STRATEGIC PLANNING IN THE SELECTED PUBLIC TECHNICAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the introduction and operation of strategic plan (SP) in Technical Higher Education Institutions (THEIs) in Tanzania. It specifically explores specific reasons for the introduction of SP; involvement of management and staff on SP formulation; staff knowledge on the existing SP; how SP is the factor for staff performance; and challenges facing SP implementation apart from budget constraints. Data were collected through documentary review and interviews with three chief planning officers and three experienced academic staff. The staff were sampled using purposive sampling technique. The collected data were analyzed using interpretative approach. The results indicate that, the SP was introduced between 2005 and 2007 mainly following the order from the government and as a requirement for transformation process of THEIs. The management was mainly involved while the staff had no or had very minimal involvement in the SP formulation. It was noted that SP facilitates the staff performance through preparation, implementation and appraisal of detailed SMART annual operation plans. The main challenges facing SP implementation apart from budgets’ constraints include poor staff knowledge on SP and political directives and interference. The findings of this study advocate for the involvement and participation of staff in SP formulation. This would in turn make the staff knowledgeable and feel the sense of ownership during the implementation process.

Key Words: Strategic Plan, Technical Higher Education Institutions

1. INTRODUCTION

A strategic plan (SP) is a range of strategies that contribute to achieve the organizational direction (Tapinos et al., 2005). The SP has been introduced in the institutions to ensure that institutional staff work toward the same goals and direction (Gitonga, 2013). This implies that, the staff’s motivation and performance in the institutions usually relate to the mission, vision, objectives, strategies and values of the institution which are all reflected in the SP.
The concept and practice of SP has been adopted globally across private and public institutions because of its supposed influence to work performance (Arasa & K’Obonyo, 2012; Owolabi & Makinde, 2012). Being the management tool, the SP has gained sustained prominence in the management of public services as it helps an institution focus its energy on its objectives (Gitonga, 2013). The SP has become therefore an essential condition for performance in different countries of the world regardless of their level of economic development (Suklev & Debarliev, 2012).

Like many other developing countries, Tanzania acknowledges the importance of SP for the realization of her institutions’ performance. The SP was therefore introduced in 2002 in all ministries and in some public institutions which had no SP (Baker, Bliss, Chung, & Reynolds, 2013). Since then, the public institutions were increasingly required to embrace SP to chart out their broad directions and as part of their management techniques after its introduction in Tanzania.

Since the higher education institutions (HEIs) are also part of what is happening in Tanzania and the world at large, their shift to SP was very important. They shifted to SP by defining clearly their purpose in a mission statement; providing a framework for decision making; revealing and clarifying future opportunities and threats; providing a basis for measuring performance; and increasing productivity from increased efficiency and effectiveness (Owolabi & Makinde, 2012).

Several previous studies (e.g. Ahamed, 2015; Arasa & K’Obonyo, 2012) about SP were done mainly in purely business sectors (i.e. production, manufacturing, finance and banking, etc.) and there is little evidence that similar studies were done in education sector like HEIs. Scholars observe that SP process in the business sector may not necessarily be applicable to education sector due to the differences in performance of such sectors (Owolabi & Makinde, 2012).

Although previous studies stressed formulation and implementation as the SP dimensions, the dimensions used in such studies lacked staff participation and details on implementation aspect. It must be noted that staff are the principal implementers of the SP in the organization hence should be involved since the SP formulation process. Johnson and Whittington (2008); Wairimu and Theuri (2014) maintain that, staff participation and involvement is significant at each stage of the SP process for execution; and that an SP without effective and measurable implementation, is no SP at all. Due to the lack of staff participation dimension in the previous studies, nothing about the staff knowledge on the formulated SP is addressed.

Additionally, in some previous studies (e.g. Suklev & Debarliev, 2012; Owolabi & Makinde, 2012), the dimension of management participation in SP process was not comprehensively addressed. The dimension lacks the details on the true nature of management participation and involvement. The studies did not specifically and comprehensively portray the details on how and when does the management participates and get involved in the SP process.

