

MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THINKING AND PLANNING MORE STRATEGICALLY

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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of the paper is to discuss the actions to be taken by higher education managers in the framework of developing a strategy aimed at achieving competitive advantage in the globalized external environment.

Design/methodology/approach The paper is based on the analysis of 1) theoretical literature and research papers within the area of educational and strategic management; 2) official OECD and EU documents on higher education; 3) the author's own experience in higher education management.

Findings Various factors – international, national and institutional – comprise the context, in which education managers make strategic decisions. In the fast-changing global environment characterized by the increasing level of competition, managers have to re-examine their strategy that should be focused on identifying the areas of competitive advantage. The priority areas may have either an external or internal accent, or both. The established priority action areas can be further developed into different focus areas. This demands using the holistic approach to creating a competitive strategy built on basic strategic priorities.

Practical implications The author hopes that whatever lessons the analysis provides will be helpful to higher education managers responsible for developing a competitive strategy of a modern university in the international context.

Originality/value The performed analysis has allowed the author to explore the factors that embrace the complex context, in which education managers develop their strategy, and identify the priority action areas in the framework of their overall strategy aimed at accomplishing competitive advantage and academic excellence.

Keywords: Higher education, strategy, priority, focus area

1. INTRODUCTION

UNESCO experts agree that globalization has deeply influenced higher education, globalization being characterized by “an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology, the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions” (Altbach *et. al.*, 2009).

Nowadays, education and research are considered to be basic elements in the development of the global environment (Marginson and van der Wende, 2009), in which contemporary universities are functioning. This global environment is constantly changing; it is characterised by increasing competition and the emergence of new requirements (COM(2003) 58 final). As modern higher education institutions are complex multi-level non-linear systems, education managers make strategic decisions in a very complicated context shaped by various contributory factors, their decisions being aimed at accomplishing competitive advantage and academic excellence (Stukalina, 2013).

The global education market is continuously evolving. Today, higher education institutions (both public and private) are pressed to increase their revenues, at the same time decreasing their costs to stay competitive and affordable on the international education market. The expectations of students are also changing – they expect to choose what, how and when they learn, in compliance with their individual needs and interests, in their native country or abroad (COM(2013) 499 final). Consequently, higher education has become more flexible for satisfying the needs of new student populations; modern universities offer

relevant courses to attract adult populations, as the response to the changes in the labour market (The State of Higher Education 2014: Executive Summary, 2014).

Contemporary higher education institutions have to compete not only for attracting students, but also international staff, international academic and business partners, as well as international research funds in the context of cross-border higher education. Strengthened competition between modern public and private universities in respect of increasing local enrolment rates and attracting international students makes education managers re-examine their strategy, think and plan more strategically.

The purpose of the paper is to discuss the actions to be taken by higher education managers in the framework of developing a strategy aimed at achieving competitive advantage in the globalized external environment. The paper is based on 1) analysis of theoretical literature and research papers within the area of educational and strategic management; 2) analysis of OECD documents and European Union documents on the main trends and challenges in the area of higher education; 3) the author's own experience in higher education management.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION MARKET: KEY TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The tertiary education systems of many OECD countries have experienced fast growth over the last decade; they are now facing new pressures as the result of a globalising economy and labour market (Huisman *et al.*, 2007; Tremblay *et al.*, 2012; The State of Higher Education 2014: Executive Summary, 2014).

As stated in the OECD Report "Education Indicators in Focus" (2013), between 2000 and 2011, the number of international students has more than doubled; almost 4.5 million tertiary students are enrolled outside their country of citizenship. Besides, new players have emerged on the international education market in the past decades (Australia, New Zealand and others). So it is hardly surprising that the main issue European universities face today is providing quality higher education (Bologna Declaration, 1999; Berlin Communiqué, 2003; COM (2003) 58 final; Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2005; London Communiqué, 2007; The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012; Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions, 2013).

