STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING:
THE CASE OF MAKERERE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The strategic perspective in which an institution of higher learning is managed aims at ensuring that clear goals and objectives are specified by moving away from routine traditional orientation to management by considering in a systematic way, longer –term considerations of the very future of the institution. In the case of a higher institution of learning such as Makerere University, the Vice Chancellor, as the Chief Executive Officer, has to manage the institution with a sense of strategy where strategy is concerned with positioning the institution to face an increasingly uncertain future- in mind. The article argues that Makerere University, which over the last two or so decades, has expanded exponentially in terms of student numbers and programmes amidst scarce resources, requires its management to constantly have an idea of optimising resources to gain its objectives and by following instructions while taking into account the institution's externalities. Short of this key strategy, the University is bound to experience extreme difficulties in attaining its gaols and objectives as well as its mission and vision.

Introduction

The strategic perspective regarding the way in which an institution is managed considers its external environment. In so doing, it specifies clear goals and objectives and moves away from routine management tasks by considering, in a systematic way, longer-term considerations of the very future of the organisation.

Indeed, the term strategy itself addresses a crucial concern: positioning the organisation to face an increasingly uncertain future. Specifically, in the case of Makerere University, a Vice Chancellor, as an administrator, has to administer the institution with a sense of strategy in mind – i.e., by having an idea of optimising resources to gain objectives and by following instructions while taking into account external focus.

The strategic focus is a relatively new focus. It arises from the realisation that those supposed to be responsible for strategic planning and strategic management may not always be in a position to provide long-term strategic leadership for their organisations. This observation is what this paper intends to argue; that, for a long time Makerere University, as an institution of higher learning, has experienced serious difficulties in planning and managing its business strategically. The spontaneous mushrooming of courses in different Institutes, Faculties, and Departments, the rapidly increasing numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate students across disciplines, and the deficiency of lecture and office spaces as well as lecturers for the different courses and programmes, are all indicators that strategic management should become central to the way Makerere University is administered. To argue these standpoints, this article will begin by defining the term strategy and placing it within the public and private sector domains. Then, the key operative phrase, strategic management, will be comprehensively explained. The methods of developing a strategic management plan will be highlighted to aid in the understanding of how Makerere University conducts its business. It will attempt to answer the question; What approach does Makerere University use in managing itself strategically. The key challenges likely to be faced by Makerere University administrators in trying to plan and manage its affairs strategically will be highlighted. A conclusion will be drawn to wrap-up the key issues emerging from the discussion on strategic management and how it can be operationalised at Makerere University.

Strategy

Many writers have attempted to define the term "strategy". (Macmillan and Tampoe, 2000:12) One of the earliest definitions of strategy comes from the ancient Greek writer Xenophon (Cummings, 1993:134) who sees it as knowing the business you propose to carry out. In other words, this definition stresses that strategy requires knowledge of the business, an intention of the future, and an orientation towards action. This definition also emphasises the link between leadership and strategy formulation. Andrews (1971) agrees that strategy is "the pattern of major objectives, purposes or goals and essential policies or plans for achieving those goals, stated in such a way as to define what business the company is in or is to be in and the kind of company it is or is to be".

Hence, the place of strategy within any organisational set up is to try to specify what the results should be for the organisation and to set out how any achievements aggregate into its

purpose or mission. Bozeman and Straussman (1990) note that strategy involves dealing with the external environment, and the broad missions and objectives of organisations.

Environmental scan involves the detailed assessment of the organisation's internal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This would include items inside the organisation such as the skills of workers, managerial capabilities, nature of plant, financial structures, and the constraints of government. Items outside the organisation or external environment would include market structures and trends, other countries, the extent of technological change, threats from similar products or substitution, the capabilities of competitors, and anything that affects the very future of the organisation.

