Ethiopian public university leaders' understanding of strategic management: A critical path to sustainable institutional success

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Abstract

This paper explores public university leaders' conceptual understanding of strategic management and its benefits as a tool to make strategic choices and decisions to gain competitive advantages toward pursuing excellence. The qualitative case study method was employed with an interpretive approach. The study examined the perspectives of eleven top-level leaders from here public universities, involving three presidents and eight vice presidents. . The findings revealed that public university leaders conceptualize strategic management through the lens of different strategic management facets. They tended to emphasize specific fundamentals of strategic management, such as strategic planning, strategic leadership, transformational leadership, and total quality management. As a result, their understanding of strategic management is conceptually incomplete and practically limited. Moreover, the meaning they ascribe to strategic management is very narrow in scope, and it lacks consistency. Thus, an ambiguity of concepts may mislead to set an unrealistic vision and be accompanied by designing irrelevant strategies, which may affect institutional sustainability. Besides, strategic management initiatives supported leaders in setting goals, enhancing program expansion, conducting performance evaluation, introducing internationalization, mobilizing resources, and building leadership ability. The paper concludes with implications for higher education policy and recommendations for further research.

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Introduction

Strategic management (hereafter SM) is crucial for achieving sustainable success in higher education institutions globally. To achieve this, leaders of these institutions need a better understanding of strategic management, including when to use it and its benefits. University leaders play a key role in formulating and implementing strategies that align with national educational goals, institutional missions, and the dynamic demands of the global academic community (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2024; Gomez & Girotto, 2015). Furthermore, integrating strategic management into public universities management requires

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an understanding the dynamic capabilities that enable institutions to respond effectively to internal and external changes, such as innovation, resource reconfiguration, and the development of new capabilities that support institutional objectives and ultimately help them survive and prosper (Helfat et al., 2007; Taylor & De Lourdes Machado, 2006).

The higher education sector in Ethiopia has experienced significant expansion and transformation over the past three decades, driven by government policies that aimed at increasing access to tertiary education. However, this rapid growth has also brought about significant challenges, including concerns regarding quality education, resource allocation, and institutional governance (Molla, 2018; Saint, 2004; Yizengaw, 2004). Therefore, university leaders' ability to understand and implement strategic management practices is crucial in addressing these challenges and ensuring the long-term sustainability of their institutions. Institutions can enhance their operational efficiency, quality, and overall institutional resilience by embracing strategic management (Helfat et al., 2007). In this regard, leaders' understanding of SM is essential. As Gallos and Bolman (2021) succinctly state, "When you understand, you know what to do" (p. 42). This statement emphasizes the importance of knowledge-based leadership in making informed strategic choices and ensuring sustainable institutional success. Hence, understanding the unique importance of strategic management is a prerequisite for leaders to effectively formulate, implement, and evaluate key strategies for addressing the complexities and challenges faced by public higher education institutions in Ethiopia.

Therefore, this study explores university leaders' conceptual understanding of strategic management and its benefits as a tool for making strategic choices and decisions to gain competitive advantages toward pursuing excellence. With this intention, this article seeks to answer the following research questions: (a) How do Ethiopian public university leaders understand strategic management and its value? (b) What benefits do public universities receive from using SM as a tool for making strategic choices and decisions?

Strategic management has long been a point of discussion about its invaluable contributions to the business, public, and nonprofit organizations since it emerged as management thought. Strategic management consists of an institution's obtaining a unique, advantageous position in its field or market and sustainably maintaining this for an extended period (Johnson et al., 2008). Strategic management is further elaborated as the process consists of the analyses, decisions, and actions an organization undertakes to create and sustain competitive advantages (Dess et al., 2014). Moreover, Certo and Peter (1990, p.5) argued that "SM is a continuous, iterative process aimed at keeping an organization appropriately matched with its environment." From these concepts and definitions of SM, we can understand that strategic management helps an organization shape its future in the desired direction during uncertainties by enabling it to hold a competitive advantage. As Morden (2007) explained, competitive advantage is an idea that illustrates the degree of relative advantage owned by an enterprise within its sector compared to other organizations with which it directly or indirectly competes.

Others, such as Hitt et al. (2016), define the strategic management process as "the full set of commitments, decisions, and actions required for a firm to achieve strategic competitiveness and earn an above-average return." (P.6). These authors viewed SM as a substantial instrumental value that incorporates commitment, decisions, and actions; thereby,