Furthermore, studies (e.g. Owolabi & Makinde, 2012; Njeru, Stephen & Wambui, 2013) identified challenges facing SP implementation in various organizations including HEIs. The principal challenges identified are lack of funds and budget constraints. Though there are currently budget constraints in several government-owned organizations and institutions, it was
believed that there are other challenges facing SP implementation in the HEIs apart from lack of funds and budget constraints.

Generally, most of the previous studies were less comprehensive as they lacked details of the addressed SP. The details such as how SP is really the factor for staff performance; what are contextual, typical and specific reasons for the introduction of SP in particular institutions, how SP process takes place in the surveyed institutions, who initiates the SP process in the surveyed institutions and what was used before the introduction of SP in the surveyed institutions were missing. The previous studies lacked the aforesaid details due to the methodology used. Specifically, most of them were quantitative than qualitative in nature. Their quantitative nature could not depict the missing details.

This study intended therefore to answer the following questions about SP in the public selected THEIs in Tanzania:

i. Why was SP introduced in the public selected THEI?
ii. How are the management and staff involved in the SP process in the THEIs?
iii. Are the staff knowledgeable on the existing SP in the THEIs?
iv. How is SP the factor for staff performance in the THEIs?
v. Are there any challenges apart from budget constraints facing SP implementation in the THEIs?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

SP is a set of processes embarked on for developing a variety of strategies in achieving the organizational direction (Tapinos et al., 2005). SP emerged when several institutions became concerned with achieving lucidity of purpose. It was essential to adopt SP since institutions possessed scarce resources to address performance requirements in their environmental situations (Moxley, 2004). The SP offered therefore institutions a way to accomplish focus in their respective environment full of considerable changes, turmoil and uncertainty and other several emerging challenges (Moxley, 2004).

The maturity and complex nature of the institutions make the need for SP greater (Njoroge, 2013). That SP makes all the staff understand the vision, mission, direction, objectives and core values of their business. It further makes the institution more relevant and responsive to the community needs. SP provides the framework for evaluating results and impact and finally it facilitates the organization to focus into the future orderly and systematically (Njoroge, 2013).

Scholars uphold that issue of organisational direction for institutions worldwide has generated growing interest in the recent past. Thus, formation of SP by many institutions has attracted growing concerns due to environmental pursuit of organisational growth and survival in the long run (Njeru, Stephen & Wambui, 2013).

In analyzing the factors that influence the formulation of strategic plans in secondary schools in Embu North District, Kenya; Njeru, Stephen and Wambui (2013) found that employee motivation, availability of funds, support by top school leadership, government policy and employee skills had a statistical relationship with formulation of strategic plans. Although the study was done in education sector, it did not show specific reasons for the introduction of SP; involvement of management and staff in the SP process. Also, the study did not document the
detailed staff knowledge on the existing SP, factor for staff performance and challenges facing SP implementation in such public secondary schools.

Similarly, Njoroge (2013) investigated factors that influence preparation of the SP in the secondary schools in Kikuyu District, Kenya. The study revealed that the school administration facilitated the preparation of strategic plan through involvement of teachers, parents and board of governors. Although this study portrayed the management and staff involvement in SP formulation, it did not show the true nature and details of such involvement.

Sije and Ochieng’ (2013) further studied the relationship between effective strategic planning and its formulation in public secondary schools in Homa – Bay County, Kenya. Their findings established existence of strong relationship between SP and its formulation. It also identified academic qualification and training of the secondary school principals and board of governors’ chairpersons as determinants for effective SP formulation. Although the study discusses about SP formulation, it is less detailed on reasons for the introduction of SP in surveyed schools, staff knowledge on the existing SP, involvement of management and staff in the SP process, SP as the factor for staff performance and challenges facing SP implementation.

