

Exploring the Key Components to Consider in the Strategic Planning in the Public Universities of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

There is a significant demand for higher education in Sri Lanka. The stakeholders of higher education are students, graduate employers, funding agencies, staff, and society. It appears that Sri Lankan state universities do not meet the needs of those who are interested in the university system. Possessing a place in a state university is a great challenge for students; the students who learned at state universities face various challenges in finding suitable jobs. Therefore, the key objective of the current study is to explore the key components to consider for strategic planning in Sri Lankan public universities. The Qualitative method that equips documentation data of newspaper articles was adopted. This study used a purposive sampling method; 15 newspaper articles related to strategic planning in Sri Lankan public universities were selected as the research sample. Thematic content analysis is applied to analyze the accumulated data. The specific factors that should be focused on in strategic planning are Global Reputation, Technology Oriented Education, Human Resource Development, Fundraising / Fund generating, Curriculum Quality, Graduate Employability and Academic Innovation.

Key words: *Strategic Planning, Public University, Higher education*

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Introduction

Education is the most critical parameter which measures and determines the development of socio-economic status of a nation. Universities are known as communities with all academic programs, centralized physical settings and a kind of governance with a wide range of services (Ariyawansa, 2013). In other words, universities are seen as social institutions that facilitate the higher intellectual requirements of a community in terms of academic knowledge and training preparing the students to pursue various careers in the country. Meanwhile, solving social problems, protecting and exchanging knowledge are important duties of universities. Therefore, it must meet the social aspirations towards higher education and support to obtain results of social changes. Strategic planning in state universities creates important directions or visionary approaches and goals for a university or a department. It allows senior management to use their resources and capabilities efficiently and effectively to achieve strategic objectives, maximize benefits for stakeholders, and be competitive (Perera 2013).

With the complexities created by the globalized world, universities must re-examine their role in generating development results, particularly as a developing country that relies heavily on the skills and capabilities of the country's human resources. Therefore, the present study aims to respond to the objectives of the research, to identify the key factors that should be considered in strategic planning in Sri Lankan public

universities and to recommend the appropriate strategic approach for the effective performance of the public universities.

Problem statement

Generally, graduates are recognized as the most critical human capital in a country. Socio-economic changes, continuous and rapid innovations in science and technology, cultural diversity and globalization have led to creating changes in the educational environment, especially in higher education (Weerasooriya, 2013). In developing countries like Sri Lanka, the process of establishing an educational system has begun, shaking up the static academic life. Deregulation of public enterprises, in particular, the entry of new institutions into higher education, has created aggressive competition in higher education (Samarajeewa, 2016).

There is a significant demand for higher education in Sri Lanka, and Students who learned at public universities face various challenges in finding suitable jobs (Fernando, 2016). It is obvious that the country could not obtain the maximum contribution to the growth and success of the economy from its human capital. This is the time which requires a paradigm change in higher education. For any organization, it is completely difficult to remain static for long. With the complexities of the globalized world, strategic planning enables to steer the affairs of the university while successfully meeting stiff competition from the industry to embrace the changes in the globalized environment. Therefore, the current study attempted to answer the main research question, "What are the

key components that should be focused on in the strategic planning process in Sri Lankan state universities?"

Literature review

Strategies are simply a set of actions that allow an organization to achieve results (Pearce, 2000). Strategic planning is an organizational process to define its strategy or direction and make decisions about the allocation of its resources to pursue this strategy (Henry, 2008). The main objective is the documentation and establishment of the future business direction. The organization hopes that successful strategic planning will lead to action until the final step (Pearce, 2000). The main purpose of strategic planning is to share the vision through values-based organizational strategies. Strategic planning must be an inclusive and participatory process. The process accepts accountability to society (Henry, 2008). Strategic planning has an external focus to filter all aspects of the organization. In addition, it is sensitive to the organizational environment. The strategies are based on quality data to offer the best planning. The strategic planning process is the key part of effective management ((Bryson & Roering, 2018)).

