A Conceptual Review on Strategic Planning for Universities in Sri Lanka

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Executive Summary
Strategic planning for universities is increasingly becoming popular nowadays as almost all the universities have started adopting a framework for developing a strategic plan to be incorporated in their corporate plan. As far as Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) are concerned, the extent to which they have achieved the things laid down in the strategic plan is used as a yardstick to keep their identity sustainable. Since it is almost applicable to all the universities, Sri Lanka is no exception. Strategic planning consists of two parts named managing today as well as managing tomorrow. It is imperative for all the universities to have a strategic plan so as to steer them towards achieving their vision, mission, goals and objectives.
Keywords: Strategic planning, strategic plan, sustainable, corporate plan, HEIs

1. Introduction to Strategic Planning
Strategic planning is a core element of strategic management which focuses on establishing major directions for an organization. The term strategic planning originated in the 1950s and was very popular between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. During these years, strategic planning was widely believed to be the answer for all problems. At the time, much of corporate America was obsessed with strategic planning. Following that boom, however, strategic planning was cast aside during the 1980s as various planning models did not yield higher returns. The 1990s, however, brought the revival of strategic planning and the process is widely practiced today in the business world.

Strategic planning is one of the most common organizational practices in existence today irrespective of the type of organizations. In general, it is well accepted among CEOs of top private businesses as well as CEOs of non-profit organizations like state owned organizations and universities. Strategic planning is more directed towards how organizations can make use of their limited resources in a way to satisfy their stakeholders - those we exist to serve and who are connected by the choices we make. As far as educational institutions are concerned, those stakeholders include students, funding agencies, employers of graduates, faculty staff, government and etc.

2. The Value of Strategic Planning for Universities
Managing a private or state owned institution has become a difficult task nowadays simply because of the turbulent environment. The task of the CEOs and managers today is to build organizations capable of creating value and sustain it as long as they can. This is possible only when the managers are capable of managing today: the present context as well as tomorrow; the future.
Managing today involves fine tuning of current operations and introducing incremental changes while strategy is staying reasonably fixed. These changes are evolutionary rather than revolutionary, thus the managerial focus is on managing complexity and ensuring efficient functioning of organization. Ideally, vision, mission, and values are deeply embedded in the firm, well understood and accepted by all. The organizational structure should be designed and instituted appropriately so as to manage the organization in an efficient and effective manner.

The following are some of the examples of activities aimed at managing the present;
✓ Improving loyalty and allegiance of stakeholders,
✓ Improving quality and relevance of study programs via curriculum revisions, improving teaching and training methods and assessment schemes,
    &
✓ Enhancing procedures and processes to improve governance and management.

In terms of managing tomorrow, managers should possess different skills so as to foresee the future. Strategic planning comes into play when it comes to managing tomorrow. Irrespective of the organization, all organizations should have a strategic plan to manage the future. It should not be static, as there are times of rapid change. No university or college or department can remain static for long. Therefore, the strategic plan should be flexible enough to adapt the changes in the future. If it so, it will definitely minimize the crisis-made decision making.

To survive, all organizations must astutely identify and adapt to change. In today's business environment, the only constant element is change. Successful organizations effectively manage change, products and cultures to survive the shocks and prosper from the forces that destroy the competition.

The following activities might be considered as strategies aimed at managing tomorrow especially for a university;

- ✓ Move away from traditional structure to boundary less university structure.
    - The speedy flow of information has eaten away at national boundaries so that people worldwide readily see for themselves how other people live and work.
- ✓ Changing the scope of the university.
    - Merely concentrating on undergraduate degree programs will narrow down the scope of the university and limits its activities only towards it. Attention has to be paid on broadening the scope of it. One way of broadening the scope is to move towards becoming a post graduate research university.
- ✓ Move away from the nation of conventional, state university towards state-owned, entrepreneurial university by adapting cost sharing with beneficiaries, engaging in income generating activities, establishing strategic alliances with other foreign universities, etc.
- ✓ Adopting a performance based evaluation as opposed to granting increments and promotions based on years of service.

