

5 Transforming Universities

Roberto Carneiro, Catholic University of Portugal

Abstract The article begins by proposing a theory of change to interpret and encompass the modern challenges of University transformation. Next it moves into the discussion of four key levers of institutional change: the role of structure, culture, leadership, and governance. The last section establishes the relationship between effective transformation and meaning. In this respect, meaning is presented as the highest stage of a value chain moving upward from raw data and information to knowledge, learning and meaning-building.

5.1 A Theory of Change

When looking into strategic change and innovation in higher education, we need to adopt a robust theory of change capable of providing the necessary analytical tools of interpretation. We propose using Kotter's framework to analyse change effectiveness (Kotter, 1995: 59-67). This conceptual framework consists of eight fundamental steps which we shall describe in brief terms and illustrate by indicating major obstacles to University transformation:

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency

Most change programmes fail at this very first step. Resistance to change can reach dramatic levels at the outset of a reform policy and comfort zones are extremely difficult to dismantle especially in organizations with a diffuse power structure. Universities are usually regarded as ultra-stable homeostatic systems much more likely to rely on the 'analysis-paralysis' attitude than on the 'just do it' posture. Getting advanced learning institutions to understand the need of change and to establish a sense of urgency that is sufficiently strong to drive lasting innovation can be a formidable task. The drive to transform is commensurate with what E. Schein coined as the 'anxiety of survival' (Coutu, 2002: 100-106) – unless such anxiety reaches a threshold level Universities will normally protract change for the sake of security or certainty.

2. Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition

Effective change stems from a leadership of good will and solid commitment to shared objectives that grow over time. Seldom will sustainable renewal rely on the shoulders of a restricted apex of senior managers. This guiding coalition must normally motivate and mobilize non-formal and informal networks of people and create synergies among stakeholders. A clear strategy geared at the formation of a broad coalition of ‘change doers’ is required. Difficulties to produce change and to overcome vested interests in Universities cannot be underestimated. Change management alliances should cut across traditional boundaries and grant adequate voice to bodies that are not usually regarded as key players such as students and external actors. Excessive fragmentation of University fabric can work against the viability of strategic concertation and coalition formation.

3. Creating a Vision

A powerful vision reaches far beyond a mid-term plan or an outline of a strategic idea. Vision is a composite creature, made of a combination of dream, ambition, direction, analytical thinking and realism, which go together hand in hand. Usually, an inspiring vision entails some form of institutional rebirth or refoundation. Alignment of resources and energies is the major consequence of a powerful vision. Transforming Universities is to a great extent the challenge of building an inspiring vision. In order to reach a sensible vision Universities must nurture leadership that is to say a determination to produce change and to unfreeze somewhat deeply “frozen” cultures. Vision, alignment, inspiration, motivation, new mental models, are some of the outstanding ingredients of an effective leadership for change.

4. Communicating the Vision

Effective communication lies at the heart of lasting and meaningful change. Often powerful visions fall short of motivating people because of a lack of appropriate communication. Only credible leadership can deliver the inspiring message: change is urgent, necessary and ... possible. Normally, change entails enduring short-term sacrifices and the willingness to move away from established practices. Communicating a transformative vision requires the ability to lead people to buy in a long-term perspective that is sufficiently attractive to make accept short-term sacrifices. Universities may prefer to act on strictly short-term gains, away from future-time perspectives that entail delaying immediate gratification. Hearts and minds of University faculty and staff are usually focused on maximising immediate targets and getting over the near cycle of activities. As a consequence, challenging ‘short-termism’ that could prevail among academics is the task of change agents and of true leaders.

