

## Establish the Criticality of Strategic Leadership in Strategic Execution in Open and Distance Learning Institutions

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**Abstract:** The execution of an institution's strategic plan ensures that there is institutional success, which is the achievement of institutional vision and mandate. The study sought to interrogate the various factors that influence the successful attainment of the vision. Heathfield (2015) identifies a number of challenges that might militate against the achievement of institutional objectives, but this paper argues that although there could be those challenges a lot could be done to ensure the institutional objectives are successfully attained. The researcher adopted a qualitative research methodology due to its ability to enable the researcher to access the deep-rooted experiences, perceptions and beliefs of strategy execution participants and stakeholders. A number of in-depth interviews were held with practitioners and their experiences and perceptions were sought. Further, focus group discussions were held in which participant shared their experiences and perceptions and were able to interrogate each contribution until its meaning and contribution to the study were comprehended. A process of trustworthiness was undertaken through detailed analysis of every input, a prolonged engagement with participants within the institution, the reference of transcripts to individual members for validation and the attainment of researcher trust over a prolonged period of time; this showed that data accessed and analysed truly reflected the perceptions and experiences of participants. The findings were that for successful execution of strategy the institution should identify institutional competences, use implementation guidelines, be able to adapt to rapidly changing conditions, employ knowledgeable and engaged leadership and exercise prudent use of resources, among others. The study concluded that the whole institution should buy-in to the strategy for the necessary achievement of objective to be realised. The researcher encouraged other researchers to carry out further work into this area.

**Keywords:** institutional success, leadership, Distance Learning

### INTRODUCTION

A strategic plan is a document that clearly focuses the university in a chosen direction, energises and moves the institution towards the achievement of a stated vision of the university; the document should also articulate how the resources, skills and time of the university would be harnessed and channeled towards the attainment of the goals and objectives of the institution. The process of operationalising the strategic plan is referred to as strategic execution.

Strategy execution is a process that brings together people, strategy and operations. An organisation constructs a strategy, which indicates the direction and scope the organisation seeks to follow for the duration of the strategy. People are the agents of

strategy execution and they carry out operations using resources in the organisation. Strategy execution could also be explained as a process activity that houses six sequential stages; the first stage is the developing of a strategy; the planning stage involves the mapping out of activities that are implemented to execute the strategy; the whole organisation, or institution in the case of education, should be aligned to the strategy; operations are planned for before they can be executed; during implementation the process should be monitored to ensure activities are fulfilling the required objective; and, there should be a fair amount of testing and adapting to new ways of working as a response to changes.

### Background to the study

Planning must have started when man started to employ his mind in order to cope with his environment, which should have been the same time that the importance of implementing that plan came to bear on him. However, the challenges surrounding plan implementation must have taken most of the time available because conventional wisdom has shown that more time is needed to successfully implement a plan than in planning. Implementation seeks to put together the requisite resources, skills and competencies and align activities to the resources in such a manner as to be able to produce more output from less resource utilisation. Strategic planners have grappled with similar concerns from time immemorial in an effort to come up with the ideal strategic plan implementation blueprint to no avail. The current study is part of that effort, albeit from an angle of identifying and assessing the factors that influence strategy execution; factors that should improve strategy execution.

A strategic plan is a framework for decision making and for securing approval and support before an activity is undertaken. It provides the basis for detailed planning, at lower levels in an institution and it can be broken down into annual plans. A strategic plan is a document that can be employed to explain a business concept to others and it assists in benchmarking and monitoring the performance of an institution against that of comparable institutions. A really novel plan can stimulate change and become building blocks of future plans. A strategic plan is a visionary, conceptual and directional document, but it should be realistic and attainable.

When crafting a strategic plan, which is a long-term document, care should be taken to clearly identify the current status of the institution, its objectives and strategies and decide whether the institution is an existing one or a new one. Secondly, an environmental scan should be undertaken to determine the environment within which the institution is doing business, which should be in terms of the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities that face the institution. The strategy covering process should include the institution's vision, mission, values, goals and objectives, strategies and programmes. Strategies are the guidelines that the vision and mission may be achieved, which may cover such diverse matters as diversification, organic growth, acquisitions, divestments and other related matters.

