

2015-4

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Recommended Citation

Lillis, Deirdre, "Masters of the Universe or Survival of the Fittest: Rethinking Strategy Development in a Technological University" (2015). *Stream 1: Enterprise and Engagement*. 7.
<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/st1/7>

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Masters of Our Universe or Survival of the Fittest? Rethinking Strategy Development in a Technological University

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Abstract

Strategic planning has become an integral part of the management of higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide, largely in response to an external environment that is exerting increased pressure. The experiences of all but one of Ireland's 21 Universities and Institutes of Technology with strategic planning over a ten-year period are considered in this paper. Despite evidence of growing experience with strategic planning, some significant deficits are identified. With the development of Technological Universities in mind, recommendations are made with respect to strategic planning for institutional diversity, consolidation of merged institutions, performance-related funding, integration with quality assurance frameworks and external stakeholder engagement were identified. Like all aspects of their institutions, internal strategy development processes need to adapt in the new landscape for higher education in Ireland and the development of Technological Universities.

The Higher Education Landscape in Ireland

In 2015 the higher education sector in Ireland is comprised of seven universities, Dublin Institute of Technology, thirteen Institutes of Technology and a small number of specialist and private colleges. Public expenditure on higher education is slightly less than the European Union (EU) average, even though Ireland has some of the highest participation rates in education the world and the latest available European data ranks Ireland as the fifth most efficient higher education system behind the United Kingdom, Japan, Netherlands and Finland (Aubyn, Pina, Garcia, & Pais, 2009). Graduates from Irish HEIs have been considered the 'most employable' in Europe and Ireland produces more graduates per 1,000 inhabitants than any other European country (Aubyn et al, 2009).

The Universities and the DIT/IOT sectors account for more than 95% of nearly 200,000 publically funded students in higher education. The size of Irish HEIs ranges from institutions with over 20,000 enrolments to ten regional HEIs, some with 5,000 enrolments or less¹. The economic challenges facing Ireland in 2015 are unprecedented however and while the higher education sector has seen its overall funding levels maintained, it is expected to provide additional places from within these resource levels (Lillis & Morgan, 2012). In line with international trends, Irish HEIs are having to reduce their dependence on public funding by generating greater percentages of their income from private sources. The re-introduction of tuition fees, or further increases in the student registration fee, is a particularly emotive issue for the Irish public but these measures may yet prove necessary. This would strengthen the concept of the 'market' in Irish higher education and level the playing pitch between public and private colleges. The immediate challenge is to 'do more with less'. The more onerous challenge however will be to 'do things differently'.

¹ <http://www.heai.ie> Student Statistics 2013/14

A new funding framework is being rolled out which introduces a performance-based element to institutional funding for the first time. This is implemented through an annual '*Strategic Dialogue*' between HEIs and the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2011). As part of this, HEIs will provide annual reports to the HEA on their performance in five dimensions including (i) distinctiveness of mission (ii) alignment to national priorities (iii) institutional performance against key indicators (iv) regional cluster context and (v) engagement with external stakeholders. Similar principles will underpin the allocation of research funding following a national research prioritisation exercise (Government of Ireland, 2011).

The Path Toward Technological Universities

The first national strategy for higher education, a long term strategy to 2030, was developed as the economic crisis of 2008 was unfolding and it made significant recommendations for the national system structure, funding arrangements and institutional governance and management (HEA, 2011). The most salient features of the strategy are its vision for a consolidated but diverse sector comprised of institutions with distinctive missions attuned to the needs of their regions. A new kind of HEI for Ireland, a 'Technological University' (TU), was identified as a potential path for a small number of larger Institutes of Technology. TU status can only be achieved by first merging Institutes within a regional cluster. The intention is also to form 'regional clusters' of collaborating institutions (which may include universities, Institutes of Technology and other providers). The national strategy also identified external stakeholder engagement as a 'third pillar' of activity of equal esteem to teaching and research, though there are no insights as to how this activity will be funded. Internationalisation and part-time education were given increased emphasis. For the first time, all quality assurance will fall under the remit of a single agency, Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (QQI).

The 'Technological University' envisaged in the Irish national strategy for higher education is one which will '*operate at the highest academic level in an environment that is specifically focused on technology and its application*' (HEA, 2011). The strategy calls for a distinct mission for TUs that is based on career- focused education that is closely aligned to labour market needs. There is an emphasis on science, technology and engineering programmes. It envisages TUs engaging in industry-focused research and innovation appropriate to its mission, while noting that the majority of PhD provision will remain in the university sector.