5. Empowering Others to Act on the Vision

Successful transformation is never down to just one individual. On the contrary, the broader the constituency for change, the larger the numbers of stakeholders involved, the more likely it turns out that change will stick. Institutional renewal is the product of collective will and ownership. However, change momentum will arise only when people feel both inspired and empowered. Removing barriers to innovation and obstacles to participation in the overall movement towards change are necessary levers of meaningful transformation. Universities can be inorganic beings exhibiting anemic levels of social capital and trust. Therefore, sparking a collective aspiration to introduce innovation at the grassroots that is consistent with a broader transformative purpose requires an artful involvement of the different ‘orchestral components’. Credibility is of primordial importance: this attribute is highly contingent on the ability to encourage others to act and take responsibility to effect change.

6. Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins

Maintaining the momentum for change is a tricky job. Intermediate goals must be reachable within a reasonable time framework to nurture a feeling of achievement and to ensure a minimum threshold of enduring motivation. One key role of leadership will be to make evident outcomes and to celebrate the overcoming of hurdles that are meaningful milestones in a longer journey. Preferably, short-term wins can be visibly associated with recognition, premiums or awards. An effective change plan encompasses analytical tools that lead into short-term goals. Moreover, a rewards system designed to encourage commitment toward achievement of tangible targets should be put in place. Tertiary learning institutions often underestimate the opportunity of running celebrative moments. Responsibilities are sparsely distributed which makes recognition a tough job to undertake. However, change can be fun and measuring against the yardstick of concrete steps that are successfully completed is a good recipe for sustainability.

7. Consolidating Improvements and Producing Still More Change

Celebrating short-term wins should not be confused with early or precipitous declarations of victory. After the end of the war is officially announced weaponry becomes heavy, energy undergoes a natural process of dissipation, the will to push further quickly erodes, troops become weary. The danger is that transformation comes to a halt and the entire process risks reversal back to square one. Regression to the initial stage can be extremely detrimental to the institutional confidence to engage in new change experiments. Limited mandates in time horizons of Universities may work against the consolidation of new cultures – the temptation to call the shots before change patterns are embedded fully into the University *ethos* is a common mistake especially when managerial continuity feels endangered. As

a rule, important gains, however significant, remain fragile unless they are used to leverage further change.

8. Institutionalizing New Approaches

At the end of the day, change patterns must sink deeply into the organization avoiding any possibility of a return back to the initial state prior to the deployment of change efforts. Effective structural renewal is determined by a generalized awareness of benefits on which new behaviours and attitudes become “normal”. *Declared* values, norms, and habits coincide with *espoused* and *rooted* values, norms and habits. Both individual and corporate mental models shift to a new wavelength of social conformity allowing the emergence of new ways of “getting things done”. Universities are by design conservative institutions. This accounts for the fact that University corporations can easily offset innovative attempts and absorb most piecemeal change impetus. This is the case with particularly consolidated cultures, decanted over the passage of time and inherently resistant to change. The sheer fact that Universities harness a great deal of ‘brainpower’ which is a very distinct production factor, in contrast to the traditional ‘manpower’ of the industrial assembly line, can be a liability to the extent that talent is often atomistic and inward looking. Notwithstanding, talent may also turn out a major asset provided leadership brings together the wealth of intellectual capital and fashions a powerful culture of change. Transformation is much more likely when this culture of change trickles down by capillarity to each and every portion of the University fabric.

5.2 The role of structure

Organisational structure is usually regarded as a potent determinant of the readiness to transform. The specialized literature on organisational typologies is rich and varied, one of the most acclaimed – and respected – descriptor of structural design is the concept of ‘configuration’ advanced by the Canadian academic Henry Mintzberg (1996). Mintzberg drifts away from the “one best way” approach, typical of a ‘scientific management’ thinking, as well as from an “it all depends” theory, favoured by a ‘contingency approach’ to organizations. He prefers an architectural perspective on organizations that departs from six basic parts or components that may combine into different shapes or structural designs:

1. Strategic Apex (top management)
2. Middle Line (middle management)
3. Operating Core (operations, operational processes)

4. Technostructure (analysts that design systems, processes, etc)
5. Support Staff (support outside of operating workflow)
6. Ideology (halo of beliefs and traditions; norms, values, culture).

