



# Managing the Corporate University Learning Curve

Richard Dealtry

An Article in the Series  
**Optimising Demand-led Learning**



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## An Article in the Series Optimising Demand-led Learning

### Introduction by Richard Dealtry

Dear Reader,

I welcome you to this series of publications on "Optimising Demand-led Learning".

This current article in the series describes one of the important aspects that will lead to the optimising of your understanding of demand-led learning. Each publication takes a different perspective which, when combined together, presents a full picture of the demand-led scenario.

Your resulting understanding will help to optimise the position of each of the publications in the series and its role in managing a successful outcome.

Best regards,  
Richard

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## **Abstract**

This article reviews a Conference Process that was introduced to help Companies, Regional Development Organisations and Universities to evolve and share their perspectives on the active business led concept of the corporate university.

The conference forms part of an evolving initiative launched by the Copenhagen Business School. The conference, entitled Trends in Corporate Universities - September 2001, had an agenda that contained state-of-the-art presentations about the theory and practice of the corporate university concept and also company presentations about the progress they are making in evolving their particular corporate university applications.

The conference objective was aimed at raising the visibility of the potential of the corporate university and its capacity to renew and enhance organisational effectiveness and strategic development processes. From these observations and discussions it was expected that delegates would be in an informed position to evolve a realistic and sustainable vision of the corporate university and fully grasp its vital contribution as an engine for change and business development.

This article focuses on a conference process model, the Corporate University Learning Curve concept, which was introduced by Intellectual Partnerships Consulting to ensure that a viable context for unfolding the aims and objectives of corporate university best practice were fully realised.

## **Keywords**

Corporate University Blueprint  
Learning curve  
Learner-gate  
Learning management  
Best practice  
Change management  
Strategic learning  
Intervention



# Managing the Corporate University Learning Curve

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## Trends in corporate universities - the scene across Europe

Many companies, organisations and individuals are at different stages of evolution in their thinking and application of the corporate university concept - they are all somewhere on a learning curve. It is not, however, a very well defined learning curve. We know that it will be, and should be, a very different learning curve experience for each of those organisations who intend to traverse its heights as they search for their own unique company solutions and gain mastery over the all important business know-how in their particular business sectors.

It has been recognised that this is will not be a simple learning curve and the Center for Applied Management Studies, Copenhagen Business School (CBS-CAMS) are taking up a pivotal role in assisting companies along the corporate university learning curve journey. They have introduced a facilitating framework of research and networking in their country and region to assist in the evolution of thinking and realisation of these essential capabilities.

Their September 2001 "Trends in Corporate Universities" Conference brought together a wide cross section of senior executives from industry, government and academic communities, all with a keen interest and first hand concern for the future direction, management and quality standards of organisational based learning, knowledge management and management education.

The conference was hosted by Professor Laurids Hedaa, CBS-CAMS and Managing Director Peter Stolt from Copenhagen Business School - Centre for Continuing Education. An important aim of the conference was to foster the establishment of the Danish Association of Corporate Academies Partnership of Organisations (DACA\*PO).

Our role at the conference was to present the first conference paper and set the context within which all the DACA\*PO delegates could examine the developmental and cultural issues that the corporate university concept implies. And as the subject should be treated in an innovative if not creative way we prepared our presentation so as

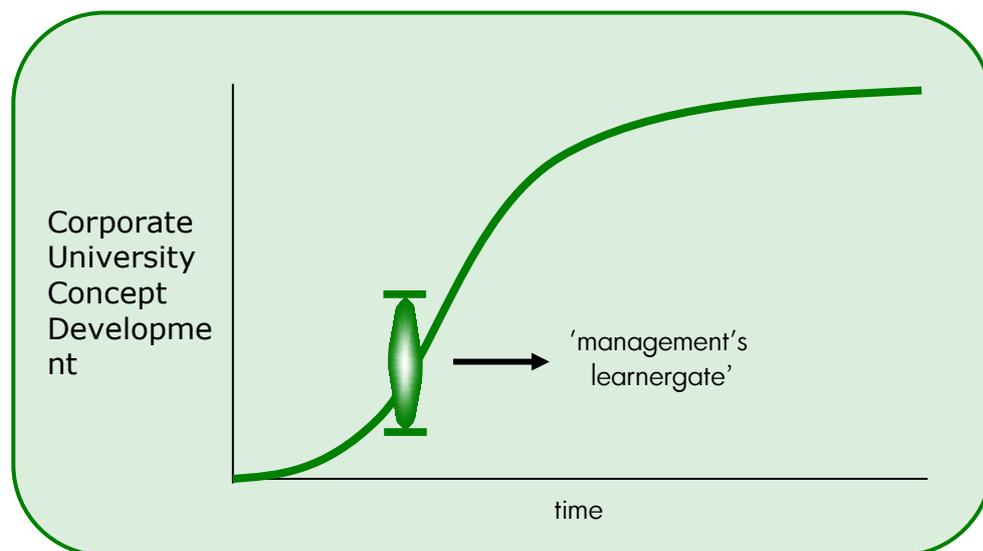
to provide everyone with an opportunity of thinking in a 'brand' new way.

