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## Strategic Planning in Universities from Pará, Brazil. Contributions to the Achievement of Institutional Objectives

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*This article aims to show to what extent strategic planning performed by Brazilian universities from the State of Pará has contributed, whether positively or negatively, to achieve institutional objectives. The research can be classified as explanatory with features of a qualitative multi-case study because it seeks to explain casual relationship between strategic planning and institutional objectives. Managers at strategic and tactical levels were interviewed and the data collection was conducted through interviews, questionnaires and documentary research. Cross-analysis is used to explain cause-effect relationships, as well as to validate the conclusions drawn from the confrontation with the theoretical framework. It was found that University A has nearly performed all the strategic planning process steps; however, it does not positively contribute to the achievement of institutional objectives since some weaknesses were identified. On the other hand, despite having followed the same process with minor differences, University B has been able to achieve the institutional objectives.*

**Keywords:** *Strategic Planning; Organizational Culture; University; Pará State; Brazil*

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## Introduction

There has been an increasing social need for Higher Education in Brazil and one that it is comparable to national trends such as cutting public spending in higher education, science and technology advances resulting in new disciplines and the emergence of new communication technologies and computerization. At the administrative level, there is an awareness trend toward organizational restructuring, resource optimization and supplying of quality proceedings and services. The demand for quality proceedings in the university became an undeniable concern in higher education, in which excellence has been a major topic of the educational agenda.

Thus, in order to face the social and institutional demand, Brazilian universities are using strategic planning as a management tool to face new trends and challenges from an increasingly competitive market. At the same time, higher education institutions are trying to avoid the pitfalls of strategic planning that are usually associated with prescriptive schools.

However, due to their specific organizational and cultural features, universities are a different type of bureaucratic organization. According to Baldrige and Deal [1], universities have political objectives based on interest groups, clients with different needs and decision making autonomy. Therefore, if the expected outcome is to be achieved, they must adapt a business strategic planning model.

The main objective of this article is to study the strategic planning process in two Brazilian universities from the same state. Moreover, this article seeks to establish how the strategic planning process is contributing to the achievement of institutional strategic objectives both in public and private universities. This article is structured as follows: topic 2 presents some universities' specific characteristics that should be considered by planners when conducting a strategic planning process adapted to these organizations; topic 3 focus on the understanding of the university strategic planning; topic 4 describes the methodology used in the study; topic 5 presents and analyses the cases studied, and, finally, topic 7 presents the conclusions about how strategic planning followed by two Brazilian universities from Pará State has enabled them to achieve their objectives.

## **Universities' organizational characteristics**

Universities have complex organization systems that must be taken into consideration by planners. Estrada [2], Rocha [3] and Rizzatti and Rizzatti Jr. [4] share the opinion that universities are basically a bureaucratic organization which differs from other organizations insofar as their organizational reality resembles the model of professional bureaucracy set up by Mintzberg [5]. In fact, in the professional bureaucracy model, experts are highly trained and have a good deal of control over their work. In terms of the organization structure, coordination translates into the use of universal standards that must be used by all profession bureaucracies and taught by the university.

As regards work processes, results cannot be easily measured and as far as authority is concerned, due to the very nature of the work, professionals have expert power. The professionals who achieve control of their own work are the ones who also seek collective control over administrative decisions affecting them. When in control of their own work, professionals are driven to act independently, although remaining in close proximity to the customers they serve.

In short, two hierarchies can be found, one academic and the other administrative that run parallel to each other. The academic hierarchy is regarded as democratic and decision making is bottom-up, whereas the administrative hierarchy is mechanized, bureaucratic and decision making top-down, frequently becoming a source of conflict. However, the same features of the political organization model can also be found at the university.

The study and understanding of universities' characteristics provide a favourable environment to the developing of a strategic planning process. Moreover, if planners choose to ignore these variables, the outcome of the strategic planning process will be most likely negatively impacted.

## **Universities' strategic planning**

The vast literature that has been published on the topic of strategic planning refers multiple concepts. However, strategic planning concepts focus on

changes and turn around institutional behaviours to achieve institutional objectives. According to Ackoff [6], strategic planning is a project that guides the organization to achieve both the desired future and the ways to accomplish it. Therefore, it is recognised as a conception of ideas aimed at the future, guiding the institution in the path of achieving the institutional purpose while maximizing institutional progress.

