

# The Road Ahead: Strategic Planning Challenges in Higher Education

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## Abstract

Strategic management in higher education institutions (HEIs) has become increasingly crucial in establishing and achieving organizational missions, goals, and objectives within today's dynamic global environment. This paper examines the evolving significance and contemporary challenges of strategic planning in higher education, with particular emphasis on quality assurance, resource allocation, and institutional performance in the post-pandemic era. Through a systematic review of current literature and institutional case studies by identify key challenges including financial sustainability, quality assurance mechanisms, digital transformation, and the impact of globalization on educational delivery. The findings suggest that effective strategic planning requires an integrated approach combining institutional vision, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive management practices to address these challenges while maintaining educational excellence. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on strategic management in higher education by providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing contemporary challenges in institutional planning and development.

## 1. Introduction

Higher education is acknowledged as a vital tool for building a knowledge economy and fostering human capital development. Institutions of higher learning play a critical role in increasing income and enhancing human capital. The quality of knowledge is fundamental to promoting advanced learning within these institutions. This quality not only facilitates competition among global institutions but also bolsters national competitiveness. Consequently, national advancement can promote sustainability through improved education and well-informed human capital. By providing advanced educational opportunities, countries can equip their populations with a wide range of skills and competencies, thereby strengthening their human capital. Akyel, Korkusuz Polat, and Arslankay (2012) noted that rapid environmental changes have led to a heightened demand for higher education institutions. Additionally, recent studies highlight that evolving market demands necessitate continuous innovation in higher education curricula (Koch et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023).

Strategic planning is utilized to drive and shape the future of an institution by evaluating the current state of higher education (Akyel et al., 2012). This analytical process includes considerations such as future educational objectives and the strategies to achieve these goals through the efficient and effective use of resources. In the context of higher education, strategic planning involves tasks like assessing the present situation, executing plans,

and evaluating these strategies to monitor changes in environmental conditions. The efficacy of institutional and decision-making processes is closely tied to the evaluation of performance and quality within the strategic planning framework (Fernández & Nussbaum, 2021).

The goal of developing management functions within institutions is to streamline and systematize complex tasks and processes, requiring an assessment of the current situation and the creation of comprehensive planning. The importance of strategic planning is increasing within institutions as it helps to organize operations, define institutional objectives, identify targets, and develop strategies to reach these goals (Santiago et al., 2020). This process also includes preparing budgets that align with established goals and targets, ensuring resource allocation based on priority objectives, and facilitating participatory management. In higher education, integrating strategic planning and management is essential for aligning an institution's vision, mission, values, goals, and strategies within a cohesive framework (Kayyali, M., 2025).

This paper will explore the importance and challenges of strategic planning in higher education amidst the current competitive landscape. The quality and performance of higher education are critical issues for institutions aiming to gain competitive advantages in the global university arena. As economic shifts, knowledge transfer, and technological advancements reshape the landscape, universities prioritize quality in their agendas. Consequently, higher education institutions are tasked with providing industries with highly skilled and employable graduates capable of navigating the challenges of a competitive economy (Saha et al., 2023).

## 2. Strategic Management in Tertiary Education

Strategic planning is crucial for all organizations and institutions, primarily encouraging stakeholders to reflect on and focus on their future mission and vision. It aims to establish a long-term vision, achievable objectives, and to address strategic challenges along defined trajectories. Research indicates that numerous organizations and institutions that emphasize long-term objectives through effective strategic planning tend to exhibit higher quality performance compared to their counterparts. A key benefit of strategic planning is its commitment to long-term performance, superior quality, and strong growth rates. The importance and advantages of strategic planning have been recognized globally, especially in higher education institutions. The primary goal for managers implementing strategic planning in these institutions is to establish a continuous process of assessment and evaluation across various dimensions, including strengths, weaknesses, goals, resource needs, and future opportunities (O'Neill & Maguire, 2021).