This article focuses mainly on the approach that was used to stimulate the new thinking opportunity and the reflective points that we consider to be important for success in managing this transition.

## The corporate university learning curve

Conference delegates were asked to consider a typical learning curve, and to consider where they or their organisations lie along this educational learning pathway. Their respective positioning on the curve was denoted by the idea of a frontiers model, in this case a 'management learner-gate', beyond which there is a new business model landscape that contains all the properties and realities of the full corporate university concept.

Fig A – A typical learning curve



The emergent challenge is to characterise that concept comprehensively for their own companies and use it as a mind-share and planning base in their organisations for further internal and external intellectual partnership development.

Fig B - Thinking in discrete terms about educational models

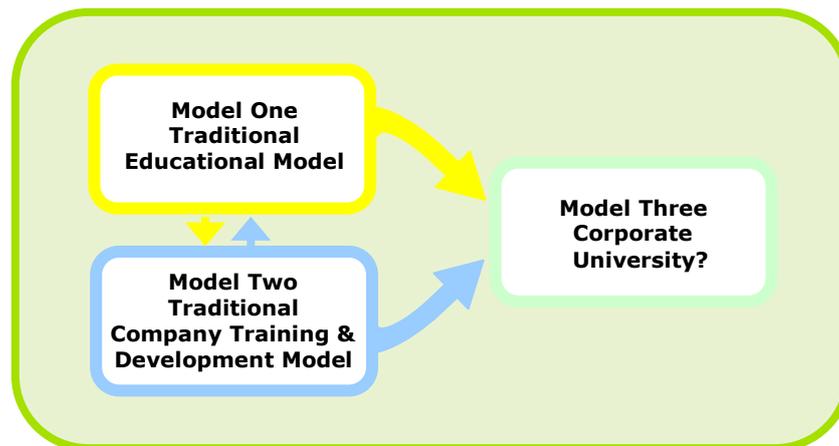


Figure B illustrates that beyond management's learner-gate there is possibly a third educational model manifesting itself which may contain elements of Model 1, the traditional educational model and Model 2, the traditional company training and development model.

Figs A(a) and B(b) describe abbreviated listings of the characteristics that define models 1 and 2 respectively.

Figure A(a)

**Model One  
Traditional Educational  
Model**

- characterised by -

- educational stages or steps
- delivered through institutions
- highly structured curriculum
- well-ordered learner groups of students
- gatekeepers of the knowledge
- an institutional hierarchy that takes all decisions
- rewards have intrinsic value and are variable

Figure B(b)

**Model Two  
Traditional Company  
Training & Development  
Model**

- characterised by -

- performance improvement and management development
- delivered through a specific function: training department/HR
- module-focused: defined content meeting organisational needs
- groups are selected according to identified needs or potential
- knowledge is business experience based
- functionally controlled
- rewards are tenuous - connected to career opportunities, remuneration packages.
- formal qualifications are not emphasised

The conference objective was to establish a new perspective on Model 3.

*Would Model 3 be very similar to Models 1 and 2, or would it be highly differentiated?*

There are many questions to be addressed concerning the roles of Models 1 and 2 in the context of the corporate university intervention and it is important to raise our level of understanding about possible connections and synergies between them before we can move forward through management's learner-gate.