the organization will become more competitive since it helps to yield more than average returns. Such conceptual standpoint is strongly linked with the notion of academic excellence, where excellence can be explained by achieving outstanding quality, producing exceptional, meritocratic, outstanding, and exceeding normal expectations (Brusoni et al., 2014). Some others also describe strategic management in various ways. For example, some describe it as a process for achieving high-level performance (Hitt et al., 2016), while others see it as a tool for gaining a competitive advantage (Morden, 2007). Likewise, Dess et al. (2014) describe SM as a principle that helps organizations thrive in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Most importantly, scholars view strategic management as a process that involves making sound decisions through identifying, implementing, and evaluating strategies (David & David, 2017; Dess et al., 2014; Wheelen & Hunger, 2012). Moreover, it involves three interconnected processes (David, 2011; Dess et al., 2014). For instance, David (2011) suggested that the strategic management process consists of strategic formulation (sometimes called strategic planning), strategic implementation, and strategic evaluation. David further explained that strategy formulation is the process of developing a mission statement, identifying external opportunities and threats, determining internal strengths and weaknesses, establishing long-term objectives, formulating alternative strategies, and selecting strategies to pursue. David added that strategy implementation also explains establishing annual program objectives, devising policies, motivating employees, and allocating resources to execute formulated strategies successfully. They also involve developing a strategy-supportive culture, creating an effective organizational structure, preparing budgets, and developing and utilizing information management systems. Similarly, strategy evaluation reviews external and internal factors that underlie current strategies, measures program performance, and takes corrective actions.

Therefore, strategic management is characterized by flexibility and a dynamic view of its environment. It is also profoundly change-oriented and emphasizes innovation and creativity. These characteristics imply that Ethiopian public university leaders must adopt a proactive and adaptive approach to strategic management. This entails anticipating and responding to changes in the educational landscape, fostering a culture of innovation within their institutions, and maintaining flexibility in their strategies to navigate emerging challenges and opportunities effectively. By doing so, institutions can enhance their sustainable success and resilience in a competitive and dynamic global academic community.

Though SM is a broad term, there has been a debate regarding conceptual understandings and their functions among strategic planning, strategic leadership, and strategic management in the management literature. There is ambiguity in using strategic management interchangeably with strategic planning and leadership. The terms strategic management and strategic plan may be used interchangeably at a time, but 'strategic management is much more than strategic planning.' To avoid such confusion, the researchers take the position of Johnson et al. (2008) strategic management model elements (aspects) since the model is comprehensive and informative. According to the model, strategic management is a broad concept, and strategic leadership and planning are part and parcel of it. Likewise, Macmillan and Tampoe (2001) explain the link between strategic management and leadership. They argue that SM is the formal and structured process by which an organization establishes a strategic leadership position. Then, they explain that strategic

leadership is about achieving sustained competitive advantage. Hence, strategic leadership is the outcome of the strategic management process. It is a state of being rather than a management mechanism. They concluded that strategic leadership does not replace strategic management; it results from it. Therefore, the three concepts are not the same but complement one another.

Even though the concept and practice of SM have their roots in military organizations, other organizations, such as businesses, public institutions, and nonprofits, including higher education institutions (HEIs), also adopt strategic management principles (Keller, 1983; Poister & Streib, 1999; Rowley et al., 1997; Siegel & Leih, 2018). SM is important and applicable to any organization but requires context-specific analysis. When applying SM in the higher education context, it should consider its unique nature, such as its loosely coupled nature, the need for greater autonomy, and other significant factors (Birnbaum, 1988).

The emergence of SM in higher education is a recent development, making it a young discipline. In the late 1970s, most US universities began considering the potential benefits of strategic management (Keller, 1983). According to Martin (1992), the decline in student enrollment and the limited availability of public resources in higher education were two factors that prompted institutions to explore strategic management. Hence, in times of crisis, SM plays a significant role. A seminal book by George Keller and subsequent works by other scholars highlighted the importance of strategic management in higher education. They argued that SM offers valuable insights into how institutions can navigate future uncertainties and showcased examples of campuses that effectively tackled challenging times through creative strategies (Keller, 1983; Lockwood, 1984; Spitzberg, 1984). Moreover, colleges and universities need to apply modern management concepts to understand and handle the changed circumstances the HIEs face (Lockwood, 1984). However, colleges and universities initially refused to accept modern management and planning ideas and practices for their uses; due to falling enrolments, inflated costs, and shifting academic priorities, strategic management has become increasingly crucial in HEIs (Keller, 1983).

Furthermore, Spitzberg (1984) argued that colleges and universities need strategies for survival and opportunities for improvement consistent with their culture and fundamental principles. Universities often deal with strategic management to get the most out of it. For instance, Lillis (2006) discussed the benefit of strategic management by merging the concept with strategic planning and articulated that strategic planning benefits HEIs by capturing the complexity of the entire organization and directing it toward a coherent direction. This benefit provides a platform to define the unique mission of an HEI, identify competitive advantages, and enhance awareness of, as well as alignment with, the external environment.

Thus, universities can use SM to cope with external pressure, such as increased local and global competition, budget cuts, the desire for quality, and the need for a more systematic approach (Reichert, 2006). In times of crises or uncertainties, higher education institutions can no longer afford to act or react unthinkingly (Eder, 1983); they should respond strategically. As a result, strategic management is becoming part and parcel of modern higher education management (Keller, 1983).