It is important to note that all future TUs in Ireland will originate in and emerge from a merger of some kind. At the time of writing two applications are in progress – the Technological University for Dublin which depends on a successful merger of Dublin Institute of Technology with two Institutes of Technology in the greater Dublin region (Tallaght and Blanchardstown) and the Munster Technological University which involves Cork Institute of Technology and the Institute of Technology, Tralee. Ireland would do well to consider international experiences of mergers in higher education sectors. The driving force for the creation of TUs in Ireland was stated in the national

strategy as a concern for creating institutions of sufficient scale and critical mass, to deliver on national objectives at regional level. It is widely assumed to be a rationalisation agenda, notwithstanding the fact that the Irish higher education sector performs well by international norms (Aubyn et al, 2009). At institutional level mergers are the most radical of reforms as they cut to the core of institutional identity and autonomy which some cases can stretch back over 125 years (e.g. the Kevin Street campus in DIT). International experience of mergers suggests that while governance, management and administration can be strengthened in a merger process, it rarely results in cost reductions, even in single location scenarios (Skodvin, 2014). The application process for TU in Ireland does not take into account time to consolidate as a merged institution and is an important factor for future strategy development.

The draft Technological Universities Bill sets out the process for mergers and the process for TU designation (Government of Ireland, 2014) and it enshrines prescriptive performance targets that have to be achieved by the merged institutions. The most challenging targets to achieve *viz a viz* existing activities include the requirement for a minimum of 4% of student numbers to be enrolled in postgraduate programmes and the requirement that 45% of academic staff to hold a doctoral qualification. This signals a far greater emphasis on research that was previously the case for some institutions. The increased focus on stakeholder engagement within regional clusters may require more strategic consideration of stakeholders. In some cases the enhancement of internationalisation activities will require increased attention. These targets also expose some disparities between partners in merger bids. It is also worth noting that the step toward TU is largely a step into the unknown as the funding arrangements remain Technological Universities are unclear. At the level of individual staff contract details are not available yet, other than a provision for existing staff to hold their existing contractual status and remuneration (rather than grade and responsibilities) at the date of transfer.

To Plan or Not To Plan?

Strategy Development

Strategic planning is one of a number of sub-sets of strategy development and this distinction must be drawn from the outset. Whittington contends that there are four approaches to strategy development which are differentiated by (i) the degree to which the outcomes are intended and (ii) whether the processes used are deliberate or emergent (Whittington, 2001) (Figure 1).

The classical approach to strategy development, dubbed *Masters of Our Universe* by the authors, makes the assumptions that (i) deliberate planning is vital to future success (ii) changes in the environment can be mastered and (iii) that the future can be predicted with certainty (Table 1). This approach dominates the publically funded higher education sector in Ireland and internationally, as seen in strategic plans with vision and mission statements, long-term goals, SMART objectives and indicators/targets. The evolutionary approach by comparison assumes that long-term strategy is futile and *Survival of the Fittest* is the most appropriate approach (Table 1). It can be argued for example that the evolutionary approach is more suitable for HEIs which depend solely on tuition-fee income, or research institutes which

depend on competitive funding, who need to be able to adapt flexibly to market opportunities). The systemic approach, *Play by Local Rules*, asserts that (i) deliberate strategy development processes are important (ii) that strategy development can result in both intended and unintended outcomes and that (iii) the particular social context is an important consideration (Table 1). Quality assurance processes in higher education such as self-evaluation with peer review exhibit many of the characteristics of the systemic approach (e.g. they are often conducted in a 'bottom-up' manner, rely on expert opinion and are sensitive to the organisational culture in the academic heartland). The processual approach, *Go with the Flow*, assumes that (i) strategy development has multiple drivers and outcomes (e.g. individual ambition, professional pride, managerial power, patriotism, culture and religion) and (ii) strategy development is pragmatic process of mistakes, learning and compromise.

Shades of all four approaches will be evident in any individual and it is worth noting that what could be considered success in one approach could be considered failure in another. For example diligently implementing every objective of a classical 5-year strategic plan could be considered a failure from evolutionary perspective if important changes in the environment were ignored in the interim. The important point however is that there are alternatives to when developing strategy, including *not* undertaking a strategic planning process. Strategy development in higher education is distinctive and complex when compared to many parts of the private sector and other areas of the public sector.

