

Promoting a Strategic Plan in the University Environment

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Abstract—This paper is concerned with the role strategic management plays in higher education and the methods it entails. Using the University of West Bohemia and the Czech Republic as examples, the paper describes the methods used in furthering strategic objectives within institutions and their different parts (faculties, institutes). The nature of the demands faced by the university dictates the need for a strategic framework which defines the basic objectives and parameters of tertiary education and research in a local, regional and national context. Sharing strategies with a wider range of actors (universities, cities, regions, the practical sphere) is key to laying the foundations for more efficient cooperation.

Keywords—Strategy, strategic plan, university, university environment.

I. COMMENTS ON STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

"Chaos is the strategy of intellectuals!"

"Strategic management is modern obscurantism."

THOSE of us who are devoted to strategic management in the academic environment may have heard similar exclamations. For several years now, higher education strategy and, in fact, the entire education system has been subjects of debate in the Czech Republic. Intensive work and euphoric hope are hampered not only by an unpredictable political scene, but especially by the resistance of the academic community's representative. Many reactions are still heavily conditioned by the negative imprint created by the centrally planned economy that our country was intimately acquainted with in the period of 1948 - 1989.

The representatives of universities in the Czech Republic have rejected the strategic document *"White Paper on Tertiary Education"* [1], which was based on the evidence and expert recommendations of the OECD. The rejection of this strategic document has gradually developed into a rejection of almost any suggestion for systematic change in higher education. The text *"In Defense of Public Higher Education"* [2], has become a major point of reference for the prominent student leaders and officials of the largest and most important universities (Charles University in Prague). This text plays a role in alternative strategy in Great Britain.

A very serious hurdle which prevented the formation of a new strategy for higher education in the Czech Republic was the lack of stable political support. An equally serious problem was key players not getting involved in creating the strategy itself. In short, the above can be summarized in the following

statement:

"Change is usually perceived as unpleasant by a passive recipient, but the same change can be perceived positively by the same person if the recipient becomes the apostle, i.e. the one who implements the change."

This grim situation regarding the adoption of a new national strategy for tertiary education has led to discussions about who really needs a new strategy and what is expected from it. The most important academic institutions view the problem almost solely in terms of lack of funding. Traditional universities are usually wary of interaction with industry, whereas smaller, vocationally oriented institutions welcome the cooperation but at the same time are unable to enforce the accepted reform measures at a national level. It appears that a solution based on legislative changes (an adoption of a new Law on Higher Education) will give way to a series of partial changes. This will probably not only take a higher human and financial toll, but also create the risk of producing reform phases which are inconsistent with each other.

The national project KREDO (an acronym of the words Quality, Relevance, Efficiency, Diversity and Openness) represents new hope for the transformation of tertiary education in the Czech Republic. As a result of the project, many universities have come up with new strategic plans for 2020; these are supported by many analyses.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports supports these activities not only financially but also methodologically (including the involvement of experts from OECD and EAU). Individual universities' findings should then significantly complement and expand a generally described state strategy. It is taken into account that external stakeholders will be significantly involved in the formulation of a national tertiary education strategy.

The Czech Republic has failed in implementing a higher education strategy using a "top-down" approach and is now experimenting with a "bottom-up" approach to create new strategies. This is an uncommon method, but it offers the advantage of enabling divisive universities and regions the possibility to break away from ingrained traditional mechanisms. At the same time, it is essential to adapt mechanisms of quality assessment and accreditation at a state level; these currently do not support diversity and do not emphasize the relevance of study programs. The biggest stumbling block of such conceived reforms will probably be the question of how to finance them; not only in light of the decrease in the volume of public funds, but also in the danger which lurks in unjust attempts to direct the resources to a select few centers of excellence (meaning primarily in

research).

II. PROMOTING A STRATEGIC PLAN WITHIN A UNIVERSITY

"Strategy is a state of mind, not a bundle of printed papers."

