



Business Administration and Business Economics

Stakeholder Agility as an Enabler of Strategy Implementation: Evidence from Zimbabwe's Public Tertiary Education Institutions

Nancy Matshe¹, Maxwell Sandada², Dennis Maravanyika³

Abstract: The full value of any strategic objective is achieved through effective strategy implementation. However, globally, strategy implementation is arguably the most significant drawback of the strategic management process, with failure rates as high as 90%. This article is aimed at determining the extent to which stakeholder agility contributes to successful strategy implementation in public tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe, so that, they may contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the nation. The study was motivated by the lack of prior research on the nexus between stakeholder engagement and strategy implementation in public education. Data was analysed from 486 questionnaires that were randomly distributed to the senior management of tertiary education institutions. Correlations, and regression analyses techniques were used to determine the extent to which stakeholder agility predicts strategy implementation. The results indicated that external stakeholder agility positively influences successful strategy implementation, whilst internal stakeholder agility does not. The study provides guidance to tertiary education institutions on enhancing strategy implementation through external stakeholder agility. This paper also provides evidence in the African context on the reduction of the strategy implementation failure through stakeholder agility practices relevant to the public education sector.

Keywords: Collaborations; Partnerships; Team building; Higher Education; Zimbabwe Education 5.0 Philosophy

JEL Classification: M10

¹ PhD in progress, Faculty of Business Science Management and Economics, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe, Address: Harare, Zimbabwe, Tel.: +263 242 307 134, Corresponding author: matshenancy@gmail.com.

² Professor, Faculty of Business Science Management and Economics, University of Zimbabwe, Address: Harare, Zimbabwe, Tel.: +263 242 307 134, E-mail: maxwell.sandada1@gmail.com.

³ PhD, Faculty of Business Science Management and Economics, University of Zimbabwe, Address: Harare, Zimbabwe, Tel.: +263 242 307 134, E-mail: dennismaravanyika@gmail.com.

1. Introduction

Successful strategy implementation is arguably the most important part of strategic management, through the conversion of strategy plans into actions (Galpin, 2018; Obeidat, Al-Hadidi, Tarhini & Masa'deh, 2017; Wheelen & Hunger, 2017). Accordingly, strategic management scholars have proposed several strategy implementation models such as Strategy Implementation Model by Okumus (2003); 8S Model by Higgins (2005); and Balanced Scorecard by Kaplan (2005) to enhance the strategy implementation process. However, strategy implementation is arguably a mammoth task. Recent evidence has indicated that strategy implementation failure rate, in both the private and the public sector is as high as 50% to 90% (Bhimavarapu, Kim & Jie Xiong, 2020; Oliver & Schwella, 2018; Candido & Santos, 2019). Prior studies have indicated poor execution of strategic plans in the tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe (TEIs) (Tsimba, Mugoniwa & Mutembedza, 2021; Shereni, 2020; Dube & Xie, 2018). Some strategic management scholars (Brüggen, Doelman & Joshi, 2021; Bhimavarapu *et. al.*, 2020; Oliver & Schwella, 2018) have expressed concern over this huge strategy implementation failure rate, calling it 'undesirable', and declaring the need for substantial and urgent efforts towards the reduction of the failure rate.

Subsequently, studies conducted in the private sector of the developed world, have identified stakeholder engagement as instrumental in organizational performance, through sharing of key competencies and capabilities (Buffone, 2021; Love, 2020; Guthrie, 2019; Joiner, 2019). Advocates of stakeholder agility have argued that successful companies are those that create strong, and timely engagements with key stakeholders (Joiner, 2019; Smet, Lurie & George, 2018). This study investigates whether stakeholder agility can be an enabler of strategy implementation in public TEIs in Zimbabwe?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dynamic Capabilities Theory

The Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997) refers to the ability of organizations to achieve and sustain new forms of competitive advantage in a dynamic business environment. The main assumption of the theory is that a firm can achieve competitive advantage by the development and deployment of key competencies and resources (Teece, 2012). This theory mirrors the current study on the need for public tertiary education institutions to develop stakeholder agility capabilities as a way of building capacity and competencies in a bid to improve their ability to implement key strategic objectives for socio-economic development.

2.2. Strategy Implementation

Strategy implementation is described as the process through which strategies, plans, and policies are put into action (Wheelen & Hunger, 2017). Similarly, Greer, Lusch, & Hitt (2017) states that it is a series of intervention towards desired outcomes. Its effective implementation enhances organizational performance and the creation of competitive advantage (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021; Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2017; Siddique & Shadbolt, 2016). However, strategy implementation is arguably, the hardest part of the strategic management process, highly complex and the most misunderstood (de Oliveira, 2018; Andrews, Benyon, & Genc, 2017; Hourani, 2017). Inevitably, this challenge has led to a huge rate of strategy failure. Whilst, the true rate of the strategy failure is not known, prior studies have estimated the rate to range between 50% to 90% (Hoverstadt, Loh & Marguet, 2020; Oliver & Schwella, 2018; Cândido & Santos, 2019). The failure is also a huge public sector challenge (Bhimavarapu *et al.*, 2020; de Oliveira, 2019; Andrews *et al.*, 2017), a gap this study attempts to fill.