A crucial factor for successfully implementing a new system is the institution's understanding of its purpose and functionality. Academic staff and institutional leaders must evaluate and utilize tools such as annual reports and internal evaluations to ensure that internal quality efforts are meaningful. The quality of institutional work is recognized as a fundamental tool for strategic management within institutions. The quality management system encompasses all stages of education, from inception to the completion of requirements. This compels institutions to focus on identifying specific client requirements for educational programs. For instance, Petru Maior University of Târgu Mureş (PMU) has structured its Quality Management System (QMS) processes into four categories: management processes for overseeing university operations, core processes for the QMS, supporting processes essential for sustaining core activities, and analytical processes for enhancing QMS effectiveness (Bubă et al., 2021). PMU has developed a process map to regulate the attainment of performance indicators. Following the adoption of ISO 9001, PMU created QMS documentation outlining the requirements of customers and stakeholders to ensure their satisfaction. Furthermore, PMU employs a management approach that considers global, regional, and national dimensions to enhance stakeholder satisfaction through measurement, analysis, and improvement processes (Oliveira et al., 2022).

PMU has successfully established a quality system compliant with the national requirements set by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and the international ISO 9001 standards. These criteria facilitate a methodology enabling organizations to improve their operations and prevent the recurrence of similar nonconformities. PMU management acknowledges that fostering a culture of quality necessitates continuous training for personnel due to challenges in maintaining and enhancing the system. Issues at PMU arise from individual personalities that disrupt quality management demands, as well as the substantial volume of registrations and reports required by the QMS. The application of ARACIS has significantly bolstered PMU's reputation, establishing it as one of the top-ranking universities in Romania.

The institutional transformation initiative renders the Corporate Strategic Plan (CSP) significant amid the rapidly evolving operational environment at the university, both nationally and internationally. Consequently, the university will form a committee to evaluate the challenges posed by the increasing demand for quality teaching, higher education, and globalization. The CSP identifies primary issues and challenges, including enhancing teaching and learning quality, improving public services, increasing financial capacity, and promoting sustainability. The University of Dar-es-Salaam (UDSM) serves as an example of an institution implementing a CSP characterized by its vision, mission, guiding themes, and values. UDSM envisions becoming a world-class university through dynamic knowledge development and implementation on a global scale. Its objectives include

providing public services and fostering economic growth across Africa, emphasizing the enhancement of research, teaching, and public service quality (Nabudere & Kihika, 2020).

During implementation, UDSM has faced obstacles related to societal evolution and knowledge that have negatively impacted its operations. UDSM aims to establish a world-class university that addresses global development challenges through the application of dynamic knowledge. The university has set goals to create various academic programs that meet market demands and contribute to economic growth while promoting lifelong learning and ongoing education as part of a national strategy. The objectives include establishing a knowledge-based society, developing competencies, and implementing effective quality control in production sectors (Kabera et al., 2023). Furthermore, UDSM seeks to enhance its capacity and incentivize human resources, addressing the challenges posed by inadequate compensation for academic and administrative personnel, which has led to high turnover rates. UDSM will continue negotiations with the government to secure wage increases for staff and ensure that retirees receive benefits commensurate with their contributions to the institution. UDSM is also working to strengthen connections between society and productive sectors to mitigate financial challenges and promote governmental reforms. This effort is particularly critical as the government focuses on social sectors, necessitating UDSM's establishment of stronger links to ensure the successful implementation of its strategic plans. With infrastructure nearing forty years old and lacking regular maintenance, UDSM faces deterioration challenges. To address this, the university is actively fundraising to enhance its infrastructure and expand facilities to accommodate increased enrollment. UDSM must bolster its financial resources to meet the aspirations of the institution and its stakeholders by diversifying funding sources from both local and international sectors to ensure sustainability and fulfill expansion requirements.