Teaching, research and stakeholder engagement are complimentary activities but require different treatment. Strategies need to be developed across the spectrum of academic disciplines, in a turbulent environment and in response to often conflicting stakeholder demands. To be effective strategy development must both encompass the organisational culture in the 'academic heartland' (Clark, 1998) and co-exist with the more established and more embedded quality assurance framework. There is little empirical research which demonstrates whether strategic planning it is effective or otherwise in higher education and much of the literature pertains to case studies of individual or small groups of institutions only, with some notable exceptions (Lillis, 2006; Rosa, Cardoso, Dias, & Amaral, 2011; Tabatoni, Davies, & Barblan, 2004; Thys-Clement & Wilkin, 1998).

Experiences of Irish HEIs of Strategic Planning

The experiences of Irish HEIs of strategic planning are reported on in full in (Lillis & Lynch, 2013) and summarised here. In 2000, only two Irish HEIs had a documented strategic plan but within ten years all had undergone one or more iterations of strategic planning to meet the requirements of a public sector reform initiative (The Strategic Management Initiative in 1994) (Boyle & Humphreys, 2006). This was further embedded through changes to legislation which required HEIs to produce a strategic plan (Government of Ireland, 1997; 2006). Without the backdrop of a national strategy individual HEIs at the time had to interpret their environment and determine their own strategic direction during the 2000-2010 period. Irish HEIs had to rely upon the

experiences of a small number of international HEIs, the wider public sector and the corporate sector for guidance when they embarked upon strategic planning for the first time.

Strategic planning was initiated to meet an external requirement and once established, subsequent iterations continued with little or no evaluation of its effectiveness. The classical/rational *Masters of Our Universe* approach predominated, an approach that assumes a stable environment where extreme change and unexpected events are not accounted for. No strategic plan of any Irish HEI in the 2000-2007 period predicted or prepared for the economic crash in 2008 for example but in their defence, they were not alone in this. Alternative approaches were not considered and the majority of Irish HEIs demonstrated little awareness of or evaluated alternative strategic planning models prior to selecting one for their context. More than half employed external consultants to assist with strategic planning. In second and subsequent iterations, it is clear that HEIs learned from their initial experience and made modifications to their strategic planning processes but none questioned their fundamental approach to strategy development.

There was ample consideration of opportunities and threats, and PEST factors (political, economic, social and technological factors) in the external environment by strategic planning processes in most institutions. All Irish HEIs underwent at least one institutional review process but no institution considered how strategy development might be undertaken, even in part, by their institutional review process. It is interesting that the reports from two institutional review panels who used the EUA methodology (EUA, 2012) made explicit recommendations in relation to this:-

“... a more explicit link by the university executive between the Quality Review Process (QRP) outcomes and strategic management (is needed)”

“Use the Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement process and results, together with an increased institutional research capacity, to support strategic planning and actions”

It can be argued that some of the knowledge produced by institutional review about the challenges facing the institution and the necessary responses can be broadly similar to strategic planning though their methodologies and presentation may differ. No Irish HEI positioned its strategic planning office in or alongside its quality assurance office for example, although it can be argued that there is considerable overlap in planning and review work (EUA, 2012; Lillis, 2007).

Given the relatively homogenous nature of Irish higher education by international standards, with over twenty HEIs deriving their functions from two Acts in legislation (Government of Ireland, 1997; 2006), it is arguable that achieving a truly unique vision beyond a specific geographical region is difficult. Irish HEIs struggled to articulate a distinctive vision in relation to their positioning in the higher education landscape. Porter's contention that organisations should avoid being all things to all people is relevant here and

some distinctiveness could be achieved for example by focusing on certain disciplines, responsiveness to the particular market, stakeholder engagement or carrying out work in a particular way (Porter, 1996). It is also unclear how Irish HEIs objectively assessed the uniqueness/distinctiveness of their mission as the vast majority did not undertake a competitor analysis as part of their strategic planning. It is not obvious from the analysis is how Irish HEIs prioritised between goals and objectives. This is partly because the implementation phase was beyond the scope of the study but it is arguable that the documented strategic plan itself should give some sense of this.

In all but one HEI there was a high level of involvement by staff at all levels (senior management, middle management and academic staff) and all roles (academic, administrative, technical and support). Staff involvement has been noted as particularly important in strategic planning in higher education (Bayenet, Feola, & Tavernier, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988; Davies, 2004; Henkel, 2000; Tabatoni et al., 2004). While staff were involved the process however, students and external stakeholders had a limited role in shaping strategy. In general the student voice in strategic planning was considerably less than one would expect in quality assurance processes but if students are viewed as customers or consumers of higher education then it is fair to say that their involvement in strategic planning would not be expected. Industry and other external stakeholders in the strategic planning process was limited but again it can be argued that if feedback is sought on an ongoing basis it may not have been necessary to seek it explicitly.

