

FORMULATING STRATEGIC PLANNING IN UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The process of strategic planning permits universities to determine their respective vision and mission. Once these have been established, it is imperative to evaluate the kind of resources at a university's disposal, and to conduct environmental analysis. Failure to plan could drive institutions into uncharted waters, which could be detrimental to their sustainability. Universities have embraced the idea of strategic management from business in order to gain a competitive advantage, and provide value to stakeholders. The purpose of this study was to investigate the way in which academic Heads of Departments (HoDs) engage in strategic planning. A qualitative research approach was employed to understand the role that these HoDs play while formulating a strategy in their respective departments. A case study research method was chosen to identify the participants, and data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, as well as through document analysis. To ensure the credibility and dependability of the study, the same questions were posed to all of the participants. A thematic analysis technique was used to analyse the data. The results revealed that the university at which the research was conducted promoted a direct, or top-down approach in formulating their strategy. As such, the academic HoD's conformed to the university's strategy. Future research should focus on the effectiveness of a strategy that incorporates a bottom-up, as well as a top-down approach.

Keywords: Heads of departments, resource-based view, strategic planning, strategic formulation, SWOT analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Persistent changes in the higher education landscape are spurred by rigorous competition and the need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to provide greater value to stakeholders, such as the national government, that offer considerable monetary support to these institutions. This has obliged universities' management to put concerted efforts into, and a focus on strategic planning (Williams, 2021). Strategic planning has appeared as an essential management instrument in the university setting (Albon et al., 2016). In particular, educational development centres view strategic planning as being a potentially valuable undertaking as this process

assists in communicating the unit's value to the organisation. It further allows them to establish priorities, and illuminate future prospects. The significance of strategic planning in higher education has been established in recent years. This is due to the overarching need to attain quality, uniqueness, sustainability, and resilience within a context that is broadly competitive, whether operating as a public or private institution (Inga et al., 2021).

In HEIs, strategic planning provides potential as well as prospects for managers to act proactively in anticipation of the future, become accustomed to technology, and become accustomed to the environment in total (Yaakob et al., 2019). Goldman and Salem (2015) explain that HEIs regularly find themselves in a competitive marketplace, determined to attract highly esteemed scholars, top-notch students, and funders, as well as to expand their prominence and prestige. This kind of environment could enable universities to maintain stability in a fluctuating environment, and respond constructively to external threats (Thamrin and Pamungkas, 2017).

Typically, strategic planning has been central to organisations in the commercial sector (Uzarki and Broome, 2019). Nevertheless, that has changed as universities now incorporate this practice. There was a period during which governmental financial support and research funding somewhat declined, and tuition caps became prevalent. Thus, it was obvious that HEIs, like in industry, needed to make critical decisions on how to manage resources more efficiently, particularly during financially restricted times.

The advent of strategic planning in higher education coincided with the challenges experienced in many HEIs in the 1970s and 1980s, when student enrolment fluctuated, student demographics started to change, and subsidies became inconsistent (Hilton, 2012). Strategic planning assists universities to consider the challenges experienced, and derive a solution to conquer these challenges (Williams, 2021). For instance, there has been an increase of unemployment in graduates, potential students from different backgrounds experiencing restricted access to HEIs, and inadequate financial resources to fund teaching, learning, and research.

Previously, universities' strategic plans often concentrated on internal organisational matters, human resources, and the development of documents that described the university's vision, mission, and value to society. However, these plans contained insufficient or unreasonable objectives for change (Williams, 2020). Strategic planning was frequently considered as a symbolic exercise, and projected as a profile-raising mechanism for the university in partial recognition of external pressures or strategies to acclimatise to imminent challenges. Haan (2014) asserts that in universities, strategic planning is viewed as a rhetorical, makeshift device rather than a useful template for action. Hinton (2012) avers that initially, the

strategic plan in HEIs was considered as an instrument to articulate the institutional mission and vision, assist in prioritising resources, and stimulate organisational focus. Consequently, many early strategic planning efforts generated documents that explained the institution, however, these did little to inspire the process.

Strategic planning is an involved, sophisticated, and complicated process that steers an institution into uncharted terrains. It does not offer a ready-to-use template for goal attainment, instead, it provides institutions with a structure for responding to demands, and creating solutions to the challenges encountered (David, 2011). However, it is important to be aware of the potential pitfalls, such as: (a) Using strategic planning to influence decisions and gain control over resources, (b) Conducting strategic planning only to comply with the regulatory requirements, (c) Hurriedly moving from mission development to strategy formulation, (d) Failing to communicate the plan to employees, who continue to work without bringing new developments to the institution, (e) Senior management making numerous spontaneous decisions that contradict the formal plan, and (f) Senior management merely passively supporting the strategic planning process.