For example, do we consider that Models 1 and 2 are competing or complementary ideas? Are there issues of subject relevance to organisational goals in terms of excellence and enterprise? What are their similarities and differences? What is the present state of their relationship? What bridging skills do we have in managing these two worlds? What is their respective cost effectiveness and return on investment? What are their strengths and weaknesses in relation to model 3?

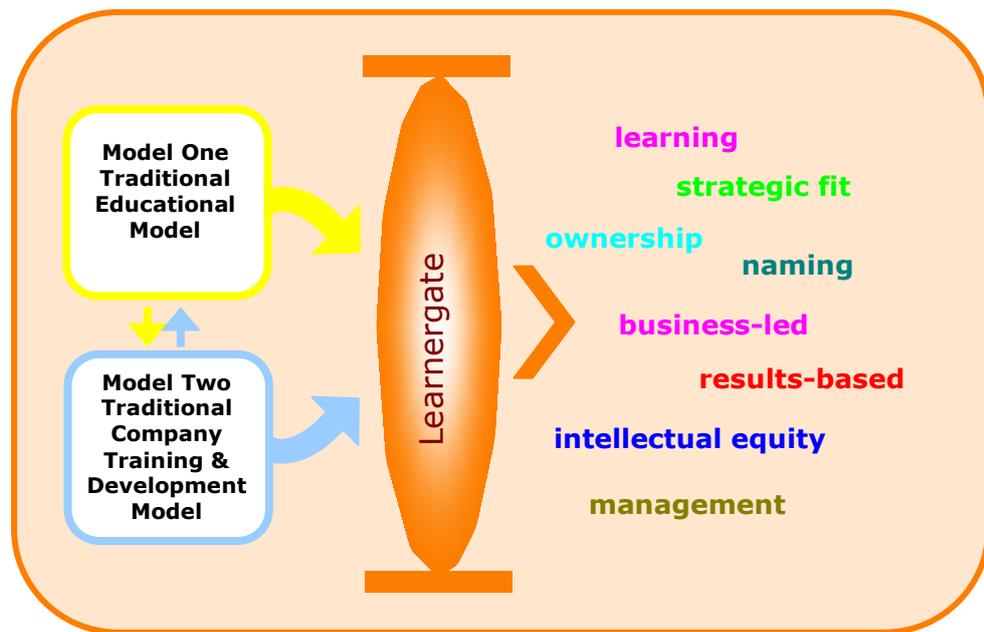
***Does Model 1 + Model 2 = Model 3***

Understanding the validity or invalidity of this equation is the first 'small step for mankind' along the corporate university learning curve.

To what extent will the past inform the future?

Figure C illustrates the fields of pulse issues beyond learner-gate in the organisational and business environments that our experience and research has uncovered as being very important areas for success in decision making. These fields of issue dynamics have an important bearing on and a critical influence over the educational properties and intellectual attributes that will optimise Model 3 for a given set of strategic conditions. If we can assess their relative importance and manage these strategic fit learning dynamics we can begin to formulate Model 3.

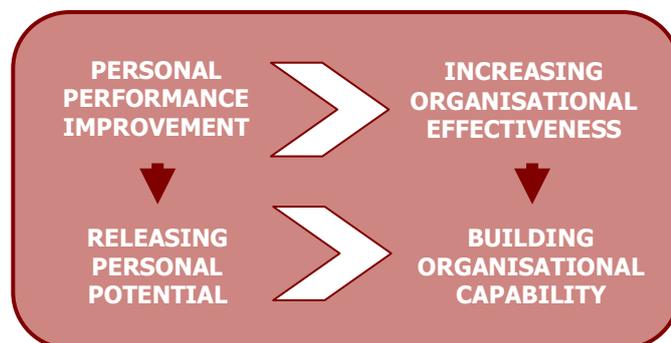
Figure C - A Dynamic Landscape - Optimising Model 3



To help us do this we have certain management guidelines that can provide a framework for assessing the relevance of Model 1 and 2 characteristics and their possible derivatives and also for innovating new advanced business-led learning paradigms.

