

A Path to Enhance University Relevance and Competitiveness in Developing Countries

Serwan M J Baban, The Presidency of Kurdistan Region, Iraq

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions attempt to remain relevant and competitive through modernizing their teaching, research, and consultancy as well as engaging effectively with society, government and the private sector at all levels. However, attaining these aspirations is a challenge due to multiple issues which include fluctuations in student enrolments, market influences and the strains to fulfil public expectations. Managing these interlocked issues successfully will require setting the future plans of the Institution based on its assets, markets, political and economic issues, customers and competitors. The plans will need to clearly show direction, create measures for success and drive key decisions. This paper presents an interactive process for planning in higher education and developing a practical strategic plan as a road map to determine what an institution aims to become in the future. Hence, providing a framework to facilitate an institution's vision, mission, values, goals, and strategies to remain relevant and competitive. In addition to managing the implementation procedure to successfully realize the declared objectives.

Keywords: University, Challenges, Relevance, Competitiveness, Strategic Plans, Developing Countries

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1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions endeavour to remain relevant and competitive by continuously raising their reputations in terms of teaching, research, and consultancy as well as engaging effectively with society, government and the private sector at all levels. However, due to multiple external and internal issues they often face significant challenges in attaining these aspirations (Baban, 2017, 2023). The challenges often include:

- i. Fluctuations in student enrolments, the change in student demographics and associated funding irregularities.
- ii. Market influences driven by the threat of competition has led to the emergence of higher education as a business. As a result, institutions have been under pressure to expand rapidly and redefine their roles and vision to match the new reality (Newman and Couturier 2002).
- iii. The pressures to meet public expectations and the obligations to become more transparent and accountable in the new competitive environment (Moja, 2008). Therefore, the “business as usual” approach became less and less acceptable from the public perspective (Taylor et al., 2008).
- iv. Meeting the demands made by accrediting bodies, these bodies, responding to external demands for accountability through the development of standards for assessment and learning outcomes, started to assert that HEIs should have a strategic plan and an assessment plan in order to meet accrediting requirements (Baban, 2018a).

It has been recognised that these challenges can often be handled successfully through good governance, effective management practices and resourceful planning; these will result in university aligning its decisions with its mission and goals, while addressing risk assessment and risk management and considering the needs and expectations of its internal and external constituents (Baban 2018a). In other words, to enable the organisation to determine what it intends to become in the future and the path to realise its aspiration.

Success in carrying out effective governance, management and planning responsibilities to remain both relevant and competitive often depends upon observing the principles of good governance, accountability and inclusiveness, having a culture of openness and integrity and finally being steered by organisation believes and values in its actions and decision-making (Biggs, 2001; Biggs and Tang, 2007; Baban, 2017, Baban 2018b, 2023).

2. Strategic Planning in Higher Education

Strategic planning in higher education emerged in the 1970’s and 1980’s and has been steadily evolving since as a response to various external and internal challenges facing higher education intuitions (Chaffee, 1984; Gumpert and Sporn, 1999; Hinton, 2012).

Crisp (1991) defines strategic planning in higher education as “the set of activities designed to identify the appropriate future direction of a college and includes specifying the steps to move in that direction.”

Essentially, strategy involves setting the future plans of the Institution, but it requires a comprehensive understanding of the Institution's resources (such as cash, assets and employees), its environment (such as markets, political and economic issues, customers and competitors) and exactly what the Institution's stakeholders (anyone with an interest in the business, such as shareholders, staff, customers, government, etc.) expect of the Institution.

Consequently, strategic planning is a tool for developing a road map to determine where a university is headed over a specified time frame and the process by which it will realise its goals and objectives. Consequently, there is wide consensus that strategic planning, if developed and implemented properly, will offer universities a solid road map to progress and to successfully serve the community (Hinton, 2012; Baban, 2017, 2023). More specially, having an effective a strategic plan will:

- i. Provide direction: One of a strategy's main advantages is the direction it provides for the Institution. By laying out a well-thought-out plan, the institution will be sure that everyone is working toward the same objectives and will give staff members a sense of shared responsibility.
- ii. Establishes a measure for success: by enabling organisations to compare their growth and performance to predetermined objectives.
- iii. Increases adaptability: In the current innovation-focused society, Institutions need to be responsive to change. An effective business strategy will allow Institutions to predict and meet the changing demands of the current market.
- iv. Enhances adaptability: Institutions must be flexible to change in the modern, innovation-focused society. Institutions will be able to anticipate and meet the shifting demands of the present environment with the help of an effective business plan.