The mission of the organisation includes a clear definition of current and expected business scope, products, markets, and expectations over a period of a few years. The mission involves consideration of what business the organisation is in. In our context, a university is in the business of supplying educational service to the public as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Objectives are more specific aims resulting from the mission and environmental scan. Elements of strategy at a higher managerial level become objectives at a lower one. Indeed, Ansoff (1988: 54) observes that:

> Objectives are a management tool with many potential uses. In the operating problem they can be used for establishing performance standards and objectives for all organisational levels, for appraisal of performance, and for control decisions. In the administrative problem they can be used to diagnose deficiencies in the organisational structure ... the strategic problem, objectives are used as yardsticks for decisions on changes, deletions, and additions to the firm's product-market posture.

From the mission, environmental scan, and specific objectives, a business strategy plan can be derived for both the short and longer term, combined with resource allocation and performance measures.

Furthermore, Bozeman and Straussman (1990) argue that there are three major features of a strategic approach: defining goals and objectives, developing an action plan that mediates between the organisation and the environment, and designing effective methods of implementation. To Allison (1982), strategy involves establishing objectives and priorities for the organisation (on the basis of forecasts of the external environment and the organisation's capacities) and also devising operational plans to achieve these objectives.

Therefore, a key part of the administrative responsibility of a Vice Chancellor, or any strategic manager for that matter, is to determine the overall strategy and to set objectives of the organisation. Without strategy any organisation is without direction (Hughes 1994:169). Indeed, without strategy, day-to-day activities do not add up to any coherent goal. In fact, strategy is used to create focus, consistency, and purpose for an organisation by producing plans, ploys, patterns, positions, and perspectives that guide strategic action.

Strategy in the Private Sector

'Strategy' is a term deriving from the military, where it refers to the objective of winning the war, as opposed to 'tactics' – the lower-level objective of winning a particular battle.

Similarly, in the context of this paper, the Vice Chancellor is also at war because he or she has to utilise plans to use resources to meet core educational objectives. (Bracker 1989:303).

Applications of strategy in the private sector (including private educational institutions) are obvious enough, with there being considerable advantages to looking at the long-term and the external environment, rather than always considering more immediate problems. Hence, it is easy to see that strategic management fits the private sector and, if implemented well, would provide an organisation with an information base to make decisions that would not necessarily arise from normal operations. It helps an organisation to, at times, step back from the normal management process or the day-to-day operations and pose fundamental questions about the existence and the future of the organisation.

Strategy in the Public Sector

Public organisations do have long-term existences and problems in deciding focus. Hence, they could conceivably benefit from a strategic perspective, although some modification of the private sector perspective may be necessary. Strategic planning in the public sector is a phenomenon of the early 1980s, significantly later than its development in the private sector. In the public sector, strategic management is being adopted but, again, following the private sector with a gap of some years. Hence, strategic planning and strategic management are private sector concepts and it cannot be taken for granted that the ideas will work in the public sector as expected.

Nutt and Backoff (1992: 23) ague that:

> Strategic managers in the public sector should be wary of using private sector approaches that assume clear goals, profit or economic purposes, unlimited authority to act, secret development, limited responsibility for actions, and oversight through market mechanisms that signal financial results.

In public organisations, many of these private sector assumptions are not valid. Early formulations of strategy in the public sector tended to commit all these sins, but the more recent movement towards strategic management, may prove the most promising approach, as it has done in the private sector over the years. But what is strategic management?

Strategic Management

In the 1980s, strategic planning started to be replaced by 'strategic management' – a more refined form that incorporates the strategic planning function, but extends it much further. The difference between strategic planning and strategic management is that the former is focused on making optimal strategy decisions, while the latter is focused on producing strategic results: new markets, new products and/or new technologies.

Strategic management, therefore, is more comprehensive and rather than merely drawing up a plan, it aims at integrating planning with all the other parts of the organisation. In fact, Hax and Majluf (1984) argue that:

> Strategic management has, as an ultimate objective, the development of corporate values, managerial capabilities, organisational responsibilities, and administrative systems which link strategic and operational decision-making, at all hierarchical levels, and across all businesses and functional lines of authority in a firm. Institutions which have reached this stage of management development have eliminated the conflicts between long-term

development and short-term profitability. Strategies and operations are not in conflict with one another, but they are inherently coupled defining the managerial tasks at each level in the organisation. This form of conducting a firm is deeply anchored in managerial style, beliefs, values, ethics, and accepted forms of behaviour in the organisation, which make strategic thinking congruent with the organisation culture.