The strategic plan is created under some types of requirements. A solid plan should serve as a framework for decisions to gain support or approval. It should provide a basis for more detailed planning (Henry, 2008). The strategic plan must ensure three principles: simple, logical and practical. It should focus on matters of strategic importance. The plan must be separate from daily work (Maleka, 2014). Especially, the strategic

plan must be complete and integrated to achieve organizational results. Management should review in the relevant period (annually, semi-annually or monthly) to measure effectiveness. The management must necessarily prepare the strategic plan in writing. The plan must distinguish between cause and effect. When preparing strategic planning, management must be able to control the capacity of the strategic plan ((Bryson & Roering, 2018)). The plan should aid in referral marketing and performance tracking. It should stimulate change and become the cornerstone of the next plan (Maleka, 2014). Management expects to retain in a realistic, critical and achievable way through the strategic plan. Organizations follow five steps to strategic planning: prepare, articulate the mission and vision, assess the situation, develop strategies, goals, and objectives, and complete the written plan. When implementing the strategic plan, management must consider three essential elements, such as process elements, content elements and use elements (Maleka, 2014).

To prepare the strategic plan, management must have the maximum amount of information to ensure availability. SWOT analysis is often important to gather initial information about the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats ((Bryson & Roering, 2018)). There are four key elements in strategic planning which include vision, mission, values, and strategy. Strategic planning is an organizational process to define its strategy or direction and make decisions about the allocation of its resources to pursue this strategy (Henry, 2008). The organization can achieve some types of

benefits within strategic planning. These are focus, coordinated action, control, and time management. Mainly, management tries to demonstrate mission, vision and values through the strategic plan of the organization. They use long-term goals and action plans to align organizational goals (Crittenden, 2000).

A well-written strategic plan can grow your business with survival and success. The future success of the organization depends on effective strategic planning and the nature of execution. Strategic planning analyzes the entire business to lead to significant changes in the business. Finally, set realistic goals and objectives ((Bryson & Roering, 2018)). The efficiency of the public sector in terms of operational competency is known to be very poor (Joyce, 2004). With long term strong strategic plans, government sectors lack facilities and knowledge to implement strategy, which is one of the key issues in developing countries. The final result of failing reduces the quality of output generated by the universities (Weerasooriya, Khatibi and De Alwis, 2014; Kasturi Arachchi, 2017). The current situation of handling Covid- 19 pandemic, confirms the lack of finding causes and implementing solutions, which is a gap in strategic planning process by the universities (Abayasekara, 2020). One would question the university and its inability to change. Various factors of internal and external environment can affect the strategic planning (Covid-19, 2020). Therefore, the main objective of this research is to explore the key components that should be considered in the strategic

planning in the public universities in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study outlines the research methods required to complete the study. The study is based on Interpretivism as it works with observable social reality and inductive approach; the researcher directs efforts to investigate a specific objective that examines an existing theory based on past literature (Williams, 2000). The study used the qualitative method and the documentation method, collecting data from secondary sources in the newspaper category to examine what components are required in the strategic planning process in Sri Lankan state universities.

The purposive sampling method is applied to select the sample (Langkos, 2014). Fifteen newspaper articles related to strategic planning in state universities, which were published during the period 2019-2020 in Sri Lankan news sources were selected as a research sample. . Thematic content analysis is used to analyze the study data (Parveen and Showkat, 2017). The articles were reviewed, analyzed and explored themes to determine the components required for strategic planning in the public universities of Sri Lanka.

The research process for this study is illustrated in Figure 1. The researcher used documentation analysis to compile newspaper articles for this study. Since then, the researcher has explored the themes to identify the key components that are of great importance to be considered in strategic planning.