As a consequence, strategic planning has emerged as an effective tool for developing and implementing a proactive and flexible stance whilst operating in a fluctuating environment (Baban 2018b, 2023). It follows that strategic plans were viewed as pathways for formulating institutional mission and vision, prioritising resources, and promoting organisational focus.

Contemporary strategic plans have multiple components and each component serves a specific purpose. These components are planning tools used either separately or in groups, the planning process is tasked with ensuring that these individual components are aligned with each other and mutually supportive.

Strategic planning can be developed with two focuses, first a focus on internal pressures, bases strategic planning on institutional values, and is purely practical, seeking to assist the university to run efficiently and effectively (West-Burnham, 1994; Larsen and Longfield, 2005). The other focus is related to positioning the university in relation to its external environment, emphasising planning in response to financial changes, government regulations, changes in the student market, competition from other universities, emerging technologies, or international pressures (Gosport and Scorn, 1999; Bayenet et.al., 2000).

In terms of process, strategic planning will need to examine the recent history of the institution as well as the changing internal and external circumstances (Baban, 2018a;

2018b). In addition to developing comprehensive strategies, and detailed action plans for the core activities of teaching and learning, research, consultancy and community service (Fig 1).

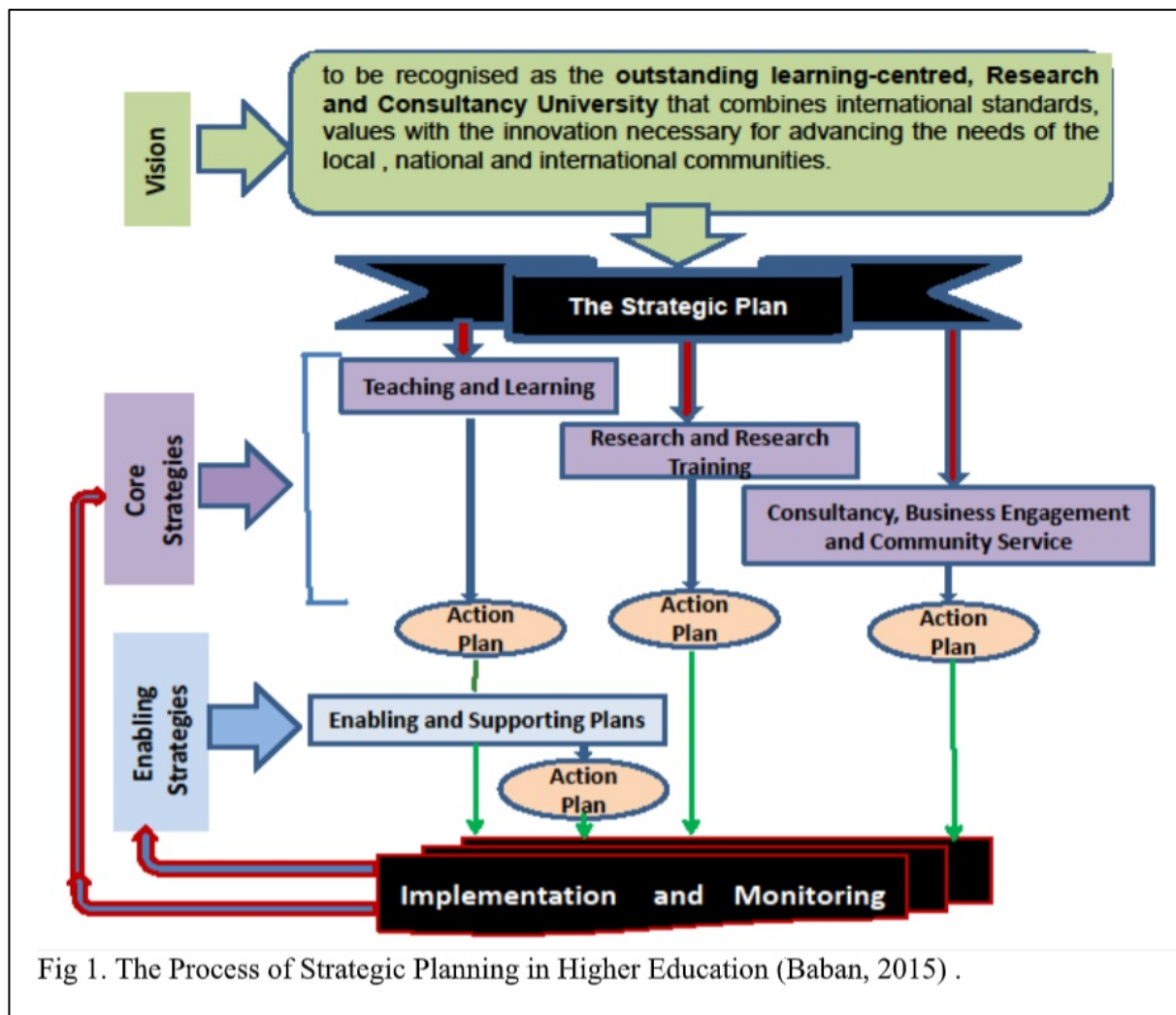


Fig 1. The Process of Strategic Planning in Higher Education (Baban, 2015) .

These supporting documents will provide specific points of reference and guidance in the planning process and during the implementation period. The process will lead to assessments of institutional strengths and weaknesses and determination of how to capitalise on strengths and to articulate a vision for the organisation's future and determine the necessary priorities, procedures, and operations to achieve that vision.

The vision must be based on the values of those involved in the process and will have a stake in the achieving the vision. The collective institutional vision is then translated into a mission statement and goals. Then after, the planners need to articulate practical strategies for achieving the goals as well as addressing goal measurement which involves articulation of objectives (the short-term conditions needed to achieve desired conditions for a particular goal), indicators (the quantifiable measures of progress; they provide numeric assessment of the desired conditions of well-being for a particular goal) and benchmarks (the target levels of performance expressed in measurable terms and specified time frames, against which actual achievement is measured).