Views such as Mintzberg's and Quinn's [7] help us organizing our understanding of the strategic planning concept that can be found in the literature. These authors classify strategies under five P headings: strategy as plan, pattern, position, perspective and ploy.

A different concept of strategic planning results from different contributions of the strategy formulation schools at different times as a means to respond to environmental changes. These changes affect not only universities but also the people working there, causing an uncertainty scenario for institutional decisions.

The literature presents vast options of strategic planning models. According to Estrada [2], there have been few strategic planning models for universities; nevertheless, the literature identifies two models proposed by Braga and Monteiro [8] and by Fernandes [9], respectively. Although different, they follow common steps in their reasoning such as the statement definition of the institutional mission; the environmental analysis (internal and external); the strategy formulation, the strategic plan implementation and the strategic control. These steps are both necessary and essential if a strategic planning process is to be carried out in universities.

## Methodology

Due to the everyday complex reality of universities, research was directed to a qualitative multi-case study since, as Nohara and Acevedo [10] argue, there is an inseparable link between the objective world and the subjectivity of the subject that cannot be translated into numbers.

As it has been mentioned before, this paper analyses the contribution of strategic planning to the achievement of institutional objectives. The object of study involves two universities (one public, one

private) from the State of Pará in Brazil. This research can be classified as exploratory because, as postulated by Cooper and Schindler [11], it tries to address the problem in such a way as to make it explicit, although attempting to explain the causal relation between strategic planning contribution and the achievement of institutional objectives.

In a multi-case study, special attention should be given to its reliability and validity, especially when the data are collected and analysed according to the dimensions referred by Yin [12], namely: constructs' validity - establishing a logical sequence of evidence; internal validity - definition of cause and effect so as to identify common evidence among cases; external validity - comparison of findings between cases; repeatability - analysis of the possibility of case replication. The multi-case study is especially useful when one looks for similarities and differences between the cases and it also opens the way for future research based on cross case analysis.

A convenience sample of top and middle managers from the two universities was selected, thus allowing strategic and tactical levels of the university to be represented. The data were collected over a single period which, according to Marconi and Lakatos [13], allows one to characterise this research as a cross-sectional study. In order to structure a strong database that was appropriate to the reliability of the multi-case study, as well as to obtain the necessary evidence, a triangulation of data source was done with recourse to interviews, documentary research and a questionnaire. Initially, it was important to build a conceptual map that would explain the matter in hand. Subsequently, primary data concerning specific characteristics of the universities investigated were collected in order to identify some factors likely to influence strategic planning.

At the same time, managers' perception as regards strategic and tactical level was surveyed so as to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of the strategic planning process and the reasons that justify it. Thus, the manager of the planning department was inquired in order to ascertain organizational actors' responsibility in activities which are related to the strategic planning process. Subsequently, based on the strategic planning model presented by Fernandes [9], a survey was conducted in order to analyse and compare the strategic planning stages undertaken by both universities which, along with other data collected, allowed a better

exploitation of the strategic planning process. As secondary data, information on universities and on strategic planning was also gathered.

Overall, the data analysis aimed, firstly, to understand each case and seek explanations of cause and effect as well as valid conclusions from the comparison with theoretical framework. The description of the results obtained serves as a general analytical strategy. In the second stage of the analysis, a cross case analysis was used making it possible to aggregate findings across individual cases, to compare data from each case and find similarities and differences. The universities which took part in this study were identified as University A and University B.

## **Results**

In this section results of data analysis are presented, focussing on the organizational characteristics of universities, the reasons underlying planning, the responsibility of organizational actors and the managers' perception concerning strengths and weaknesses of the strategic planning process developed by both universities.

### **Universities' organizational characteristics**

The data showed that the universities studied result from the merger of higher education institutions. University A and University B, a public and a private university, respectively, were created in 1993 and have a multi-campus structure. Although University A has 21 undergraduate courses, it has a larger number of students enrolled than University B which offers 34 undergraduate courses. Regarding the strategic planning process, University A is in the second cycle of the strategic planning, while University B is already in the third cycle. Both institutions' attitude towards strategic planning is a positive one and points to the growth and improvement of the strategic planning process.