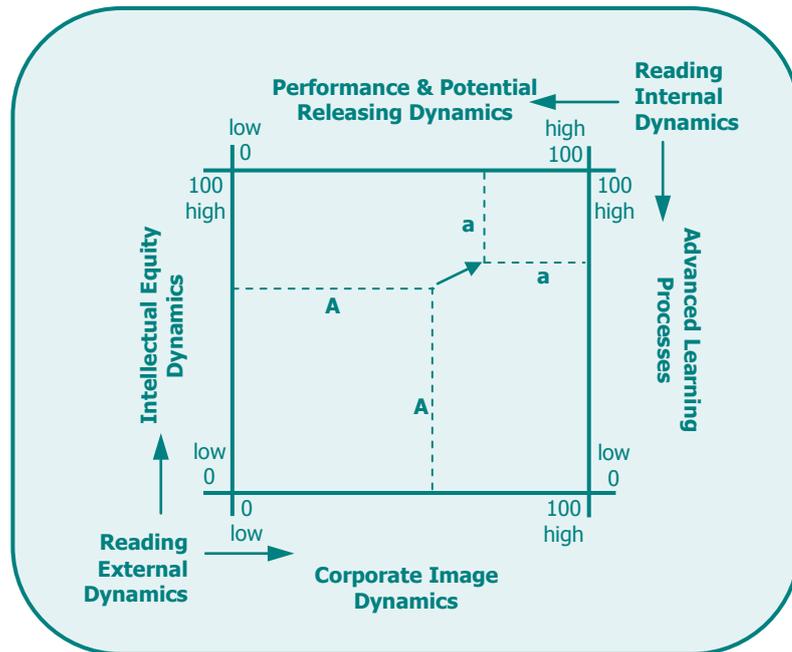
For example, beyond learner-gate we know that we must maintain ongoing investment thrusts in personal and organisational effectiveness and in capability development.

Fig D - Managing performance and potential



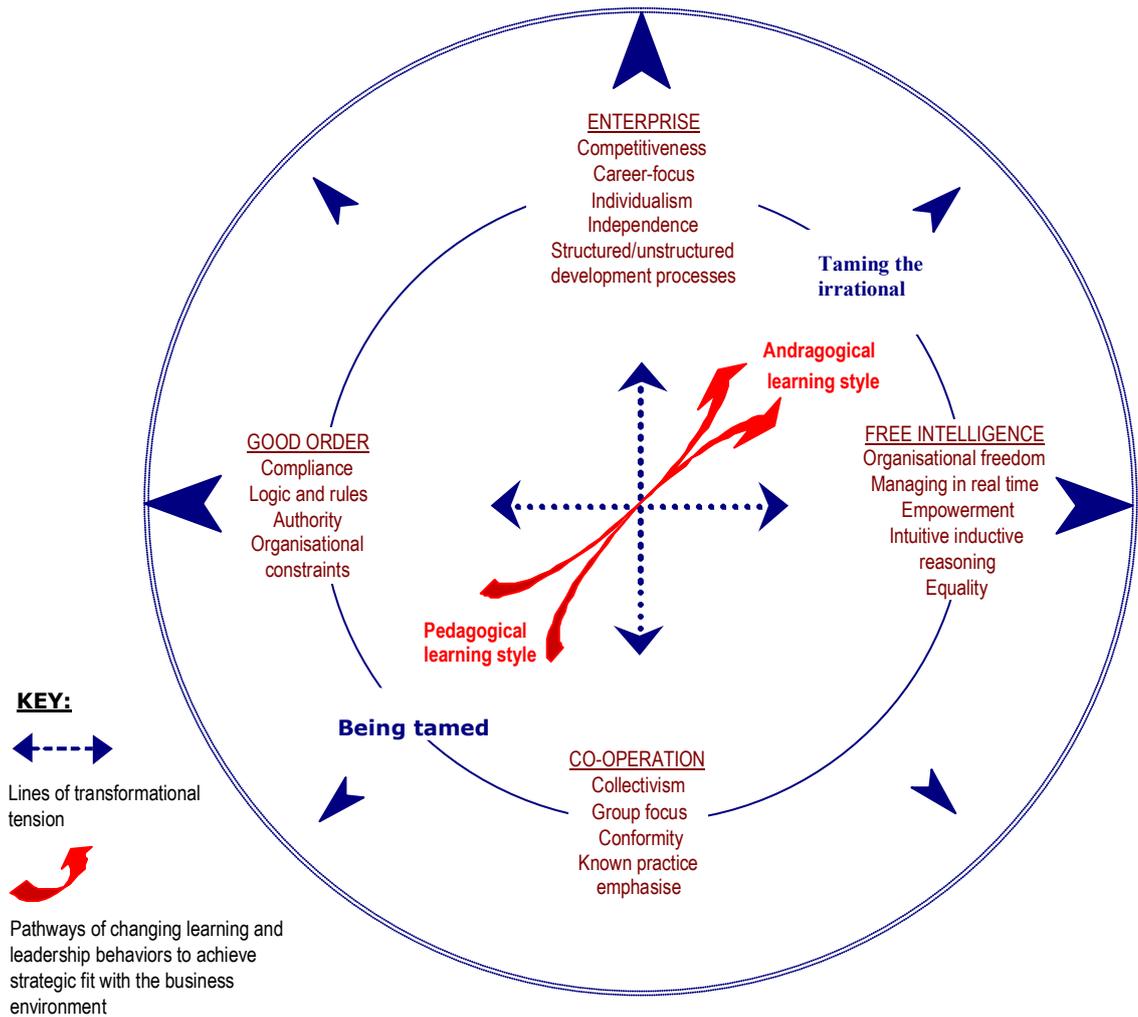
We know that intellectual development practice must be congruent with the strategic intellectual purpose of the business.