Another study by Kiptoo and Mwirigi (2014) investigated factors that influence effective SP process in an organization. The study reports organization structure, organizational culture, leadership and human resources as the factors which influence SP process. Similar to other studies, this study shows less information on management and staff involvement in the SP process, the reasons for introducing SP in organizations surveyed, the staff knowledge on SP process and the challenges facing the SP process in surveyed organizations.

Abok (2013) investigated the factors affecting effective implementation of SP in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kenya. Her findings indicate that many organizations have slowly embraced SP but the implementation process remains a challenge due to management style, communication, organizational culture, stakeholders and organizational resources. Though the study stipulates the challenges facing SP implementation, such challenges are noted in the NGOs and not in the education sector like THEIs. It is asserted that challenges for SP implementation in the NGOs may not necessarily be applicable to the education sector due to the difference in performance of such sectors (Owolabi & Makinde, 2012).

Moreover, Messah and Mucai (2014) analyzed the factors affecting the implementation of strategic plans in government tertiary institutions. Although the study was done in the technical institutions, the factors were not directly addressed as challenges. The study was interested on showing their relationship with SP implementation.

In his study on the use of SP in the public sector organizations in Tanzania with a survey of four executive agencies, Sulle (2009) reveals financial constraints and general uncertainty to change being the challenges for full implementation of SP in the public organizations. The study gives little details of such two challenges. Since, THEIs are public organizations and there are a lot of changes that have occurred since 2009; their SP implementation might be faced with more challenges than the ones identified in the study.

Generally, as the reviews indicate, more details are needed in both education sector and business sector to conclude on specific reasons for the introduction of SP. Also, detailed information on
management and staff involvement in the SP process; SP as the factor for staff performance; staff knowledge on the existing SP and challenges facing SP implementation are highly need

3. METHODOLOGY

This study followed the qualitative approach which facilitated the acquisition of details regarding SP in the public THEIs in Tanzania. An exploratory case study design was used in this study. The design was chosen due to posed "how" and "why" questions and the focus were on a contemporary phenomenon (i.e. SP) within some real-life context (Yin, 1996).

This study was conducted at Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) in Mbeya, Dar es Salaam Institute of Technology (DIT) in Dar es Salaam, and Arusha Technical College (ATC) in Arusha. These institutions were chosen as they have similar operating characteristics, they have the same history; and they have adopted and adapted SP when introduced in Tanzania. Emphatically, the institutions were expected to perform well in terms of SP implementation after its introduction.

The main respondents of this study were three chief planning officers of the THEIs who are the key informants of anything about SP in their respective institutions. The information from the chief planning officers was supplemented with information from three experienced staff. The chief planning officers and staff were sampled using purposive sampling technique.

The main methods used for data collection were semi-structured and unstructured interview formats. Participants were asked to provide elaborated accounts about SP in their THEIs. Such accounts and information were easily facilitated by providing the participants a list of questions before the interview (Hill et al., 1997). Also, documentary review was used for data collection by the researchers. Through this method extensive reading of SP formulation meeting minutes, memos and the previous and current SP documents was done following the researchers’ interpretations and reactions (Timulak & Elliott, 2005).

The analysis of the main objective of this study was based on linguistic data by applying meaning-based forms of data analysis (Polkinghorne, 1983). The main research questions attended here were open-ended and exploratory in nature i.e. needed to employ qualitative data collection and analysis strategies (Timulak, & Elliott, 2005) whereas participants were flexible and encouraged to communicate their experiences and elaborate on their accounts regarding the SP in the THEIs. The format of such qualitative data was mastered by verbal accounts or descriptions in words which were put into writings and texts.

The analysis of the collected data was done by firstly transcribed verbatim. This pre-analysis influenced further steps of analysis to get the unfolded relevancies. In so doing, the whole collected data set were initially read to get the whole picture of the studied SP which in turn led to emerging of initial insights and understandings. Furthermore, the initial editing of the data took place and some obvious redundancies, repetitions, and unimportant digressions were omitted.