2.3. Stakeholder Agility

Stakeholder agility is a modern phenomenon, described as the ability for organisations and leaders to engage with stakeholders, develop and foster relationships, partnerships, and collaborations for the mutual benefit of all stakeholders involved (Joiner, 2019). It requires leaders to come out of authority and break silos, to a new mind-set of partnerships, collaborations, networks, and relationships building to meet their organisation's unique goals (Smet *et al.*, 2018). Based on research spanning over a decade across the globe, Joiner & Joseph (2019) concluded that, the most successful companies are those that create strong, timely alliances and partnerships with customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Literature (Lokman, Khalid, & Nasri, 2019; Aghina, Smet, Lackey, Lurie, & Murarka, 2018) has revealed that stakeholder agility with partners and customers enhances organisational performance through sharing products and services enabling organisations to meet the changing needs and demands of their clients. Other benefits of organizational stakeholder engagement include tapping into skills and ideas, and other capabilities that an organisation may not possess (Guthrie, 2019, Maalouf, 2019). Various studies (Joiner & Joseph, 2019; Smet *et al.*, 2018) have emphasized the importance of internal stakeholder agility such as building teams, fostering internal relations, guiding, and supporting, and co-creation, to organizational performance.

3. Problem Investigated, Research Hypotheses, and Objectives

Despite the high rate of failure in the strategy implementation process, there exists little evidence on empirical research that have sought to evaluate the role of stakeholder agility on strategy implementation in the public tertiary education sector. A review of literature on strategy implementation in general, in Zimbabwe indicates a paucity of studies that have focused on the public tertiary education sector. Yet, prior studies in tertiary education in Zimbabwe have demonstrated strategy implementation failure (Tsimba *et al.*, 2021; Shereni, 2020; Dube & Xie, 2018). Existing studies on strategy implementation studies in Zimbabwe, did not dwell on the impact of stakeholder agility on strategy implementation in the public tertiary education sector. For example, Guruwo & Chiguvi (2017) examined the effect of strategy implementation on organizational performance in the retail sector. Mapetere (2021) examined the impact of resource allocation on strategy implementation in telecommunications, whilst Goromonzi (2016) studied the effect of culture on strategy implementation in the commercial banks. Clearly, little is known about the nexus of stakeholder agility and strategy implementation in the public tertiary education sector in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, to address the existing dearth in literature on this subject, this study seeks to investigate the effect of stakeholder agility on strategy implementation in the public tertiary education sector in Zimbabwe. To support the objective of the study, the following hypotheses was formulated.

H₁. Stakeholder agility has a positive effect on strategy implementation.

4. Methodology

The study was underpinned by the positivist, quantitative research paradigm. The positivist philosophy seeks to test hypotheses to explain the causal effect relationships between the variables (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). This philosophy was adopted to explain the relationship between stakeholder agility and strategy implementation. The population of the study were public tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe (8 polytechnics and 13 teacher education colleges). The sample size was 486. The unit of analysis was middle and senior management level from both academic and non-academic staff of the institutions. The sample frame was the fiscal payroll for the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education for tertiary institutions. Data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire.

5. Results and Discussion

Out of the 730 questionnaires distributed, 486 were received and usable. This result represents 66.5% response rate which is sufficient for validity of the study. Data analysis for the study was conducted using the SPSS Version 26. Demographic data was analysed using descriptive statistics to identify the frequency distribution. Correlation coefficient analysis was done to establish the relationship between stakeholder agility and successful strategy implementation. Regression analysis was also conducted to analyse the predictive relationship between stakeholder agility factors and successful strategy implementation.

5.1. Reliability and Validity

The internal consistency of the scale was established through reliability testing. Cronbach alpha's coefficient values were calculated to test the reliability of the variables (internal stakeholder agility and external stakeholder agility). As shown in Table 1 below, the overall Cronbach alpha's coefficient for internal stakeholder agility was 0.857; and for external stakeholder agility was 0.791, and 0.911 for successful strategy implementation. The coefficients are all greater than the benchmark of 0.7 (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Nunally, 1978) indicative that the instrument was reliable.

Table 1. Reliability and Validity Tests

Variable	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Internal Stakeholder Agility	6	0.857
External Stakeholder Agility	2	0.791
Successful Strategy Implementation	15	0.911

Source: SPSS26

Content and face validity of the instrument was also checked through use of subject experts that analysed the instrument. A pilot study was also conducted with two tertiary institutions similar to the sample of the study, to establish the adequacy and validity of the instrument. The findings of the pilot study were used to validate the instrument.