A major benefit of strategic planning in Higher Educational Institutions is that it can lend stability to an organization in spite of increasingly frequent leadership changes. Simmons and Pohl (1994) found that from 1980 to 1994 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the average dean's tenure was five years. They further noted that the average length of leadership tenure was declining sharply with each year. Their observation was that strategic planning creates a broad decision making group by actively involving middle and operational levels of management. By pushing decision making down viz decentralizing, a system for strategic planning can help the organization maintain a core purpose during times of changing leadership.

3. Key Steps of Strategic Planning for Universities

Strategic planning is one of the core elements of strategic management which involves a series of steps to be followed in a sequential manner. It is a cyclical and dynamic process and should be monitored and revised periodically so as to face the uncertainties in the environment. The following diagram provides a pictorial review of the overall strategic management process where strategic planning comes at first followed by strategy implementation and ends up at strategy evaluation.
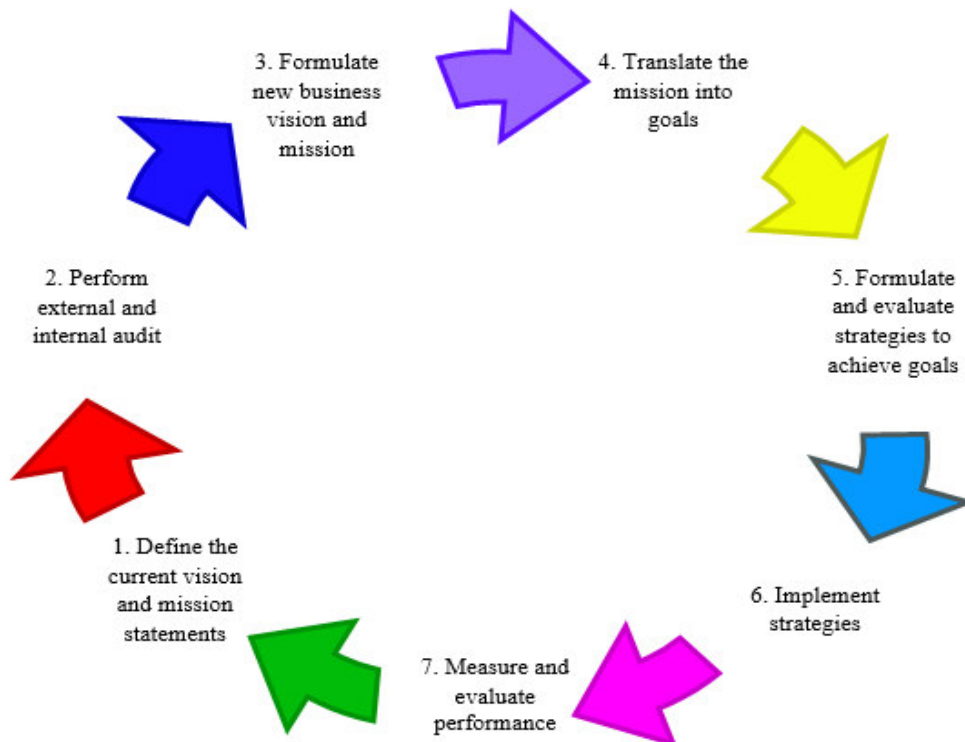
Source:- Fred R. David, "How Companies Define Their Mission", Long Range Planning 22, No. 3 (June 1988):40.

The model as depicted in the diagram mentioned above is a widely accepted, comprehensive model of the strategic management process. As you can see from the figure, the first five steps are known to be strategic planning also known as strategy formulation, the sixth step involves strategy implementation and the seventh step that is directed towards measuring and evaluating performance is known as strategy evaluation.

Identifying an organization's existing vision, mission, objectives and strategies is the logical starting point for strategic management because a firm's present situation and condition may preclude certain strategies and may even dictate a particular course of action. The university's vision sets out the reasons for its existence and the ideal state that the organization aims to achieve.