### 3. Key Challenges in Higher Education Strategic Planning

Strategic planning aims to enhance and elevate the performance and quality of educational institutions. However, several challenges persist in the strategic planning processes of higher education institutions (HEIs). Schram (2014) notes that certain universities struggle to identify appropriate tools and methods for implementing strategic planning due to recurring issues. They often establish a static foundation while facing continuously evolving challenges influenced by the global environment. Strategic planning typically occurs in unpredictable contexts, particularly at non-governmental universities that operate independently. Many HEIs encounter significant, recurring challenges, including limited financial resources, inadequate faculty pay, low enrollment rates, employer pressure regarding graduate quality, and insufficient guidance on how to address these issues.

#### 3.1 Insufficient Financial Resources

The primary challenge faced by HEIs is financial management. In Malaysia, for instance, the New Economic Model (NEM) 2010 aims to uplift 80% of the population from low-income to middle-income status. To support this plan, the Ministry of Higher Education implemented the National Higher Education Action Plan (NHESP) from 2007 to 2009, aimed at improving human resources by expanding educational access and developing HEIs as tools for fostering a knowledge-based economy. Additionally, the Malaysian government launched the Economic Transformation Project (ETP) to align all sectors with the NEM's objectives, recognizing education as critical for national development and focusing on research and innovation.

Despite these initiatives, HEIs often struggle with insufficient funding, which hinders their ability to construct necessary facilities, offer competitive salaries, and develop academic programs. As Kettunen (2008) suggests, financial mechanisms are a primary limitation influencing HEIs' strategic decisions. Insufficient funding can prevent universities from fulfilling their mission and meeting strategic objectives, affecting their operational capabilities and long-term planning. Furthermore, the rising costs associated with modern higher education, including increased labor and service costs, compel institutions to raise tuition rates, creating a significant barrier for students seeking higher education.

#### 3.2 Inferior Quality of Tertiary Education Institutions

Quality is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses various activities and functions within higher education institutions. Activities include teaching, research, scholarships, facilities, staffing, and community engagement. Asiyai (2013) argues that quality assurance in education poses a significant challenge to establishing minimum academic standards, particularly concerning lecturer qualifications and the overall quality of education. The effectiveness of strategic planning in higher education hinges on the quality and qualifications of academic personnel. A shortage of qualified and experienced lecturers can significantly hinder the quality of education offered, thereby affecting the long-term success of institutions.

The lack of focus on improving the quality of graduates can lead to substandard outcomes in institutional policies, which often neglect to prioritize student learning. Research by Mhd Sarif and Ismail (2013) indicates that many strategic planning approaches fail to enhance institutional management despite the objectives being

mutually discussed. Academic staff associations, such as the Persatuan Kakitangan Akademik (PKA), emphasize that senior management often neglects planning processes and the welfare of their personnel, resulting in ineffective student management and support.

### 3.3 Sustainability Challenges in Higher Education

The push for sustainability in higher education has introduced additional obstacles. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to define focal areas for research, management, education, and outreach initiatives within universities. However, some institutions have been slow to act, and many have yet to adopt sustainable practices. The international Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education (TLSHE) identifies several difficulties in integrating sustainability into institutional frameworks, such as varying interpretations of 'sustainability,' potential overgeneralization of the concept across programs, and inadequate support for sustainable initiatives from senior management.

Here, while strategic planning holds the potential to significantly improve higher education institutions' performance and quality, persistent challenges related to financial resources, educational quality, and sustainability practices hinder effective implementation. Institutions must navigate these obstacles to achieve their strategic objectives and fulfill their mission in the evolving global landscape.

### 3.4 Inadequate Development Management Process

In strategic planning within higher education, the development of management processes is crucial for achieving overall institutional goals and addressing associated challenges. These processes often encompass several dimensions, including financial management, administrative coordination, information and knowledge flows, and policy implementation (Adepoju & Asaju, 2020). Insufficient leadership and management at both the government and institutional levels can hinder strategic planning efforts, resulting in poor-quality higher education systems, financial instability, and inadequate management processes (Macke & Genari, 2019).