Conceptually, therefore, strategic management aims to extend the strategic vision throughout all units of the organisation, encompassing every administrative system. Instead of being mechanistic, it recognises the central role played by individuals and groups and the influence of corporate culture. (Toft, 1989:6-7).

Furthermore, strategic management also aims to integrate the planning function with the overall management task. Strategic planning involves analysing the environment for opportunities or threats, and formulating strategic plans to exploit these opportunities or cope with threats. Strategic management includes these two aspects of strategic planning and extends strategy development to include strategy implementation and strategy control.

Bozeman and Straussman (1990:29-30) see four aspects or principles to strategic management. First, is concern with the long-term. Second, is the integration of goals and objectives into a coherent hierarchy. Third, is the recognition that strategic management and planning are not self-implementing. Fourth, is an external perspective emphasising not adapting to the environment but anticipating and shaping of environmental change.

Furthermore, Eadie (1989:171) notes that strategic management includes the following: 1) An action orientation – an action orientation is to make sure that any document has built-in processes of implementation, including detailed action plans, schedules, accountabilities, and specified costs; 2) recognises the importance of design – design involves matching desired outcomes with the processes to achieve them so that what an organisation accomplishes through the strategic management process and how quickly these accomplishments are to be achieved are obviously tied to its capability, including human and financial resources; and 3) Recognises the importance of the human factor – management takes place within a human setting. Therefore, every member of the organisation should be brought on board for the organisation to achieve its goals and objectives.

Viewed from a university perspective, university managers, and, indeed, the Vice Chancellor, play a crucial role in strategic management. In fact, the functions of the university administrators include achieving the institution's goals and objectives, developing programmes, establishing and coordinating the organisation, managing resources, making representation to community groups, and appraising both the processes and the outcomes (Campbell et al, 1983:68-69). Of course, the implementation of these functions will vary according to the position the administrator occupies. It will also depend on the strategic management plan that has been developed by the university. Many times, however, university managers do not take time off to review the plans they have developed; most often they add new plans onto old ones in a rather cumulative way.

The Strategic Management Plan

Strategic management includes strategic planning and the formulation of a plan. Six things have to be considered in order to develop a strategic management plan (Nutt and Backoff, 1992:152). First, it is important to depict the organisation's historical context in terms of trends in its environment, its overall direction, and its normative ideals – noting how they have changed in the past and how they are likely to change in the future (organisations have a history and a culture, both of which need to be considered in formulating strategy).

Second, there is need to assess the immediate situation in terms of current strengths and weaknesses and future opportunities and threats - i.e., by conducting a SWOT analysis.

The third thing that needs to be done is to develop an agenda of current strategic issues to be managed – i.e., by developing a logical framework (logframe) of activities. Fourth, there is need to design strategic options to manage priority issues. Fifth, the strategic options in terms of stakeholders affected and resources required – i.e., by conducting a stakeholder analysis – need to be assessed.

Finally, implement priority strategies by mobilising resources and managing stakeholders – stakeholders could prove vital in the implementation of strategy since they have a 'stake' in what goes on in the organisation or school. Stakeholders are decision-makers within the organisation and its environment who have an interest in organisational performance and can help or hinder the choice and implementation of strategies. Stakeholders must, therefore, be brought along for the strategy to succeed.

However, it is not easy to implement a strategic management plan once developed. There are several challenges that need to be surmounted. The challenges are discussed hereunder.

Brief History of Makerere University

Makerere University was first established in 1922 as a technical school. In June 1922, the school was renamed Uganda Technical College. It opened its door to 14 day students who began studying carpentry, building and mechanics. The College was soon offering various other courses in Medical Care, Agriculture, Veterinary Sciences and Teacher Training.

In 1937, the College started developing into an institution of higher education offering post-school certificate courses. In 1949, it became a University College having a special relationship with the College of London. It soon became a College for the whole of Eastern Africa, offering courses leading to General Degrees of the University of London.