Contemporary universities encounter complicated multidimensional problems and face a number of serious challenges. From an institutional perspective, universities are under pressure to become more effective and efficient across all of their missions – teaching, research and innovation and local economic development (The State of Higher Education 2014: Executive Summary). From a strategic management perspective, higher education managers have to find the most efficient ways to balance their university's position in terms of internal strengths and weaknesses against external opportunities and threats. Thus, in the extremely globalized international environment, higher education institutions must have the ability to investigate the up-and-coming opportunities and threats, so that to provide their students with the access to a broad education (Stukalina, 2008).

Among essential factors that have their impact on the development of higher education, experts mention increased cross-border education, the so-called "massification" of higher education, enlarged number of international students and diversified student population, more focus on branding and marketing, decreasing state funds, bigger expectations for quality, higher competition for better students and researchers, university internationalization,

introduction of new forms of digital learning, etc. (Gul *et al.*, 2010; Katsarova, 2015). Besides, universities have to balance higher education principles with labour market priorities (The State of Higher Education 2013: Executive Summary, 2013).

It should be noted that there are much more factors that are supposed to have an impact on the operation and further development of modern universities. In Table 1, the key trends for the future of higher education and the associated development opportunities for modern universities are summarized.

Table 1

Key trends for the future of higher education and the associated development opportunities

Main trends for the future of higher education (based on <i>Higher Education to 2030: Executive Summary</i> , 2009)	Development opportunities for modern universities
1. Intensified cross-border higher education and mobility of students	Exporting higher education services, this way attracting alternative financial resources (e.g. tuition fees for international students)
2. Increased international academic research affected by both collaborative and competitive forces	Attracting international funding for university research
3. Increased global impact of higher education systems in Asia and Europe and the growth of their scientific output	Attracting more young talents and outstanding researchers from all over the world
4. Increased private higher education provision and financing worldwide	Satisfying the increased demand for higher education that coincides (COM(2003) 58 final) with the low birth rate in Europe
5. Growth of market-like tools in higher education management through the use of performance-based and competitive allocation of funds	Developing a set of integrated management practices used to provide quality enhancement of a university in the customer-driven education context
6. Increased focus on quality assurance in response to the growing importance of private and cross-border higher education, institutional rankings and the quest for accountability	Developing quality assurance systems that set the parameters for the review of both undergraduate and postgraduate university programmes

As seen from the Table above, modern trends in higher education may stimulate further improvement of contemporary higher education institutions, at the same time posing new challenges to higher education managers. These challenges include, among other things, ensuring that European universities have sufficient and sustainable resources, increasing universities' research and education excellence, opening up universities to the outside world and increasing their international attractiveness, providing new opportunities to students in the context of the job market customization and lifelong learning, reorganisation of knowledge delivery, etc. (COM(2003) 58 final; COM(2007) 61 final; The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012; Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions, 2013).

3. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

As is evident from the foregoing, a broad range of factors make education managers think and plan more strategically. The need for a strategic vision of European higher education is obvious. According to Jeffs (2008), the role of strategic management in modern organizations is very important, since it offers a logical approach to strategic decision-making. Managing strategy is critical for higher education institution, because it supports the realization of its central activities such as teaching, research, social and economic service

(Watson, 2000). These activities, in turn, are determined by specific features of the educational area (Tavernier, 2005). Though educational management occurs in specific social and economic settings (Bush and Coleman, 2000), and is concerned with the purpose of education (Bush, 2007; Bush, 2011), the basic principles of strategic management are supposed to be relevant to contemporary universities (Stukalina, 2014), provided that the accomplishment of education-specific organizational goals requires using a special approach to developing strategies aimed at accomplishing competitive advantage and academic (research) excellence.

Strategic management in a contemporary university is linked to developing institutional policies intended for increasing its potential for change and a persistent concern for quality (Tabatoni, 2002). Today, institutional policies may focus on the following developments (Vincent-Lancrin, 2009):

- Europeanisation, which presupposes evaluation of a university's achievements in the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy.
- Use of institutional rankings and related metrics of publication and citation, global rankings acquiring more policy significance and becoming more sophisticated.
- Increase of cross-border faculty mobility, since global element in labour markets has gained weight because of use of global university rankings.