A lack of commitment from governments to the development of higher education institutions often leads to compromised quality in teaching, research, and financial stability. Insufficient leadership at the institutional level can negatively impact the efficiency of management systems and administrative relations, further compounding the challenges (Varghese, 2018). Additionally, weak governance often demotivates academic staff, impairing their commitment to academic pursuits and contributing to a deteriorating institutional environment (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). This creates unhealthy organizational dynamics, undermining strategic planning efforts and fostering suspicion that threatens collaboration and coexistence within institutions (Altbach, 2019). Moreover, the effective integration of information and communication technology (ICT) is essential for enhancing efficiency, productivity, and educational outcomes in higher education (Deem et al., 2021). However, poor development of management processes often results in strategic failures that compromise institutional performance and the overall quality of education (Kruk et al., 2022).

In Lebanon, higher education institutions face challenges due to shortages of trained and specialized personnel, which hinders their ability to implement and leverage new technologies (Makarem, 2020). In contrast, countries like South Korea and Bulgaria struggle with outdated curricula that fail to meet global and international standards, causing difficulties for students in adapting to a competitive global environment (Shin, 2021).

### 3.5 Insufficient Student Persistence in Academic Pursuit

Research conducted by Danciu Aniela Raluca and Strat Vasile Alecsandru (2020) has revealed significant challenges in student persistence, particularly among master's students, with low rates of advancement to doctoral programs. Their study highlights that only a small percentage of students transition from master's to Ph.D. programs, reflecting a broader issue in higher education related to the sustainability of academic engagement. Several key factors contribute to this trend, including financial difficulties, the perceived lack of value in pursuing advanced degrees, and inadequate institutional support structures.

*Financial Barriers:* One of the most significant impediments to student persistence is the financial burden associated with postgraduate education. Rising tuition fees, coupled with limited availability of scholarships or funding opportunities, leave many students unable to justify the long-term financial commitment required for advanced studies (Jones, 2021). For many students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, the costs of postgraduate education far outweigh potential benefits, leading to higher dropout rates at both the master's and doctoral levels (Smith & Johnson, 2022).

*Lack of Institutional Support:* Institutional factors also play a major role in hindering student persistence. Studies have shown that insufficient academic mentoring, lack of career counseling, and inadequate psychological support services within universities contribute to the discouragement of postgraduate students (Mason & Gould, 2019). Many institutions focus more on undergraduate retention, often neglecting the unique challenges faced by

postgraduate students. As a result, students pursuing advanced degrees often feel isolated, lacking the guidance and encouragement needed to overcome academic obstacles (Wang & Zepeda, 2022).

*Career Uncertainty:* Another contributing factor to low persistence rates is the uncertainty regarding career prospects after graduation. As highlighted by Danciu and Strat (2020), many students are hesitant to continue their education to the doctoral level due to unclear career pathways. The academic job market is becoming increasingly competitive, and the return on investment for doctoral education in non-academic careers is often seen as insufficient. This discourages students from making the commitment to long-term academic pursuits (Kumar & Silva, 2021).

*Balancing Responsibilities:* Many postgraduate students are working professionals or have familial responsibilities, which makes it difficult to balance academic obligations with personal and professional life. The growing demands of work and family often lead to academic burnout, further decreasing persistence rates (Mason & Gould, 2019). For such students, the flexibility of academic programs, access to online resources, and tailored support systems are crucial in promoting persistence, but these resources are often limited (Harrison et al., 2020).

*Psychological and Social Factors:* Psychological and social factors also play a crucial role in academic persistence. Postgraduate students frequently experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to the academic pressures they face, compounded by the absence of strong peer networks (Smith & Johnson, 2022). The social environment of higher education institutions is another determining factor—students who lack a sense of belonging or who feel marginalized are more likely to drop out, particularly in highly competitive doctoral programs (Jones, 2021).