Once the vision and mission are clearly identified, the university must analyze its external and internal environment. The environmental scan, performed within the frameworks of the Porter's Five Forces Model and SWOT analyzes information about organization's external and internal environments. Universities should pay much attention on the external environment factors as they are un-controllable viz universities should get acclimatized to the changes occurring in the external environment. The following table shows a pictorial review of the SWOT analysis performed by the Jaffna University in their 2013-2017 Corporate Plan.

Strengths	* Guaranteed State funds
	* Commitment of the Government to strengthen the State University System
	* Good team work among the academic staff
	* Increasing number of students from diverse cultures
	* Young Ph. D holders with foreign exposure
	* Post graduate courses to meet the needs of the society
	* Established educational traditions

Weaknesses	* Less number of publications in the graded journals by staff as well as students
	* Distinguishing qualities and identity not well known
	* Lack of facilities for staff to enhance their knowledge base
	* Slow adaptation, acceptance and preparedness to use emerging technologies
	* Lenient enforcement of laws as regard to disciplinary matters, protection of properties, leakages, etc.
	* Lack of industrial support
	* Static and inflexible organizational structure
	* Absence of multi-disciplinary and job oriented courses
	* Inadequate number of qualified staff

Opportunities	* Government policy to promote Sri Lanka as the knowledge hub in Asia
	* Increased access for foreign students
	* Restoration of normalcy in the country after three decades of turbulences
	* Linkage with international universities
	* Willingness of Alumni
	* New faculties - Faculty of Technology & Faculty of Engineering (Growth potential)
	* Societal trends - growing demand for graduates

Threats	* Dependence on state funding - Lack of internally generated funds
	* Lack of proficiency in English - New entrants' knowledge level in English is very poor
	* Better academic atmosphere in other universities
	* Emergence of non-state universities for example arrival of new colleges affiliated to foreign universities
	* Conflicts of interest between academic and non-academic staff
	* Increase in reporting expected by government and society
	* Availability of outside professional courses
	* Poor facility maintenance threatens image
	* Global economic slowdowns reduces academic scholarship opportunities

Source: Corporate Plan 2013-2017, University of Jaffna.

As soon the external and internal audit is done, the organizations should develop new business vision and mission statements for their organization. Afterwards, vision and mission should be translated into strategic goals or objectives, action plans and tactics. Strategic goals are the milestones evolving from strategic issues, the university aims to achieve. The SMART goals model is essential to set meaningful goals. SMART goals are

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound. Action plans are the steps required to reach the strategic goals and tactics are specific actions used to achieve strategic goals and implement the strategic plans. As the last step, the tactics, strategies and action programs of the university should be evaluated periodically to assess the success of the strategic planning process.

Unlike business organizations, the strategic planning of Public Sector Institutions especially setting goals, mission and vision are largely influenced by three major factors, namely;

a) The government policy
b) Higher Education Development Framework prepared by the Ministry of Higher Education and University Grants Commission
c) Institution's Mandate, Vision, Mission and Goals.

Therefore, the corporate plan of a university is being prepared via two steps namely;

Step 1:- Development of University Policy and Strategic Development Framework (UPSDF).

Step 2:- Development of Units Action Plans on the basis of UPSDF by Central Administration, Campuses, Institutes, Faculties and Centers.

The compilation of these documents, viz UPSDF and Action Plans of Central Administration, Faculties, Campuses and etc. is known as the corporate plan of the university. Hence, corporate planning in universities involves iterative, top down and bottom up approach.

4.0 Conclusion

Many organizations tend to spend an inordinate amount of time, money and effort on developing the strategic plan, treating the means and circumstances under which it will be implemented as afterthoughts. But, change comes through implementation and evaluation, not through the plan. A technically imperfect plan that is implemented well will achieve more than a perfect plan that never gets off the paper on which it is typed. As far as universities are concerned, all have corporate plans. But the problem lies in whether the matters laid down in the plan are being implemented or not. If not so, then there is no point in having such plans. Moreover, the plans should periodically be reviewed in order to incorporate the changes in the environment viz, it should be flexible rather than static. The strategy formulation, implementation and evaluation activities should be performed on a continual basis, not just at the end of the year or semiannually, as it is an ever ending process. Universities can reap out the benefits of strategic planning only after adhering to this formula.

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