Today's higher education institutions' management demands proactive change, adaptation, positioning, and market orientation to thrive (Martin, 1992). Therefore, strategic management is essential for universities' survival and prosperity, especially in the turbulent

and rapidly changing working environment (Temple, 2018). Global higher education is now facing intense competition due to international pressure. Consequently, universities of all sizes and types compete for talented students, faculties and other limited resources. As a result, winning the competition and maintaining high performance is becoming increasingly challenging (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2024). Therefore, public higher education institutions can benefit from strategic management by developing innovative strategies that align with their specific contexts, enabling them to outperform their competitors.

The history of higher education in Ethiopia dates back to the 1950s when the first university college of Addis Ababa was established (Semela, 2006; Yizengaw, 2007). However, higher education expansion remained restricted in towns for an extended period and was criticized as an elite education system (Saint, 2004; World Bank, 2003). Since the last three decades, the expansion of higher education in Ethiopia has increased rapidly. About 46 public universities currently accommodate more than four hundred thousand students in different fields of study. Such expansions of universities demand more resources and, at the same time, the proper management and leadership skills of incumbents. Moreover, the government subsumes the massification of higher education in its mega plan as a strategic priority in achieving the vision of being a middle-income country by 2025 (National Planning Commission, 2016).

Consequently, universities have been given greater responsibilities to play economic and social roles in breaking the vicious circle of poverty (MoE, 2015; National Planning Commission, 2016). As a result, in the trajectory of moving toward being a middle-income country, public universities designed strategies that emanate from the mission and vision to be responsive to the country's demand while being competitive globally. Thus, the intent of strategic management as a management philosophy becomes a vital issue to ensure public universities' competitiveness through the pursuit of excellence in research and teaching-learning.

The practice of strategic management in Ethiopia is a recent phenomenon. The Ethiopian government has emphasized the importance of strategic management in improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness as part of its civil service reforms. The government began reforming public services in 1991 and has undergone several phases of reform. The third phase, which started in 2003, focused on improving service delivery in the public sector. This phase aimed to strengthen public institutions by depoliticizing the civil service, improving managerial effectiveness, and empowering private and civil society organizations and higher education institutions(Tilaye, 2007). As a result of the civil service reform, HEIs, including universities, were compelled to implement strategic planning and management, often referred to as the SM approach, to lead their institutions effectively (Jiru, 2020; Tilaye, 2007).

Recent evidence from the Ethiopian public university suggests that developing a strategic management framework, specifically a comprehensive strategic plan, is necessary for leaders assuming leadership positions (MoE, 2017; MoSHE, 2020). The civil service reform also enforced that all public organizations, including higher education institutions, must develop and implement SM to improve service quality. This includes developing organizational mission, vision, and strategies in their leadership and management practices (Jiru, 2020; Markos, 2013; Tilaye, 2007; World Bank, 2019). This civil service reform has

impacted and changed the orientation of university management. Consequently, this civil service reform has significantly impacted and transformed university management.

Methods

Research Approach and Design

This study was undertaken within the framework of the interpretivist research paradigm and utilized a qualitative research approach. Specifically, a cross-case study design was employed to explore how top-level leaders at Bahir Dar University (BDU), Addis Ababa Science and Technology University (AASTU), and Assosa University (ASTU) understand strategic management.

Sampling

This study was conducted in three universities categorized under the traditional classification of four-generation universities. The three sample universities were purposively selected by considering two extreme cases. One is the first generation, believed to have better experiences, and the other two are newly emerged universities with a certain age gap between them. Consequently, Bahir Dar University represents the first generation, while Assosa University represents the third generation. Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, a university with a distinctive mission, was also included.

Initially, the researchers planned to use a comprehensive sampling technique to include all presidents and vice presidents from each university. This would provide a complete understanding of strategic management practices and perspectives from all top-level leaders. However, due to scheduling conflicts and other commitments, three vice presidents could not participate. For example, at Bahir Dar University, six top-level leaders were selected as primary data sources, but one interviewee could not participate due to a busy schedule. Additionally, the other two vice presidents from ASSTU and ASU were unavailable during the data collection period. As a result, eleven top-level leaders (three presidents and eight vice presidents) were selected using availability sampling techniques. Table 1 summarizes the research participants.

Table 1

Sample Distribution of Participants by University

University	Sex	No. of Participants	Sub-Total	Remark
Bahir Dar University	M	4	5	1 President
	F	1		4 Vice-presidents
Addis Ababa Science and	M	3	3	1 President
Technology University	F	0		2 Vice-presidents
Assosa University	M	3	3	1 President
	F	0		2 Vice-presidents
		Total	11	3 President
				8 Vice-presidents

Regarding educational background, study participants represented diverse academic disciplines such as engineering, science, mathematics, humanities, business, economics, and agriculture. Besides, their experiences in higher education leadership roles, particularly in top management positions, varied significantly, spanning service periods from one and a half years to ten years. Notably, only three leaders received more than three weeks of training programs, while others participated in short-term training lasting from two days to a week on HE leadership.