The planning process will also provide an interactive platform for all relevant staff at the institution to develop and document a collective vision, values and mission statements (Baban, 2015).

2.1 Definitions and Terms

Developing and implementing a strategic plan requires clear definitions for the essential terms and concepts from the Higher Education Management and Governance perspective. The following represents some of the key definitions and terms;

i. Vision Statement

The vision statement is the expression of institutional aspiration, and is based on analysis of the institution's environment. It is a motivating and ambitious statement about what the university would like to achieve or accomplish in the mid-term or long-term future. It should challenge and inspire staff, students and all other stakeholders. It is intended to serve as a guide for deciding current and future courses of action.

A vision statement describes the University as it would appear in a future successful state. It should essentially answer the question: If the organisation were to achieve all of its strategic goals, what would the University look like a number of years from now?

ii. Mission Statement

The foundation of any strategic plan is the institutional mission statement. It is a written declaration of the University's core purpose and focus that normally remains unchanged over time. It describes the University's overall intension, reason for existence and what it does at the levels of University, College and Department (Baban, 2018a, 2018b, 2023). Hence, this statement needs to be brief and clearly explain why the institution exists and what its operations are intended to achieve.

The mission statement supports the vision and serves to communicate purpose and direction to staff, students and all other stakeholders. More specifically, effective mission statements should:

1. Serve as filters to separate what is important from what is not.
2. Clearly state which markets will be served and how.
3. Communicate a sense of intended direction to the entire organization.

Hence, a mission is different from a vision in that the former is the cause and the latter is the effect. Furthermore, a mission is something to be accomplished whereas a vision is something to be pursued for that accomplishment.

iii. Values

Values Statement should explain what the institution stands for and the way in which it intends to conduct its activities. Therefore, the values statement should declare, "These are

the characteristics we believe are important in *how* the institution will work to achieve its goals.”

iv. Goal

Goal is the precise final outcome toward which the plan is directed. It is the general statement of a long-range purpose that should directly address needs and is outcome and not process oriented. Therefore, the university goals need to clearly identify the aspirations in a tangible, achievable and measurable outcome(s) that can be reasonably expected at the end of the planning period.