Therefore, education managers must consider different processes in various contexts. Various strategies are developed to provide an institution with a competitive advantage (Hill and Jones, 2013), strategy being defined as a set of coordinated actions designed and performed for accomplishing the purpose of an organization (Hill and Jones, 2013; Sadler, 2003). The university's overall strategy may embrace a number of strategies differentiated by the nature of leadership, which are intended for guaranteeing the competitiveness of the organization (Moldovan, 2012). As said by (Vincent-Lancrin, 2009), in the agenda of the internalization of higher education and research in a globalizing world, education managers may employ different strategies:

- The traditional internationalisation strategy based on mutual understanding, which encourages the international mobility of students and academic staff by means of grants, academic exchange programmes and partnerships between universities.
- The strategy based on skilled migration, which is focused on excellence and competition for talent, and involves a more proactive and results-oriented approach to the recruitment of foreign students.
- The strategy based on revenue generation, which is focused on exports of education services.
- The strategy focused on encouraging studies abroad and establishing foreign courses and institutions in the country.

It should be noted that the above strategies are closely related to the main challenges posed to education managers by a globalizing external environment, which are mentioned in European documents on education (Fig.1).

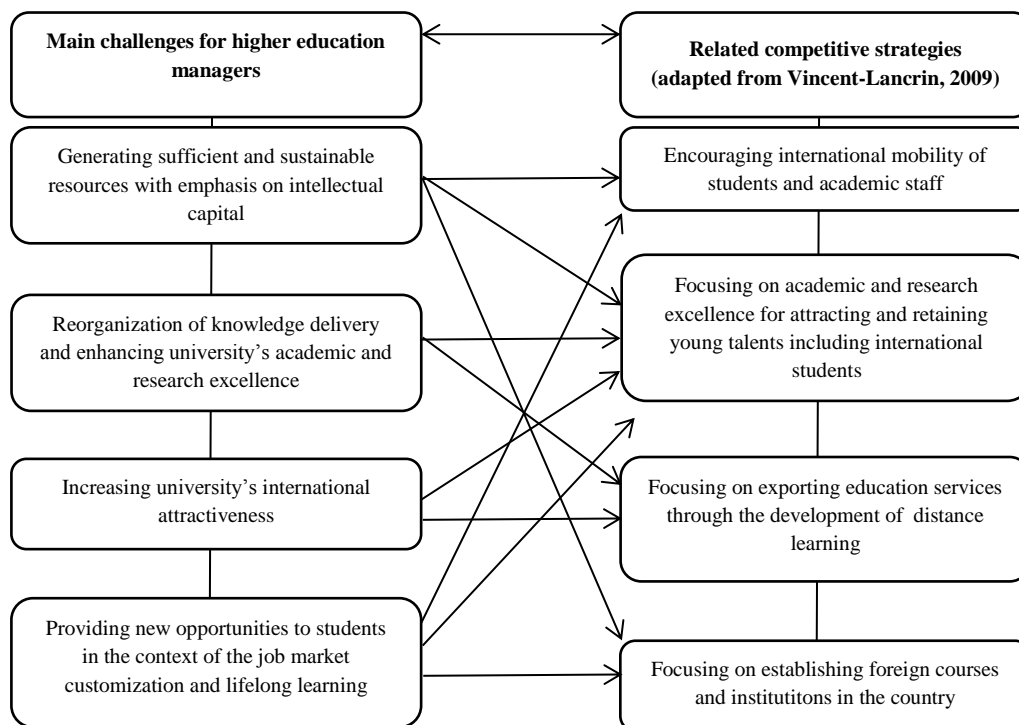


Figure 1. Competitive strategies in the context of cross-border higher education

From Figure 1, we can see that the proposed strategies can be applied to meet some critical challenges of higher education management. However, we assume that the matter cannot rest here, since there are many other contexts (both external and internal), in which strategic decisions are made.