Data Gathering

As the first step of the research, the pilot study was conducted at Debre Tabor University with one president and one vice president to meet three significant purposes. The first was to find issues and barriers related to recruiting potential participants since this study was primarily designed for top-level public university leaders: presidents and vice presidents. Accordingly, the pilot interviewees' feedback showed that the issues entertained in the study are appropriate to include a president and vice presidents of each case university. The second reason is to determine the time required to conduct an interview. Initially, the interview protocol was designed to take approximately half an hour. During the pilot study, the interview took a minimum of twenty and a maximum of twenty-five minutes. The third result obtained from the pilot helped the researchers avoid too many interview questions. For instance, initially, from the questions that asked the leaders to explain what SM means and what how it differs from other management fads, the latter one was removed in the main study. Finally, two major decisions were made based on the results of the pilot study. The first was to identify questions and thematic areas to help pursue in-depth, one-to-one interviews. Secondly, the interview questions were modified and reduced from eleven to six.

Finally, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with the selected participants. After conducting semi-structured interviews with public university leaders, the information obtained from them was transcribed into Amharic, documented as a Word file, and then translated into English for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique employed in this study was thematic analysis. The refined data were entered into Atlas.ti qualitative research software to identify patterns that could inform the extraction of themes. As a result, a total of fifteen codes and eight categories were derived, ultimately leading to the identification and analysis of three overarching themes.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the anonymity of participants, the researchers assigned distinct codes to each interviewee, ranging from PR1 to PR11. Furthermore, to minimize potential bias, the researchers solicited feedback from professionals in the field regarding both the interview guide and preliminary findings. Additionally, transcribed data were shared with some interviewees to confirm the consistency of their expressed ideas. Of the participants, two confirmed the accuracy of the transcribed data, while others were unable to respond due to time constraints.

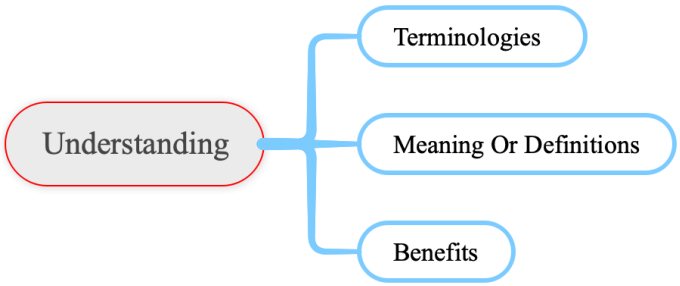
Results

Public University Leaders' Understanding of Strategic Management

The interviewees were asked about their understanding of SM concepts and benefits in the context of higher education. Before they answered the question, the researchers provided them with a common definition of strategic management and asked if they had a similar understanding or if their understanding was specific to their context. Accordingly, all public university leaders agreed that their understanding of strategic management was very similar to the researchers' definition. However, the problem arose when they tried to explain their understanding in more detail. Therefore, after thoroughly analyzing the data, the detailed responses of the leaders were categorized into three main themes: Terminology, Meaning, and Benefit.

Figure 1

Branch out Themes from an Understanding of SM Discourse.



Terminologies Emerged from Leaders' Conceptualization of Strategic Management

While interviewing the respondents, some terms frequently appeared to explain the concept of strategic management. As indicated in Table 2, terms such as 'strategic leadership' [PR4, PR5, PR7, PR8], 'Strategic planning' [PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, PR5, PR7, PR8, PR9, PR10], 'change management [PR5], 'Transformational leadership' [PR4, PR5], 'Total Quality Management [PR2, PR7, PR8], 'Management Information System' [PR9], 'Strategic Management' [PR6, PR10, PR11] and 'situational Leadership' [PR5] are the common terms used by interviewees while they explained strategic management concepts.

Table 2

Lexical Terms Used by Leaders to Explain Strategic Management

No	Terms	Interviewees		
		BDU	AASTU	ASU
1	Strategic planning	PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, PR5	PR7, PR8	PR9, PR10
2	Strategic leadership	PR4, PR5	PR7	PR8
3	Transformational leadership	PR4, PR5		
4	Change management	PR5		
5	Total Quality Management	PR2	PR7, PR8	

	(TQM) (Principled Leadership)			
6	Management Information System			PR9
7	Situational leadership	PR5		
8	Strategic management		PR6	PR10, PR11

Meanwhile, interviewees, such as [PR5], used more than four terms: strategic planning, strategic leadership, change management, and transformational leadership, while [PR7] used three terms, such as planning, strategic leadership, and TQM. Some others, such as [PR4], interchangeably employ three terms: strategic leadership, strategic planning, and transformational leadership. Furthermore, others employed two terms, [PR8] strategic planning and TQM and [PR9] strategic planning and management information system. Though different terms were mixed, three participants [PR6, PR10, PR11] often directly referred to SM in their responses. One thing we can see from their explanations is that most interviewees used strategic planning regularly when addressing and discussing the topic of strategic management. Using varied terminologies suggests leaders may have diverse understandings and interpretations of strategic management. This diversity indicates that strategic management concepts might not be uniformly understood or applied within the organization. As a result, using different terminologies of strategic management has spillover effects on the subsequent knowledge of its meanings and benefits.