### 3.6 Globalisation

Globalization has significantly impacted the landscape of higher education, influencing institutional strategies and shaping student experiences. One key initiative, the Economic Transformation Project (ETP), seeks to expand global educational access by fostering stronger links between educational institutions and the global economy (Tan, 2020). This initiative recognizes education as a crucial factor for both corporate sectors and local communities, aiming to prepare students for the evolving demands of a highly interconnected professional world (Lim & Yusof, 2021). Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in this transformation by not only imparting knowledge but also by promoting the global significance of education. They are tasked with helping students adapt to the complexities of the global workforce, which increasingly demands intercultural competence, digital literacy, and adaptability (de Wit, 2019). To this end, many universities are adopting internationalization strategies, enhancing cross-border collaborations, and integrating global perspectives into their curricula (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

For students to effectively transition into the professional world, higher education institutions must prioritize the development of skills that are relevant in a globalized economy. This includes fostering critical thinking, innovation, and the ability to navigate multicultural environments (Knight, 2021). Globalization also demands that institutions emphasize lifelong learning and adaptability, equipping students with the tools they need to succeed in a rapidly changing job market (Robertson, 2022). In addition to these efforts, educational institutions are increasingly viewed as drivers of economic growth within their local communities. By aligning their goals with broader economic transformation initiatives like the ETP, universities can not only enhance global educational access but also strengthen their contributions to local and regional development (Lim & Yusof, 2021). This alignment ensures that higher education serves as a bridge between local economic needs and the demands of a globalized economy.

### 3.7 Societal Orientation

National strategies increasingly prioritize the expansion of access to higher education, recognizing its vital role in improving individual life outcomes and fostering societal development. The growing demand for education stems from the recognition that higher education equips individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in an ever-evolving global economy (Marginson, 2021). Governments worldwide have thus been working to implement policies that ensure equitable access to higher education, particularly for underrepresented and marginalized groups (Oketch, 2019).

Higher education institutions are key players in these national strategies, and they bear a dual responsibility: preparing students to navigate both the rigorous academic research environment and the broader societal expectations. As research becomes more interdisciplinary and global in nature, students must be equipped with the ability to think critically, engage with complex problems, and contribute to innovation (Cummings & Finkelstein, 2020). Institutions must foster a research culture that encourages curiosity, collaboration, and the ethical pursuit of knowledge (Altbach, 2022).

In addition to preparing students for academic research, higher education institutions must also address the increasing societal demands for graduates who are not only technically skilled but also socially responsible. There is growing pressure for universities to produce graduates who are conscious of their societal impact and who are

prepared to address critical global challenges, such as climate change, inequality, and technological disruption (Zezeza, 2020). This requires institutions to integrate social and ethical considerations into their curricula and research programs (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, as society becomes more knowledge-driven, higher education is seen as a cornerstone for national development and social mobility. Ensuring that students can meet societal expectations means fostering skills like leadership, adaptability, and civic engagement (Mok, 2020). These competencies are essential not only for personal success but also for building a more inclusive and sustainable society. Ultimately, the national strategy's focus on higher education access underscores the importance of preparing students to contribute meaningfully to both their professional fields and the broader social good. By doing so, higher education institutions fulfill their societal mandate, shaping individuals who can meet the diverse expectations of an increasingly interconnected world.

## 4. Finding and Discussion

To address challenges in higher education, many experts share ideas for improvement. Nowadays, students heavily rely on the internet and technology, understanding their functions well. By merging social, economic, and technological factors, higher education can better tackle its challenges, as noted in the journal *The Future of Higher Education: Beyond the Campus*.