Strategic execution starts from the time strategic planning is started; the planners should wear their strategic thinking hats in order to come up with a product that satisfies what the institution desires to achieve and how that achievement can come about; a strategic plan should be viewed as a guide that focuses time, competences and resources towards a successful

management of institutional affairs. A strategic plan not be a list of recurrent activities, in an incremental manner, but it should contain new insights and ideas that are likely to advance the achievement of institutional goals and objectives. The new insights result from creative and innovative thinking premised on exploring new possibilities without constraint, exploring the ideas and aligning them with the purpose of the institution. Each new idea should be explored and expanded for their potential to position the institution at a new and exciting plateau of institutional success. There should be a criterion to distinguish a bad idea from a good one, and this criterion should be agreed upon well before the ideas are generated. Each idea that is adopted should render the institution to be different in some respect from other institutions. The impact of the idea should be determined before the idea is included in the plan, and the impact of not implementing the idea should be determined well. All this is done in order to identify the activities that should add value to the institution and enhance the achievement of the purpose of the institution.

#### **Statement of the problem**

Experience has shown that institutions of higher learning face challenges in achieving their vision and mission goals and objectives. The current study seeks to establish the factors that militate against the successful execution of strategic plan and suggest how the situation can be improved.

#### **Research questions**

The primary research question is:

- How can strategy execution be successfully undertaken?

The subsidiary research questions are:

- Which factors influence the successful execution of a strategic plan?
- How can the factors be employed to influence the successful execution of the strategic plan?

#### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to identify factors that influence strategy execution in ODL institutions of higher learning in order to improve the process.

#### **Significance of the study**

The current study is beneficial to open and distance learning institutions of higher education, which are likely to revise the way they have, hitherto, crafted and executed their strategic plans.

The study would benefit the workers in the institutions by raising their morale when they are able to successfully execute their strategic plans. The failure to achieve a strategic plan has a debilitating moral effect

on workers because they feel they would have failed and this may even affect the annual bonus they are likely to forego.

The study could also benefit higher education, as a whole, when the ODL institutions succeed in attaining their strategic plans, which moves the education system to a higher level.

**Delimitation**

The study confines itself to the execution of institutional strategic plan in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions of higher education. The ODL institutions studied are from the Southern African Development Community area.

**Ethical considerations**

The researcher undertook to generate data from participants in an ethical manner; every participant voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, and they are free to leave at any time they feel they can no longer continue in the study.

The study would not divulge the names of the participants, or the names of the institutions under study; these would remain confidential throughout the study. The researcher would use pseudonyms where names are needed.

**Review of related literature**

The review covered an overview of strategic planning process, an implementation section and what other researchers and writers say about strategy

execution. The review also covered the factors that affect or influence strategy execution and possible solutions to these factors in order to improve strategy execution.

**Theoretical Framework**

The Strategic Execution Framework was designed to explain how strategy execution could be undertaken successfully, irrespective of the many pitfalls, myths and challenges advanced by researchers and practitioners alike. The execution should would if projects and programmes were aligned to institutional goals and objectives. Secondly, resources could be invested more wisely and across the entirety of the portfolio of programmes and projects. Monitoring and management tools and techniques should be leveraged in the institution. Lastly, leaders should be assisted to accomplish more output through the exercise of stronger leadership.

Boot, A [1] contends that for strategy execution to succeed there had to be deliberate effort focused on deliverables, like the planning, analysing the data, and controlling finances. However, this was not enough, collaboration across the institution was more important, which could in teams, functions and institutional units.

The accompanying Strategic Execution Framework illustrated the inter-connectedness of collaborative action and the roles that each player was expected to play.



**Fig-1: The inter-connectedness of instituional activity in strategy execution**

In a study, Boot [1] revealed that strategy execution was possible where the practitioners had to successfully deal with an increased rate of change and complexity; where there was the need to absorb disruptive technological developments; where the institution was forced to build agility and complexity in strategy execution; the institution was able to master the dynamics of global markets; where collaboration was undertaken on a cross-institutional and cross-cultural basis; where a new way to change how to navigate short-term and long-term goals and objectives; and, the institution was faced with new innovative players. An institution that satisfied these requirements was assured of successfully executing its strategy.