With the establishment of the University of East Africa on 29th June 1963, the period of special relationship with the University of London came to a close thus instituting the degrees of the University of East Africa. On July 1 1970, Makerere University became an independent national University of the Republic of Uganda offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses leading to its own awards.

Today, Makerere University has twenty Faculties/ Institutes/ Schools offering both Day and Evening and External Study programmes to a student body of around 3,000 postgraduates. It is also a very active center for teaching and research.

The University Council is the supreme governing body of the University. It is composed of Ex-Officio and appointed or elected members. The University administration is composed of the University Council, Senate, and Central Administration. The Central Administration is composed of the Office of the Vice-Chancellor, the Office of the University Secretary, the Office of the Academic Registrar, Convocation, Finance Department, and the Office of the Dean of Students. The Senate is the chief academic organ of the University.

All these organs of the University are expected to engage in the strategic management of the University. Although this is the case and given that the University has faired generally well amidst the many constraints, it still faces several challenges. To this discussion I now turn.

Challenges of Implementing Strategic Management at Makerere University

Here, implementation refers both to the implementation of strategic management and the implementation of any strategic plan. Both of these will certainly involve changes within the organisation itself. The following are the implementation challenges.

First, it has to be acknowledged that Makerere University is aware of the external environment within which it is operating and especially the way the market is demanding for certain skills – hence the mushrooming number of courses. Nearly all Faculties or Institutes or Departments are busily thinking of new courses to introduce to attract the bludgeoning demand. However, the University still falls short of positioning itself to face the uncertain future. For instance, there is marked haphazardness in the way courses are introduced. Secondly, some of the courses have not caused many of the students to fend for themselves. Although the University has developed a five-year (2001-2005) Strategic Plan, it still faces a daunting task in terms of planning and management. Clearly, there are symptoms that show that the University is groping in the dark regarding its future direction despite its motto: "we build for the future".

Despite the fact that managers in Makerere University generally know what business they are in for, it does not, however, seem to be the case that they are quite clear of the future nor the concrete action they should put in place to address the prevailing bottlenecks. This is despite the fact that all Faculties, Institutes and Departments having done Strengths, SWOT (Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. However, with regard to SWOT analysis, it is not yet clear as to the extent to which the University Strategic Plan, which is an aggregate of the Strategic Plans of the Faculties, Institutes and Departments, has been operationalised in the day-to-day management of the University. Although the University is funding some of its academic staff in various Universities especially in South Africa and others are being funded by donors in other Universities, the number of academic staff that possess requisite skills in the area of strategic planning and management are still inadequate.

Furthermore, although the University and the Faculties, Institutes and Departments Mission and Vision statements are entrenched in their Strategic Plans, some of their respective academic and administrative members of staff have not imbibed them as corporate and organisational cultures worthy of day-to-day business practice. Routine and past practices tend to inform more of what is happening on the ground than of the systematic use of Strategic Plans.

Indeed, some academic and administrative members of the Faculties, Institutes and Departments do not cohere and thereby fail to act as a team in the conduct of their daily unit operations. Hence, objectives of these units and, indeed, that of the University remain vague to such members. In such situations, objectives cease to serve as a management tool. This perhaps explains why some decisions in these units generally tend to be made in haste thereby affecting implementation to the extent that functionally the University suffers from ineffectiveness and inefficiency.

Perhaps the way in which most times Makerere University attempts to manage its decisions haphazardly can be explained by the fact that it is a public institution. This is despite the fact that practically the University is more or less operating as a private sector institution driven on the basis of generating revenue through the commercialisation or privatisation of its programs. Probably this mode of behaviour is because Makerere University has over-emphasised the commercial side of the enterprise than the service side. There is little focus on how private sector enterprises (which are, by and large, profit oriented) are managed.

Specifically, the University does not seem to clearly define its mega-goals, it is highly bureaucratic, it is lax in the way it sometimes acts, and it finds difficulties to cope with the governmental and market driven pressures for introducing courses demanded by the market. Hence, the need for integrating planning throughout the University is, therefore, of paramount importance.