It is noteworthy also that separate structures and processes for strategic planning were created in all HEIs. There is an argument that with careful design, strategic planning could have been 'baked into' into normal operations such as existing management meetings, academic council meetings, governing body meetings, School boards, programme team meetings and other quality assurance processes.

Challenges for Future Strategy Development

Despite the growing experience with strategic planning over the decade, it can be argued there are significant limitations to current internal strategic planning models. This section considers the challenges presented by the path toward Technological Universities and how strategy development processes need to adapt to meet those challenges. At national level Ireland is moving from a bottom-up and laissez-faire system to top-down and nationally steered, in a system that did not have a national strategy for higher education until 2011. For the strategic dialogue process to be credible Irish HEIs will have to transparently demonstrate their performance to their funding agency and the HEA will have to demonstrate its capacity to conduct the strategic dialogue process meaningfully with more than 20 institutions. Both the HEA and Irish HEIs will need to be able to communicate this performance to stakeholders in an open and transparent manner, in a way which will also have to withstand the scrutiny of peers, whose own funding allocations may be impacted in an environment of declining resources.

A broader debate about strategy development

At the outset it is important to note that Irish HEIs may not have a choice in their *formal* approaches to strategy development, and thus could remain firmly in the Classical *Masters of the Universe* quadrant. Institutional inertia and the annual Strategic Dialogue process with the HEA will be powerful anchors, despite the fact that this approach that has demonstrable weaknesses in terms of its responsiveness to the environment. Within HEIs, the target-driven nature of the annual strategic dialogue process with the HEA is likely to re-enforce a rational approach to strategy development to ensure that (i) the institution can demonstrate that it takes strategic planning seriously and (ii) that it can provide evidence to demonstrate that its strategic objectives are being achieved. It remains to be seen to what extent decisions taken by the HEA and others will mirror this rational approach, noting the political and other considerations that will come into play. If Irish HEIs continue to rely upon rational strategic planning, they are assuming that their environment can be mastered and that their future can be predicted with certainty. At this point also it is worth pausing to reflect on Brunsson's view of organisational hypocrisy when he contends that organisations talk in a way that satisfies one demand, decide in a way that satisfies another and supply products in a way that satisfies a third (Brunsson, 1989). A scenario where strategic planning exists in a vacuum, undertaken to meet external requirements and paid lip service internally, needs to be avoided.

Some aspects of an evolutionary approach to strategy development may therefore be more appropriate in some aspects of an HEI's activities. When *Survival of the Fittest* becomes the guiding philosophy, responsiveness to the environment becomes paramount and an institution moves forward through innovation, trial and error, continually learning from its mistakes. There is no strategic plan, a notion that is likely to sit uncomfortably with funding agencies and with institutional management teams who struggle to direct the activities of academic units into a coherent institutional strategy. If carefully managed and steered, an evolutionary approach does have the potential to harness the greatest resource available to HEIs, its human capital. Likewise, aspects of a systemic approach, 'Playing by Local Rules', which builds on the indigenous and more established quality assurance framework within HEIs and which respects the organisational culture of the academic heartland, may prove a more effective, if less glamorous, approach to strategy development.

A wider debate is required, involving all actors including HEIs, funding and quality assurance agencies to consider more fundamental questions – is the predominant model for strategic planning in higher education fundamentally mismatched to the social context it is used in and are there better ways to develop strategy in higher education?

The relationship between quality assurance and strategy development

An integrated strategic planning and quality assurance system would see feedback from the quality assurance system informing strategic goals and objectives and strategic planning would include objectives about how quality could be improved. The level of integration between strategic planning and

quality in Irish HEIs was generally quite low. At its simplest level institutional review can be considered a 'Review-Plan-Implement' model whereas strategic planning is essentially a 'Plan- Implement-Review' model (Figure 2).

The knowledge produced by both processes about the challenges facing the institution and the necessary responses can be broadly similar although their methodologies and presentation may differ. For example there is overlap between the evidence required to support the self-evaluation phase of institutional review and the external analysis (IPEST) and internal analysis (SWOT) phase of strategic planning. Similarly the institution's response to the peer review panel's recommendations should inform the goals and objectives of strategic plans. Both processes are expensive undertakings in terms of the time invested by participants therefore there is a strong case to be made to streamline the overlap between them and to increase the alignment of their outcomes.