### **Strategic planning challenges**

Heathfield [2] identifies a number of factors that hinder the execution of strategic plans, and some of them were:

#### **Competition effect**

Strategy execution could fail due to a negative change in sales. Apart from just the sales component failing, strategy execution could be caused by a sharp rise in competition with upgraded products, which can stifle the ability to fill growth in created positions;

#### **Lack of prioritization**

The lack of prioritization and the adoption of all activities in equal measure, could lead to strategy execution failure. An institution should prioritise activities or performance areas then the rest could be auctioned at a date when the priority areas are achieved. When all the areas are a priority, the workforce is forced to spread effort over a wide area and end up making baby-steps in a number of ineffectual areas;

#### **Over-consultation**

When institutions work with consultants they may be requested to generate too much data that they may not use in crafting the strategy and end up with weak strategy. The weakness could emanate from too much data which the institution may not have the ability to convert into information for planning purpose; and

#### **Inherent inability to execute strategy**

An institution may fail to create a necessary specific framework for the execution and follow-up of the strategy. A monitoring framework makes it possible to create an accountability system that consists of action items and follow-up plans that enable strategy execution to be successful.

Kilic, and Atkuna [3] carried out a study in which they desired to establish the reasons for institutional failure to execute strategy in Turkish Public Organisations. They started by the premise that the inability to execute strategy was a result of inadequate

translation of strategic objectives to employees in an organization, low motivation levels, resistance to change, development hell, peer pressure or group influence and the mere prevalence of underperformance. However, the findings of the study were that in Turkish Public Organisations the translation of strategy objectives was perceived to be successful, the perception was that the level of understanding of strategic objectives and the perceived motivation were high, and the other obstacles that they had were not perceived to be influential, except for the perceived development hell obstacle.

In 2013, Dunlop, Firth, and Lurie, found that many university strategic plans failed at the implementation stage and attributed the reasons to a failure to translate the strategic plan to workers, a failure at adapting to change and a failure to sustain change over the long term. The writers claim that every year profit-making and non-profit making organisations meet to craft the best strategic plans to capture the market, enter new markets and increase profitability, but a large percentage of these strategic plans fail to be executed successfully; the strategic plans introduced with fanfare and jubilation fall short of meeting the expected targets. The major reason for the failure at execution resides in that the organisations and institutions fail to bridge the gap between what the strategic plans were designed to accomplish and the approach taken to implement the strategic plan. The mismatch could be summarised into three categories, which were: the institution's failure to translate the strategy from the level of the Chief Executive Officer to the shop floor; institutions fail to appropriately adapt the strategy when the operating environment changes; and, the failure to resource the execution, either with material or human resources and competences.

Dunlop, Firth, and Lurie [4] relate the failure to execute a strategy to what they call "inevitable slump" in enthusiasm, excitement and the general organisational resistance that set in after the crafting of a strategy. The resistance emanate from fatigue that results from waiting from the big day launch of the strategic plan and the changes that it brings into the organisation. This resistance could also be a result of the lack of skills, competences and knowledge in workers needed to execute the new strategy, and the workers feel they receives inadequate support from management in order for them to build the necessary competences. Leadership could contribute to the failure by under-investing in capacity building initiatives and workers revert to past behaviour.

According to Dunlop, Firth, and Lurie [4] the generic approach to strategy execution was administrative in nature; it focused on workforce, time, and a sequence of activities that usher in change. The

approach treated strategy execution as a gigantic activity that was broken down into manageable pieces that developed a master plan which detailed the implementation and timed the activities to specific time frames. The administrative approach was attractive to institutions and organisations because it ensured an institution was quickly mobilised as a unit, the certainty of clear time frames was assured, a large and complex problem or issue or activity could be broken down into manageable portions and the roles and responsibilities of the workforce were clarified, which freed leadership from close supervision.