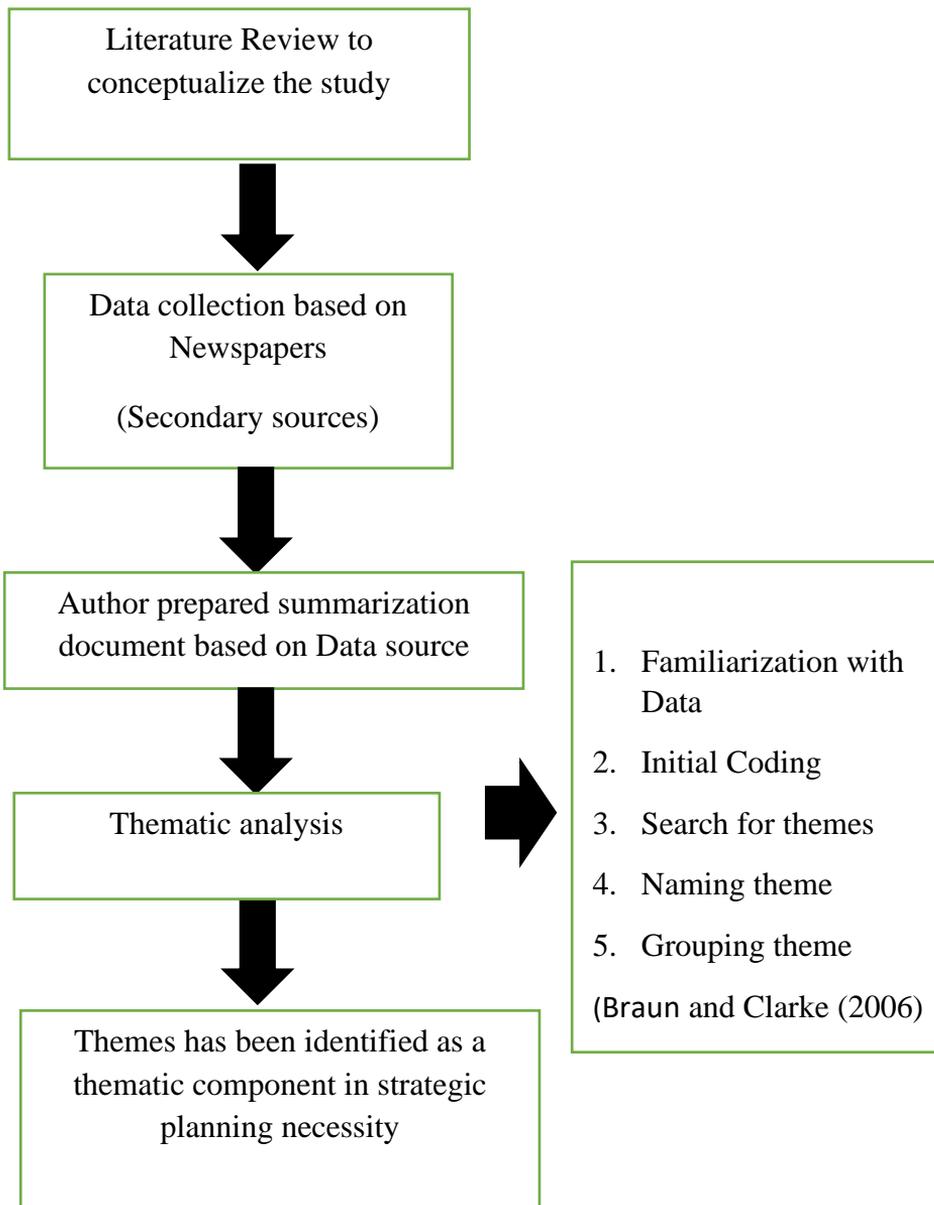


Figure 1: Research process Diagram

Source: Researcher Created

Data Source and Title of Publications

The data collected from 15 various news sources available in the country.

Table 1 shows the data sources and the title of the publications that were used in the present study.

