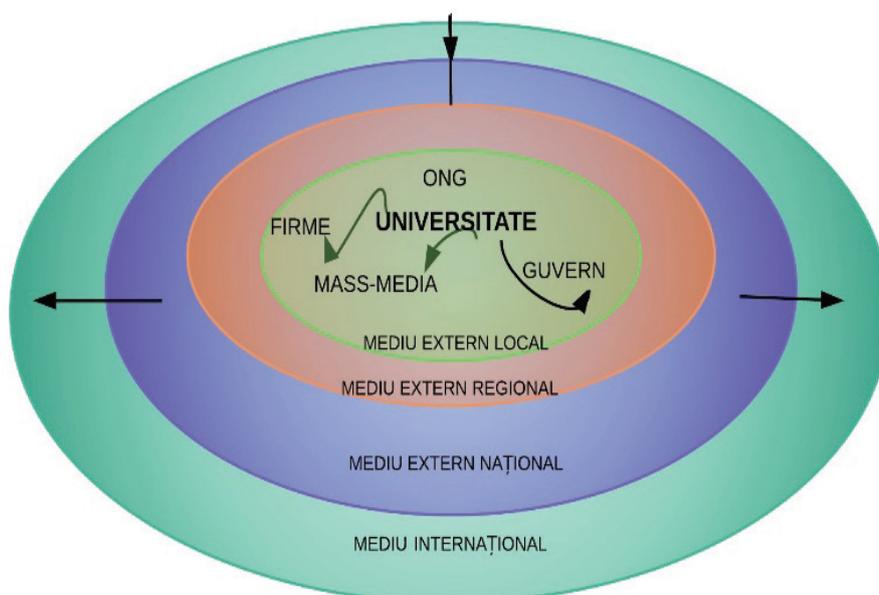
The contribution of such integration is to streamline activities, determining cost reduction, profit increase and synergy in action with a better chance to maintain the logical and ongoing performance and quality processes. Thus, a university will evolve, grow, and develop. The key for this development to occur in a prosperous way for an indefinite time is to maintain control over a balanced development in relation to needs and resources.

But, again, absolutely any vertical integration link or event will contribute its own context for a corresponding horizontal integration.

*Horizontal organizational integration* mainly concerns the idea of reaching out to new markets, including by incorporating other similar organization (Investopedia, 2014). Its purpose is, in principle, to strengthen the resources and the position of that organization in the respective goods or service sector. But this also means integration of the organization in the context of its external environment: political, economical, social, technological, informational, cultural, competitive, legal and of the environmental conditions; the entities, events, and factors surrounding an organization that influence its activities and choices, and determine its opportunities and risks. It is also called the operating environment.

For a university, this approach would be reflected, in our opinion, by the extent to which it is capable to become integrated in society and develop all the networks and strategic partnerships that could build its capacities (in relation to suppliers, customers, competitors, professional associations, government, alumni association, funders, the community, the media, supporters, the business sector, other universities, former employees and collaborators, international bodies, parents, friends, acquaintances, co-workers of the alumni and their associates, or any members of the university, raw material resources, experts, etc.). And this dimension needs to be regarded both in a local and in a regional, national, and even international context, including in regard to compliance, cooperation or co-competition, as applicable, and learning and adaptation of best practice from global experience. And in this case, as it inter-correlates with any of the links, a university will continue to acquire new valences of its organizational integration, and capabilities for sustainability. And thus the university will, as well, evolve, grow, and develop. The key for this development to progress prosperously for an indefinite time it also is to maintain control over the balanced development in relation to needs and resources.

**Figure 2:** Levels of horizontal organizational integration for a university



In both processes of organizational development, the main purpose is the assumption and exercise, with full awareness, of the university's mission and role in society and its development, and of its corporate social responsibility. All of this means continuous provision of high quality services and ensuring sustainable development parameters for society.

Again, it is worth pointing out, as a matter of major importance, that both the vertical and the horizontal organizational integration events and phenomena take place concurrently, even though not all the steps at once, but rather as a matter of operational coordinates. Any aspect of vertical integration will place the organization into a different correlation at the level of horizontal relationships and vice versa. The two types of organizational development, even if considered and analyzed separately, actually conjugate into the same process of organizational evolution, at every moment of its existence (as a societal living body). And this perspective typifies and defines the status of an organization as a whole, at any point in time.