Organisations, regardless of their particular design, have two opposing requirements: division of labour, on the one hand, and coordination, on the other. Mintzberg defines six basic coordinating mechanisms that are ultimate expressions of culture: mutual adjustment, direct supervision, standardisation of work processes, standardisation of outputs, standardization of skills, and standardisation of norms.

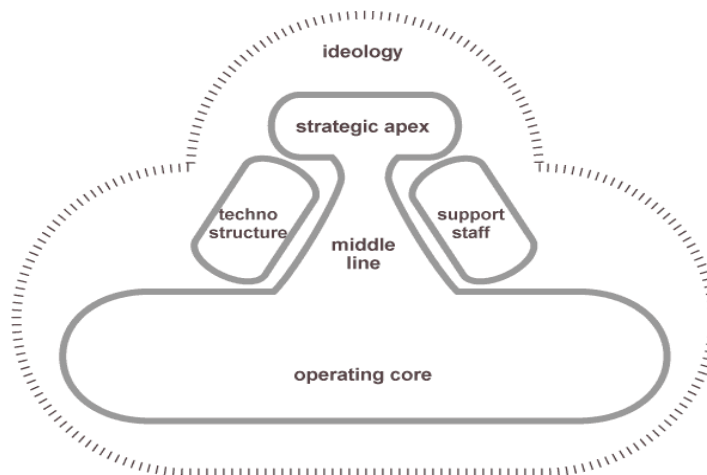


Figure 5-1: Mintzberg configurations, six structural components (Mintzberg, 2009)

Thus, any possible configuration may be described as an aggregation, in different weights, of the six structural components compounded by specific cultures of coordination. Mintzberg proposes seven basic paradigms of organisation: entrepreneurial, machine, professional, diversified, innovative, missionary, and political.

In line with Mintzberg's creative theory on organizational architectures, Universities are primordially 'Professional Organisations' (also called 'Professional Bureaucracies'). They rely on the standardisation of skills, directed to standardised delivery of services to clients. Universities recruit highly educated personnel with a lot of influence and authority with respect to their own work. Faculty members perform their tasks independently, with few middle management, and a lot of support for the professionals. In short, Universities tend to address complex and stable

context, and require a not regulating, not very sophisticated but manageable technostucture.

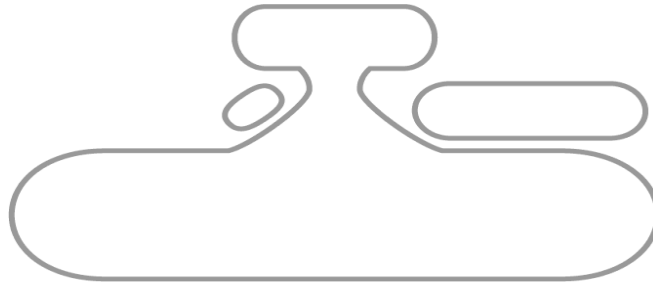


Figure 5-2: Universities portrayed as Professional Organisations (Ibid)

Empirical studies have thrown evidence on a set of difficulties displayed by professional organisations to unlearn old practices and to learn anew (Carneiro 2001). It does not come as a surprise to underline that Universities epitomise one of the longest lasting guilds. Tradition throws its weight as a key force of conservation and faculty members are well known to undergo great pains in order to maintain vested interests.

Research conducted on structural learning behaviours elicits professional organisations as examples of specialised learning involving high-skilled brainpower (Carneiro, 2001). The constant pull to professionalise generates impediments to institutional change that stem from the rate of internalisation processes to adopt new skills patterns or to renew ancient beliefs among professionals who perform their duties with broad independence and reduced accountability.

From this viewpoint the challenge to transform Universities coincides with the art of tilting towards change high-priced professionals who exercise considerable control over their work environments through powerful associations that select, protect and co-opt membership with a good deal of self-government.