Research conducted on the Chinese Higher Education Institutions Strategic Planning Survey has revealed that there was no difference between different types of universities, or at different levels within a university in terms of formulating a five-year plan. Alternatively, there were noticeable differences in terms of formulating a specialised plan and a medium- and long-term plan (Hu et al., 2018). HEIs in China are stratified in terms of institutional missions, with university management being the major influencer. Of note, while most of their HEIs attribute great importance to mission explanation, many were not keen on discovering how to implement the set goals. A study conducted at the Duke University School of Nursing revealed that the Dean of the Faculty individually worked with consultants to create a strategic plan. However, the staff realised that not all of the departments were able to function effectively due to limited resources and fiscal constraints.

Most South African universities continuously develop five-year strategic plans, however, there are limited studies on the formulation thereof, particularly in academic departments. Recent studies in South Africa have focused on the design and implementation of a strategic plan in primary schools (Van Wyk, 2014), factors that influence successful strategic planning (Bosire, 2017), and the analysis of the strategic process of planners and communication practitioners (Hadji, 2020). The purpose of this study was to investigate the manner in which academic departments at the university under study formulate their strategic planning. Furthermore, the study intended to examine how these academic departments developed their mission, values, and set objectives. As a result, the following questions were addressed: (a)

How do academic departments formulate strategic planning? (b) How are values recognised in the department? (c) What approach do academic departments use to set objectives and ensure the successful implementation thereof?

RESOURCE-BASED VIEW THEORY

According to the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory, resources are essentially what assist an institution to exploit opportunities and offset threats (David, 2011). The fundamental premise of RBV is that the combination, magnitude, and nature of an institution's internal resources ought to be well-thought-out in order to derive strategies that can produce a sustainable competitive advantage. The theory emphasises that it is beneficial for an institution to pursue a strategy that is not implemented by any other rival institution. Louw and Venter (2021) clarify that RBV is a theoretical viewpoint for understanding the manner in which competitive advantage is accomplished in institutions, and maintained over a period of time. This view suggests that, when broken down to their parts, institutions are conceptualised groupings of resources that are differently dispersed across the organisation, and can be used to implement value – generating strategies and venturing into new market opportunities.

Pearce and Robinson (2013) highlight that RBV is employed by an institution to analyse and identify its strategic advantages. This is done by scrutinising its distinctive combination of assets, skills, proficiencies, and other intangible elements. Hitt et al. (2015) explain that the RBV framework assumes that every institution is an assortment of incomparable resources and competencies. The fundamental premise of RBV is that institutions vary in fundamental practices; each institution holds a matchless bundle of resources – tangible and intangible assets, and institutional competencies to utilise their assets (Ehler and Lazenby, 2019; Pearce and Robinson, 2013).

STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Greek verb “*strategos*” means “army leader or general”, and the idea of *stratego* refers to conquering an opponent by effectively using the available resources. The term strategy comes from the Greek term “στρατηγία” (“*strategia*”), which symbolises “head-quarter, command, military art” (Louw and Venter, 2021; Perova, 2015). This leads to “strategists” being interpreted as leaders or commanders of an army. This word is derived from the combination of “*stratus*”, which signifies “army, host”, and “*agos*”, which means “head, chief”, derived in turn from “*ago*”, which implies “will, lead, and leader”. The term strategy thus has its origins in the military (Hitt et al., 2015; Horwath, 2006), however, modern conceptions originated in

the business practices of the early twentieth century (Albon et al., 2016). The notion of strategic planning originated around the 1950s and mid-1960s, with business leaders embracing it as the most desirable approach to improving competitive advantage (Mintzberg, 1994), and solving problems (David, 2011).