Fig E - Development gap analysis - intellectual practice and intellectual purpose



And we know that there is a turbulent background that is changing learning and leadership behaviors (Fig F), moving on from the spheres of good order and co-operation - *'being tamed behaviors'* - to moving onward and forward into brain rich executive action business cultures dominated by enterprise and free intelligence - *'taming the irrational behaviors'*.

Fig F - Pathways on changing learning and leadership behaviours



In Model 3's environment we are moving on from simple ideas of skills and competencies into a managerial environment where a large part of a businesses strategy is created by chance and opportunity and will be based upon rigorous strategic learning needs assessments and highly adaptive advanced focus learning capabilities.

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The visualisation and interaction of these models presents managers with an objective scenario of the present educational mindsets and the emergent possibilities beyond the gateway. These perspectives facilitate new thinking on a new or derived mental model of what is possible and should be emphasised in the future. The task beyond learner-gate is to cherry-pick and innovate to optimise Model 3 around the developmental issues facing the business.

*This leads to the realisation that the raison d'être and first strategic imperative of the corporate university intervention is that of defining Model 3, i.e. defining the menu not eating the meal!*

## The learning management lessons to be learnt

Table 1 lists many of the key subject areas that will contribute to the formulation of policy and purpose for the resolution of each of the primary pulse issues identified in Fig C.

Table 1 - Dynamics of pulse issues - influencing model 3

MODEL THREE			
<p><b>Learning Solutions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Classroom teaching</li> <li>Experiential learning</li> <li>Action learning</li> <li>E-learning</li> <li>Distributed learning</li> <li>Lifelong learning</li> <li>Learning infrastructure</li> <li>Learning resources</li> <li>External provision</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategic Fit</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>L &lt;-&gt; C</li> <li>In real time</li> <li>Reading &amp; righting issue dynamics</li> <li>Balancing HR investments</li> <li>&lt;&gt; Capability</li> <li>Who should learn, what, how, where and when</li> <li>Learning alliances</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ownership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Top management</li> <li>HR function</li> <li>Training &amp; development</li> <li>Corporate Affairs department</li> <li>Organisation</li> <li>Internal/external</li> <li>Board of Governors</li> <li>Independent body</li> <li>Intervention Strategy</li> </ul>	<p><b>Naming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning Organisation /Company</li> <li>Corporate University</li> <li>Enterprise School of Management</li> <li>(Business Sector) Academy</li> <li>'Company' School of Management</li> <li>'Industry' University</li> <li>&gt; &gt; &gt; the 'BRAND'</li> </ul>
<p><b>Business-led</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Needs of the business</li> <li>Needs of the organisation</li> <li>People performance needs</li> <li>People capabilities</li> <li>Competitive position</li> <li>Competitive objectives</li> <li>Shareholder expectations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Results-based</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Happy' sheets</li> <li>Assessment criteria /standards</li> <li>Feedback on performance</li> <li>Quality assurance</li> <li>Real assignments</li> <li>Payback</li> <li>Return on investment</li> <li>Premium rate knowledge</li> <li>Knowledge harvesting</li> </ul>	<p><b>Intellectual Equity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Internal perspective</li> <li>External perspective</li> <li>Differences</li> <li>Intellectual leadership in business sectors</li> <li>Intellectual properties</li> </ul>	<p><b>Management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Objectives of Model 3</li> <li>Intervention strategy</li> <li>Define properties</li> <li>Branding programme</li> <li>Engagement and communications</li> <li>Time scale</li> <li>Resourcing</li> <li>Project management</li> </ul>