Hence, the strategic plan’s broad goals should guide the process. Top-down guidance on vision, mission, and goals, is necessary, especially given the decentralised structure of many universities. However, given the structure of universities, bottom-up planning is also an essential requirement to ensure comprehensive participation in and ownership of the developed strategic plans.

v. Objective

Objective is a statement of the results to be achieved based on specific time frames, method of measuring the results, and criteria for successful achievement. Hence, objectives should be stated in ways that clearly describe what will be accomplished and how it will be achieved. Furthermore, objectives state results, not activities and when accomplished it will lead to the goal.

2.2. SWOT Analysis

This analysis can be viewed as an initial decision-making tool for evaluating the institution’s internal strengths and weaknesses, its opportunities for growth and improvement, and the threats the external environment presents to its survival (Cheng-lin H and Chen Jian W., 2016). It is a planning instrument that involves specifying the objective of the organisation and identifying the internal and external factors that are favourable and unfavourable to achieve that objective (Dyson, 2014).

In the context of developing and implementing a strategy for a university, it can be briefly conceptualised as:

- Strengths: characteristics of the University that give it an advantage over others universities at present time.
- Weaknesses: characteristics that place the University at a disadvantage relative to other Universities at present time.
- Opportunities: elements that the University could exploit to its advantage at present and in the future.
- Threats: elements that could cause difficulties and challenges for the University at present and in the future.

This analysis in practical terms is conducted through:

1. The collection and evaluation of key data (academic programs, enrolment and student success, governance, management, finances, operations, and processes), then assessing the institutions capabilities in these areas.
2. Sorting the four categories of data: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Strengths and weaknesses generally stem from factors within the organization, whereas opportunities and threats usually arise from external factors.
3. Developing a SWOT matrix for different governance and management options under consideration. Then an expert panel will need to complete a separate SWOT matrix for each alternative.
4. Incorporating the SWOT analysis into the decision-making process to determine which governance and management options best meets the organization's overall strategic plan.

3. An Interactive Bottom-Up Approach for Developing a Strategic Plan for a Higher Education Institution

This process amongst other issues will require growing and obtaining collective intuitional understandings and agreements on the vision, core values and operating principles as well as priority and accountability issues (Dyson, 2004). More specifically;

3.1. Institutional Agreements

An essential first step for strategic planning is obtaining institutional agreements on the following concepts and principles (Baban, 2015, 2017, 2023):

- i. **Organizational Core Values and Operating Principles.** These are the beliefs and principles that guide the organization; these should be shared and strongly held values by senior management and staff.
- ii. **Vision for the Target Community.** This is the University's image of what the community it serves would be like if the values and operating principles were shared and practiced by all involved.
- iii. **Mission.** This is the University's public statement of the contribution it promises to make to help accomplish the community vision.

3.2. The Planning Process

Once, a collective institutional view is developed and agreed upon, the planning process can proceed through determining the following steps:

- i. **The Current Status.** Conducting external and internal assessments to attain a clear understanding of the current status, the university's competencies and how, in reality, the university, at present, appears to students, staff and employers within the ongoing competitive Higher Education environment.

- ii. **Priority Issues.**
The priorities will set the strategic direction of the University and define the mission (markets, customers, products, etc.) and vision (conceptualization of what the university's future should or could be).
- iii. **Expected Objectives.**
Defining what must be achieved, the expected objectives that clearly state what the University must achieve by the end of the planning period to deliver the priority issues.
- iv. **Accountability.**
Identifying and naming the responsible staff for implementing the action plans and associated budgets within agreed specific time frames. This will require clearly communicating the processes involved, step by step, such as who will allocate time, and provide human capital, and funds to address the priority issues.
- v. **Reviews.**
The University should schedule regular formal reviews of the process, to ensure that the plans perform to the required standards and within the specified timeframes. This is also essential for evaluating the outcomes and refining the plans as necessary.

3.3. An Interactive Process for Developing a Strategic Plan

The following represents a participatory and an interactive Process for developing the strategic plan. The process consists of seven tasks aimed at collecting information from all relevant staff at various University, College and Department levels (Cheng-lin H and Chen Jian W., 2016). These tasks can only be successfully executed after establishing institutional agreements on the fundamentals such as goal, core values and operating principles.

Task 1: Define or Review the Organization's Vision, Mission and Values

Develop consensus on why the organization exists, what goals or outcomes it seeks to achieve, what it stands for, and whom it serves.