Overwhelmingly, the data were analyzed using interpretative approach by testing the assumptions without reproducing them as the researchers’ own but understanding the respondents’ responses and views and interpreting them accordingly (Charmaz, 2006).
4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Reasons for the Introduction of SP in the THEIs

SP is a recent concept in Tanzania and it was introduced in 2002 for the purpose of charting out broad directions (Baker, Bliss, Chung & Reynolds, 2013). Specifically, SP was generally introduced in the surveyed THEIs between 2005 and 2007. It was introduced in the surveyed THEIs when the government urged all of its institutions to adopt and adapt the SP in order to chart out their broad directions. This finding is even consistent to what was found previously by Baker, Bliss, Chung and Reynolds (2013) who stressed that, ministries and organizations were obliged to develop SP to chart out their broad directions.

“...I remember between 2005 and 2007, the government through the concerned ministry by then directed all of its technical institutions to prepare necessary SP so that they can chart out their broad directions hence our institution obeyed the directives” (Interview with Chief Planning Officer [CPO] A on 2nd December, 2015).

It was revealed that, it was during this time when the surveyed institutions were promoted to higher education institutions according to the 2005 Act. In their promotions, the regulatory boards such as the National Council for Technical Education (NACTE) and Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) required SP as one of the significant documents in their promotions. Thus, the process of transformation and promotion of the THEIs became one of the catalysts for them to have SP.

“Our institution was then in the process of being promoted to be the higher learning education institution hence the regulatory boards that is NACTE and TCU required some necessary documents for registration; one of them was a Five Years SP...” (Interview with CPO C on 17th December, 2015).

The SP was found also as the reference point for doing annual budgeting and planning process in the surveyed THEIs. It always facilitates the annual budgeting and planning process different from when there was no SP. Whatever budgets forecast and planning done in such THEIs is directed and driven by the available SP.

“...the SP introduction reasonably facilitated the budgeting and planning process of our institution; it became always the reference point as we do annual budgeting and planning process...” (Interview with CPO B on 9th December, 2015).

4.2 Participation in the SP Process

This section presents the participation in the SP process especially during the formulation process. It explores who (management or staff) principally participates and gets involved in the formulation of SP in the THEIs.

It was found that the management participates to large extent in SP formulation whereas the staff were left for the SP’s implementation. The management includes council members vice chancellors/principals, directors/deans/principals of directorates/schools/colleges and heads of departments. All the surveyed institutions had the same experience at the SP inception stage.
Differently, Arusha Technical College tried to involve its respective staff through heads of department in the second SP.

The lack or minimal involvement of staff in SP formulation was even supported by the noted poor knowledge of the staff on existing SP in the THEIs. The staff were found implementing the SP they are not aware of. It was revealed staff are less motivated by the existing SP in the THEIs. Staff participation in SP could increase their motivation, strengthen their capabilities and skills and become more productive in the implementation process (Phillips & Moutinho, 2000).

“In general, none deny the absence of involvement and participation of staff in the formulation of SP in our institution. Staff’s participation was mainly during the implementation of SP that they are not aware of. In fact, the institution management and the planning officers became the main participants in the SP formulation…” (Interview with CPO C on 17th December, 2015).

Budgets and funds constraints were identified as the main stumbling block for lack or minimal participation of staff compare to the management in SP formulation. It was also noted that sometimes external pressures from parties such as the ministry and TCU who needed the SP within a short notes accelerated staff exclusion. This means staff’s participation would need high budget and would be time consuming, as result of external pressures, professionalism of strategic management that requires even partial/full participation and involvement from the staff of the given institutions was not taken into account. The management is sometimes advised by the planning office on the need to involve the staff yet it (management) does not agree as it is worried of time and budget. This is even supported by Njeru, Stephen, and Wambui, (2013) who found that employee motivation, availability of funds, support by top school leadership, and government policy being the barriers for staff participation in the formulation of strategic plans.

“I really doubt to say that the staff participated in the formulation of especially the previous and current SP. The staff had no any inputs in the preparation of SP and the management had never surveyed any input from them (staff) due to budget constraints and time limitation” (Interview with CPO B on 9th December, 2015).