Coupled with this fact is the need to ensure that all members of the University community understands its corporate Mission, Vision, and culture. This may, however, not be a simple task to accomplish in the short run. There is, therefore, need to design a systematic programme that can enable the members of the University community to internalise what the University stands for. The current mode where members end up being compartmentalised in their respective Faculties, Institutes and Departments as well as associations such as Makerere University Academic Staff Associations (MUASA), support staff, and the student's Guild, is therefore untenable. Of course all these malfeasance affect the way Makerere University sees its future whose motto is "we build for the future". Presently, though, Makerere University seems to be more short term oriented than long term oriented.

Second, implementation of strategic management as a practice is proving difficult at Makerere University because of multiple influences from stakeholders, and authority limits. The *locus* of power is therefore fluid. For instance, sometimes, it would appear that power resides in the Government of Uganda; which it should. At other times, it would appear that it is the University Council that has the power to call the shots by virtue of being the key decision-making organ of the University. At other times, it would appear that it is the donors, because of their funding to the University, that have the power. This fluidity has frequently influenced the operations of the University. The *locus* of power has to be clearly defined before full implementation of the University's Strategic plan begins. Other primary stakeholders such as parents need to be integrated in the way the University runs its business.

Third, implementation is turning out to be challenging especially with regard to convincing staff that a strategic focus is useful and that the changes to follow will be beneficial to them in the long run. This is why usually there is strong opposition to Strategic Plans or major resolutions arrived at from Associations such as Makerere University Academic Staff Association (MUASA). In most cases, when new plans and decisions are formulated, a section of the University community are not involved since they have not been effective participants. Yet organisations contain people. They have a culture, and convincing people or changing cultures are processes that need to be managed and not assumed. In the past, strategic planning models tended to focus on the steps involved without any consideration that there were people involved. Eadie (1989:171) rightly notes the significance of the human factor in the success of strategic management in the following words:

> People ... are ... more important to the success of strategic planning than are the mechanics of the planning process ... Since people learn to identify issues and formulate strategies, considerable attention is now being given to the development of the human resources as a key element in strategic management applications. Also, recognising the benefits of collective effort in both strategy formulation and implementation, we ... view management team building as crucial to strategic management success.

Hence, the process cannot simply be imposed; there must be ownership of the plan. Stakeholders need to be managed. Whereas the Strategic Plans drawn up by the different units or Departments of the University used the participatory approach, this was only with regard to the design process. At the implementation stage, it was basically left to the Strategic Planning Committees of the units that comprise of about six members each as well as the University administration. It is therefore, not surprising that most (if not all) strategic plans have not been implemented even up to fifty percent level.

The fourth challenge at Makerere University is usually having a separate planning branch to carry out the strategic management task. At Makerere University, the Planning and Development Department (PDD) is charged with the University's planning function. This is not the best way of formulating any strategy, as other parts of the organisation feel no ownership of it. It is better to have a strategic management team comprising of five or ten managers, including the chief executive (Vice Chancellor), but also including managers from levels below (such as Directors of Institutes and Deans) top management who are closer to the University's operations. On its part, the major constraints affecting the PDD are lack of funds to implement the plans and the failure to recruit top level staff. At present, there are two vacancies of Deputy Directors and the University has not yet advertised these jobs thus affecting the day-to-day operations of the Department.

The fifth challenge facing Makerere University is being able to assess the interests and power centers within the organisation. The strategic management group in Makerere University is made up people who represent interests (for example, students, parents, the Ministry of Education and Sports, the University community, donors, et-cet-era) and power centers internal and external to the University and which becomes the key source of ideas about change and how to make the change within it. Hence, it will require the University to undertake a serious SWOTG analysis of its current status. Otherwise, it will always assume that things are on course whereas not as it seems to be the case today.

