

12th International Strategic Management Conference, ISMC 2016, 28-30 October 2016, Antalya, Turkey

Management of a complex research project in the context of implementing the university's overall strategy

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to discuss the central issues associated with the implementation of a multidimensional research project in a university from a strategic management point of view. In the paper, it is argued that project management plays an important role in executing institutional strategy aimed at achieving research and academic excellence. The analysis provided in this paper is based on the academic literature review on some important strategic and project management concerns; it is also based on the author's experience as the leader of an international research project executed in Transport and Telecommunication Institute (Latvia) under the ERASMUS+ programme. The analysis performed in this paper allows the author to conclude that the challenges of managing a cross-disciplinary research project increase when the context is related to the complicated environment of a contemporary university. Within complex university settings, different inter-related strategies come into play for accomplishing competitive advantage of an educational organization, multidimensional research projects making their valuable contribution to achieving the university's strategic goals.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of ISMC 2016.

Keywords: university; research project; strategy; functional area

1. Introduction

Today, many European universities are involved in complex research projects. Such projects make a valuable contribution to the development of an academic organization in the context of creating the European Research Area

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launched in 2000 for realizing the Lisbon Strategy (COM(2000) 6 final); higher education that is linked to research and innovation plays a vital role in sustaining economic growth and prosperity of any country (COM(2013) 499 final).

The aim of the paper is to discuss the central issues associated with the implementation of an international cross-disciplinary research project in a university from a strategic management point of view. In the paper, it is argued that the project management plays an important role in executing institutional strategy aimed at achieving research and academic excellence. The analysis provided in this paper is based on the academic literature review on some important strategic and project management concerns. It is also based on the author's experience as the leader of an international research project (LEARNIT), which is implemented under the ERASMUS+ programme by the consortium of three higher education institutions: University of Economics and Innovation (Poland), Klaipeda State College (Lithuania), Transport and Telecommunication Institute (Latvia). The innovative solution – special software for mobile devices proposed in the framework of the project – is intended for improving efficiency of the learning process by stimulating students' level of concentration. LEARNIT is a multidimensional research project that involves people of different professions and positions, as well as various organizational resources, managerial procedures and pedagogical tools.

The analysis performed in this paper allows the author to conclude that the challenges of managing a multidimensional research project increase when the context is related to the complicated environment of a modern university. Within complex university settings, different inter-related strategies come into play for accomplishing competitive advantage of an educational organization, cross-disciplinary research projects making their valuable contribution to achieving the university's strategic goals.

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic management in the context of achieving competitive advantage in higher education

A review of academic literature linked to strategic management reveals that the role of strategic management in modern organizations is very important (Thompson & Strickland, 2003; Morden, 2007; Jeffs, 2008; Harrison & St. John, 2009; Hill & Jones, 2011; Hill & Jones, 2012). Strategic management comprises the analysis, decisions and activities aimed at generating and sustaining competitive advantage of an organization (Dess & Lumpkin, 2002). The organizational strategy is associated with the creation of the main long-term goals, the implementation of actions and allocation of resources that are needed for achieving the established goals (Koontz & Wehrich, 2010); it is also related to the analysis of both the external and internal environment an organization (Capon, 2008). Strategic objectives are based on an analysis of the current market situation and opportunities, because they are associated with a company's competitive situation (Kotler, 2000).

Strategic management in a modern university is associated with creating institutional policies, which are directed towards enlarging its potential for change in the constant pursuit of quality (Tabatoni, 2002). Today, higher education managers face many challenges: they have to have to a) balance their philosophies with labour market priorities (The State of Higher Education 2013: Executive Summary, 2013); b) provide new opportunities to students in the context of lifelong learning, etc. (COM(2003) 58 final; COM(2007) 61 final; Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions, 2013); c) increase the university's research and education excellence and improve its international attractiveness.

Therefore, managing strategy in higher education supports the implementation of its key activities: teaching, research, social and economic service (Watson, 2000); this presupposes that educational management has to be with the purpose or aims of education (Bush, 2007). It should be mentioned that the accomplishment of education-specific organizational goals requires using a special approach to developing strategies aimed at the accomplishment of competitive advantage and academic (research) excellence. From a strategic management perspective, higher education managers have to find the most efficient ways to balance their university's position in terms of internal strengths and weaknesses against external opportunities and threats (Stukalina, 2015/a).

The intellectual context of strategic management includes many conceptual elements, as strategic management deals with a variety of practical issues (Nag et al., 2007). Several strategies can be created with the aim to provide

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