The study also explored the stage when different participants are involved in the SP. Is it before, during or after the SP formulation? The planning officers identify the need for the SP. Going on or not with the SP formulation process depends on the approval from the management. When the management approves the SP need from the planning officers, the preparation and formulation commences which again is commenced by the planning office. When the SP document is prepared, it is presented to the management meeting in which the comments, suggestions, views, and opinions are given and noted by the planning officers. The planning officers incorporate the comments given and resubmit the same to the management for approval, submission and presentation to the council meeting. When the council approves the SP document, its implementation commences.

From the three surveyed institutions, the management and the council commonly participate mainly with minimum inputs as comments after the SP document has been prepared by the planning officers. The planning officers participate in the preparation and formulation of SP from the inception to the end of its approval by the council. In short, the planning officers have maximum inputs. It was apparent that the staff had very minimal participation in the SP of the
institutions while the planning officers, the management and the council had maximum participation in the process.

“…the planning and budgeting officers participate fully before, during and after preparation while the management and the council participate partially before and fully during and after formulation process of SP…” (Interview with CPO C on 17th December, 2015).

Furthermore, it was significant to explore on the nature (how) of participation in SP formulation. In so doing, several means were noted being used to participate in the formulation of SP. These found means included letters and/or memos, meetings, mails, text massages and or calls, presentations and discussions, interviews and questionnaires. The style of preparation and formulation of SP depends on the means and who participated. In fact, the general style of SP preparation and formulation was downward, beginning from the management to the staff.

The planning and budgeting officers receive and work upon the command to prepare the SP document through memos/letters; after preparing it; they present it to the management through the meeting. The management through that meeting discusses, give views and comments on the presented document. After the management’s comments are incorporated by the planning and budgeting officers, the management go through the document and approve it ready for the council meeting. The council then goes through the SP document during the council meeting, give its comments and lastly approve the plan for the implementation in the institution.

“…it is through memos, letters and meetings the management, council and planning officers formulate and prepare the SP…” (Interview with CPO B on 9th December, 2015).

4.3 Staff Knowledge on SP
This part explores the knowledge of the staff on the existing SP in the THEIs in Tanzania. The staff were asked whether they know when the SP introduced in their respective institutions was and if they know the contents of the previous and present SP in their respective institutions

The study noted most of the staff did not know when the SP was introduced in their respective institutions and they do not even know the contents of the present SP. Most of the staff did not even refer SP when filling OPRAS forms. Uniquely, some staff had some little knowledge on SP. A further exploration revealed that, those staff are or were the heads of departments (HoDs). Thus, such little knowledge might have gained during the headship as they were opportuned to participate in the SP process during formulation. Njeru, Stephen and Wambui (2013) stressed on the staff knowledge on SP being the very important factor in the effective and implementation of SP in the institutions.

“…when it came to reviewing and evaluation of the SP in our institution, we realized that most of the staff don’t know our SP in terms of its introduction, contents and their filled OPRAS’ forms hardly had issues stipulated in the SP but rather full of job descriptions.” Interview with CPO C on 17th December, 2015).

4.4 SP as the Factor for Performance
This part aimed at exploring the role of SP for staff performance. The study found that although SP is the factor for staff to perform in their respective institutions, it would become the critical
factor if these staff participate and get involved from preparation, formulation and eventually the implementation. Staff participation and involvement would make them feel typically the part of the SP hence motivated, inspired and committed to implement through their routine performance in the institution.

“...the SP helps the staff to perform but depends on how they have been made part of the SP and the extent to which they are sensitized, motivated and trained by the management”... (Interview with CPO C on 17th December, 2015).

The SP facilitates the staff performance through preparation of detailed annual operation plans linked to medium term expenditure framework (MTEF) and resources available, identifying and implementing their SMART quarterly targets. Also employee can be appraised by the annual work plans which are included in the OPRAS forms and these plans are extracted from the SP. The present and the future of institution are now focused from the SP. The SP influences the performance by identifying the goals and strategies of achieving them. The SP also facilitates the acquiring of supportive funds for institution from various stakeholders.