All these influences for success have to be appraised and considered beneficially in terms of their possible contribution to Model 3 on the other side of management's learner-gate. A unique combination of these forces will shape the design and effectiveness of Model 3 in each organisation. These learning events represent the areas of new learning that have to be accomplished by management to make good sense of their intended intellectual enterprise and to maximise the inherent benefits of the corporate university concept.

Figure G illustrates the objective order that can be brought into a well-managed portfolio of corporate university issues and the

Corporate University Blueprint (Fig H) is the management process methodology introduced to facilitate this future-state strategic learning capability.

Figure G - Model 3 Integration

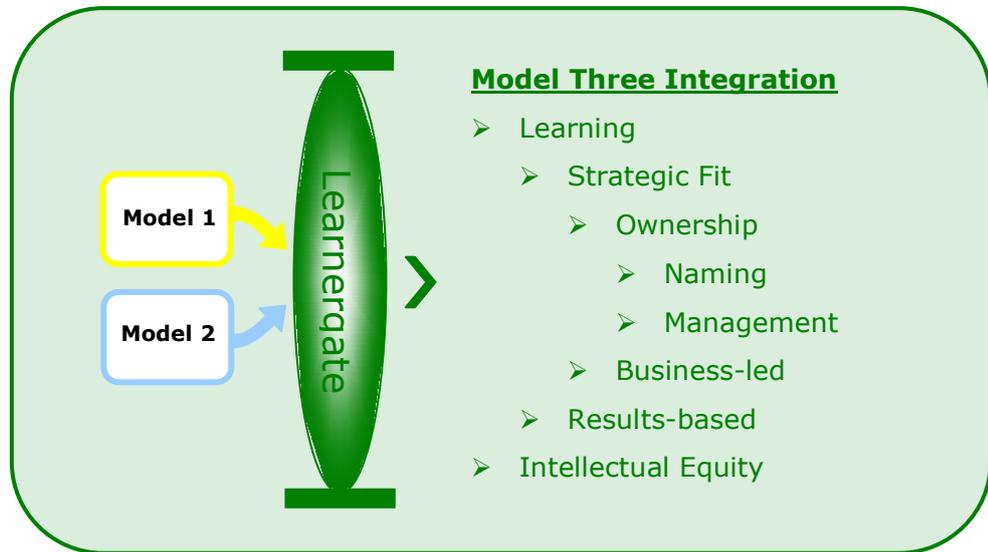
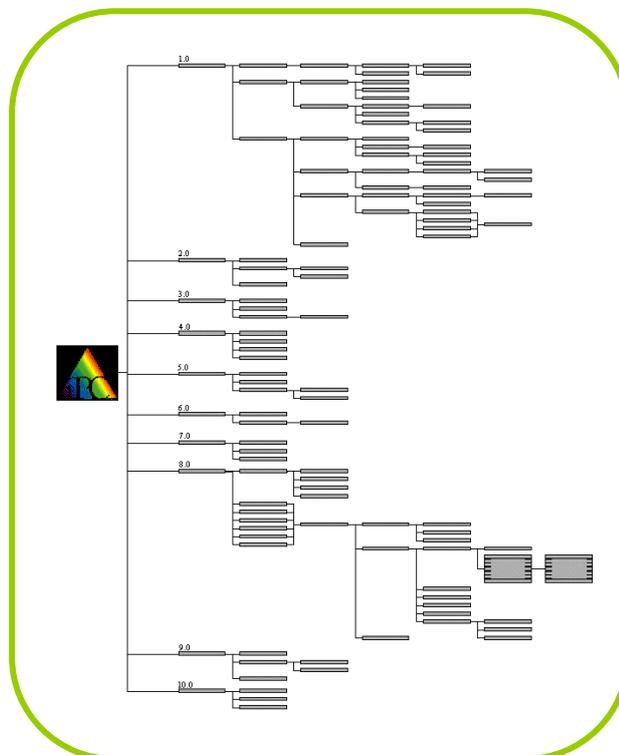