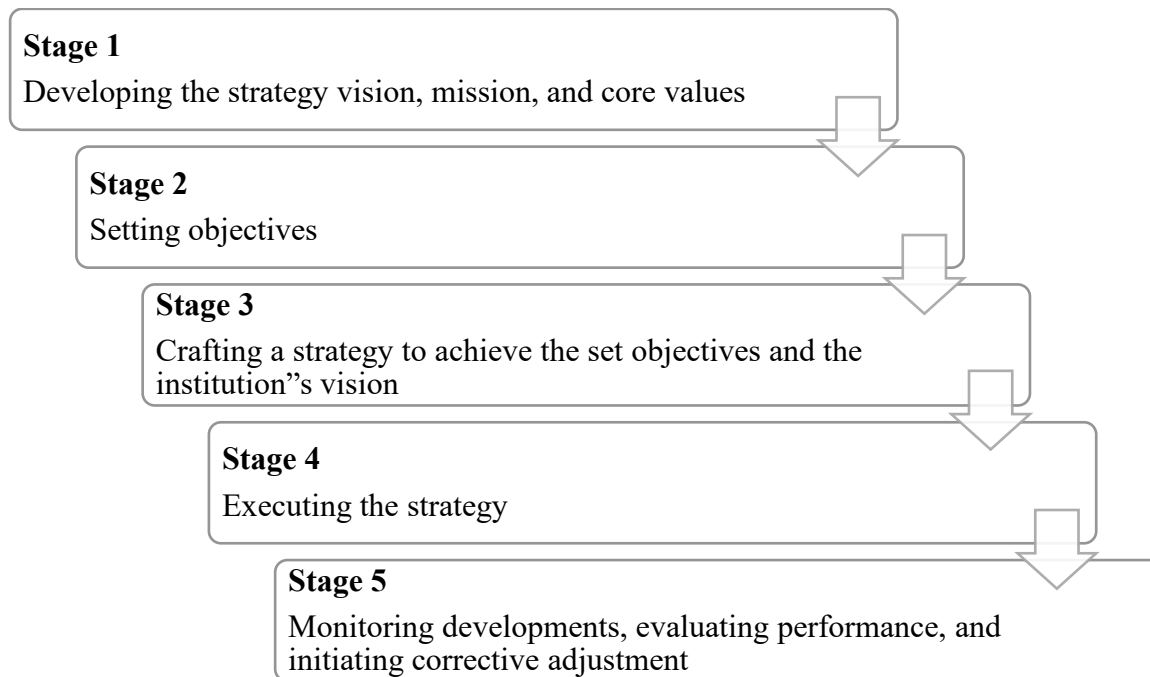
A business' strategy is comprised of a harmonised set of actions that managers take to surpass the organisation's rivals, and accomplish greater success (Thompson et al., 2020). The intentions of a well-crafted strategy are not simply an interim competitive accomplishment and profits in the immediate term, but instead the sort of long-lasting success that can sustain and serve the business' future over the long term. Strategies are the means through which long-term objectives are accomplished (David, 2011). Strategies in business involve geographical growth, divergence, attainment, product development, market infiltration, cost-cutting, divestiture, insolvency, and joint ventures. Furthermore, strategies are potential actions that require senior management decisions, and a large amount of the business' resources.

Alternatively, planning in HEIs comprises an activity that permits stakeholders to position the institution's educational development, establish priorities in consultation with various personnel, identify priority interventions, and extend financial support for monetary and social objectives (Caillods, 2015). In this environment, planning concerns exploring the future and developing a vision of how the educational landscape should look in the next five to 10 years, and determining the appropriate actions to reach the anticipated state of affairs. Strategic planning is described as a set of processes embarked on to craft an array of strategies that support an institution's attainment of goals and objectives over a three-to-five-year period (Uzarki and Broome, 2019). David (2011) asserts that planning is the impetus for effective strategy formulation. Furthermore, planning allows institutions to identify what needs to be accomplished, and details accurately who, what, where, why, and how to carry out the plan in order to attain the desired objectives.

Strategic planning is a multifaceted and time-intensive process that involves the commitment of all interested parties in the higher education system (Chen et al., 2018). Strategic planning is a meticulous process that can be used to design the future of HEIs, and has significant implications for shaping the institution's culture (Nataraja and Bright, 2018). Strategic planning prompts the university to analyse current conditions, the available resources, and to envision the future. It further involves augmenting resources in an HEI, and investing in laboratories with apparatus that are not only utilised for teaching purposes (Inga et al., 2021). It further involves commitment from the faculty administrators, which suggests assessing needs and creating research projects. This can be used to acquire competitive funding to support research and students in a substantial manner. Hu et al. (2018) assert that, by and large, strategic

planning can be understood as an organisation's process of outlining its mission or objectives, and deciding on how to allocate resources to pursue the set mission and objectives. Table 1 below describes the five stages of, and the model for formulating and implementing a strategy.

Table 1: The strategy making, strategy executing, and executing process stages (Thompson et al., 2020)



Thompson et al.'s (2020) model in Table 1 portrays the five interrelated and integrated stages of the strategic management process. In Stage 1, the senior management team envisages the institution's long-term direction, and what product-market-customer business mix appears ideal for the road ahead. Essentially, in this stage, a strategic vision is established that points an institution in a precise direction, charts a strategic route for it to follow, establishes commitments to the future course of action, and moulds institutional distinctiveness. A mission statement clarifies the institution's current core business and purpose, and defines the value and priorities of an institution (David, 2011). Stage 2 depicts management's ambitions for institution performance in the light of the industry's prevalent commercial and competitive circumstances, and the internal proficiencies. Well-selected objectives are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Time-limited, Challenging, and Achievable).