The sixth challenge is to introduce strategic management in Makerere University that has expanded phenomenally and rapidly within a short spell of time. Therefore, to change such an organisation into a dynamic organisation – one with expectation of change – requires a complete change of culture; again, a process that cannot be achieved overnight. The main aim of strategic management is to incorporate strategic thinking into management at all stages, instead of undertaking a one-off planning exercise to produce a document that may not be used. Indeed, casual observation now shows that most Strategic Plans have not been implemented as planned. All that now happens is that the individual strategic plans are reviewed annually as a matter of routine and little, if at all, tends to change for the better as a result of these plans. In fact, the culture at Makerere University has largely remained conservative at the expense of being dynamic and responding to the increasingly challenging needs arising from the environment.

The seventh challenge is that strategic management should not be initiated or forced in a rigid way. Instead, it should be implemented through updating of the management plan at regular intervals or by seeing strategic planning as a continuous rather than a cyclical process. In a time of rapid change, environmental scanning and strategy formulation should be seen as ongoing activities if an organisation is to respond effectively to both threats and opportunities (Eadie 1983:449) In addition, the plan should not be the main product, but rather the process of thinking about the organisation in a strategic way. Makerere University is too bureaucratic to the extent that plans are developed and implemented from above in a hierarchic way to the extent that there is hardly serious consideration, at least at the implementation phase, of strategic plans from Faculties and Institutes. In fact, what seems to be happening today in the management of the University is that it is being forced to respond to donor pressures for change rather than seeing change as an inevitable requirement for its own survival and growth.

The eighth challenge of strategic management at Makerere University is that it has the tendency of seeing strategic planning as a mere symbolic or ornamental enterprise; an activity that has to be undertaken anyway! Yet a strategic plan should be seen as having an impact on practical management. In other words, the output of strategic management process should not be a mere document but must be seen to be causing a realistic change in management; it must translate ideas into concrete reality in which the teaching and learning process can be carried out as smoothly as possible and in a qualitative way. In Makerere University, strategic plans

turn out to be mere documents meant to give an impression that something is being done. At the implementation level, new policies usually take precedent.

The last challenge is the availability of sufficient information to enable a plan to be developed. There may be a bias towards measurable activities in the strategic plan, to the cost of activities that are not. Staff may be inadequately trained and there is always the problem that even when produced, the strategic plan gathers dust on a shelf and is not taken as meaningful by the staff. An awareness programme that enlightens the staff on cascading strategic management in an organisation could form a starting point. For instance, at Makerere University, some Departments and Faculties are inundated with huge numbers that they are not clear about the number of undergraduate students they have! The tedious registration process and payment of tuition fees that students go through till the middle of the semester is yet another indicator that the University hardly takes strategic management seriously.

In sum, however, none of these challenges should be seen as too impossible to surmount as to make a strategic perspective useless. They may be a caution against expecting too much and to point to the need for careful implementation with stakeholders. Hence, any strategic planning process is worthwhile only if it helps key decision-makers to *think* and *act* strategically. In fact, strategic planning is not an end in itself, but merely a set of concepts to help managers or administrators make important decisions and take important actions. Therefore, introducing a strategic perspective into any organisation is valuable if it is done sensibly, not too rigidly, involving stakeholders, and as an aid to management rather than being an end in itself.

Conclusion

An enhanced concern and appreciation with strategy is part of the modern managerial approach. Without strategy, no organisation can automatically guarantee its future existence. Even if it may not face the immediate threat of going out of business if a product does not sell, the organisation will surely one day have to think and act strategically in order to survive and prosper. Strategic management and planning are, therefore, useful tools for management, although they may not have proved to be a panacea. Nevertheless, thinking about the future is a useful exercise in any organisation. If the major aim of strategic planning is to assist in the provision of information, then it should prove useful. Thus, Makerere University should realise that strategic management should not be introduced in an overly rigid fashion. The process should be gradual and incorporate all stakeholders. Also, strategic management and planning should not be done once. It is the planning *process* and not the plan itself which is important; that is, the use of strategic concepts allow the organisation from top management down to develop a shared vision for the future. It does not guarantee that mistakes will not be made. Strategic planning and strategic management simply give some direction and purpose to organisations.

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