It should be mentioned that each of the above strategies represents a different means of creating a competitive advantage. In business, companies may adopt a single strategy, two or even three strategies (choosing the so-called hybrid strategy) in order to survive in the current era of globalization (Baroto *et al.*, 2012). University management has to decide on the appropriate strategy (strategies) taking cognizance of the fact that different strategies have different consequences in different contexts. Moreover, every strategy has its advantages and risks. So the choice will depend on several factors: the effects of globalization, situation in the global labour market, situation in the international higher education market, social and university context, financial models, leadership and management models, specialization (technical/humanitarian), etc. Besides, public and private higher education institutions may choose dissimilar strategies. There is a further point to be made here – the implementation of these strategies without clear goals and careful planning runs the risk of generating poor outcomes.

4. IDENTIFYING THE AREAS OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Performing the strategic analysis of a university's external and internal environment, education managers make various decisions at different levels and in a number of social situations. They include decisions about customers and products, different resources, organizational systems and technologies, risk, etc. (Morden, 2007). In education, the strategic analysis process also includes the acknowledgment of the prevailing internal culture of the educational organization (Fiddler, 2002).

From strategic management perspective, strategic analysis will be focused on the external and internal resources of an educational organization. According to Gaponyuk *et al.* (2013), the issue of managing educational resources in a contemporary university is related to the issue of modernization in education, which is understood as the “process of educational system transformation”; modernization in education presupposes that managerial process can be regarded as a set of interconnected elements: management of a) education development; b) institutionally-organized educational systems; c) modernization risks. We suppose that, in this framework, management of education development can be associated with accomplishing academic and research excellence; management of institutionally-organized educational systems can be related to creating reorganized and updated university infrastructure for supporting education development, management of modernization risks encompassing the process of identifying, assessing and responding to emerging risks.

Therefore, the inclusive management of the integrated educational environment of a modern university occurs in different functional areas of an educational organization, being based on the holistic approach and directed at achieving synergy necessary for accomplishing education-specific organizational goals (Stukalina, 2014). In these functional areas, various strategies can be initiated. Though strategy is usually associated with large decisions, even smaller tactical moves prove to be strategic in certain cases (Gopinath and Siciliano, 2010). Strategic decisions can be made on the basis of numerous criteria (Bhushan and Rai, 2004). Though, at the same time, uniformity must be maintained throughout the organization; uniformity is supported by accentuating a “spirit of shared strategic goals and a sense of higher education community” (Kohtamaki, 2010).

In the agenda of an overall strategy, managers can develop a collection of generic strategies that will most probably lead to sustained competitive advantage (Duncan *et al.*, 1998). In the framework of developing multiple strategies, strategic planning will include all elements that are crucial to any managerial process: organizational goals, organizational structures and resources, relationships within the organization, etc. (Tabatoni and Barblan, 2002). For creating a competitive strategy, managers have to understand and examine the internal and external situation of an organization (Thompson and Strickland, 2003); strategic decision-making should be directed at matching the internal capabilities of an organization with the external environment by deciding on the best possible alternative (Bhushan and Rai, 2004). As the methods used for overall management of a university may have a crucial influence on the progress of academic disciplines (Shattock, 2003), competitive advantage and academic (research) excellence escort each other. It is obvious that academic (research) excellence is closely related to organizational performance.

As previously stated, competitive advantage may be achieved by focusing on particular priority areas, which will be singled out as fundamentally important; these priority areas can be further developed into different focus areas. The main idea is to set specific goals and allocate (reallocate) various resources more efficiently for the implementation of different tasks. The goals include corporate-level strategic goals (associated with the entire educational organization as a single body) and functional area-specific strategic goals subsequent upon the corporate-level goals (Stukalina, 2014). The priority areas may have either an external or internal accent, or both. Determination of the areas of competitive advantage may be done in the framework of the selected overall strategy (single or hybrid), which is aimed at attaining the university’s academic and (or) research excellence judged to be essential at European or at international level. The areas of competitive advantage are identified using the holistic approach to strategy development and implementation.