Stage 3 emphasises crafting a strategy to achieve the set objectives and the institution's vision. The architects of the strategy have to consider early changes and be willing to experiment with distinctive ways to create a market position for the institution in the future (Thompson et al., 2020). In Stage 4, the strategy is then implemented. Effective strategy

execution necessitates the pursuit of functional superiority. The last phase of the framework, Stage 5, involves monitoring new external developments, evaluating the institution's progress, and making necessary adjustments. The last stage of the strategy management process provides the platform to decide whether to proceed or review the entire strategy and make changes.

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative research approach was employed to assess and understand the manner in which academic HoDs at a specific university formulate a strategic planning in their respective departments. The study was conducted in a school within a South African university, referred to as the School of Education at the University of Bakone (pseudonym) for the purposes of this research. Qualitative research is naturalistic, and thus focuses on the natural setting in which the interaction has come about (Maree, 2017). Moreover, qualitative research seeks to answer questions by scrutinising different social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. A case study was selected to obtain a thorough description and understanding of the entity (Leedy and Ormrod, 2021).

The sample constituted four academic HoDs in the School of Education at the University of Bakone. The School of Education consists of four HoDs who report to the Director of the School. The University of Bakone customarily develops a four-year strategic plan, which the HoDs are then required to contextualise and implement in their respective departments. More specifically, the HoDs are required to contextualise the above goals, set targets, and identify key performance indicators. Ethical clearance was sought from the university (see the attached) in question in order to adhere to the set procedure. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the university and the HoDs. Participation was on a voluntary basis, and the participants were informed that they were free to withdraw at any stage of data collection without being humiliated or penalised in any way. Most importantly, the participants' right to privacy was respected.

DATA COLLECTION

In a typical case study, the researcher collects extensive data on the individuals, programmes, or events on which the research is focused (Leedy and Ormrod, 2021). The data were collected from the four participants using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, as well as a document analysis. A combination of data sources, such as interviews and documents, promotes the chances of the phenomenon under study being understood from different perspectives (Ary et al., 2010). To successfully exploit the use of semi-structured interviews, questions were

arranged in advance, which allowed the researcher to effectively guide the interview proceedings (Flick, 2020). The participants were interviewed once in the span of two weeks since they were located at the same university. Moreover, the participants were allowed to express themselves freely and without interruption. The School of Education's strategic planning (2023 – 2027) served as the document that was examined to verify the information collected through the interviews. Maree (2017) highlights that documents are often used as a data collection method to help clarify the situation under investigation.

Four participants, Peter, Paul, John, and Mark (pseudonyms), were interviewed, and the following questions were phrased in a manner that permitted, and encouraged the participants to share their experiences: (1) Explain the process in which the department develops its vision and mission. (2) To what extent does the department conduct a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis prior to crafting strategic planning? (3) Does the department reflect on the existing strategic planning before crafting a new one? (4) Explain the degree to which members are involved in crafting the strategy in the department. (5) Which values represent your department? Briefly describe how these values were identified. (6) Explain the manner in which the strategic objectives are developed in the department. (7) How do you ensure that the set strategic objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound? (8) How often does the department monitor and evaluate the implementation of the strategic objectives? (9) Which approach does the school or faculty use to communicate a strategy? All four HoDs were asked the same questions to promote the credibility of the investigation (Ary et al., 2010).

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis methods were employed to analyse the data (Flick, 2020). The statements presented by the HoDs were initially recorded, transcribed, and arranged into meaningful units. The themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews were then identified and discussed. The research findings were presented in a narrative manner in accordance with the nine questions that were asked. Furthermore, the description of the study's context was highlighted to determine the reasoning for arriving at the conclusions reached. The strategic planning (2023-2027) document was used as reference to corroborate the information presented by the HoDs.

RESULTS

Five themes emerged from the nine semi-structured questions, namely: human capital; a

directive approach; organisational culture; set targets; and a cascading strategy. In addition, three patterns also emerged, viz.: the vision and mission being aligned with that of the university, quarterly and annual reporting, and faculty meetings.

Human capital

Human Capital (HC) refers to the skills, knowledge, and experience acquired by individuals, which is considered as their value or cost to an institution. HC is also identified as an important and essential ingredient in the success of the institution in a competitive environment (Al Qershi, 2021). Strategic human capital management could provide different benefits to the institution, such as facilitating the support and efficient execution of the organisation's policies, which are important to the institution's mission and sustainability (Steffri et al., 2023). Consequently, the organisation's strategic advantage is maintained and expanded, and the institution's capacity for innovation and adaption is boosted. When the participants were asked to explain the extent to which the departments conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis prior to crafting the strategic plan, they responded as follows:

Peter: A SWOT analysis is considered to the extent that we reflect on departmental factors, such as staff capacity to deliver on the project of teaching, as well as other external factors such as chances of, or opportunities for the employment of our student output.