When interviewed at the strategic and tactical level, managers expressed the opinion that both organizations (University A and University

B) share features pertaining both to the political and the professional bureaucratic model. Results revealed the existence of an essentially bureaucratic structure, interest groups, negotiable rules and fragmented power. These results are consistent with Estrada's [2] and Rocha's [3] studies and confirm that, in these universities, the bureaucratic model of organization is not predominant since characteristics of the political model were also found. In fact, universities are political organizations where different views and interests of different groups collide in an attempt to maintain power or to control the decision-making process.

The characteristics identified in these models influence the strategic planning process and, therefore, should be acknowledged by planners and analysed with greater emphasis on the process if effective results are to be expected.

### Reasons for planning

From the analysis of each case (Table 1), it becomes apparent that, in general, the two universities do strategic planning for two reasons, namely to formulate strategic alternatives and to reach greater efficiency and managerial and institutional effectiveness. In their strategic planning models, Bryson [14], Bryson and Alston [15], Braga and Monteiro [8] and Fernandes [9] have indicated strategic alternatives as a step to the achievement of institutional goals. Efficiency and managerial and institutional effectiveness are highlighted by Oliveira [16] as one of the strategic planning principles. For the latter, strategic planning must provide the institution with these conditions.

**Table 1** : Reasons to make strategic planning

Reasons	University	
	A	B
Doing an environmental analysis	yes	no
Having a vision for the Future	no	yes
Formulating an institutional mission statement	no	yes
Creating strategic alternatives	yes	yes

Achieving efficiency and managerial and institutional effectiveness	yes	yes
Being acknowledged by and focussed on the market	no	yes
Getting stronger and surviving	no	yes

In general, all these reasons seem to be significant to strategic and tactical level managers. Undoubtedly, the process can contribute to the achievement of important results as long as universities prepare themselves in terms of models, planners, planning organization and staff mobilization so that goals may be achieved and expectations fulfilled.

In the case of University A, both the external planning consultant and the managers are responsible for planning activities which means that the university does not have qualified personnel on its staff capable of making strategic planning. If the external consultant is not fully aware of the internal reality of the university, the results of the strategic planning process may be compromised.

Student participation is not as valued as it should be. In fact, students are only called to participate in the planning activities in what concerns plan approval and its dissemination. Students can give a greater contribution to the strategic planning process, highlighting problems and providing solutions once they have experienced different areas at the university, namely teaching, research and extension.

### Strengths and weaknesses of strategic planning

Table 2 shows how different managers' perception of strategic and tactical levels as regards strategic planning strengths can be in Universities A and B.

**Table 2 :** Strengths and weaknesses of the strategic planning process

Strengths	University		Weaknesses	University	
	A	B		A	B
Environmental analysis	yes	no	Strategic planning detailing	yes	no
Actions setting	yes		Strategic plan	yes	yes



			evaluation		
Goal setting	no	yes	Participation	yes	yes
Goal identification	yes	no			
Regional objectives selection	no	yes	Monitoring	no	yes
Mission statement to guide the actions of the university.	no	yes	Little comprehensive process	no	yes
Monitoring and evaluation of actions planned	no	yes	Insufficient information for scenario analysis, environment, etc.	no	yes

The weaknesses highlighted are, nevertheless, coincident as regards two issues: evaluation of the strategic plan and academic participation in the strategic planning process. These issues do require special attention because, if not addressed, it will lead to scarce results. Furthermore, these issues express the strategic planning in the rational dimension and are important steps in the process.

Overall, managers are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the institutional strategic planning process. This is, indeed, positive because it tends to generate changes in the strategic planning process that may improve especially those steps which present a negative development. The managers' interviews regarding the strategic planning process revealed insufficient information for scenarios and environmental analysis. Consequently, the analysis is weak and strategies cannot contemplate the existing problems.