5.3 The role of culture

Broadly speaking, culture is a by-product of community, a reflection of how people relate to one another within an organisational habitat. These patterns of social interaction are a manifestation of shared interests and mutual obligations that tie together a multitude of organisational constituencies.

Organisations are increasingly seen as communities of people whose fate and happiness levels are closely related to the fate and happiness levels of the organisations where they work and to which they pledge allegiance. Culture plays a cen-

tral role in bolstering a particular organisation's capacity to engage in innovation and to welcome transformation.

Goffee and Jones explain organisational differentiation through the lens of sociology. They analyse and plot two distinct dimensions of human relations within organisations: sociability and solidarity (Goffee, 1996: 133-148). In brief, sociability is a measure of sincere friendliness among members of a community. Solidarity/Efficiency is a measure of a community's ability to pursue shared objectives quickly and effectively, regardless of personal ties. The result is four types of community: networked, mercenary, fragmented, and communal. None of these cultures is "the best" in the authors' assessment. Each is appropriate for different business environments. Goffee and Jones (1996: 134) express it in the following sentence:

"In other words, managers need not begin the hue and cry for one cultural type over another. Instead, they must know how to assess their own culture and whether it fits the competitive situation. Only then can they consider the delicate techniques for transforming it."

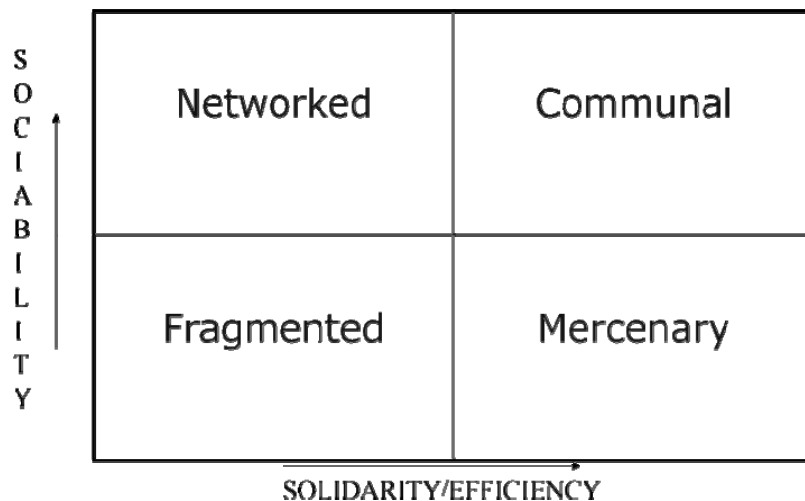


Figure 5-3: Two Dimensions, Four Cultures (Goffee & Jones, 1996)

Constantly adjusting the corporate culture to a rapidly mutant environment is the pivotal challenge posed to modern leadership. The authors place Universities unequivocally in the Fragmented quadrant: Low Sociability, Low Solidarity/Efficiency. The primary characteristic of a fragmented organisation is its low consciousness of organisational membership seldom exhibiting the rites and rituals of high-sociable cultures. Professionals – notably faculty members – tend to work on their own and to discard accountability as mandatory requirement. Colleagues have difficulty in agreeing on common objectives and on critical perform-

ance standards. High levels of dissent may occur around vision statements and/or organisational priorities that collide with idiosyncratic work styles and professional autonomy.

Nevertheless fragmented cultures may fare under a very specific set of conditions: when achieving high performance levels can be reached at the expense of interdependence; when innovation is driven by individuals; when standards are the result of input rather than process controls; when knowledge transfer and sharing takes place at highly decentralized levels.

We are fully aware of the danger of hasty generalisations. However, if some of the most common features of tertiary learning institutions lean toward cultures of fragmentation there is a need for preventive measures and remedial actions to ensure that key change is not averted by adverse cultural conditionalities.