Leaders' Perceived Meaning of Strategic Management

As previously stated, using several terminologies by public university leaders to convey the SM concept resulted in a wide range of meanings. Viewing strategic management through the lens of different management facets entails leaders connoting diverse definitions for the idea. Consequently, the meaning top leaders at public universities ascribe to strategic management signals having different perspectives and knowledge. Hence, study participants' reflections are presented with sub-themes for a detailed explanation. Accordingly, the following sub-themes amplified the leaders' perceived meaning of SM: SM as a synonym for strategic planning, SM as a tool, and SM as a principle.

Strategic Management as a Synonym for Strategic Planning

Some of the points they raised during the interview indicate that most leaders' definitions and meanings of strategic management describe strategic planning. The following extracts from the leaders' responses are evidence for this argument. For instance, some of the interviewees believed that strategic management is a strategic plan of their institutions and reflected in this way. One interviewee claimed, "… a plan helped envision the future and envisage what the university can achieve [PR1]". Another also reflects, "It is a plan the university is heading to by addressing what to do, how to do it, and what we would eventually achieve [PR2]. Besides, another also claimed, "It is about setting targets to achieve and ensuring we are on the right path towards these targets [PR9]."

Moreover, other interviewees also argued that strategic management is an objective framework for goals, strategies, and tasks. Thus, their ascribed meaning to strategic

management is more like the concept of strategic planning, which is one element of the strategic management process. Therefore, it is worth noting that university leaders have limited insight into strategic management because their perceived meaning is associated with one of its constituents, the strategic plan.

Strategic Management as a Tool

Some leaders also viewed strategic management as a tool that enables the university to control its business by addressing its mission. For instance, some argued that:

> 'SM is …. the 'way' or 'method' or a 'tool' to address the university's missions.' [PR11]
>
> … It is a method an institution determines where to go and how to go there; moreover, it is a means to check its achievement level. … SM is all about control of the businesses.' [PR10]

These interviewees conceived that strategic management is a tool that helps institutions achieve their missions and controls whether the university's business is running effectively and efficiently. Scholars argue that SM is a broad concept that comprises different elements, of which evaluation and control are one part (Wheelen & Hunger, 2012). Hence, only linking strategic management to evaluation and control may result in retaining marginal understanding and conceptual blurring.

Strategic Management as a Principle

Two other study participants gave meaning to strategic management by considering it a management principle. They believed that strategic management is one of the principles that leaders can apply to oversee the institution's overall performance. For instance, some interviewees claim "… that SM is a management principle used to evaluate system performances [PR5], where the top-level leaders are responsible for overseeing these efforts [PR5, PR11]." These leaders emphasized two key aspects of strategic management. Firstly, they described strategic management as a principle that guides system-level performance evaluation. Secondly, they pointed out that top-level leaders are responsible for strategic management.

Leaders' Perceptions of the Benefits of Strategic Management

On the other hand, the case study universities' Leaders have shared valuable insights into the benefits they have gained from being guided by strategic management. The study found that public university leaders benefit substantially from applying strategic management. This includes setting goals, improving operations and resource allocation, expanding international presence, increasing program offerings, evaluating performance, and enhancing leadership capabilities.

Setting Directions

Some interviewees discussed that applying SM in their business gives them a clear sense of direction. Accordingly, some argue, "SM or SP enables the universities to set targets

[PR3] and direction [PR6, PR5]". Moreover, some others state, "SM helped the institution to have a sense of purpose and direction, hold a strategic position, and create a better tomorrow [PR5, PR8]". Besides, one interviewee claims, "SM enables a university to specify its objectives and develop policies and plans to achieve them [PR6]."

These leaders believe that applying SM or SP greatly improves universities' ability to establish clear goals and objectives. By setting specific targets, defining a strategic position, and creating actionable plans, universities can ensure that they are working towards their long-term goals in a structured and efficient way. An institution that establishes a clear sense of direction provides clarity on where to head, ultimately benefiting the overall growth and success of the institution.

Improving Implementation

Some interviewees again explained the benefit their intuitions gained from the strategic management approach. For instance, some interviewees claimed, "Strategic management helped their institutions to execute the mission in a better way [PR1]; it also improved teachers' engagement in conducting research [PR11]." These leaders' reflections implied that their strategy implementation practice improved over time because they followed the SM approach. This can result in more effective operations and a research-oriented academic environment, contributing to the overall success and development of the institution.

Expanding Programs

Some leaders also argued that the current expansions of different undergraduate and postgraduate programs of their universities result from applying strategic management practices and, more importantly, developing a five-year rolling strategic planning. They said:

> SM or SP helped expand undergraduate and postgraduate programs [PR2] … enhanced program diversity and expansion [PR4], … established more research centers. [PR5, PR11].

> One university leader claimed their university's postgraduate programs are expanding due to their adherence to SP practices. These programs expanded and opened over 140 second- and 60 third-degree programs [PR5].