### Steps of strategic planning

Using the strategic planning model described by Fernandes [9], it was established that the strategic planning process conducted by the University A did not cover all the steps, unlike the process followed University B which was complete. (Table 3)

**Table 3** : Steps of strategic planning process

Steps	University	
	A	B
Definition of mission statement	yes	yes
Definition of generic objectives	yes	yes
Environmental analysis (both internal and external)	yes	yes
Formulation of deliberate and emergent strategies	yes	yes
Definition of specific objectives, action programmes and budgeting	yes with reserves	yes
Strategic control	no	yes

Table 2 shows that the institutional mission statement occurred in both cases. However, in University B, the mission is disseminated both internally and externally while in University A it is mostly externally. This suggests that managers do not know the significance and importance of the mission to the organization. Moreover, University B shares its purpose with the academic community and the society in general in order to get recognition and survive in a competitive market. Fernandes [9], Bryson [14], Bryson and Alston [15], Braga and Monteiro [8] and Oliveira [16] emphasise the importance of this step. Objectively, this is a strength in both strategic planning processes.

As regards the definition of generic objectives, results revealed they have been accomplished in both cases. Generic objectives were defined according to the institutional mission statement and were described in the universities' plans. This is critical because the objectives should not go against the institutional mission statement and should be known by the staff. Although setting objectives may present itself as a difficult task, given the complexity of universities, managers should make an additional effort to define the objectives as clearly as possible and according to

quantitative measures. It is unfortunate and detrimental to the process of University A that quantitative measures to evaluate the objectives have not been defined in its strategic planning process, resulting in little or no control of the intended results.

Among the strategic models studied in the literature, the definition of generic objectives is mentioned by several other authors besides Fernandes [9] such as Bryson [14], Bryson and Alston [15], Braga and Monteiro [8] and Oliveira [16]. In fact, setting generic objectives is another strength in Universities' A and B strategic planning process.

The internal and external environmental analysis was also performed by the two universities studied. According to managers from planning units, this analysis was carried out by planners and other organizational actors. This participation presents, however, restrictions as seen earlier in the results presentation as to the responsibility of different actors in the strategic planning process. Indeed, technicians' and teachers' participation is secondary and students' is unimpressive at University B and null at University A.

In both cases the environmental analysis was performed with recourse to a SWOT matrix. This analysis is suggested by Braga and Monteiro [8], Fernandes [9] and Oliveira [16] and commonly used in environmental analysis. Managers from University B reported they had insufficient information to carry out this analysis, though. Despite these reserves, this step can be considered as yet another strength of the strategic planning process for the two cases studied.

The strategy formulation step was performed in the strategic planning processes of Universities A and B. In both cases deliberate strategies were formulated. These strategies were based on internal and external information considering the objectives that had been previously defined. This information is essential to the formulation of strategies since it is impossible to make real and appropriate decisions based only on past experience. Another favourable feature is the fact that strategies specify deadlines and the people responsible for them and they are both referred in the strategic plan. This is an important fact because it establishes a commitment on the part of a

person or of an entire sector for a certain period of time, allowing monitoring, evaluation and an immediate change of course, if necessary. Emerging strategies are also incorporated into the plan. Both deliberated and emergent strategies are discussed by Mintzberg and Quinn [7]. According to these authors, besides deliberate strategies, there may be emergent strategies arising from the interaction of the institution with the environment. The definition of strategies is another strength of the strategic process in both cases.

As far as specific objectives and action programmes definition was concerned, it was verified that the strategic planning of University A has just started this step. This university has obviously still much work ahead in what concerns detailing the strategic plan. This is, indeed, a weakness of the institution's strategic planning and one that will have an impact in the achievement of strategic objectives.

Contrarily, University B has included in its strategic planning process tactical plans and resources that were allocated in the university's budget in order to perform all the strategies formulated in the strategic plan, as a means to achieve the expected results. Here it is understood that it facilitates achieving strategic objectives and strategies, thus showing the institution's commitment to the strategic plan and pursuing institutional objectives. This strategic planning step is specifically addressed in the model described by Fernandes [9] and constitutes a strength in the strategic process of University B and a weakness in the strategic process of University A.

Strategic control is the last strategic planning step and it is responsible for developing control mechanisms to evaluate objectives, strategies and/or actions. Of the two universities, only University B included this step in its strategic planning, although it does not yet fully control its strategic plan.

In general terms, University A and its strategy planning are considered not to have fulfilled the last step because the process was not completed. On the other hand, being a public university, University A does not use control mechanisms much, mostly because academic autonomy and teachers' independence regarding

their decisions, not to mention their resistance to control, make such process especially difficult. By contrast, being a private institution, University B uses control mechanisms, although still not very effectively due to organizational characteristics and current organizational culture.