Favaro, Hirsh and Rangan [5] believe that many business leaders think they would rather have great strategy execution than a superior strategy, although they tend to also believe one may not have the first without the second. They shift the discussion from the desirability of brilliant strategy execution to a theoretical discussion about whether to have a great strategy or be able to brilliantly execute a poor or average strategy. Brunings [6] carried out a research on strategy execution and came up with myths on why strategy execution failed. The first myth was that there was poor alignment which led to the failure of strategy execution. The researcher found that 40% of respondents cited poor vertical alignment of strategy for failure in execution. A further 30% cited that failure to coordinate horizontally across the institution was the cause of strategy execution failure. The second myth was the belief that strategy execution meant sticking closely to the strategic plan. In some instances the lack of institutional competences caused the execution of a strategy to fail. Almost a quarter of respondents cited that institutions responded too slowly to fast moving opportunities or the response was too swift and failed to meet the opportunity. The third myth was that a lot of communication could not be translated into understanding of the strategy. The researcher cited that 55% of managers' could not name one of their top five priorities and less than a third of senior management could connect the dots between the institution's priorities and how they aligned to the strategy.

Blue Ocean Strategy [7] talks of strategy execution failure due to four hurdles, and these were: the cognitive hurdle, effort to navigate workers to blue ocean strategy may not succeed. Workers could have become too comfortable with the historical administrative strategic planning approach to be able to navigate to a blue ocean strategy; moving to a blue strategy could be viewed as rocking the boat, an unnecessary activity. The resource hurdle posited that the greater the shift in strategy the greater the resources required for its execution, which resources may not be available. The motivation hurdle explained the lack of motivation among key practitioners why could change fast from the historic approach to the blue ocean

strategy. The political hurdle was a big obstacle to workers who would want to proceed and change their way of doing business but they feared victimization along political affiliation in the institution.

Murray, A [8] says there were three main requirements for a successful execution of strategy. First, there should be clear goals and objectives that support the strategy. The second requirements were that there should be ways of measuring performance and its progress towards the achievement of the goals and objectives, and lastly, the institution should have transparent accountability for the performance and progress. Murray [8] also says that for strategy execution to be successful, there should be a systematic manner of exposing reality and acting on the reality, when so exposed.

In the work by Boot [1] the importance of collaboration was emphasised, and in pursuit of that goal a few suggestions were made. The suggestions were that: the institution had to foster a mindset that encouraged collaborative behaviour in the form of team building, thinking outside the box, in functions, culture and in departments; the institution needed to make decisions and prioritise in a manner that created transparent responsibilities, so that workers could make informed choices; the process and procedures had to stimulate continuous feedback among people, teams and leaders; the institution needed to have in place a portfolio of integrated technologies that promoted collaboration; and, there had to be a method to measure and establish a balance between learning through analysis and learning through evaluation. An institution that followed the suggested route was most likely to win in strategy execution.

Hrebiniak [9] says that strategy execution can only be attained through a carefully planned approach, without which no strategic goals and objectives can be attained. The development of such a strategically planned approach was a monumental task and a challenge to management. The approach required the setting of clear priorities and the analysing of data, keeping a rhythm to meetings and evaluating the strategy.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The researcher believed that knowledge was a result of social interaction and it was not in existence, waiting to be discovered. In the same vein reality was not given but was a product of social creation and agreement. Because of these facts the researcher adopted the constructivist approach to the study, with an interpretive perspective. The researcher went into institutions of higher education and dialogued with practitioners in order to learn their perceptions of factors that influence the successful execution of

strategy. Conversely, the discussion also considered the factors that hinder the successful execution of strategy.

The qualitative paradigm was chosen for the study because it allowed the researcher to carry out in-depth discussions and analyse institutional documents to establish the nature of strategy execution being carried out.

### **Population**

The population was composed of all open and distance learning institutions in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), with an average of one such institution per country.

### **Sample and sampling technique**

The researcher considered the institutions in three nations, which were easily accessible. The researcher purposively selected to dialogue with personnel in the managerial position and in administration because these were exposed to issues of strategy formulation, implementation/ execution and monitoring. They were the best people to respond to the questions and contribute fruitfully to the outcome of the study. The researcher engaged participants in an interview and analysed the strategic plans and the progress reports that were produced in each institution.