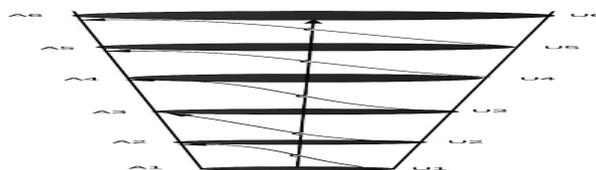
In this whole process of existence and institutional building of a university, and of its role and position in society, we think that *alumni* are the most important source of resources (Stefanescu *et al.*, 2009) and capital, of all kinds (informational, human, financial, creativity and innovation, relational, social, intellectual, trust, image etc), as well as its most valuable multi-dimensional stakeholder (ex-interns: as former students, and externals: as potential clients, consumers, suppliers, employees, experts, donors, supporters, marketers etc.) (Stefanescu *et al.*, 2010b). Moreover, depending on how the university will relate to them, alumni could be always available to the university management for potential capitalization, at every step or moment of its progress toward sustainability.

In an extended meaning of the concept, *alumni are*:

- a). In the vertical integration of university services, *formers* (from newborns, to day care or nursery, preschool, primary and high school students potential undergraduates and then graduates – integrated in society);
- b). In horizontal integration, *future* leaders, managers or specialized personnel, in all the sectors, at all the levels of management or operation thereof, as well as citizens, i.e. mere members of civil society, and family members.

The integrative approach to alumni resources for a university, by fully capitalizing on this community potential, can give it all the leverage, resources, opportunities, advantages, instruments and ways to aim for sustainability. Alumni, in the broad meaning of the concept, are the *strategic resource* of the university, which can provide it continuously and increasingly with opportunities to create competitive organizational advantage (Stefanescu *et al.*, 2010b), and to extend its social support. With all of this, in fact, alumni contribute in providing the university as well as society with resources and opportunities to reach balance between economic development, by meeting social, health and environmental conservation demands. In other words, in their complex potential, and at every stage in their development and involvement, for vertical and in horizontal university integration, alumni are always the *present* – as human resource and stakeholders of the university, well as of society, providing a permanent link between all the steps in their evolution, in inter-dependency.

**Figure 3:** Flow of the university – alumni - society relationship



This is why, in our opinion, *alumni are actually the graduates of human society which, by investing in education, invests, through them, in its own evolution, in its progress and sustainability.* Ultimately, alumni are an essential part of the society's *intellectual capital for global development.*

In this perspective, the mechanism (of social progress and strengthening the role of universities in this process) may come to operate as a welcome sort of *perpetuum mobile*, leading humankind, on a continuous ascending spiral, towards sustainable development through ever higher levels of education.

In this process, the university will continue to be the concrete unit of a tangible edifice of the supreme power of learning, while alumni continue to represent a force – a flow of energy for knowledge, skills and attitudes, intangible values (HBR, 2014) that make it perennial. In conjugating roles and responsibilities, both will evolve interdependently and in inter-correlation, creating and supporting the progress of society through knowledge and, we hope, synergy. Education, for sustainable development is (and thus may become) the light and nourishment that help souls flourish, spirits bear fruit and society bloom, always prosperously and beneficially for all, in a balanced evolution for an indefinite time.

Overall, it is the ever increasing need for academia to harmonize to contemporary and future challenges with minimal trauma and to be able to play its role and destiny, fulfilling its mission with increasing awareness and accountability.

By learning from diverse experience and practice worldwide, and by identifying ways of combining strategic management methods into an integrating approach (Bleicher, 1994) universities can attract more benefit toward sustainability, especially if starting from an expansion and strengthening of their alumni networking and from maximizing capitalization of such potential.

Thus, collecting information and learning lessons from the experience of other organizations especially corporations, but other universities too, including from other cultural backgrounds can be an important way to improve own institutional methods and tools for the better management of the university – alumni relationship and strengthening capitalization of their potential.

Although the concept of integration – with all its derivatives – is widely known and used, including in management, we think it would be useful to bring some clarification and comment on the sense in which we look upon and propose this approach, in reference to capitalization of alumni potential by the university management, and through it, by society.

While integrating means “combining things, people or ideas of different types into one effective unit, group, or system, capable of being used or shared by all” (Macmillan Dictionary, 2009 – 2014), or “making a whole by bringing all the parts together” (The Free Dictionary, 2002 – 2012), Dr. Bleicher pointed out that, in matters of institutional management, especially in troubled times, the best *strategic approach* is *integrative*. The meaning of the concept, in this strategic management action context, is to bring together, and combine, anything that works on several levels and leverages, in order to provide the organization and its operations more flexibility and complexity of viable alternatives. This approach provides a broadening of the resource range available to the organization or potentially attracted by it, and a multiplication of its support points and extension of its range of compensating or operational actions for better performance. To which it should also be included the foresight dimension, as policy and model of integratory management (Alper and Oner, 2003). This is what we think the universities should also do or start to provide for, in their strategic management, in the context of such challenging and dramatic transformations at all levels. And investing in alumni, in this light, can prove very welcome. This is why, the more complex and polyvalent university – alumni relations and their capitalization, the higher the chances of a university to gain support in various ways and at multiple levels (Stefanescu *et al.*, 2011).