Therefore, leaders believed that applying strategic management or strategic planning, mainly through the development of five-year rolling strategic plans, has significantly contributed to the expansion and diversification of undergraduate and postgraduate programs and the establishment of research centers. This strategic approach has thus enabled universities to enhance their academic portfolio and research capabilities.

Securing a Good Performance

Besides the above explanations, some public university leaders believed that because the strategic planning process governed them, their institutions' performance improved from time to time. More specifically, SM has brought staff harmony to help evaluate their position per the objectives. The following discourses can corroborate this argument.

SM or SP helped us to achieve good performance [PR9],

> … check whether the university is on the right track or not, and take corrective measures, providing an opportunity to learn from the experiences through a rigorous evaluation process [PR8],
>
> … boosted the spirit of harmony among staff …, made objectively verifiable performance measures [PR7], and brought improvements in graduate employability [PR11].

These leaders generally claimed that applying strategic management in a university benefited the institution by having better performance and allowing its staff to create harmonious conditions. They believed that executing SM resulted in substantial returns for their respective institutions.

Mobilizing Resource

On the other hand, other Leaders also argued that applying SM in their management practices benefitted the institutions to enhance human resource development, i.e., academic staff is increasing in number and qualification, and students' profiles are also highly growing [PR1, PR4, PR9, PR11]. Moreover, SM enabled them to attract internationally competitive projects, helped them to generate income, improved the wise use of scarce resources, and allocated resources [PR1, PR2, PR3, PR5, PR6, PR9]. Therefore, according to study participants, SM has effectively contributed to the growth and optimal utilization of institutional resources.

Enhancing Internationalization

Some leaders also discussed how their institutions became more visible internationally. They contended that:

> SM or SP helped their universities attract international students, increase global visibility, improve publication status, and present research outputs in academic forums like international conferences [PR2, PR4].

Therefore, top-level leaders claimed that implementing strategic management or strategic planning has significantly enhanced their universities' internationalization efforts. Consequently, universities governed by strategic plans have played a pivotal role in strengthening these universities' global presence and academic reputation.

Enhancing Leadership Capacity

Some leaders also added that governing by SM or SP helped their universities. The following excerpts epitomize this contention: "…become focused" [PR1, PR6], "… make proactive decisions" [PR6], "…follow a flexible approach" [PR8], and "create a system so that the organization operates smoothly" [PR10].

Therefore, it can be concluded that being guided by SM or SP significantly enhanced the leadership capacity within universities. As a result, SP has contributed to more effective and adaptive leadership, fostering a well-organized and forward-thinking institutional environment and helping them create strategic agility.

Many study participants listed several benefits from strategic management practices. They emphasize that these benefits represent improvements compared to the universities' previous state, indicating progress in performance due to the implementation of strategic management, especially strategic planning approaches. However, they also note that despite these improvements, it remains crucial to address various management issues where the universities are still lagging.

Leaders added that though some efforts were made to live what is in the book (i.e., SP), because of the leader's limited understanding of SM and the staff's limited implementation capacity, more things remained in black and white, implying a more systematic approach to pushing leaders' understanding of SM.

Cross-case Analysis

A cross-case analysis was made of the three cases studied regarding the thematic areas mentioned above. These are terminologies, Meaning, and Benefits.

Terminologies

Some convergent and divergent views of the terminologies have been observed among the three case study universities. Five top-level leaders from BDU participated in this study. The leaders frequently used more than five terminologies to describe and explain strategic management concepts. At AASTU, three top-level leaders were involved in the study. The leaders employed four different terminologies to elaborate their understanding of SM. They sometimes used these terms interchangeably with strategic management. Yet, they frequently used the term strategic management to heighten their conceptual understanding.

Meanwhile, at Assosa University, three high-level leaders participated in this study. Consequently, leaders used three terminologies to explain their conceptual understanding of strategic management. As can be observed from the demographic data of interviewees, all BDU leaders had prior leadership experiences compared to the two other universities' leaders before they assumed the current leadership position. Some were college deans, others held executive director positions, and others served as vice presidents before taking their current roles. These background experiences may help leaders become familiar with various management terminologies because of the exposures they have had before.

Meaning

Top-level public university leaders provided different meanings to strategic management concepts. The meaning they attached to strategic management parallels the terms they used when explaining SM. Bahir Dar University attached more meaning to strategic management than the other universities. AASTU and ASU offered only a few interpretations of strategic management. The case study universities have different interpretations of strategic management. The most common understanding of strategic management across all of them involves SM, which involves planning for the future, deciding on future directions, establishing objectives, assessing performance, and confirming that institutions are headed in the right direction. Moreover, they view strategic management as both a tool and a guiding principle. BDU and AASTU particularly emphasize that strategic

management is a principle that guides the future destiny of the university. On the other hand, ASU sees strategic management as a form of systems thinking where leaders are responsible for its implementation. However, each case university explained the meaning of strategic management using different words; the central theme they discussed was similar to the meaning of strategic planning.