Outcomes From Task 1:

1.1. Vision:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining the vision for the University as a national/international university.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

1.2. Mission:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining the Mission for the University.

- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

1.3. Values:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining the values for the University.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

Task 2: SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis

The University has aspirations to become international and competitive at regional, national and international levels.

Given the common perceptions, development history and current practices it is critical to focus on quality, relevance, internationalisation, accreditation, graduate profile/employability (preparing graduates for the new realities of nation building, wealth creation, market demands and competition).

Outcomes From Task 2:

- i. Given the new realities and aspirations of the University and based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, perform SWOT analysis for The University.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

Task 3: Developing the University Graduate Profile

The University graduates will leave the institution with specific knowledge and expertise in their chosen discipline as well as the necessary skills to succeed in a competitive environment and to make tangible contributions to the development regionally, nationally and internationally. Furthermore, the University aims to prepare graduates to become active global citizens and leaders, attuned to cultural diversity to benefit from employment opportunities regionally, nationally and internationally.

Outcomes From Task 3:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining the knowledge and skills of the University graduates based on Market needs, this will be the 'The Brand' and the Profile of all university graduates.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

Task 4: University Core Functions: Teaching and Learning

University Teaching and Learning will be centred on the preparation of a distinctive university graduate who will leave the University with the knowledge, skills and the intellectual curiosity required for development regionally, nationally and internationally.

Realising this graduate profile which has a focus on employability skills necessitates addressing the following aspects of undergraduate education at the University.

Outcomes From Task 4:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining the Teaching and Learning aspects of curriculum development, learning and teaching quality for the University.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

Task 5: Research and Research Training

Research is the systematic generation of new knowledge, development of new ideas and experimentation with new techniques. These activities inform student learning and provide an intellectual platform for engagement with Business, Government and the wider society.

The quality and impact of its research is what will bring the international recognition that it needs to increase its effectiveness in accessing funds in today's competitive international environment. It is research that will contribute to the rejuvenation of teaching programmes and enhance their quality and relevance, and that will enable the University to continue to set and lead the standards of scholarship regionally, nationally and internationally.

If the University is to become a major contributor to economic, social and cultural development, then, this critical function must be expanded and strengthened in order to become a more research driven institution.

Outcomes From Task 5:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining the requirements for making The University a successful Research and Research Training institution.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

Task 6: Consultancy, Business Engagement & Community Service

The university as a national/international entity needs to contribute to the key drivers of competitiveness and economic growth and development in the region, country and internationally through knowledge generation and use, innovation, invention and technology transfer to business and industry. This contribution is best achieved through;

Outcomes From Task 6:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining the requirements for making The University a successful player contributing to the key drivers of competitiveness and economic growth and development regionally, nationally and internationally.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

Task 7: The University in 2030

Once the agreed vision has been realised in 2030, it is hoped that The University will become the preferred destination for students and the first choice for employers.

Outcomes From Task 7:

- i. Based on institutionally agreed values, concepts, definitions and your own experience, list five points best defining The University in 2030 as a national/international university.
- ii. Develop and provide this information at one of the following levels as appropriate: University, College (specify) or Department (specify).

4. The Implementation Plan

The implementation plan is the means of turning goals and objectives into a working plan.

There are a number of prerequisites that reinforce implementation and ensure a successful outcome; these include (Baban 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2023):

1. Assignment of responsibility, deadlines and identification of measures of completion and documentation. Therefore, it is necessary to identify one person to be accountable for the implementation of a specific action into competition, a person to monitor the implementation of the specific action, a date by which the action is expected to be completed, and what measures will be used to define success in the implementation of the action.
2. Figure 2, represents a basic implementation plan for a Higher Education institution's priority, containing clearly defined actions, implementation and monitoring responsibilities as well as the deadlines for delivering the actions (Baban, 2015).
3. Strengthen the participation and capacity of planners and implementers. This is necessary to enable the organizational units to successfully fulfil their role in strategic planning process and it can be achieved through creating a diverse leadership team with deep organisational knowledge, a variety of perspectives, and an understanding of decision-making powers and boundaries.
4. Conducting a semi-annual review. This review necessary to transparently manage the goals of the strategic plan.