The University of West Bohemia in Pilsen normally prepares strategic plans in varied teams and, to some extent, involves external actors. Teamwork on strategy plans fulfills an educational role; the team learns about strategic management "by doing". In recent years, however, we can observe an interesting phenomenon: the creation of university strategies includes an eloquent formulation of ambitious goals, often supported by a team from a university department that does not contribute to the achievement of the professed goal. An authentic statement clearly illustrates this situation:

"I want to work at a research university, but you cannot expect cutting-edge research from my department. Other departments are in a better position to provide it."

So-called strategic dialogues, i.e. face-to-face discussions between university management and faculty/institute management about strategic objectives have ended with similar declaration. How can the university deal with these defeatist declarations?

We have decided to combine the following procedures:

a) A declaration of strategic objectives will be followed by a study designed to determine the feasibility of the suggestions on the basis of comparative analyses.

b) Negotiation with the faculties will address their individual responsibility for the university's strategic objectives.

c) In order to achieve the strategic objectives and meet key strategic milestones, an allocation of funds is needed. The positive contributions of individual departments and individuals should be valued, met with operational support and financially rewarded.

d) The university management should meet to assess the progress made in the implementation of a strategy at least once every three months. If necessary, objectives which have become unrealistic should be abandoned and new objectives should take their place.

The managerial technique „traffic lights“ has proved itself successful:

a) Green indicates that we are approaching the given objectives without any foreseen difficulties.

b) Yellow indicates an objectives which is more likely to fail. The coordinator of the objective (usually a member of the university management) is required to analyse the possible difficulties in detail and design effective interventions.

c) Red indicates a serious risk and the university management must raise the question of whether to leave or replace such an objective. If the objective cannot be left, the particular area of university life which the objective relates to may suffer a management crisis.

We have also applied a similar system of evaluation when dealing with faculties. These words demonstrate the level of creativity of faculty leaders: *"This objective is yellowish, but still green."*

We believe that investing in the strategic thinking of university employees will bear fruit. We would like to see strategic management gaining more importance in quality evaluation, accreditation and even in grant administering.

We expect the state's trust in institutions to increasingly be based on medium-term thinking, on reasoning backed by data and on the information gleaned from such data. Management of high quality has to steer clear from impressions and rely more on trends backed by analysis. What they say in Cybernetics should hold true for the university and the state:

"What is not measurable is not manageable."

III. SHARING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Modern universities are, or rather, can be an effective catalyst for regional development. For example, it has been our experience that in Pilsen, the technical disciplines of the university have played an important role in attracting investors to choose Pilsen for their interesting development plans. The most important industrial zone of the region has thus developed near the campus, which prevented an increase in unemployment rates at a time when a large engineering company was disintegrating.

It is common practice nowadays for every university to cooperate with the commercial sphere, and with industry in particular, at least to some extent. If this cooperation is limited to one-off contracts, it will result in demotivation and often in resistance from within academic centers. We choose to place our hope on combined strategies which incorporate universities, cities, regions and other entities.

The University of West Bohemia in Pilsen has received an interesting commission aimed at creating an integrated urban development plan for education, research, development and innovation. The preparation of the strategy involved 30 partners and, gratifyingly, the final document received the full support of the city's representatives. Our demanding work on the development of this strategy was rewarded in the form of support from European and national financial sources. It is a sad paradox however that the city was the cause of the only "problem" in our shared strategy when it refused to supply the transportation service which had been assumed it would supply to the new research centres.

Nevertheless, sharing strategies creates a better chance of eliminating the dire affects one partner's mistake could cause.

IV. CONCLUSION

In times of economic hardship the application of strategic management cannot be waived. This applies at the state level, but also at the university level. One might even recall that:

"A hectic operation is a fair punishment for a neglected strategy."

A secondary but very valuable result of strategy formation is inspiring a wider range of employees with strategic thinking. These people can then be used to support the strategy's implementation and maintenance. We have said that strategy is a state of mind. This should be reflected in a certain openness when evaluating strategic changes in an institution.

It is as valid for the management of a university as for the management of a company that:

"There is no worse sight than that of a strategy neglected."

REFERENCES

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