Benefit

Regarding each university's benefit from applying strategic management, all case universities confirmed that SM helped them shape their direction through strategic planning efforts. Moreover, each case university firmly explained that SM benefited their institutions by mobilizing resources. Meanwhile, BDU leaders, focusing on specific performance issues, found that SM helped them expand undergraduate and postgraduate programs and prompted them to consider and work towards internationalization. Conversely, AASTU and ASU aimed to address overall performance issues. Their adherence to strategic management led to continuous improvement in their universities' performance over time.

Overall, the three universities may have different perspectives on the outcomes they achieved by implementing strategic management. However, the most frequently cited advantages they reaped include the ability to establish a clear direction, enhance the execution of strategies, mobilize resources, promote internationalization, expand academic programs, evaluate performance, and develop leadership capabilities.

Discussion

This discussion focuses on the strategic management understanding of leaders in public universities, as presented in the case study. The discussion is aligned with the major themes identified: terminologies, meanings, and benefits. Before leaders do something, they should understand what it is about and what is expected, unless they may not be successful.

Terminologies

The findings revealed that leaders conceptualize strategic management through different terminologies: strategic planning, strategic leadership, change management, transformational leadership, and total quality management. They believe that these terms have similar meanings to SM. Nonetheless, most of the terms they use are specific fundamentals of strategic management. Understanding SM with these specific fundamentals allows them to retain a narrower insight into this broader concept. The discussion hereunder mainly focuses on strategic management, strategic planning, and strategic leadership regarding convergent, divergent, and complementing views.

During the mid-90s, there was a debate about whether strategic plans and strategic management were interchangeable. However, scholars have argued that they are distinct concepts, with SM being broader in scope than SP (Bryson, 2018; Middlewood & Lumby, 1998; Poister & Streib, 1999; Tabatoni et al., 2000). Poister also claimed that “strategic planning is concerned with formulating strategy’’ (Poister, 2010, p.s247), which is just one element of SM. Other scholars, such as Lumby, define strategic management as the

overarching process, which includes strategic thinking, strategic planning, implementation, and review (Lumby, 2002). Strategic planning is the basic building block and, at the same time, the cornerstone of strategic management (Bryson, 2004). Strategic planning can be piecemeal, and strategic management requires more completeness. When leaders understand the difference between strategic planning and strategic management, they become better at both.

Concerning strategic leadership terminology, the confusion of the terms is directly linked to the debate of leadership versus management. This argument has also brought confusion in the conceptual discussion between strategic leadership and management. However, some scholars still perpetuate the debate, and these researchers wanted to adhere to (Bush & Coleman, 2000; Middlewood & Lumby, 1998) their arguments. These scholars mainly see the two concepts in the context of educational institutions. Accordingly, the role of a leader in the strategic management process is crucial. As Middlewood and Lumby (1998) discussed, strategic management is a key leadership task since change and improvement are one of its primary aims. Likewise, other scholars argued that strategic leadership is about achieving sustained competitive advantage. It is the outcome of the strategic management process. It is a state of being rather than a management mechanism. They concluded that strategic leadership does not replace strategic management; it results from it (Macmillan & Tampoe, 2001).

Concerning other terminologies, such as transformational leadership, although respondents believe that strategic management is one aspect of transformational leadership, this leadership style has distinct characteristics from strategic management. Transformational leadership focuses on transforming an organization to the next level where change is needed (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, the leader's conceptual explanation emphasizes a management philosophy that works in a dynamic and ever-changing world; mixing strategic management with transformational leadership requires careful treatment. While strategic management shares common themes with strategic leadership, change management, transformational leadership, and total quality management, it is distinct in its broader scope and integrative nature. Understanding these similarities and differences is crucial for effectively integrating these concepts to achieve sustainable institutional success in higher education.

Meaning

This study’s findings revealed that the top-level leaders of the case universities interpret strategic management in three fundamental ways: as a strategic plan, a tool, and a principle. These leaders' insights align with and diverge from various perspectives on strategic management discourse. The conception of strategic management as a strategic plan is consistent with the traditional view in management literature. Strategic planning involves setting long-term goals, determining actions to achieve those goals, and mobilizing resources to execute the actions. According to Bryson (2018) strategic planning, it is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it. However, some contemporary scholars like Bryson argue that strategic management goes beyond mere planning.

Viewing strategic management as a tool aligns with the resource-based view of the firm, which sees strategic management tools and frameworks as essential for leveraging organizational resources and capabilities to gain competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Nonetheless, some literature argues that an over-reliance on tools can lead to a mechanistic view of strategy, ignoring the nuances of human behavior and organizational culture (Whittington, 2006). Strategic tools are beneficial but must be used within the broader context of dynamic and complex organizational environments.

Strategic management as a principle resonates with the fundamental concepts of strategic thinking and strategic leadership. Strategic principles provide a guiding philosophy for decision-making and action within organizations (Dess et al., 2014; Hitt et al., 2016). Some literature emphasizes that strategic principles need to be adaptable to change. The 'strategic agility' concept highlights the importance of flexibility and responsiveness to environmental shifts (Doz & Kosonen, 2008). Strict adherence to fixed principles without adaptation can hinder an organization's ability to navigate uncertainty.