### **Instrumentation**

The study engaged participants in an interview and analysed the strategic plans the institutions had in place to determine how they envisaged to execute them, and with what result.

### **Interview**

An interview is a crucial data generating tool in qualitative research because they give valuable data in the form of perceptions of participants about research conferences. Interviews are important in qualitative research for the following reasons: they are important because they provide some background information that is crucial in ensuring the reliability of data. Interviews also provided access to information that cannot be easily accessed through observations and document analysis, for example, feelings and intentions [10]. Participants were interviewed individually in formal conversations.

The researcher placed a lot of faith in the interview and this position was strengthened by the support of Yin [10] who gave three important reasons for using the in-depth interview as a data generating tool, and these were that:

- Interviews gave background information on the participants;
- Interviews assisted the researcher to gain access to information that could not be accessed through other data generating tools;

- Interviews assisted in identifying other sources of evidence not available in document analysis or observations.

### **DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

There were two basic purposes of document analysis that were supported by Chisaka [11] and these were:

- To develop insights into the purpose and significance of strategy execution;
- To develop an understanding of the perspectives that were reflected in these documents, as they related to strategy execution in higher education.

Document analysis helped the researcher compare data generated through the comparison of insights contained in such documents. Some documents contain elements of strategy execution which were unique to them, with reference to how they contributed to institutional success.

In the current study, document analysis was adopted as the primary data generating method, complemented by some interviews. The researcher analysed strategic plans from three universities in order to determine how they were formulated and the interviews were meant to add the experiences of people in these institutions and their perceptions on strategy execution, leading to a solid determination of the nature of strategy execution and how they contributed to institutional success, determined through the attainment of institutional goals and objectives.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

Data that were extracted from interviews and document analysis were analysed and interpreted to give meaning to it. The researcher was guided by the themes that emerged from the data generating process, which were an indicator to the factors that the practitioners considered appropriate if strategy execution were to be undertaken successfully.

Themes extracted from interview and document analysis:

- “identification of institutional competences”
- “proper execution guidelines”
- “need for knowledgeable and engaged leadership”
- “prudent use of resources, especially monetary resources”
- “worker buy-in emanating from involvement and participation in strategy formulation”
- “adaptation to changes from implementation”

### **Findings of the study**

The themes that emerge from the data generating process were indicative of the factors that influence the execution of strategy in institutions of higher learning. The factors that were identified in the themes were discussed below.

#### **Identification of institutional competences**

It was evident that strategy execution could not be undertaken without undertaking a competence audit in each institution. The institution needed to know the competences that existed within its workers and what it could do exceptionally well, where it enjoyed comparative advantage. For instance, an institution, like University of South Africa, was competent in tutorials, where it grew its competence in e-learning and hoped to be a paperless university within five years from 2014. An institution needed to prioritise areas of attention in the strategies that it pursues as a short-cut to world class performance.

The institution should start by realising and appreciating the competences within it, by defining those competences, by demonstrating value differently and by continuously evaluating impact through the measurement of output. Momentum could be accelerated through demonstrating value differently from historic demonstrations and the traditional tools of formal training.

The identification of institutional competences could be broken down into individual competences before they are aggregated into institutional competences. This would help in the future when hiring new employees or replacing those who leave; an institution could draw up a competence map, where it listed the competences it possessed and where these were located. The competence map could then be employed as a basis for re-alignment of existing employees, moving employees to areas where they performed at their best.

#### **Translate strategy into explicit implementation guidelines and choices**

Dynamic approach addressed the administrative approach shortfalls and started off by articulating the actionable design principles, which divided the direction of the institution to many execution teams. Dynamic principles represented the intermediate level in detail by articulating some strategy ambition. The client was afforded centrality in the dynamic approach. Leadership would describe its desired outcome and the rest proceeded to craft how they could achieve leadership goals; the worker would decide where to start from and how to evaluate their achievement. The novelty with the dynamic approach was that workers were left with the freedom to be creative and adaptive.

