

TOWARDS REVITALIZING NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM THROUGH STRATEGIC THINKING AND PLANNING

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ABSTRACT: *The main purpose of this paper is to present how Nigerian university system could be revitalized through strategic thinking and planning. The university education in Nigeria is faced with a lot of challenges. The result is that most employers of labour complain about the poor quality of the products. This paper therefore examines the roles and state of university education in Nigeria. It also presents the steps in strategic planning process and how to revive the university system through strategic thinking and planning. The measures to be taken in order to sustain the gains of strategic thinking and planning in Nigeria universities are also presented and recommendations were also made.*

KEYWORDS: Strategic Thinking; Strategic Planning, University Education.

INTRODUCTION

The central goal of any university education is to prepare the students for productive employment. Such employment can be paid one or self-generated. The connection between education and employment is, however, not automatic. It depends on several considerations. The first is the extent to which education attributes are congruent with labour. The second is the emerging dynamics in the labour market. The third is the speed with which investments, hence jobs, are generated in the economy, and the last is the efficiency with which job seekers (graduates) and job givers (employers) sort out their demands and expectations resulting in job offers.

Learning at the tertiary level of education could be described as being effective if it results in bringing about the expected transformations in the attitude, skills and knowledge of higher education students over a period of time. Moreover, effective learning should result in producing graduates who are adequately informed, technically equipped and morally prepared to become productive workers, self-reliant entrepreneurs, responsible parents, good citizens, selfless leaders etc.

The big questions, however, are: are university graduates in Nigeria adequately educated for the labour market? This question is mostly debated by the public and the press in particular. It is a question of particular concern to graduates who are seeking employment and to employers who consider hiring them. Also, how do employers assess the qualifications of current degree-holders and how well do graduates perform when they are able to obtain employment? The questions of “why” and “how” are strategic in nature and this paper focuses on how the falling standard of university education in Nigeria can be revived through the strategic thinking and planning.

Conceptual Considerations

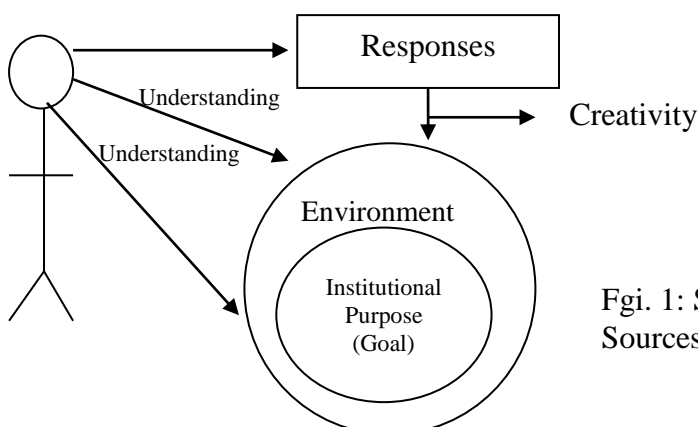
Strategic thinking and planning are distinct but interrelated and complementary thought process that sustains and supports one another for effective strategic management. The role of strategic thinking in university management is to seek innovation and imagine new and very different futures that may lead the university to redefine its core strategies or operations. The role of strategic planning on the other side is to realize and to support strategies developed through the strategic thinking process and to integrate these back into the university operations.

Current management thought suggests that critical strategies question is not “What?” (usually addressed by conventional thinking) but why?” or “How?” (Bonn, 2001). According to Mintzberg (1987), there is a distinction between strategic planning (defined as systematic programming of pre-identified strategies) and strategic thinking (a more integrated perspective on the organization. For us to understand the concepts better, it is necessary to give a more elaborate discussion on them.

Strategic Thinking: There is no generally accepted definition of the term, “strategic thinking”. There is no common agreement as to its role or importance and there is no standardized list of key competencies of strategic thinkers, rather, the intensified exploration of strategy from new direction now come together in the concept of what is being called strategic thinking (Abraham, 2005). The exploration enumerated from the management belief that traditional models of strategy making (which are primarily based on strategic planning) are not working (Chaussil, 2005), hence the need for strategic thinking.

Operationally, strategic thinking means asking the questions: “Are we doing the right thing?” In other words, it mean asking the above question considering three key areas: (1) bearing in mind the purpose of the institution; (2) understanding the environment particularly the forces that affect the actualization of that purpose; and (3) being creative in developing effective responses to those forces. This is better illustrated in figure 1.