5. The implementation plan should be flexible in its formation; hence it can be easily adjusted to respond to concerns about the planning process as well as the internal and external changes that will occur within the duration of the strategic plan.
6. Universities in their early years of strategic planning, especially those embarking on strategic planning for the first time need to be mindful of financial limitations and establish goals and action plans reasonably feasible in regard to both human and financial.

Teaching and Learning Priorities				Dates			
Priority: Curriculum Development and Renewal				Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Actions		Implementation	Monitoring				
1.1. Staff Development							
A	Staff Training on graduate Profile, Curriculum Development and Program Benchmarking	Head of Dept.	L & T Unit				
B	Training in Class administration	Head of Dept.	L & T Unit				
C	Training in preparing course handbooks	L & T Unit	Head of Dept.				
D	A development strategy to introduce staff to in new learning methods and technologies.	L & T Unit	Head of Dept.				
1.2. Curriculum Development							
A	Prepare graduates for professional Practice and fulfilled the University's graduate attributes.	Dept. Scientific Cttee	Univ. Council + L & T Unit				
B	Form a Curriculum and Renewal Committee.	Head of Dept.	Dept. Council				
C	Embed Graduate Attributes into coursework, including assessment, design, teaching and evaluation.	Dept. Scientific Cttee	Univ. Council + L & T Unit				
D	Examination of Core courses with a particular focus on learning to the graduate profile and market needs.	Dept. Scientific Cttee	Univ. Council + L & T Unit				
E	Committee evaluating (Benchmarking) of complete curriculum internally and with other relevant University.	Dept. Scientific Cttee	Univ. Council + L & T Unit				
F	Department council approval of curriculum.	Dept. Council	Head of Dept.				
G	University Council approval of curriculum.	University Council	Univ. Council + L & T Unit				

Fig 2. The implantation plan for an identified priority with a university teaching and learning plan (Baban, 2015).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of an organization defines why it exists in a specific environment and what it is intended to do. Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) are the engines of social and economic development in their host communities. Hence, to remain relevant and competitive, HEI's need to evolve continuously and to operate in the context of serving their stakeholders, host environment and to contribute effectively towards national social and economic development. Evidently, these aspirations can be achieved via strategic planning which can provide a framework to facilitate institutions vision, mission, values, goals, and strategies.

This paper presents an interactive process for planning in higher education and developing a practical strategic plan as a road map to determine what an institution aims to become in the future. Hence, providing a framework to facilitate an institution's vision, mission, values, goals, and strategies to remain relevant and competitive. In addition to managing the implementation procedure to successfully realize the declared objectives. The process was derived through several tasks. The tasks can only be successfully executed after establishing

institutional agreements on the institution's operating principles and fundamentals such as vision, mission, values and goals. Hence, the paper advocates establishing collective institutional agreements on the institution's operating principles, priorities and fundamentals to allocate and ensure the availability of all the necessary resources when they are needed at university, college and department levels. Hence, the leadership should focus on aligning the necessary human, financial and physical resources allocations and cultivating new resources to support the key teaching and learning priorities in the university strategic plan. The paper also proposes an implementation procedure to manage the delivery of declared learning and teaching priorities and objectives.

Experience shows that many HEI plans express worthwhile goals and sensible strategies to achieve those goals, but they fail because resource allocation is not aligned to the key priorities in the strategic plan. As a result, organizations continue on their previous path based on traditional allocation of resources, rather than realigning resources and cultivating new resources that support their strategic plans. Therefore, the process must start with a clear understanding of the motivation for planning, ensure the availability of all the necessary resources, and the leadership must maintain a focus on the strategic plan's broad goals, because many plans become hindered by long lists of actions and indicators that draw the organization's focus away from its major goals.

Ensuring success requires engraining middle management and staff throughout the planning process so they develop the capacity and understanding required to implement the plan. At the same time, wide input from multiple constituencies must be formed into a coherent plan that is aligned with the institution's major goals.

The Strategic planning process and associated procedures can help guide senior management, as well as empower middle managers, while aligning their everyday activities to the institution's broad aims. Furthermore, it can also advance evidence based decision-making and lay the foundation for performance measurement, which allows leaders to monitor progress, detect deviations from the plan and correct them, and make resource allocation decisions in accordance with clearly defined goals. Additionally, strategic planning process can be used to measure institutional effectiveness including all important activities and is heavily linked to the process of decision making including the budget process and allocation of resources.

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