The move from fragmented to mercenary organisations is abundantly documented. In this case, change is catalysed by an efficiency-driven reform that offers clear advantages to the benefit of key University groups and stakeholders. Right choices down this path are the consequence of effective communication combined with the creation of a winning culture that allows a full expression of individual values and preferences. The following challenge is whether, or not, Universities would be able to move upward from mercenary to communal cultures of transformation and redemption.

While *cultures of resistance* will re-trench within close boundaries with a preference for “old” ideas and ways as well as risk-averse practices, *cultures of anticipation* will nurture experimentation, empowerment, emulation and strategic thinking.

In sum, University “openness” would constitute a valid measure of the learning potential and a solid indicator of the institution’s ability to cope with a necessary change momentum.

5.4 The role of leadership

The best-led Universities are the best positioned to undergo transformation. By the same token, over-managed and under-led institutions are less aware on the need to change and to adapt to new challenges. While leadership is the art of effecting change, management is about coping with complexity (Kotter, 1990: 103-111).

The problem is that Universities are both “complex” institutions – demanding skillful management to introduce order and consistency – and highly “exposed” institutions to the rapid pace of change in information, knowledge, and globalisation of talent. The net result is that tertiary learning institutions are faced with a double challenge: ensure a high degree of efficient management and nurture leaders and leadership practices that warrant decisive change whenever needed.

Kotters’ article establishes a clear cut distinction between one and another. While managers tackle complexity by minute *planning and budgeting* leaders would ca-

ter for change by *setting a direction*. While management is concerned with *organising and staffing* leadership *aligns people* in the organisation. While management ensures accomplishment by *controlling and problem solving* leadership serves a vision by *motivating and inspiring* and appealing to peoples' values, emotions and feelings.

Universities must find ways to train good managers and to develop excellent leaders at the same time. Zaleznik warns that what it takes to guarantee a good supply of seasoned managers may work against the development of great leaders (Zaleznik, 1977: 67-78). Likewise, the overwhelming presence of great leaders may overshadow and undermine the role of managers who often find it difficult to cope with the degree of chaos and disorder that leaders typically generate.

Transforming Universities is the primal role of leadership. But can Universities create and develop cultures of leadership? Can leaders arise from the realm of "old" University cultures? Are University networks actively interested in tapping sources of new leadership and assisting in the emergence of bold "twice-born" personalities?

University leaders may have much more in common with artists, designers, scientists, and creative professionals, than they would have with managers who permanently seek to impose order and discipline in organisations. Universities that really seek transformative paths will do well to seek and nurture talented creative personalities who understand the urgency of change and the necessity of reaching out beyond the strict limits of the box. Leadership and change management is increasingly the art of moving beyond the possible and of releasing the innovative potential that lies beneath inertia.

5.5 The role of governance

Governance can be guided by different, even conflicting, sets of principles. For instance, if legality is the prime concern then the main criterion orienting governance would be the *rule of law*. If managerial principles prevail one would expect *efficiency* to emerge as the outstanding indicator of governance. If ethics champions above all other parameters the overriding principles would touch on guidelines such as *codes of conduct and values*. Alternatively, if knowledge is the main attribute sought by governors and ruling bodies *accuracy* becomes the metrics of good governance.

While seeking transformation Universities may elicit a distinct mix of guiding principles. Indeed, effective governance is by and large the ability to combine change and stability in complex environments. And, once the rule to address extreme complexity is self-organisation, then effective governance demands unique competences to establish and communicate an inspirational vision while devolving the ultimate responsibility to enact the vision down to the grassroots of organisational networks whether formal, non-formal or informal arrangements.

Having reached this point of reflection, it becomes evident that the philosophical foundation for leadership governance would be *wisdom*.

A wisdom that rewards risk-taking, that provides proper incentives to experimentation, that tolerates failure, that understands the benefits of conflicting ideas and of adversarial debate, that has the ability to reconcile multiple interests, that pools wholesale knowledge in the University, that negotiates change functions and distributes responsibilities at all levels of the institution.