### 4.1 Emerging Themes

Education has often focused on individuals, but we are realizing that collaboration can generate knowledge and solve problems effectively. Governments are looking to technology to help institutions overcome difficulties. Developing and managing a long-term national plan is crucial for addressing these issues. It is important to connect strategic planning goals with management systems to tackle ongoing challenges. Dr. Schram (2014) suggested tools such as leadership development, organizational culture, and creating a common language. These tools apply from top management to all levels of staff. Each tool has various stages. Leadership tools aim to create strong leadership. Commitment from top management is essential in strategic development. Strong leadership helps university leaders manage resistance to change. The organizational culture tools consist of a "First 90 Days" program and a complacency test. The "First 90 Days" program evaluates how well new managers can manage change, while the complacency test measures how ready staff are for change. Creating a common language involves analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Setting clear, achievable goals is vital for planning. Strategic planning and management are both essential for higher education institutions, and these two elements should not be confused. Effective strategic planning benefits both private and public sectors. If staff or programs need to be reduced, these decisions should be made carefully during the planning process to avoid losses and discouragement.

Key benefits of strong strategic planning include:

1. A clear approach to unify planning efforts.
2. Tools for improving quality and effectiveness.
3. Training for staff on business and customer needs.
4. Better communication between managers and staff.
5. Monitoring key performance indicators.
6. Managing unwanted actions and improving plans.

### 4.2 A structured Approach to Achieve Strategic Goals

Effective strategic planning helps higher education institutions see their goals clearly and guides them toward successful outcomes.

Additional guidelines for strategic planning include:

1. Understanding how the institution can contribute to national plans.
2. Recognizing how external factors affect the institution's direction.
3. Leveraging strengths while ensuring performance motivation.
4. Committing to maintaining the quality of education as a public good.
5. Using institutional studies to improve decision-making.

Therefore, higher education institutions should focus on strategic planning and adapt their curricula to meet market demands and societal needs. For instance, they should standardize their curriculum, credit hours, and graduation requirements. This standardization can also reduce education costs. If applied globally, it would transform higher education, allowing students to work abroad without facing problems related to different

education systems. Additionally, institutions should recognize the importance of English for global communication, as internationalization is a key feature of higher education.

Furthermore, recent studies in UK universities identify four key areas for development: creating connected strategies across organizations, improving learning and teaching functions, prioritizing content, and developing a shared understanding of sustainability in higher education. Challenges also include a lack of shared terminology and understanding regarding implementation, particularly related to leadership and quality support. To implement change effectively, institutions need strategies that address sustainability challenges in higher education. Change does not happen suddenly; it requires effective leadership. Approaches such as shared vision, trust, participation, and research unification can drive transformation. Higher education is a complex entity, connecting various stakeholders, including students, parents, government, and professionals. Universities must respond to the new economic environment, especially since entrepreneurship education is crucial in today's context. Creating new businesses and jobs is essential, and education in entrepreneurship can significantly impact economic change and society.

Indeed, researchers and educators must find ways to turn their knowledge and research into economic value. Through higher education, students can learn not just theory but also practical skills related to entrepreneurship. Thus, university education is vital for helping individuals become successful entrepreneurs.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenges and opportunities within higher education are shaped by a complex interplay of factors such as leadership, globalization, student persistence, and societal expectations. Insufficient leadership and governance hinder the development of effective strategic planning, affecting both the quality and management processes in higher education institutions. Moreover, student persistence remains a critical issue, with financial, institutional, and psychological barriers limiting the ability of students to pursue advanced academic achievements. Globalization, through initiatives like the Economic Transformation Project, has underscored the importance of preparing students for the professional world by adapting to the demands of a globalized economy. Furthermore, societal orientation emphasizes the growing role of higher education in fostering not only professional success but also social responsibility, reflecting broader societal expectations for universities to drive both economic growth and social development. To address these challenges, higher education institutions must implement robust policies that enhance leadership, provide comprehensive student support, embrace internationalization, and align academic programs with societal needs. By doing so, institutions can ensure that they are preparing students for the rigors of research, professional success, and their roles as active contributors to global society.

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## Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

## Author Contribution

*The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Abd Rahman Ahmad, Hairul Rizad; **data collection:** Alaa S. Jameel; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Abd Rahman Ahmad, Hairul Rizad; **draft manuscript preparation:** Abd Rahman Ahmad. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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