Strategic Thinker



Fgi. 1: Strategic Thinking Process
Sources: Authors

As shown in figure 1, it takes proper understanding of environmental factors that affect institutional goals to respond creatively to the forces that can affect the actualization of the goals

Strategic Planning: This on the other hand, refers to the complex process by which an organization envisions its future and develops the necessary procedures and operations to achieve that anticipated future. With reference to tertiary institution, it is a systematic process of charting the course for good and sustainable governance and management of a tertiary institution.

Strategic planning has also been described as a disciplined effort to make fundamental decisions and take actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why and how it does it, with a focus on the future (Clark, 1998). It may also be seen as a management tool that helps an organization to focus its energy toward specific objectives, to ensure that staff of the organization work toward the same objectives, and to assess and adjust the conduct of the organization's business in response to a changing environment. Strategic planning is an integral part of strategic management (a broader concept) which integrates both internal and external contexts by creating a vision of a "desired" future that rests firmly on common values and that channels institutional energies toward repositioning the institution in a changing environment (Ekeh, 2003). A strategic plan describes the objectives of an institution and how it intends to produce in its bid to achieve its strategic goals. Strategic planning is not chaotic but follows some steps.

The Roles of Universities in Nigeria

According to Adekanmbi (2007), Cox (2006) and Barnet (1990), universities emerged out of a need for junior and older scholars to search for knowledge, and identify a forum for testing out their theories and ideas. According to Iyang (2008), the traditional roles of Nigerian universities have been training of manpower for public administration, the professions and corporate needs.

In the words of Ajayi (2003), university education is geared towards serving as power houses and think tanks for the continuous advancement of knowledge, the generation of innovative ideas, the development of the minds of the young and the old (through engagement in challenging intellectual work) and continuous engagement in issues concerning the survival of humanity.

Ekeh (2003) saw the role of universities as a basic necessity which helps countries to rip off poverty, ignorance and disease. Universities achieve this through the inculcation in young people of requisite knowledge and skills in science, technology, arts and humanities. By so doing, university education ensures that qualified manpower is produced for proper management and development of different sectors of nation's economy, including education, health, transportation and industries.

In line with the foregoing, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2004) declared succinctly in the National Policy on Education as follows:

The goals of tertiary education (university inclusive) shall be to:

- Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;

- Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
- Promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
- Forge and cement national unity; and
- Promote national and international understanding and interaction (Section 8: 59).

Specifically, Section 641a – c, specifies that university education shall make optimum contribution to national development by:

- Intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation;
- Making professional course contents to reflect our national requirements; and
- Making all students, as part of a general programme of all-round improvement in university education to offer general study courses such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge and nationalism.

It is expected that these goals shall be pursued through teaching, research and development, generation and dissemination of knowledge and maintenance of minimum educational standards through appropriate agencies. It is important at this juncture to examine the state of universities in Nigeria vis-à-vis the performance of the above roles.

State of University Education in Nigeria

In Nigeria, university education has become a major concern for so many reasons. Firstly, the concerns about poor learning in Nigerian universities amplify as many of the Nigerian youth found it increasingly difficult to gain employment in the formal sector or end up working in poor conditions in the informal economy. Secondly, ineffective learning becomes a prime suspect as research findings increasingly reveal that universities graduates in Nigeria acquire skills in discipline such as economics, law and medicine that are neither demanded by the labour market nor required by the economy especially in the growth sectors such as petroleum, gas, agriculture, manufacturing, solid minerals, tourism and ICT (Federal Ministry of Education, 2005 and Babalola, 2007).

Thirdly, increasing scientific evidences about employers' complaints regarding poor graduate preparedness. For instance, Aina (2007) revealed that employers complained that skills of Nigerian graduates had steadily deteriorated between 1990 and 2000 and therefore these graduates have become increasingly unproductive on the job.