John: The performance of the department in the year informs the conducting of the SWOT, which in turn informs the departmental strategic planning.

Paul: Our discussion and development of our departmental strategic plan started with a SWOT analysis.

Mark: In our initial strategic planning, members highlighted the departmental Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), and discussed the way in which the weaknesses and threats could be turned into strategic objectives. Emphasis was placed on the capacity of the staff in the department.

Directive approach (top-down approach)

A directive approach (referred to as an expert approach) comprises the competent execution of a strategy that is directed from the top of the institution. This is enabled by external consultants, and is also known as the top-down approach. In this approach, a top-down strategy is initiated

by the institution's top management, and is established in the performance outcomes of the specified activities (Kim et al., 2014). The directive approach to strategy formulation and implementation is linked to leaders who exercise power over employees, directing them to commit to embracing new forms of institutional conduct (Rosinski et al., 2014). When the participants were asked whether they reflected on the existing strategic plan before crafting a new one, they replied as followed:

Peter: Yes, the department is informed and guided by both the Faculty and School strategic plans. The department is the entry level in terms of the organisational structure of the institution, therefore it is imperative that it is seen to contribute in line with the set objectives of both the school and the faculty in order to contribute to the overall strategy of the university.

John: This is also informed by the Faculty and the school's strategic plans.

Paul: Strategic planning always involves reflection on existing plans before new strategic plans are developed. Reflection on the existing plans allows us to identify changes needed going forward and adjust departmental goals.

Mark: This was the first time the department developed a strategic planning, previously the department focused on yearly allocations during the strategic planning meetings. As a result, the department did not have any document to draw from besides the existing faculty strategic planning.

Organisational culture

Organisational culture can be described as a set of important, frequently unspoken assumptions, beliefs, behavioural norms, and values that the members of an institution share (Ehlers and Lazenby, 2019; Okwemba, 2023). It is imperative that an institution's beliefs, vision, and objectives sustaining its preferred strategy are well-suited to its institutional culture. Culture serves as a driver, and streamlines strategy implementation. A strong institutional culture has become as important as business strategy in maintaining an institution's competitive edge (Reddy and Scheepers, 2019). When the participants were asked to explain the degree to which department members were involved in crafting its strategy, they responded as followed:

Peter: Staff members pull together, where everyone is an advisor, particular in this department, which accounts for five different units. Ideas are shared and the strategy is then clarified.

John: Departmental members are allocated goals as the university and faculty strategic plans and then develop the goals for the department, which are informed by these university and faculty goals.

Paul: All members of the department participate in departmental meetings and annual review sessions. Members contribute to strategic plans at these platforms. However, the strategic plans are developed by the HoD. The plans are submitted to staff for their input and recommendations.

Mark: A workshop for three days was arranged whereby all members of the department participated and share their experiences. At some point there was confusing in terms of strategic and operational planning. Some members could even suggest daily operational activities instead of the long-term goals. However, this was corrected by the HoD.

A follow-up question was created to determine how these departments ensured that the set strategic objectives were Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-Bound (SMART). It is in this instance that another theme emerged, the set target.

Set targets

In order to provide more specific direction with reference to each element of the mission statement, long-term objectives have to be formulated (Ehlers and Lazenby, 2019). These objectives provide a structure and vision for what an institution intends to achieve over the next three to five years. Department members must then meet certain requirements to ensure that they contribute effectively to the strategic management of the institution as a whole. Well-defined targets offer direction to the institution, create priorities, lessen uncertainty, and assist in resource allocation. To be effective in the strategic management process, long-term objectives should be: (a) Measurable, (b) Realistic, but challenging, (c) Understandable, and (d) Congruent. The statements below present the participants' utterances on this topic:

Peter: Members of the department set realistic objectives with specific periods, e.g. quarterly, per term, etc. that allow for the evaluation of the successes and failures at the lapse of time. Some departmental meetings also reflect on the progress made and, where necessary, schedule review meetings.

John: The department hold meetings regularly in each quarter reporting on the progress in teaching, learning and assessment, research and community engagement. Reports are

submitted to the School and the Faculty quarterly on the progress in achieving the set university goals.

Paul: The objectives assisted in developing action items linked to the strategic plans. The items should be achievable and realistic and evidence driven.

Mark: Strategic objectives are based on what the university intends to achieve in a specific time. The department attempts to develop practical, achievable objectives within the resources at our disposal.