Wisdom is not the outcome of intensive training, to the same extent that governance is not the product of numerous management techniques. Wisdom is the juice of experience, the salt of life, the greatest gift an organisation can expect to receive from its most mature members.

Universities in search of wise leaders: a motto that would constitute an inspiring policy and would lay ground for forward-thinking governance. These evolving institutions would keep morphing into successive stages of self-awareness, self-determination and maturity. That is to say that they take on board the challenge of climbing the transformational process conducive to the emergence of *learning organisations*.

The latter stages of this upward mobility elicit *generative learning* over mere *adaptive learning* as a goal: expanding capabilities rather than reacting to symptoms; enhancing creativity rather than responding to threats; finding new ways of looking at the environment rather than ducking risks; addressing underlying causes rather than addressing consequences; thinking differently and anticipating futures rather than choosing flexibility as prime value.

The task of producing lasting change and ensuring quantum transformational leaps poses the formidable challenge of building a unified vision in an organisation made up of qualified specialists.

Systemic thinking is the central attribute of learning Universities. It is also the distinctive characteristic of the great symphony orchestra.

Over 20 years ago Peter Drucker proposed a lively metaphor constructed around three types of organisations which in his expert judgment could be offered as advanced exemplars of the new 21st century organisations: the hospital, the university, and the symphony orchestra (Drucker, 1988: 45-53). All three are knowledge-based institutions composed of highly skilled specialists whose performance is constantly informed by feedback from colleagues, customers and leaders.

When singling out the musical metaphor he describes the unique functioning of a symphony orchestra in an enlightened and passionate way (Drucker, 1988: 45, 48):

- A large symphony orchestra is even more instructive, since for some works there may be a few hundred musicians on stage playing together. According to organization theory then, there should be several group vice president conductors and perhaps a half-dozen division VP conductors. But that's not how it works. There is only the conductor-CEO – and every one of the musicians

plays directly to that person without an intermediary. And each is a high-grade specialist, indeed an artist.

- Because the “players” in an information-based organization are specialists, they cannot be told how to do their work. There are probably few orchestra conductors who could coax even one note out of a French horn, let alone show the horn player how to do it. But the conductor can focus the horn player’s skill and knowledge on the musicians’ joint performance. And this focus is what the leaders of an information-based business must be able to achieve.
- The quality of leadership exercised by a musical director and/or conductor is the core determinant of high-level orchestral performances.
- Additionally, the ‘intensity’ by which the whole orchestra performs, which is a rare combination of knowledge and intuition in bringing the score ‘alive’, weighs in the overall rating of artistic delivery.

Individual excellence coupled with team work – a function of the degree to which each musician is able to listen to the ensemble, without losing his/her personality – is a key factor in ‘transforming’ personal talent, group/section cohesion and orchestral alignment into a masterpiece of sublime musical interpretation.

Good – and wise – governance in Universities may well find inspiration in the orchestra as paradigm. Effective change strategies are not dissimilar from timely and appropriate ‘orchestrations’ of inner talents and energy pools that often subside under the diktats of University bureaucracies. And this predicament leads us directly into meaning as a fundamental asset for lasting transformation.

5.6 The quest for meaning

Meaning making is part of our human predicament. Being human - in its deepest essence – seeks understanding of life and making sense of things. Our common pursuit of transformation is, no doubt, a search for meaning.

This is a world we no longer fully grasp and cannot control. The tension between our neat models of how the world works and our actual experience of its messiness is raising fundamental questions in key areas of human understanding. These questions challenge the place of consciousness, our core concepts of learning and put to test our educational designs.

The same applies to institutions.

No University can expect to find a path toward lasting transformation without embarking in some sort of soul searching and value added conducive to accrued meaning making.