Consolidating as a merged institution – one step backwards, two steps forward?

An important consideration is that the starting point for all TUs in Ireland is a merged institution. Two or more communities of staff, possibly coming from institutions with distinctly different cultures and styles, must come together to work together, in an environment where most staff are faced with some degree of uncertainty about their career development and/or their contracts of employment. In addition, mergers create confusion in the 'market' and potentially damage brand and reputation unless there is internal consensus on the message and consistent communication to key stakeholders. There are particular challenges for some of the proposed mergers where different quality assurance frameworks and awarding powers exist and where academic standards (as measured by CAO points on entrance) are disparate.

Creating a distinctive vision and mission

Somewhat paradoxically, the opportunity to seek designation as a Technological University is arguably a counterweight to the promotion of diversity within the sector as the pursuit of TU status may amplify the rational approach to strategy development and force conformity to one type of institution. HEIs will work toward whatever is rewarded in funding arrangements and institutional status. Irish HEIs in the last decade struggled to articulate a unique/distinctive vision for their institutions. Even when informants thought this had been achieved, a competitor analysis which would provide an evidence base for any assertions of distinctiveness was absent. The concept of strategic choice or prioritisation was also under- developed. With a greater emphasis on distinctiveness of mission and performance against strategic objectives Irish HEIs will struggle to remain '*all things to all people*'. Much greater emphasis on strategic choice and risk management is required in future strategic planning models than is currently the case.

While Irish HEIs come to grips with fully understanding diversity in the new landscape, and to finding their niches within it, their strategic planning models need to emphasise the development of an institutional profile that measures

distinctiveness. Irish HEIs will need greater knowledge of themselves and their competitors, at the very least within a regional cluster. Criteria such as those outlined in the EU U-Map project (van Vught et al., 2010) and in the HEA institutional and sectoral diversity report (Higher Education Authority, 2014) provide a mechanism to compare HEIs using indicators which include teaching and learning, student profile, research involvement, involvement in knowledge exchange, international orientation and regional engagement. Adaptions of techniques such as Porter's *Five Forces Framework* which systematically analyses other players in an organisation's environment, could provide a basis upon which to build this knowledge (Porter, 1985).

Engaging external stakeholders in regional clusters

While Irish HEIs work with external stakeholders on a daily basis and seek formal and informal feedback through many channels, the level of explicit external stakeholder involvement in strategic planning processes is low. The national strategy envisages a small number of regional clusters of HEIs with a coordinated approach to industry and other stakeholders within their region. In a fully-fledged regional cluster one could envisage HEIs formally setting shared strategic goals with major employers, development agencies, local authorities, community groups and second/further education providers to build a regional brand or to tackle specific problems like unemployment. In a regional cluster they may even have to formally set shared goals with other HEIs. A stakeholder approach to strategic management suggests that organisations need to satisfy all stakeholders that have an interest in the organisation, and focus only on those stakeholders (Freeman, 2010). By concentrating on the active management of these key relationships the interests of external shareholders can be managed in such a way as to ensure the long-term success of the organisation. The planning process would ensure engagement with these key stakeholders in the formulation of the institution's strategic goals and objectives, and could go so far as to set shared goals with key stakeholders. In a stakeholder approach to strategic management the question for an institution is less about 'What do we want to be?' and more about 'What do our stakeholders need us to be?' In so doing answers to the problem of distinctiveness and diversity might also be found.

Conclusions

The challenges facing Irish HEIs embarking on the path to Technological University status are unprecedented. The strategic dialogue process with the HEA will move strategic planning from being a necessary evil on the periphery of institutional management to the centre stage. Strategic planning models will need to be far more rigorous and robust with clear links to decision making as its outcomes will be directly linked to funding. Evidence for distinctiveness of mission and the explicit engagement of regional stakeholders will become more critical. The pursuit of TU *status* cannot lose sight of maintaining and enhancing TU academic *standards*, which can only be achieved through a high performing team of staff at all levels and all roles in the merged institutions. Against the backdrop of creating a merged institution, all trends point to a scenario where strategy development will become more critical and more complex.