Cascading strategy

Prasety and Secokusumo (2018) assert that cascading assists departments to align their strategy by promulgating information or policies from senior management level down to all employees in an institution. Cascading is broadly conducted through top-down and bottom-up approaches. It establishes the focus necessary to prioritise activities, and isolate the essential from the redundant. Strategic focus not only guides in terms of what needs to be done, but also what must not to be done. Plenert and Plenert (2018) affirm that the point of cascading the strategy is to carry the strategy down through an institution level by level, and make it relevant to each member of the institution. When the participants were asked to explain the manner in which the strategic objectives were developed in the department, they responded as follows:

Peter: The overall institutional strategic objectives inform what the department should consider as their level. Each of the institutional objectives is unpacked and key operatives identified, which will enhance the achievement of the institutional goals through the departmental contributions.

John: The set objectives are determined guided by the mission and vision of the university. The university strategic plan is centred on eight goals, which are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound. The department draft a plan of action in implementing these objectives and monitoring takes place in terms of whether all set are achieved within the set time frame.

Mark: Subsequent to conducting the SWOT analysis, weaknesses and threats were translated into strategic objectives. Most importantly, the strategic planning in the department is aligned to that of the faculty.

Subsequent to the themes, the following pattern emerged from the data: (i) the vision and

mission aligned with that of the university; (ii) accountability, transparency, integrity, academic freedom, and academic excellence, (iii) quarterly and annual reporting; and (d) faculty meetings.

The vision and mission aligned with that of the university

When the participants were asked to explain the process through which the department developed its vision and mission, they responded as follows:

Peter: Members are encouraged to visualise the position of the department over a period of time so that everyone has an idea of where they want to see the department in future. Those ideas are communicated or brainstormed among members.

John: The development of the vision and mission of the department is informed by the vision and mission of the university, faculty, and the school.

Paul: The vision and mission were aligned with the university, faculty, and school's vision and mission, and were developed at department meetings, retreat sessions, and annual review reflection meetings.

Mark: The department followed the School's vision and mission when developing the strategic planning.

Accountability, transparency, integrity, academic freedom, and academic excellence

When the participants were asked to list the values that represented their departments and to explain how these values were identified, they answered:

Peter: Collaboration – the department is multi-disciplined, and to achieve the negotiated goals members need to find a way of working together. Student service - the business of our existence as a department is to service the client, being the students.

John: The department has the following values, which underpin the teaching, learning and assessment activities: Accountability, Transparency, Integrity, Academic Freedom and Academic Excellence.

Paul: The department's values align with the values in the strategic plans of the University and Faculty.

Mark: Transparency – information is freely shared. Accountability – members take

responsibility in terms of the roles allocated. Integrity – practice fairness and respect students.

Quarterly and annual reporting

When the participants were asked to list the values that represent their departments and explain how often the department monitors and evaluates the implementation of its strategic objectives, their utterance were as follows:

Peter: Monitoring is actually ongoing and continuous, however, depending on the duration of particular objectives, evaluation happens at mid-point and most certainly at the end.

John: The department hold meetings regularly in each quarter reporting on the progress in teaching, learning and assessment, research, and community engagement. Reports are submitted to the School and the Faculty quarterly on the progress in achieving the set University goals.

Paul: Over the last few years, the department and school adopted the plans of the faculty and did not have individual strategic plans. The faculty plans are reviewed annually.

Mark: Monitoring is conducted on quarterly basis and evaluation at the end of the term or year.

Faculty meetings

When the participants were asked how often their department monitors and evaluates the implementation of its strategic objectives, they answered as seen below:

Peter: The school and or faculty use policies and other internal systems to communicate strategy, though at times even workshops are used for communication of strategy.

John: The faculty organises strategic planning meetings where the strategic plan and the annual performance plan are discussed. These then are cascaded down to the School and the Department.

Paul: The strategic plans are communicated electronically via email and at meetings including strategic planning meetings and Faculty Board meetings.

Mark: During workshops and regularly meetings, that's where strategic planning could be communicated.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The School of Education's vision is "to be a leading African Centre of Excellence that produces highly skilled and competent educators of international standard in a rural setting." The School of Education is primarily committed to rural regeneration, empowerment, and development through a lifelong learning approach, and interdisciplinary research. The strategic planning is based on eight goals, namely: (a) Improve the quality of teaching and learning at the University, (b) Improve student support and development services, (c) Attract, recruit, retain, and develop quality academics and professional support staff, (d) Strengthen the role of community engagement as a core function of the University, (e) Improve the University's research standing and status, (f) Improve the University's overall branding, communication and partnerships, (g) Enhance the level of governance and administration within the University, and (h) Diversify the University's sources of income for sustainability, growth, and competitiveness.