In conclusion, the findings are broadly consistent with established theories in the literature and suggest potential areas for growth. Leaders might benefit from integrating more adaptive and emergent approaches to strategic management, recognizing the importance of flexibility, human factors, and the dynamic nature of higher education environments. This broader perspective can enhance their effectiveness in navigating the complexities of university leadership and management.

Benefits

The study found that public university leaders have benefited from strategic management. This includes setting goals, improving operations and resource allocation, expanding international presence, increasing program offerings, evaluating performance, and enhancing leadership capabilities. These benefits are directly linked to specific elements of strategic management, with some being holistic, such as promoting internationalization and increasing public visibility.

Most of the findings align with those of researchers and practitioners who have emphasized the positive impact of strategic management principles and approaches on organizational growth and success. Strategic management helps institutions gain a competitive advantage and ensure long-term viability (Dess et al., 2014; Hitt et al., 2016). There are two aspects to the benefits organizations gain from strategic management efforts. The first aspect relates to the overall purpose of strategic management, which is to foster growth and prosperity. Organizations must improve their products and services to survive and thrive. Strategic management significantly enhances performance and outcomes (Joyce, 2015). The second aspect is the specific benefits of the strategic management process. According to empirical research, Wheelen and Hunger, (2012) strategic management's three most highly rated benefits are providing a clear strategic vision, enabling a sharper focus on strategic priorities, and enhancing understanding of a rapidly changing environment. Empirical evidence explicitly supports that SM is instrumental in expanding and offering different academic programs, measuring the university’s performance and allocating

resources (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2024), promoting internationalization (Knight & De Wit, 2018), and enhancing leadership capacity (Northouse, 2021).

In conclusion, recent literature supports the benefits of strategic management, which university leaders have identified well. However, institutions must balance these benefits with adaptability, innovation, cultural considerations, and a holistic evaluation and leadership development approach. By doing so, they can maximize the advantages of strategic management while navigating the complexities of the higher education landscape.

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the study's findings, public university leaders possessed a somewhat fragmented conceptual understanding of strategic management. Their perspectives tended to emphasize specific facets of strategic management while potentially overlooking other crucial elements. This narrow focus suggests that their grasp of SM may not encompass its entirety, which could impede their ability to formulate comprehensive and cohesive institutional strategies. Furthermore, the study reveals a diversity in the meaning attributed to strategic management among these leaders. This variability in interpretation creates ambiguity within leadership teams and across the institution, potentially leading to disparate visions and strategies that may not align effectively with the institution's overarching goals. Such ambiguity could also hinder the institution's sustainability by fostering unrealistic expectations and strategies that do not adequately address current challenges or opportunities. Despite these challenges in conceptual clarity, public university leaders recognize the benefits of strategic management initiatives. However, the practical application of these benefits may be constrained by the leaders' limited and varied understanding of strategic management concepts. Cross-case analysis results also depicted that while each university has its unique perspective on strategic management outcomes, there is a shared understanding that it is essential for long-term institutional success. The differences in emphasis and application reflect varying institutional contexts and leadership priorities but underscore a common goal of leveraging strategic management to advance their respective missions. These findings underscore the importance of context-specific strategies and leadership experiences in shaping how strategic management is perceived, applied, and leveraged to achieve institutional excellence and sustainability.

Most higher education institution leaders in Ethiopia are appointed without adequate training in leadership and management, relying instead on intuition and others' experiences. There is no structured professional development program to enhance their skills even after they take on leadership roles (MoE, 2015; MoSHE, 2020). This traditional practice has led to poor management and leadership within these institutions. Leaders need a comprehensive understanding of contemporary leadership and management, particularly strategic management in the context of public universities. Therefore, arranging short-term and job-embedded continuous leadership development programs for current and potential university leaders is essential to promote a unified understanding of strategic management concepts. Collaboration and sharing best practices among universities also assist leaders in learning from each other; thus, arranging such a modality is crucial.

This study has important policy implications that suggest the need for increased government support and the allocation of additional resources to enhance strategic management initiatives. Furthermore, it is imperative to establish regulatory frameworks that mandate strategic management practices. Incentives should be introduced to promote excellence in strategic management. Integrating strategic management principles into national higher education policies and fostering research in this domain will significantly enhance Ethiopian public universities' effectiveness and long-term viability.

Study Limitation

This study has limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the research relies solely on semi-structured interviews. This approach may limit the depth and breadth of the data collected and the robustness of the findings. Secondly, the study is confined to three case study universities, which restricts the generalizability of the results. The insights gained from these institutions may not represent all public universities, limiting the study's conclusiveness for the entire sector. Lastly, the focus is exclusively on top-level leaders responsible for the universities' overall performance. This narrow scope excludes perspectives from other stakeholders, such as faculty, staff, and students, who also play crucial roles in strategic management processes. These limitations suggest that future research adopt a more comprehensive methodological approach, include a broader range of institutions, and gather data from diverse stakeholders to provide a more holistic understanding of strategic management in higher education.

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