“...SP now facilitates easily the preparation of detailed annual operation plans linked to medium term expenditure framework (MTEF) and resources available for the immediate year; and it also portrays the Specific, Measurable, Achievable and Time framed (SMART) quarterly targets...” Interview with CPO B on 9th December, 2015).

Generally, the SP serves as a guiding framework that defines the overall goals, sets broad objectives, and guides the operations of our institution. It provides a framework through which we shall apply our strengths, tackle our weaknesses, exploit the opportunities, and confront threats that may occur in our operating environment (MUST Five Years Rolling SP, 2012/2012-2016-2017).

4.5 Challenges facing the implementation of SP in the THEIs

The implementation of the previous and current SPs have been challenging to the institutions surveyed. This is because of several found challenges facing the SP implementation in the THEIs. Poor knowledge of the prepared SP among the staff of the surveyed THEIs is one of the noted challenges. Since the staff are less involved in the preparation and formulation of the SP, they become unaware of any prepared SP in their institutions. There were no noted workshops, consultation meetings, written submissions, questionnaires given to staff as the means of involving them in the SP formulation. This leads the SP contents unknown to staff as they are not given opportunities to see, read or even listen to the presentations about the SP.

“...failure to involve our staff in the SP formulation process makes them in turn unaware of SP. When comes to implementation, the uninvolved staff feel not owning the SP...” (Interview with CPO C on 17th December, 2015).

Inadequate funding from the government and other sources is another challenge. Recently, there has been much reduction of the government financial support to the THEIs and other government owned institutions. Financial allocations are done during budgeting and planning process but the amounts allocated are not given on time by the government. The institutions are also facing the financial crisis as the lack of research projects.
Various strategies of achieving the SP objectives are identified and well put forward. When it comes to SP implementation, it becomes challenging as there are no funds and financial resources. The same financial challenge in turn contributes to the lack of enough physical and human resources. The same institutions are facing shortage of academic and non-academic staff, classrooms and lecture theatres, offices, workshop and laboratory equipment.

“…in reality, the implementation of the previous and current SP has been challenging due to inadequate funding and support from the government…” (Interview with CPO B on 9th December, 2015).

Political and government policies, under utilization of teaching and learning resources in most areas of specialization due to lower students/staff ratios, gender imbalance amongst students and staff, few formal research activities and inadequate infrastructures for teaching, research and community service provision are other challenges facing THEIs.

“…underutilization of teaching and learning resources, lower students/staff ratios; gender imbalance amongst students and staff; inadequate infrastructures; shortage of office space; and congestion of students in the classrooms are the principal challenges facing the implementation of SP in our institution…” (Interview with CPO A on 2nd December, 2015).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATION

The main reasons which grounded the introduction of SP in 2005 are the order from the government, and transformation process of the THEIs in Tanzania. Since its introduction, SP has been operating however staff are not well equipped in the THEIs. It was further noted that SP is a very important factor for staff performance although it lacks participation and involvement of staff in the formulation process. This lack of participation and involvement made the staff unknowledgeable of the SP and thus the staff implement the SP unknowingly. Since the THEIs are government owned, the SP implementation of is likewise interfered by the political directives and policies

This study therefore urges the institutional management and education sector at large to let staff participate and get involved in SP formulation. The participation and involvement of staff will in turn ensure sense of ownership and motivation during SP implementation. The participation and involvement of staff should not only commence from SP implementation but from the onset of formulation. Being the dominant stakeholder, the government is informed to wisely leave the institutions enjoy the freedom of its autonomous. The policy of the higher education institutions being autonomous should be practical and well implementable in Tanzania among the higher education institutions. The introduction of new government policies and directives can be well implemented after a particular term (five years) of SP operation in the higher education institutions.
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