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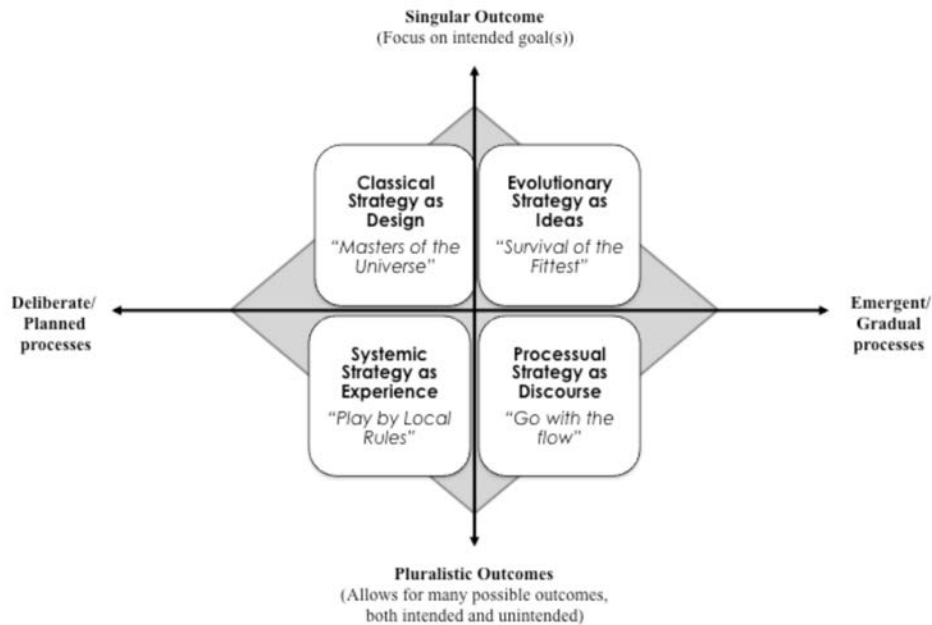
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Adapted by the authors for use in a higher education context from (Whittington, 2001) and (Johnson and Scholes, 2002)

Figure 1: Approaches to strategy development – Adapted by the Author from Whittington (2001)

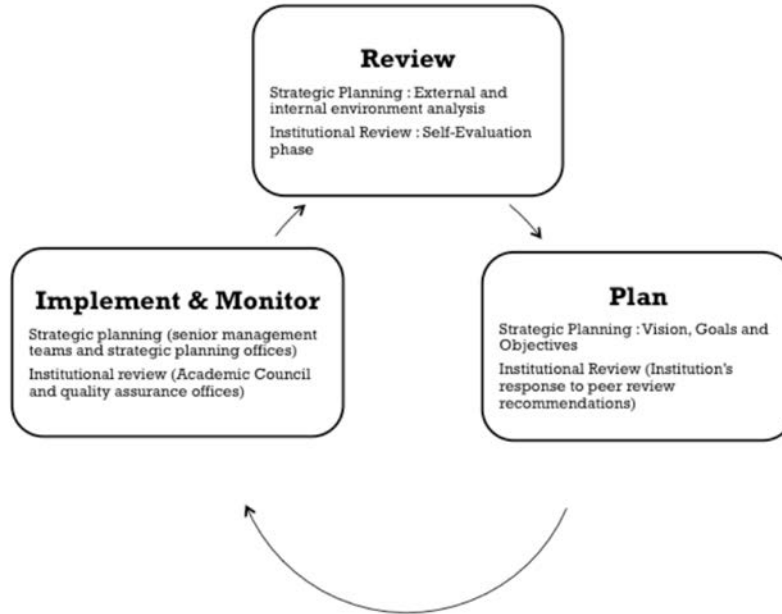


Figure 2: The relationship between strategic planning and institutional review

	Classical “Masters of our Universe”	Processual “Go with the flow”	Evolutionary “Survival of the Fittest”	Systemic “Play by local rules”
<i>Strategy</i>	Formal	Crafted	Efficient	Embedded
<i>Rationale</i>	Profit Maximisation	Vague	Survival	Local
<i>Focus</i>	Internal (plans)	Internal (politics)	External (markets)	External (society)
<i>Processes</i>	Analytical	Bargaining/Learning	Darwinian	Social
<i>Key influences</i>	Economics/military	Psychology	Economics/Biology	Sociology
<i>Key authors</i>	Mintzberg (Design School) Johnson & Scholes (Strategy as Design) Chandler Ansoff Porter	Cyert & March Mintzberg (Learning School, Power School) Johnson & Scholes (Strategy as Discourse) Pettigrew	Mintzberg (Entrepreneurial School, Environment School) Johnson & Scholes (Strategy as Ideas) Hannan & Freeman Williamson	Mintzberg (Cultural School) Granovetter Marris Johnson & Scholes (Strategy as Experience)
<i>Key Period</i>	1960’s	1970’s	1980’s	1990’s