5.2. Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength of the relationships between the variables. Bivariate correlation analysis which is a non-parametric statistical test was used. The correlation coefficients are represented by "r" and takes a range from -1.0 representing a perfect negative relationship to +1.0 representing a positive relationship ($-1 \leq r \leq +1$), and zero (0) representing no relationship between

the variables (Nayak & Singh, 2021). Each independent variable (internal stakeholder agility and external stakeholder agility) was assessed against the dependent variable (successful strategy implementation) and the results are illustrated in Table 2 below. The correlation between internal stakeholder agility and successful strategy implementation is ($r=0.514$; $p=0.000$), and external stakeholder agility and successful strategy implementation is ($r=0.514$; $p=0.000$). Both the constructs have a positive correlation with successful strategy implementation. The results for both constructs ($r=0.514$; $p=0.000$) were indicative of moderate and positive correlation with strategy implementation.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

Factor	ISA	ESA	SSI
ISA	1		
ESA	0.606	1	
SSI	0.514	0.514	1
Sig. (2- tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	486	486	486
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Key: ISA – Internal Stakeholder Agility; ESA – External Stakeholder Agility;
SSI – Successful Strategy Implementation; N-Number of Participants

Source: SPSS26

5.3. Regression Analysis

To determine the predictive relationships between the variables, regression analysis was conducted. Table 3 below presents the regression analysis results. The adjusted $R^2=0.622$ implies that stakeholder agility factors explained 62% of the variance in successful strategy implementation. The standardised beta coefficients revealed that the predictive power for internal stakeholder agility was negative ($\beta = -0.002$; $p>0.05$) and for external stakeholder agility was positive ($\beta = 0.078$; $p<0.05$). This implies that internal stakeholder practices have statistically non-significant effect on successful strategy implementation, in the public tertiary institutions. On the other hand, external stakeholder agility has statistically significant impact on successful strategy implementation.

Table 3. Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig
		β	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.866	.147		5.877	.000
	ISA	-.002	.039	-.002	-.059	.953
	ESA	0.051	.025	.078	2.046	0.041
Dependent Variable: Successful Strategy Implementation R=0.793; R ² =0.629; Adjusted R ² =0.622; Std. Error of the Estimate = 0.4144						

Key: ISA – Internal Stakeholder Agility; ESA – External Stakeholder Agility

Source: SPSS26

The results that internal stakeholder agility has no effect on strategy implementation is contrary to existing literature (Buffone, 2021; Guthrie, 2019; Smet *et al.*, 2018) which suggest that internal engagement with other tertiary institutions can improve organisational performance. Studies on the educational institutions in the developed world, indicate that higher education institutions can benefit positively from partnering with other similar institutions for educational systems reforms (Buffone, 2021), and for increased access to more resources that leads to improved research and innovation (Guthrie, 2019). Furthermore, a study by Smet *et al.*, (2018) found out that relationships, team building, and co-creation resulted in sharing of ideas throughout the organisation, which improved organizational performance. However, in the Zimbabwean context, internal stakeholder engagement may not be as effective, because the public tertiary institutions have the same level of capabilities hence the engagement with each other would not make much impact on the strategic performance of the other. Whereas, the developed economies institutions of higher learning are well developed, hence the sharing of resources is beneficial to all.

The results that external stakeholder agility has a positive effect on strategy implementation is supported by the existing literature. Joiner and Joseph (2019) concluded that organizations that practiced stakeholder agility through collaboration, alliances, partnerships, and joint ventures were able to share and increase their core competencies and capabilities resulting in improved performance. Through stakeholder agility, and the creation of good relationships with partners and customers, organisations can provide products and services that meet the demands of their clients, resulting in better organizational performance (Lokman *et al.*, 2019; Aghina *et al.*, 2018). As a result, external stakeholder agility with the private sector is beneficial to public tertiary institutions as the private sector has capabilities and resources that the public tertiary institutions do not have.

The results of the study suggest that external stakeholder agility practices impact positively on successful strategy implementation whilst internal stakeholder analysis does not enhance successful strategy implementation. It is therefore important that public tertiary education institutions embrace and practice the various facets of external stakeholder agility practices such as partnerships, collaboration, joint ventures, and relationship building. This enables them to increase their capability in the implementation of strategic objectives. Therefore, these institutions are recommended to engage in training and capacity building in external stakeholder engagement to enhancing their capability of coming up with winning external engagements.

Due to the interrelatedness of the external stakeholder agility and successful strategy implementation it is recommended that policy makers should promote a business environment that is conducive to engagements between the public sector and the private sector. Academically, the study makes significant contribution to the strategic management literature on strategy implementation in the public sector which is a current topical area of research. Overall, the implication of the study is that public tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe can achieve their strategic objectives through external stakeholder agility.

6. Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Whilst the study provides useful insights on stakeholder engagement, it has its own limitations, just like any other study. Data was collected from the public polytechnics and teacher education institutions only. The study excluded the private tertiary education institutions, as well as universities, the inclusion of which could have enriched the study. A replication of this study can be done within all higher learning institutions in Zimbabwe. The study can also be replicated in higher learning institutions in other developing countries in Africa to observe similarities and differences. Furthermore, a study of this nature can also be conducted in other sectors in Zimbabwe such as telecommunications, energy, and mining for comparison. These sectors require heavy infrastructural investments hence could benefit from stakeholder engagements. The study also relied on the subjective views of management academic and non-academic staff, yet their views could be different from the rest of the higher education sector. Future studies could build on this study to further enhance the body of knowledge on strategy implementation and stakeholder agility in developing countries in Africa.

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