We presume that the key to developing a competitive strategy lies in understanding and identifying the areas of competitive advantage education managers should focus on in order to

be up to the challenges posed to them by the ever-evolving global environment. A university should be viewed as a single entity including different integrated and interrelated subsystems and processes under the impact of modernization. The academic and research strengths of the educational organization are based on a wide variety of resources – tangible, non-tangible, semi-tangible. The resources are associated with university services and facilities, education, research and the related staff (Table 2).

Table 2

Management of a modern university: Identifying the areas of competitive advantage

Priority (strategic goal)	Focus area
<p>To gain more recognition in five years – to be ranked among the top 100 world universities</p> <p>To strengthen cooperation with other universities, research institutions, secondary schools, enterprises and interest groups</p> <p>To make university a safe, sustainable and attractive place for students and academic staff (including international students and academic/attending staff)</p> <p>To make university accessible to local citizens, international students and academic staff</p>	<p><i>University infrastructure:</i></p> <p>Creating advanced university services and facilities</p> <p>Creating ICT-based research and education infrastructure</p> <p>Creating sustainable university environment</p> <p><i>Education:</i></p> <p>Developing new advanced interdisciplinary programmes and distance learning systems for providing flexible lifelong learning possibilities</p> <p>Attracting external funds for international education</p> <p><i>Research:</i></p> <p>Building research laboratories</p> <p>Developing technology centres and science parks</p> <p>Attracting external funds for international research</p> <p>Recruiting, motivating and retaining first-rate researchers</p> <p><i>Academic staff:</i></p> <p>Recruiting, motivating and retaining first-rate academic staff</p>

It should be noted that the hereinafter appearing focus areas are associated with the university' traditional tasks, which according to McBurnie and Zigura (2009) are the following: teaching, research and community service, that is – with modern university's specificity. Strategy involves implementation of a series of actions necessary to achieve long-term goals and distribution of resources required for accomplish long-term goals (Koontz and Weihrich, 2010).

For achieving competitive advantage in the above focus areas education managers have to take a set of actions in the framework of the developed strategy (Stukalina, 2014):

- Implementing cost-effective university infrastructure improvements providing ICT-supported education
- Making university settings safe and attractive for academic and social life
- Implementing consistent attending staff recruitment procedures
- Creating new programmes including interdisciplinary programmes to respond to changes in an increasingly competitive global job market that demands transferable skills
- Developing advanced distance learning methods and blended learning techniques to make learning resources more accessible in the context of lifelong learning (ICT-based education)
- Attracting funding from various sources including European Union Structural Funds
- Increasing research opportunities by strengthening support for research grants and international collaboration and using advanced university infrastructure (ICT-based research)
- Increasing research opportunities by developing products in partnership with local companies
- Making targeted investments in the university library to create digital content with emphasis on research constituent

- Developing discipline-specific web portals
- Implementing consistent academic staff recruitment procedures and creating a new university recruiting website
- Increasing the number of professors and associate professors as an important element in providing excellent education and first-rate research.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis performed in this paper on the basis of theoretical literature and research papers on educational and strategic management, as well as a set of official OECD and EU documents on higher education allows the author to draw a few conclusions.

1. Today, managers seek new ways of creating multiple strategies to address the unprecedented set of challenges in higher education and manage emerging risks.
2. In the fast-changing global environment characterized by the increasing level of competition between universities, education managers have to reconsider their strategy that should be focused on identifying the areas of competitive advantage.
3. The identified priority areas may have either an external or internal accent, or both.
4. The three priority action areas discussed in the paper include a) university image creation (gaining more recognition in the near future, for example, being ranked among the top 100 world universities), which is particularly topical for Latvian higher education institutions today; b) development of the constructive university environment as an attractive place for all stakeholders, which requires not only the reorganization of knowledge delivery, but also campus and facility management that is in line with sustainable development; c) internationalization of universities, which should be considered as a driver for positive change and continuous improvement of educational services.
5. Various international, national and institutional factors comprise the context, in which managers working in higher education develop and implement their strategy.
6. The established priority action areas can be further developed into different focus areas for distributing various resources intended for supporting a set of actions in the framework of the developed strategy. This demands using the holistic approach to creating a competitive strategy built on basic strategic priorities.

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