To improve the quality of teaching and learning in the School, the HoDs intend to promote blended teaching, learning and assessment including online student support services strategy; achieve quality pass, throughput and graduation rates for students; implement and review the Faculty Programme Mix Qualification (PQM) for relevance, responsiveness and viability; and maintain the accreditation status of academic programme. In order to improve student support and development services, HoDs aim to develop and implement a varied number of quality learning and other support measures for students, assist students in career choices and success in finding or creating employment upon graduation; and assist the School of Education to track or identify unregistered students early to avoid late requests for registration. In terms of the third goal - attract, recruit, develop and retain quality academics and professional support staff, HoDs aim to advance the scholarship of teaching and learning for academic staff; enhance the profile of academics; and augment the diversity of staff. To strengthen the role of community engagement as a core function of the university, HoDs propose to implement integrated teaching and learning, research and community engagement projects.

To improve the School's research standing and status, HoDs plan to the research niche, conducted the supervision analysis, improve and strengthen the supervision capacity and output, enhance postgraduate throughput and output, and promote research collaboration and publications of high impact journals. In order to improve the School's overall branding, communication and partnerships, HoDs intent to strengthen partnerships, communication and overall branding of the School; and develop a comprehensive communication strategy. To enhance the level of governance and administration within the School, HoDs propose to

operationalise departmental committees; improve the flow of communication in the School; improve the level of departmental administration; and improve the overall functioning of the staff; improve governance and the implementation of decisions taken throughout the university; and improve overall internal control systems. In order to diversify the Faculty's sources of income for sustainability, growth and competitive, HoDs intent to improve the generation of third stream income; and improve financial control systems.

In examining the School's strategic planning, to which the four HoDs referred in developing their respective strategies, I observed that plans overlapped without department members conducting a thorough review of the preceding strategic planning. It is thus imperative to review any previous strategies prior to developing a new one. This practice enables the institution or the School to identify the aspects of previous strategies where the set strategic goals were not realised, and the reasons for not achieving these goals. The School in question should gauge whether the set strategic goals steered the four departments to realise the anticipated goals, which in this case was the creation of a Centre of Excellence. In its current form, the School does not have such a centre. This could be detrimental to achieving the set vision. Nonetheless, the School's commitment to rural regeneration, empowerment, and development serves as the springboard to reaching its vision.

The next section presents the summary of the SWOT analysis in the four departments:

Strengths

Highly skilled competent academic personnel. Modules allocated in accordance with the individual specialisation. NRF-rated professors. High throughput rate. Providing short courses that generate third stream income. Progressive online teaching and assessment. Available financial resources to advance academic activities. Adequate human resources and physical infrastructure. Cooperation within the departments, and incentives for excellence (teaching, research and community engagement).

Weakness

Low *esprit de corps*. Overloaded work. Subtle burn out. Self-denigration (looking down on ourselves in the face of extreme challenges). Insufficient advocate of the programmes offered in the School. Delayed compensation of work carried out. Poor classroom attendance. Undergraduate students struggle with academic writing and this often carries through to postgraduate level. Publication rate is very low and is concentrated on a few individuals. The

departments' research tends to be more qualitative in nature, which disadvantages potential quantitative students. The departments not effectively promoting community engagement initiatives, to some extent treat it as secondary.

Opportunities

Semblance of hope. Committees established in line with the strategic objectives and members provided with the opportunity to be empowered. Accessibility to research opportunities and funding, uncontested research fields. Potential third stream opportunities in the province. Consistent influx of potential students on a yearly basis. The departments able to play a pivotal role of social responsibility, creating partnerships (internally/externally) and addressing the needs of targeted communities.

Threads

Centrally scheduling of modules is problematic. Negative branding of some departments (black-sheep tag). Holier than thou attitude from external forces (e.g. use of negative constructs, lazy, old individuals). Purchasing commodities of no economic value. Two centres of power – programmes coordination. Continuous student disruptions lessons and assessments. Lengthy and superfluous hierarchy of approving the postgraduate students' research proposals. Finance department taking too long to pay for publication fees.

DISCUSSION

The fundamental principle of strategic management is that institutions formulate strategies to take advantage of external opportunities, and minimise the effect of external threats. Thus, identifying, monitoring, and evaluating external opportunities and threats are essential for success (David, 2011). Strategic decisions are not made in a competitive vacuum, each institution is in competition with another for clients. Competition is a never-ending race and a rough and tumble process in which only the most effective, efficient institutions succeed (Hill et al., 2017). In order to maximise long-term shareholder value, managers should formulate and implement strategies that enable their respective institutions to outperform competitors, thus exhibiting a competitive advantage.

Likewise, strategic planning encourages decision making that is based on an organised collection of structured information (database). It further establishes a foundation for performance measurement that enables management to assess progress, identify deviations from the plan and correct them, and make resource allocation decisions consistent with clearly defined strategic goals (Goldman and Salem, 2015; He and Oxendine, 2019; Thompson et al.,

2020). An institution should identify the capabilities that provide it with a competitive advantage, and which are of strategic importance.