In past societies – stable, simple and repetitive – memory dominated over project; principles were handed on as immutable; exemplary models were preserved as archetypes. It was the primacy of structure over genesis.

In the new society – unstable, inventive and innovative – project is superimposed on memory; future dominates past; models are constantly questioned. It is now the primacy of genesis over structure.

The International Commission on Education for the 21st Century presented its proposal for a set of **new learnings** consisting of four fundamental pillars: Learning to Be, Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live Together (Delors, 1996).

Learning to Be takes on the nature of a timeless priority, already recognized in the Faure Report in 1972, that takes on the inner journey of each and every one as a process of spiritual and existential broadening that bestows a final meaning on life and on the pursuit of happiness.

Learning to Know is a form of learning that lies within the scope of scientific and technological progress. This pillar appeals to the urgent need of reacting to the multiplicity of sources of information, to the diversity of rich multimedia content, to new ways of knowing in a society that is closely interconnected.

Learning to Do aspires at connecting knowledge and skills, learning and competence, inert and active learning, codified and tacit knowledge, creative and adaptive learning. Learning by doing and Doing by learning² equip us to face an uncertain world and also the changing nature of work.

Learning to Live Together encompasses the extraordinary challenge to rediscover a meaningful relationship, to raise the thresholds of social cohesion, to make viable the sustainable foundations for community development. It contains the core values of civic life and identity-building within a context of multiple belongings.

To construct meaning is typically a culture-driven activity. As culture and its artefacts are products of both history and sociality, it is not surprising that by virtue of sharing its symbolic systems – our “communal tool kits” (Bruner, 1990: 11) – education for meaning becomes embedded into the inner spheres of University life, drama and transformation.

Universities must also better learn to learn to be, to know, to do, to live together.

In this respect, we advocate institutional transformations that aim at a complete value chain from raw data to information, knowledge, learning and meaning-making bridging the gulf between information access, knowledge gaps, learning inequalities and meaning-making disparities (Carneiro, 2008: 149-160).

This four stage value chain allows ascending from a supply-driven information society to a demand-driven knowledge society. Moreover, getting stocks of knowledge accumulation to generate flux of learning is a subsequent path in the upward ladder of value creation. Finally, when learning and metalearning ventures

² Landes provides a colourful description of a knowing strategy that was successfully applied by the Portuguese navigators in their 15th and 16th century voyages to the Indies in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (Landes, 1999)

are capable of enhancing meaning to sort out complexity, institutions may well be equipped to fly above the ‘groundfloor of life’ and dream with quantum leaps of quality in the direction of transformational paths.

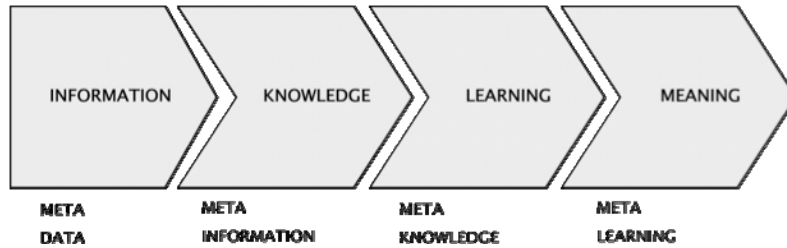


Figure 5-4: Value chain of institutional transformation

A truly inclusive education policy and purposeful learning strategy will overcome traditional dichotomies typical of a segregated long-cycle inspired by an industrial mode of organising school systems (Carneiro, 2007: 151-300).

Meaningful transformation can and will come alive when learning practices allow the ascending from simple to complex thinking, from the science of quantities to the science of qualities, from education as a product to learning as a service.

Are our Universities willing to take the voyage of structural and holistic transformation?

An ancient Sufi proverb says: “To those who are already stirring, the morning bell is a call to awakening. To those who are sound asleep it is nothing but a nuisance”.

Hopefully our Universities will listen to morning bells as an imperative to awakening.