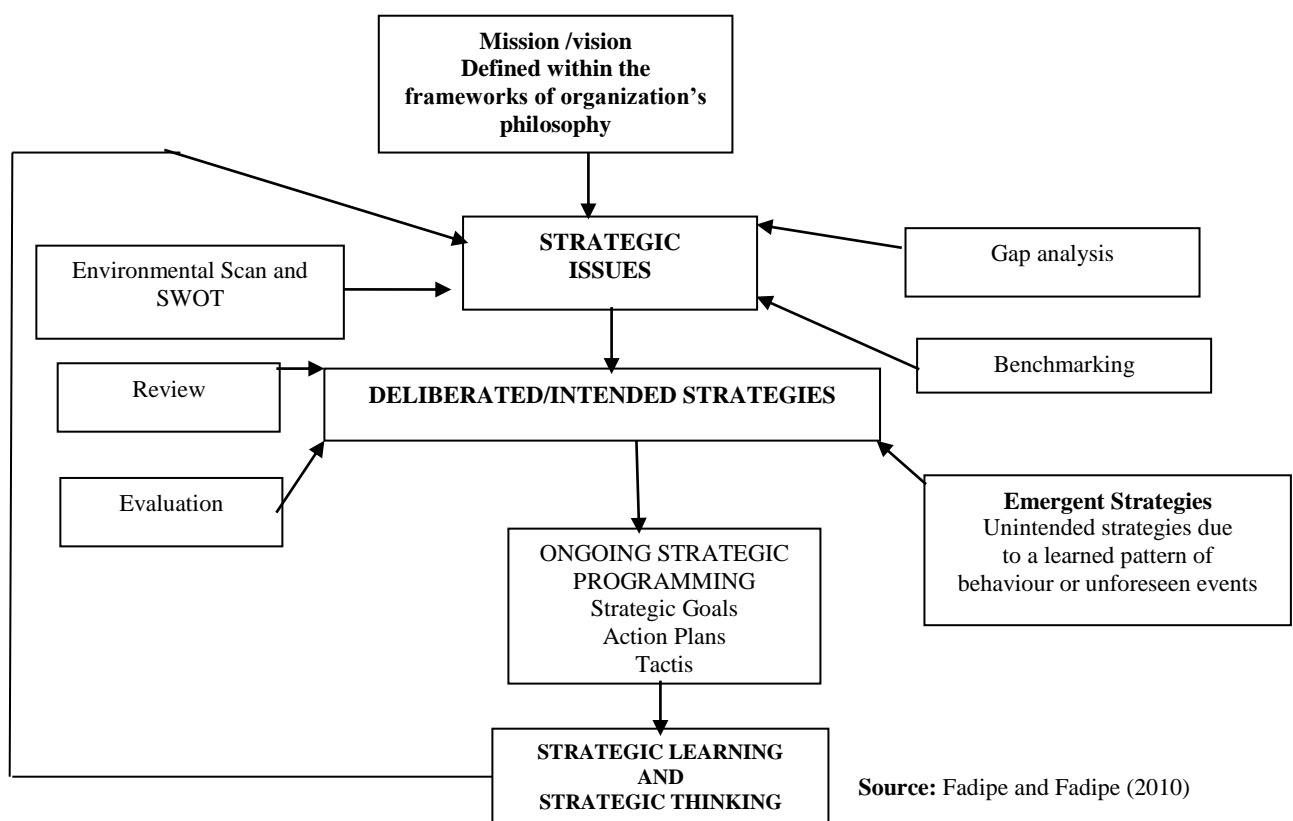
Furthermore, beyond general agreement regarding falling standards of university education, many employers cited key skill areas as particularly worrying. These skill areas are communication and technical proficiency, poor abilities in the oral and written expression of English and the technical preparation of graduates.

Although many employers confirm that the graduates possess a broad and respectable understanding of the knowledge-base in technical disciplines, they expressed disappointment with the preparation of the graduates in those applied technical skills necessary for solving problems and enhancing business productivity (Adekanmbi, 2007). Also, it is reported that employers often stated that graduates had not been exposed to equipment used in the workplace even when such equipment is quite conventional (Babalola, 2007). Graduates were also reported incapable of technical solutions to routine problems as expected of individuals with their levels of training (Ekeh, 2003). As a consequence, a number of firms, especially

larger ones with some investment capitals put their recruits through intensive post-employment training to prepare them for their responsibilities in the work place. It is in view of the above that administrators of universities should be abreast of the strategic planning processes and steps.

Strategic Planning Steps

Strategic planning as a concept is a process that includes a set of interactive and overlapping decisions leading to the development of an effective strategy for a given system. A number of steps have been recognized in strategic planning process. Although every strategic planning process is uniquely designed to fit the specific needs of a particular organization, every successful “model” includes most of the following recognized steps which will be discussed in relation to quality assurance in higher education.



- Vision or Mission:** This is the first step in any strategic planning process of an organization. In the university for example, the vision sets out the reasons for the existence and what the university aims to achieve. The mission specifically identifies major goals and performance objectives. Both are defined within the framework of the philosophy of higher education and are used as a context for the development and evaluation of intended and emergent strategies for the university revitalization. The education sector, and especially university education, is focusing on the output of the system in terms of the level of its efficiency and effectiveness and all of them must be articulated in the vision statement of the university.