In line with this, institutions are required to know their strengths, as well as the activities that enable it to perform better than its rivals (Henry, 2018). An institution applies the proceeding analysis to formulate a strategy that allows it to exploit its strategies in accordance with the opportunities that exist in the market. Simultaneously, any weakness identified in the formulated strategy should be outsourced, or new resources and capabilities must be acquired to attempt to translate the weaknesses into strength. The overall objective of strategy formulation is to assess the institution's resources and capabilities as a prospective path to maintainable competitive advantage.

Those who are responsible for making decisions regarding the strategy must match the institution's resources and capabilities successfully with the opportunities present in the environment by deliberatively selecting a particular strategy or a combination of strategies. Louw and Venter (2021) explain that strategic decision makers consider factors such as: (a) Available resources, (b) Staff skills, (c) Unique capabilities within the institution, (d) Experience, (e) Institutional competitive advantage, (f) Market conditions and rivals' strength, (g) Customer needs and changing demands, (h) Prospects in the industry, and (i) The threads in the industry.

It is particularly essential for those who are in managerial positions to provide a persuasive justification for a dramatically new strategic vision and institutional direction. A strategy has the possibility of succeeding when it is based on action, a shared approach, and competitive gains intended to (a) Please clients in a manner that sets an institution apart from its competitors, and (b) Stake a market position that is not contested by strong rivals (Thompson et al., 2020).

The most effective institutions not only have a strategic plan, deserving the description, but also have the operation thereof down to a fine art in terms of the minutiae of how the institution functions (David, 2011). By promotion communication and interaction amongst management and employees through hierarchical echelons, strategic management enables an institution to function as a competitive team. Communication is essential to effective strategic management. Through an inclusive process, or, put differently, through discourse and participation, management and employees turn out to be dedicated in their support of the institution.

SWOT analysis is one of the oldest and most extensively espoused strategy instruments employed worldwide. The original SWOT analysis, called the System of Plans (SOFT) approach was conceptualised by Stewart in 1963 as a tool in one of the earliest strategic planning frameworks (Puyt et al., 2023). SOFT was used in a precisely laid out process in which

all managers of a firm participate in long-range organisational planning. If all managers of an organisation are given the task to help resolve operational issues, which they first articulate individually, in writing in SWOT terms, it can lead to apt upward-communicative input for sound organisational plans and their execution (Puyt et al., 2023).

SWOT analysis has been significant to the strategic process of organisations and could be used as a tool to make strategic decisions in numerous fields. SWOT analysis offers a static perspective of dynamic items and focuses the organisation's attention on one moment in time (Cusi, 2023). Furthermore, during SWOT analysis, strengths and weakness are analysed at the organisational level, denoting that each strength and weakness is correspondingly relevant to all strategic business units and the products being produces.

CONCLUSION

It is commendable that the four departments conducted a SWOT analysis. This practice enabled the departments to recognise their weaknesses, and determine a strategy to turn these into strengths in order to gain a competitive advantage and enhance its capabilities. However, the University's senior management promoted a directive approach, or top-down strategic planning. In essence, this practice comprises innovativeness, particularly in staff members who are required to implement the strategy. An inclusive strategy formulation process, to a greater extent, promotes the buy-in from key strategy implementers. Strategy formulation should thus be both top down and bottom up, and determined through extensive consultations. All key players should be allowed to contribute and add value to the process. This practice advocates creative and purpose-driven culture in the institution. Most importantly, the formulated strategy should be communicated to all employees in the institution. The manner in which the strategy was communicated in the university in this case confirms the view expressed in the introduction of this study, which is that institutions fail to communicate new strategies to the entire university community. In accordance with the RBV approach, an effective formulated strategy enables institutions to implement value, and enter into new ventures with new prospects. In the case of this study, value is considered to be the establishment of a Centre of Excellence. The School of Education should explore the resources in their disposal to develop and sustain competitive advantage.

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TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

MEETING: 26 September 2022

PROJECT NUMBER: TREC/520/2022: UG

PROJECT:

Title: Formulating the strategic planning in the university academic departments.
Investigator: MI Kola
Co-Principle Investigator/s: N/A
Research: Independent Research

PROF D MAPOSA
CHAIRPERSON: TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

The Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC) is registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council, Registration Number: **REC-0310111-031**

Note:

- i) This Ethics Clearance Certificate will be valid for one (1) year, as from the abovementioned date. Application for annual renewal (or annual review) need to be received by TREC one month before lapse of this period.**
- ii) Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, the researcher(s) must re-submit the protocol to the committee, together with the Application for Amendment form.**
- iii) PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.**