Figure H - The Corporate University Blueprint – a future-state advantage tool for Model 3



This concluded the contextual framework for the Conference presentation.

## Moving ahead - managing learning leadership

The company conference delegates made many interesting observations about their current programme of corporate university development, or more popularly named Corporate Academie, and its positioning on the learning curve.

Some indicated that they had at the present time accessed only a fraction of the potential available from the concept and were on the initial part of the curve. Business conditions were, however, pressurising them to make developmental gains for the resolution of the issues identified on the other side of their learner-gate.

In other company situations Model 2 was still largely in place, unblemished and alive and kicking, but with the new name. However, their presentations contributed further penetrating and valuable insights into the reality of the influencing issues for change.

These included factors connected with staff retention and company image as a respected employer of first choice, the need for a more global distribution of learning opportunities and how the ownership and commitment of top management to the knowledge working and new learning environment really matters. This latter point was emphasised by one delegate who commented:-

*"if top management look upon the Corporate Academy as a luxury or prestige trimming, you know that they have entirely 'lost the plot'. The changes we are making today in the way we develop and manage our people is now the most important investment any company can make both for the good times and the bad times".*

## Reflective points on process and potential

Recognising the need to formulate Model 3 for each company is very important. It is the first strategic step in the evolution of the corporate university. It has to draw upon the strengths of Models 1 and 2, possibly utilising them in a different setting or more creative and flexible way. There is a need, therefore, for people involved in the management of these transitions to un-learn and re-learn as part of their professional development.

The corporate university should ultimately aim to have a very practical effect in helping people at work and to realise their ambitions; in a previous managerial age this was called 'job-enrichment'. It is essentially about connecting with the motivations of individuals and their desire to achieve a new more inspirational and better way of working and for them to have opportunities to think intelligently in a secure learning environment where they can give full expression to their capabilities.

The learning curve pathway is a progressive dynamic state that can thrive on current issues to build and energise progress. But it is helpful to know as clearly as possible where you want to arrive. Blueprint Model 3 process simulations can very significantly assist in accelerating this process and provide direction without being prescriptive. Blueprint simulations create engaging shared mental images of the complete process and also the executive actions that have to be taken. They clarify the inter-relationships and dependencies between the many developmental strands that are involved in this intervention and ensure that there is an efficient communications forum that can be accessed at all levels.

There are significant barriers to be overcome in the transfer or differentiation of both Models 1 and 2 if that is the chosen strategy. The major hurdles have to do with organisation, structure and reward mechanisms more-so than content or capability. Organisational change barriers to new ideas are well known and it was of immense interest to note the devolved academic and business-centred structure at the Copenhagen Business School rather than the all too common divisive academic vs. administration functional structure.

Thought leadership is clearly an essential strand energising this platform of business development. The corporate university is an organisational intervention that calls for real commitment to doing things differently and better by everyone.

Progress along the early part of the learning curve can be fraught with situational semantic variation which is not uncommon when different worlds collide. However, by carefully listening to the research outcomes of previous Government, Academic and Company aligned projects there is a great deal of useful case history on the lessons to be learnt that need not be repeated.

This conference was a demonstration of leadership by the DACA as they move towards new visions of corporate university best practice and further programmes of professional development in managing the corporate university learning curve.

The educational models framework 1, 2 and 3 achieved a positive arena for the discussions about the past, the present and the future and served to demonstrate that the business education boundaries are well and truly on the move, moving outward, crossing over and merging to provide new levels educational opportunity in lifelong learning and continuing professional development. We conclude that, with this style and quality of the upcoming leadership at DACA\*PO the potential is now to hand for achieving greater intellectual and purposeful cohesion between companies, universities and government agencies.



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