Table 1: Data Sources and Title of Publications

No	Data Sources	Title and year of Publications
01	Derana.lk	Harnessing technology to empower Lankan undergraduates (2020)
02	Weearsooriya	Major Problems and Issues in Sri Lankan University System (2013)
03	Colombo Page	State Universities and Private Universities should be of equal standard- President (2019)
04	Daily FT	Future of higher education and challenges for public universities in Sri Lanka(2020)
05	Daily Ft	Our public universities need more scrutiny, not blind endorsements(2020)
06	Daily Ft	Policy reform key to attract Foreign Direct Investment and spur economic growth(2020)
07	Daily Ft	Requirement of international accredited universities for A/L students in Sri Lanka(2020)
08	Daily Ft	JICA for public sector HR development with schools for young officials in Japanese unis(2020)
09	Daily Ft	Sri Lankan universities and the world rankings(2020)
10	Daily News	Dawn of a New Era (2020)
11	Daily News	How Sri Lanka could thrive as an ideal higher education destination’(2020)
12	Economic Next	Sri Lanka hires 45,000 graduates in costly fallout from state university crisis(2020)
13	Insider Highre ED	Study in Sri Lanka? (2020)
14	News Fisrt	The first US patent to University of Colombo (2020)
15	World Sociloist	Sri Lankan university workers continue indefinite strike (2019)

Source: News Sources Survey in Sri Lanka

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses at the identified key factors to consider on in the strategic planning of Sri Lankan public universities. The seven factors have been identified from the Sri Lankan news

Sources survey. Table 2 shows the identified components and the number of times those components were indicated in Sri Lankan News Sources.

Table 2: Thematic components

Thematic Components	Number of Times
Global Reputation	03
Technology Oriented Education	09
Human Resource Development	02
Fundraising/Fund Generating	04
Curriculum Quality	05
Graduate Employability	06
Academic Innovation	07

Source: News Sources survey

Global Reputation.

Daily FT, (2020f) confirmed that the university strategic planning process is not focused on the big global picture, as the strategic planning of Sri Lankan universities is at a low level. Therefore, Sri Lanka could rank no university at least among the top 1000 universities in world rankings. The planning phase is the most important to get a great result and the author of the report has stated that the planning activities of Sri Lankan universities are not carried out in a scientific way and do not use modern methods. This has classification needs to encompass a wide area not only on the recurring process but also on the development aspect with strategic planning in the ranking position.

Technology Oriented Education

Daily News, (2020a), explained that universities should focus on modern information technology in their operation, regardless of their traditional practices. The strategic planning process needs to focus information technology in your practices. Sri Lanka's public sector needs to be upgraded to adapt to new technologies in the world as there is a need for strategic planning in technological advancement. The new Sri Lankan government will pay attention to developing public sector strategies to meet the latest trends in information technology.

The importance of strategic planning in technology-oriented education was emphasized in Ada Derana Biz, (2020). It clearly mentioned that, with COVID 19, the use of technology for education has improved and Sri Lankan universities

(apart from a few) do not use that technology to continue education during the pandemic season. That means their strategy planning is out of date with modern technology, plus student internet accessibility, mobile and portable facilities, and the adoption of new practices at the student and staff level play an important role in execution. To support Ada Derana Biz, Daily News (2020b) confirmed that through strategic planning, state universities can identify the opportunities available in the external environment. For example, as a result of COVID 19, the traditional education system collapsed, but it opened up new online education opportunities to universities. Therefore, the strategic planning procedure must focus on dynamic changes in the environment and robust SOWT analysis at the planning stage.

Human Resource Development

According to Daily FT, (2020e), human resource development is a need of the Sri Lankan public sector, and there are several complaints from the public about the behavior and other activities of government office staff. Thus, Strategic Planning in Human Resource Development must address the development of human resources and is considered as one more factor that makes strategic planning essential. Academic human resources are one of the key elements for the public universities to produce competent graduates and producing national importance researches for the development of the country. The strategic planning process must address robust strategies to empower staff in the universities.