- **Environmental Scan:** This is second stage and involves the analysis of the environment. It analyses information about the external and internal environment of the university. The environment of the university which may be economic, social, demographic and political factors, the industry and internal organizational factors. The labour market projections are also most valuable for the environmental scan.
- **Gap Analysis:** This involves evaluating the difference between the current position and what university education aimed at in the future. Universities can therefore develop specific strategies and allocate resources to close the gap to ensure a revitalized university setting.
- **Benchmarking:** This measures and compares the operations, practices and best practices. Through an on-going systematic benchmarking process, a university may find a reference point for setting its own goals and targets.
- **Strategic Programming:** This is the development of deliberate strategies for achieving the institutional mission. In universities strategic goals, action plans and tactics are set during this stage. Strategic goals are the milestones which the university aims to achieve and such goals must involve strategic issues. Action plans relates to how the university gets to where it wants to go, the steps required to reach the university strategic goals. Tactics are specific actions used to achieve the strategic goals and implement the strategic plans.
- **Emergent Strategies:** Some events which are unpredicted and unintended do occur and which differ from the intended strategies of the university and to which the university must respond. According to Mintzberg (1994:23-25) emergent strategy is “a pattern, a consistency of behaviour over time, in... a realized pattern (that) was not expressly intended in the original planning of strategy”. It results from a series of actions converging into a consistent pattern.
- **Evaluation of Strategy:** In the assessment of the success of the strategic planning process, periodic evaluation of strategies, tactics and action programmes are essential. Rowley, Lijan and Dolence (1997) agreed on the important of measuring performance at least once a year (but preferably more often), to evaluate the effect of specific actions on long-term results and on the vision and mission of the university. The university is expected to measure current performance against previously set expectations, and consider any changes or events that may have impacted the desired course of actions. Through this process, the university can be revitalized.
- **Review of the Strategic Plan:** After a thorough assessment of the progress of the strategic planning process, the university needs to review its strategic plan, make necessary changes and adjust its course based on the evaluation results. The revised plan must take into consideration emergent strategies and changes affecting the university’s intended course of action. This really helps the university to be more focused in meeting up with its mission or goals.
- **Strategic Thinking:** With time, people routinely make their decisions within the framework of the university strategic vision and mission. According to Lerner (1999), strategic planning becomes an organizational norm, deeply embedded within the organization’s decision-making process, and participants learn to think strategically as

part of their regular daily activities. Strategic thinking involves “arraying options through a process of opening up institutional thinking to a range of alternatives and decisions that identify the best fit between the institution, its resources and the environment” (Rowley, Lijan & Dolence, 1997:15). The above steps are vital in reviving Nigerian universities.

Reviving Universities through Strategic Thinking and Planning

Before advocating strategic thinking and planning as management tools, there has been management in the university system. However, the reason why the management in the university system has failed to manifest the expected mission, vision, goals and values etc. has been due to the non-inclusion of the end users in the planning process. The administrators of the system only see the immediate stakeholders to be those working within the system. This has been the reason for the observed poor quality characterized by inefficiently and ineffectiveness, thus leading to educational wastages. Since the environment is dynamic, it is high time we looked for a more innovative way to plan to achieve our desired goals. This is the essence of strategic thinking and planning. One of the most important steps a university needs in carrying out strategic planning is to get committed into strategic planning. The next step here is to make sure that it analyses its environment in open and honest manner. This is not easy for our universities to do. Most universities encounter difficulties in doing this because they have inherited an institutional culture that often excludes meaningful interaction with the environment. A common mistake made by universities engaged in strategic planning, for example, is to define their stakeholders solely as the groups located in the academic community: academic staff, non-academic staff and students. What our universities consistently fail to include- except perhaps in a token and ineffective way- are the “end-users” of their products: the employers of their graduates, the contractors of their academic staff; those who provide resources to the higher education sector and who set the policies that govern it.

The need for the advocacy is anchored on the premise that when these end users are defined as stakeholders and systematically included in the process of strategic planning, the results can be dramatically different than if these groups are not given opportunities for meaningful participation. Clark (1998) affirmed that the best examples of these dramatic results are found in the rapid evolution of the “entrepreneurial university” in Europe and the United States. Fehnel (2000) in his report posited that closer to Nigeria, Universities in South Africa show a range of successes produced by strategic planning in recent years. According to him, South African universities and technikons (i.e. polytechnics) have undertaken strategic planning during the 1990s. But only those that have seriously included their end users have been able to identify and carry out successful changes in their operations as demonstrated by improvements in financial condition and in the quality of their programs.