This is along the lines of the definition of integrative approaches (in organizational management) given by Arkowitz, 1997, and quoted by Corey, 2001, stating that “An integrative approach is best characterized by attempts to look beyond and across the confines of single-school approaches in order to see what can be learned from, and how clients can benefit from, other perspectives”. More explicitly, for an integrative action as such, paraphrasing the definition given by Tricia Ellis-Christensen in 2012 it would be advisable “integrating, or combining (best theories, or knowledge, or procedures, or lessons learned, etc) all or some aspects of several different (managerial strategic approaches, instruments or practices, etc) schools of thoughts (philosophies, cultural specifics, etc), to promote wellness”.

Within these coordinates, a university is and behaves fundamentally as model for a continuously learning organization (Senge *et al.*, 2000) continuously integrating new avenues of evolution, in permanent improvement (Lynch, 2011).

The key element has always been strategic academic management of excellence, driving the university along the path to sustainability. As its strategy is defining reference, we believe that integrative managerial approaches should start by establishing it. The process should include, in its provisions and in consulting implications, followed by practical implementation, all the internal and external university stakeholders, and bring together and permanently update all the elements that can maintain the highest levels of performance.

### 3. CONCLUSION

To summarize the above, the integrative strategic, sustainability-focused management proposal, to provide maximum capitalization of the potential off all resource categories that a university (or organization) may access, or attract, or mobilize, mainly consists in a *conceptual and practical expansion of the meaning of alumni*, and in including a *new, more comprehensive approach, addressing the university human resources*.

Secondly, it means an *integration of strategies* and management plans by category of human resource available to the university into a global one, focusing on sustainability.

And it also has to do with a creative and flexible integration of, *the experience of others*, who have tested the efficiency of investing in alumni and various ways of capitalizing on the potential of this community (as part of developing the organizational culture of the university), and the integration of organizational excellence management (integrating concepts and tools, including conceptual approaches and corporative practices).

Not least, it means institutional integration internally, as well as externally, with the realities and progress of the time (through alumni and strategic partnerships with the community, in its many sectors). And it also includes integration into the educational chain, of individual lifelong learning, from birth. Such synergic integration efforts, when internalized by the universities, give it robustness and consistency in evolution.

In fact, it means that the university should commit to the responsibility and effort to embark on the path of sustainability through efficient management, by capitalizing on all the available and potential resources, investing in the best use of available and potentially attracted human resources (from internal to all the categories of stakeholders and human society as a whole). Such inter-connections, which actually mean creating and expanding the organization's social capital, are keys in improving chances for sustainability for a university or any other organization.

Let us not forget that, at all levels, we are experiencing globalization. In this context, universities not only can benefit from universal, academic and corporate experience, but also face pressure in competing at multiple levels. The only solution to cope is to become sustainable establishments, leaders of sustainable development. Alumni, in the broadest sense, are the suppliers of most resources to the university. Therefore, it is very important and absolutely necessary, for the university leadership, to be concerned for and directly involved into full capitalization of its most valuable supporters. Indeed, in order to capitalize the potential of a resource, one must start with investing in it.

To study, analyze, take on, adapt, learn and apply, in a creative and integrative way, information, lessons, management tools and practices from other universities, from other national and/ or organizational cultures, can provide access to unsuspected and very valuable resource assets for any educational establishment, especially as they have already been verified and validated over time by others, and potentially very important benefits for sustainability.

In the light of globalization trends, and for economic and social reasons, we think it is now time to review academic management practices and enrich them based on such valuable global experience. And, as alumni are the most important, perennial, handy and increasing resource of a university, able to provide multiple resources (financial, human, informational, material, creativity and innovation, social support etc), it is increasingly necessary for university, even top-ranking ones, to diversify and strengthen their options to make best use of the infinite levels of this potential. This is why we think that a strategic management approach to the university – alumni relationship, based on higher, integrating capitalization on global experience customized to the personality of each individual higher education establishment for the best benefits might be a major response to the challenges higher

education worldwide is facing. Moreover, such an approach could provide the university not only many and diverse benefits, but also strengthened social support, securing its role in outlining and defining the future of humankind, with responsibility, high quality and maximum probity.

Without universities, human society cannot make progress towards sustainable development, which might ensure life and continuity. But the universities themselves must strive to become aware of the absolute need for social integration, in order to fulfill their mission. In an era of upheaval on all planes, universities should also become a flexible establishment, open to change, even become a factor, if not leader of future social progress, a learning organization that takes on the role of guiding the evolution of humankind.

Alumni are the university's ambassadors in society and university agents of change. Therefore, capitalizing on the alumni community should be an obligation of academic management, and an integrative approach, encompassing and making best use of human experience globally, can only be a logical and beneficial action – like any opening to adaptability and progress. And this is also reflected at the level of investing in the creation of global intellectual capital, for humankind as a whole, for sustainable development, particularly in a knowledge-based society.

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