Fundraising / Fund generating

Universities are working on the basis of the Treasury Fund. In addition, to attract foreign direct funding to public institutions, including universities, they must reform policies and strategies to attract funds. The meaning of policies is strategies of the universities, and the author has suggested to plan the strategies for attracting external funds (Daily FT, 2020c). Accordingly (Daily FT, 2020b), strategic planning is necessary for public universities to make a critical observation of their finances, operations and other areas of service. At present, no critical observation is made to determine the weaknesses of the institutions. Therefore, strategic planning in the feasibility fund for implementation should focus on how to start the fund generating project by introducing new courses or developing new project proposals for obtaining funds from the donors. Relying on government funds is not enough. The planning process has to focus on financial viability is very necessary to achieve the objectives of an organization.

Curriculum Quality

The strategic planning in Quality curriculum development was confirmed in Daily FT, (2020d). Universities must be able to set their standard of service to a higher level to achieve global and local reputation. The need to integrate the studies of state universities with international standards is essential for it to be of high quality. Therefore, strategic planning must be carried out by the government, the UGC and the institution level to achieve this objective, and it is necessary to take into account the quality of education, global collaboration and

strong curriculum development in the process of planning.

Graduate Employability

In the context of the University of Sri Lanka, graduates face difficulties in finding work. Economy Next, (2020) Strategic planning to connect with employability and the labor market was the topic addressed since the important factor to address in strategic planning are the parities that participate in strategic planning must pay attention to the outputs of the university. Today most graduates are unemployed. In addition to that, strategic planning is necessary not only on the side of university students, but also to meet the requirements of the staff or employees working in the universities. Therefore, strategic planning is needed to address all aspects of the university” (World Socialist, 2019). Therefore, the strategic planning process must include: Stakeholder expectations, labor market expectations, and especially the planning process must be connected with external people.

Academic Innovation

News First, (2020) noted that the innovations made by Sri Lankan universities are low, and the University of Colombo recently obtained the first US patent. Thus, it is apparent that the current strategic planning of state universities is not in an optimal level. Therefore, the universities should focus on strategic planning in innovation to boost academic innovations too. In the university context, research is relevant to the development of the industrial base in Sri Lanka, within an internationally competitive landscape.

Academic innovation, one of the strategic dimension in the academic sector, has to be considered at a vast level in the strategic planning process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The main research objective of the study is to identify the key areas that are to be considered in the strategic planning process in Sri Lankan state universities. According to the results of the research, the need for strategic planning is led by several factors, such as global reputation, technology-oriented education, human resource development, fundraising/fund generating, curriculum quality, graduate employability and academic innovation. The study recommends that the components explored should be approached as strategic dimensions in the strategic planning process. Factors identified as strategic planning needs are supported by the literature review, and recommendations can be made to the ministry / UGC and the universities to pay attention to existing issues in strategic planning and improve current strategic planning to meet the needs identified in this study.

The study further suggests that universities should focus on enhancing global reputations by enhancing the quality of education and research. They should focus on technology-oriented education, and teaching methodologies should be connected to the digital system and provide greater accessibility to students. The academic and non-academic staff of the universities will be provided with continuous training for their professional development. Universities must attend to their financial

capacities through their own income generation programs and take advantage of the opportunities available from external sources. The quality of the curriculum must meet national and international higher education standards in order to increase the employability of the graduates. Academic innovations in all disciplines should be promoted to meet national needs.

The study provides a valuable contribution to the theory of strategic planning in the Sri Lankan context, where only a few studies were conducted regarding this area. Additionally, the study helps the universities and UGC strategic planners to focus on key factors in the strategic planning process. Future researchers may opt for longitudinal studies to assess the behavior of respondents for a long time, and the mixed study method can be used to study all the key components in-depth and to understand the similarities and differences between Sri Lankan universities.

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