Another common outcome of effective strategic engagement with end users has been the increased awareness by institutions of the need to provide continuing professional education and training to work force of key industries (OECD:2002). Institutions that have responded to this need have been rewarded financially and also found their academic staff more engaged in applied research, with a positive impact on the quality of teaching to traditional, residential students. Measures are therefore needed to maximize the benefits of strategic thinking and planning.

Maximizing the Benefits of Strategies Thinking and Planning

Strategic thinking and planning have identified as the tool for revitalization of organization performance in an ever changing environment that influence the system. But there are actions an organization can take to maximize the benefits. These actions which have unfolded themselves in institutions that have successfully utilized them to reposition their missions are:

1. Prerequisites for strategic planning should be met before starting the process. According to Fielden (1996) suggested various prerequisites for beginning a strategic planning process. The external prerequisites included: willingness by government to accept the results of strategic planning and associated innovations. The provision by government of broad policy guideline as to what government expects from universities; and the abandonment by government of tight controls over universities. The internal prerequisites included: strong backing from institutional leadership; clear understanding of what is required for strategic planning in terms of time commitments, resources, needed information, technical support, and a well-designed planning process (agreed before hand) that involves the community of university stakeholders. This means that for a successful strategic planning to take place, these prerequisites must be put in place.
2. Plan a carefully co-ordinated process of participation and inclusion, particularly of external stakeholders. Strategic planning is an important yet complex process. For this reason, it must be carefully planned, and all essential stakeholders need to be included. The failure to include all stakeholders will cause an erroneous assessment of the environment, thus invalidating subsequent decisions and plans. Inadequate planning and co-ordination of all elements of the process can cause delays, suspicious and a withholding of commitment that may ultimately cause the efforts to fail. Fry and Utu (1999) described how a multi year strategic planning process at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique almost failed because of the lack of coordination and communication between two powerful planning groups; each “commissioned” to do what management saw as complementary tasks, but which the groups themselves viewed as competing tasks.
3. Collect sufficient information and allow time for processing this information. Relevant timely information is essential to the strategic planning process. Information about availability and predictability of financial resources about labour market needs; about institutional efficiency at a program level; about perceptions concerning the quality of instructions, staff and facilities; about recent trends in the national and state economy. These are examples of the types of information which if available, will greatly help the process of judging whether an institution is doing what it should be doing, and whether identified opportunities and threats are likely to have a significant impact on the institution. Information is needed not only for planning and decision-making, but also to monitor the implementation of a strategic plan. Institutions lacking such data will need to generate it during the planning process, and consider actions to develop an appropriate management information system.
4. Provide adequate resources to carry out the process of strategic planning. Ekong and Plante (1996) noted that this was probably the single most important factor determining

the success of strategic planning. Fielden (1996) similarly underscores the importance of a well resourced effort. Ideally, a university should have access to resource-sufficient to dedicate a small, technically competent team (a least one full time professional person) to managing the process and keeping all parties informed and on track.

CONCLUSION

Circumstance in Nigeria have changed sufficiently in the past years that many vice-chancellors now appear willing to consider the use of strategic thinking and planning as important tools in determining how best to revitalize and modernize their institutions.

A fundamental requirement for institutional success in any strategic planning process is the need to engage the end users of university products and services in a more systematic way. It seems that few institutions in Nigeria have realized the extent to which Nigerian employers have become concerned about the declining value of undergraduate education. The institutions also seem to comprehend fully the potential value that developing partnership with their end-users could bring to them. It is therefore concluded that the integration of strategic thinking and planning provides an instructive opportunity for involving end-users in the process of determining how institutions can best be revitalized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For this management tool to impact positively in revitalizing the university system, the following recommendations are made:

- There is need for staff training to impact an understanding of strategic planning and to foster the capabilities needed for its implementation.
- Government should make available the needed prerequisites for strategic thinking and planning effectively.
- The end-users who would need the services of these graduates should be made to be part of the stakeholders when planning strategically.
- The vice-chancellors should receive orientation on strategic thinking and planning in the form of a workshop provided by a team of experts.
- Strategic planning unit should be established to enhance quality university management.

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