The definition of control mechanisms is crucial to the strategic planning process. Therefore, University A has another weakness in its strategic planning process, while the strategic process of the University B registered another strength. Thus, the hypothesis that the strategic planning process used by universities from Pará State, in Brazil, includes strategic formulation, implementation and control cannot be considered valid because University A did not perform all the strategic planning steps, unlike University B. Consequently, it is not possible to generalise the results.

## **Conclusions**

Universities have been affected by environment changes having to face challenges and meet with social needs and market demand in as a means to remain competitive. Competition is becoming increasingly severe and so, in order to survive, universities must use their resources and skills to the best of their ability. In this context, according to the managers surveyed, both universities have been using strategic planning as a management tool in order to create strategic alternatives and to achieve greater efficiency and managerial and institutional effectiveness. The reasons for planning pointed out by these managers are important and show similarities with the strengths and weaknesses found in the strategic planning process steps surveyed. Moreover, the universities that have been studied also conduct strategic planning to eliminate or reduce environmental threats and to take and maximise environmental opportunities and their strengths and to minimise or eliminate the weaknesses identified in the environmental analysis.

Both universities have embraced strategic planning as a way to pursue a desired future. In fact, the strategic planning process has been accomplished with the development of important strategic planning process steps. University A is in the second strategic planning cycle and University B is already in the third cycle. This fact tends to increase the chances of achieving the institutional objectives and making decisions more consistent with the changing environmental context.

Conducting strategic planning within these universities is not easy because they are professional bureaucratic organizations displaying some features of the political model. So, their organization is complex, with a wide range of knowledge in several key areas that make them different from other organizations. Strategic planning must include contributions from all hierarchical levels so that a good strategic planning can be developed.

Although University A has developed almost all of the strategic planning process steps referred by Fernandes [9], namely the definition of institutional mission statement and of generic objectives, the analysis of the internal and external environment, the formulation of deliberate and emergent strategies and the definition of specific objectives and action programmes, which are considered as strengths of the strategic process. Nevertheless, University A is considered as not positively contributing to the achievement of institutional objectives for two main reasons. The first reason has to do with defining specific objectives and action programmes, a step that has not been finalized. It is at this stage that tactical and operational plans and their respective budgets should have been defined and constructed in order to link the strategic plan with the general budget and so accomplish the institutional mission. The second reason is the failure to do the strategic control step. In fact, no mechanisms were designed to monitor, control and evaluate the plan. In this context, it is legitimate to ask how is the organization to change objectives in view of new opportunities or threats generated by environmental changes? How it to change the established strategies and policies when actions are being misdirected? And how

can it decide on new ways of allocating resources in a tactical area, if that is not controlled by the university? This is an essential step to the strategic planning process.

In general, University B revealed strengths in the execution of the several strategic planning process steps, namely the definition of the institutional mission statement and of generic objectives, the analysis of internal and external environment, the formulation of deliberate and emergent strategies, specific objectives, action programmes and budget and strategic control. However, there are some reserves as far as some strategic planning steps are concerned, particularly as regards strategic control and environmental analysis. In terms of strategic control, monitoring of the strategic plan has not been entirely performed; besides, according to the surveyed managers from the strategic and tactical level, the environmental analysis lacked information resulting in a poor analysis and the risks of planning not taking into account the priority strategic problems. For that reason, access to information must require more attention from planners.

On the whole, these weaknesses do not negatively affect the strategic planning process. As a matter of fact, the strategic planning process conducted by University B has positively contributed to the achievement of institutional objectives because all the strategic planning steps were completed regardless of the reserves mentioned.

In general, it was verified that the strategic planning process of the surveyed universities needs improvement, given the weaknesses pointed out in the process. Indeed, strategic plan must be flexible enough to internalize environmental changes. It should also be improved in order to gain efficiency and effectiveness.

Strategic planning tends to be a structured process of continuous improvement and the odds of it becoming a process of organizational learning and a permanent practice management are fairly good, as long as universities perform all the steps of the strategic planning process, bearing in mind, of course, their own specificities.

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