The dynamic approach there were four broad areas of concern: strategic leadership should be in place to craft actionable design principles. The leaders should be multilingual people with an affinity for operations and strategy crafting. These should play appropriately defined leadership roles, which empower them to make decisions, connect them to senior management and should be present during strategy design periods. The second was the pictures and practices stage, where workers should be able to visualise the desired outcomes and the paths to be used to get there; leadership should be able to provide guidance for team members; and, leadership should be able to validate senior management strategic hypothesis. Third, there should be a line-of-sight metrics, which refers to the establishment of a clear line of sight between the programme deliverables and strategic ambitions; they should define the outcomes metrics and manage the programme; and leadership should realise that outcome metrics link drivers and leading indicators with strategic outcomes. The last areas considered the traditional tools that senior management used both internally and externally. The tools included the project charters that defined the purpose, objectives and measured success, established structure, decisions and rights and the state of operating principles. There should be a stakeholder engagement plan, which illustrated the segmentation of stakeholders and drew up a customised engagement plan. There could also be a centralised communication plan and a synergy plan.

#### **Adapt to rapidly changing conditions**

The dynamic approach no longer treated the execution as a change programme that was managed and “done to” or “pushed through” the institution. It built in mechanisms for learning and course-correcting. It also sought to improve leadership contextual awareness, solicited different perspectives through many collaborative tools, which allowed it to share and test ideas early in the execution stage. Dynamic strategy execution leveraged scenario planning and environmental scanning in order for the institution to be able to anticipate challenges. Dynamic execution places immense value in productive dialogue techniques which facilitated effective collaboration, led to more efficient decision making and formed strong partnerships with key stakeholders. The institution should complement internal resources with external resources and assume a long term perspective and an outward-looking view. In better dialoguing, the institution should engage in mutual learning, translate implicit to explicit assumptions and balance the amount of advocacy with inquiry.

#### **Knowledgeable and engaged leadership**

The institutions should be led by people who were experts in the areas covered by the mandate of the institution. The leadership needed to appreciate the

institution's mandate and what it took to attain that mandate, before anything could be expected of them. The leadership should be made up of team players, people who thrived in collaborative performance. The area of collaboration was important in strategy execution because the individual members of the institution worked in semi-specialised areas and that effort, and the result, needed to be aggregated into one whole outcome, which needed collaboration.

Engaged leaders were those whole though involvement and participation, who led their charges by example. They showed that they knew what was required of the workforce and they could grease their hands as well, who identified with the workforce, as colleagues. A leader who shunned involvement and the hands-on approach found it difficult to be accepted by employees as one of them. Leaders who were not accepted did not produce results.

#### **Prudential use of resources**

Participants identified the need to efficiently use resources in order for the institution to achieve more output with fewer resources. The way to proceed was to formulate a budget for all the activities the institution would be engaged in, preferably citing the output in each budgetary area. For instance, the items in the budget could be made up of the result that was intended to be achieved so that any purchase would be for input into the production of that targeted product.

There were cited cases of monetary defrayments that did not advance the cause of the institution and were not budgeted for, but these were not of a serious nature. What was emphasised was to prevent institutional politics to get into budgetary considerations.

#### **Worker buy-in**

The employees in the institution should identify themselves with the strategy of the institution. One way of achieving this was to involve them so that they participated in the crafting of the strategy. Involvement and participation gave them the feeling that they belonged to the institution and that their voices mattered, and it enabled them to continue to be involved in the monitoring of the performance. A lack of participation and involvement meant that the workforce merely waited for management to give instructions and for them to react to the instruction, which does not contribute to quality performance and motivation.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The study result was clear in its presentation of factors identified as impediments in strategy implementation and came up with strategies on how the implementation could be a success. One suggested way bore close resemblance to the dynamic approach

method of strategy execution and this was concluded to be a new way of overcoming the shortfalls identified in strategy execution. The novelty about the approach was its emphasis on the human element and how important it was in the whole implementation process. Institutional leadership was also identified as an important cog in the implementation wheel; leadership determined and propagated the culture of the institution and its scope. The importance of the workforce brought to the fore the need for employee buy-in into the strategy and how it could be implemented.

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