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**Strategic Analysis, Choice and Strategy
Implementation in a Distance Education and Life
Long Learning Context: The Case of the Hellenic
Open University**

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Strategic Analysis, Choice and Strategy Implementation in a Distance Education and Life Long Learning Context: The Case of the Hellenic Open University

Στρατηγική Ανάλυση, Επιλογή και Εφαρμογή Στρατηγικής σε ένα Πλαίσιο Εκπαίδευσης από Απόσταση και Δια Βίου Μάθησης: Η Περίπτωση του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου

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Abstract

The Hellenic Open University is a part of the Hellenic life long learning system and, as other universities offering distance education, it operates in a more flexible way compared to the other, “traditional” Higher Education Institutions in Hellas (Greece). However, it is a new entity and its management faces a lot of challenges and issues stemming from the continuously changing environment. As a consequence, it needs a vision and the respective management approach. In this paper, a management vision is proposed as well as a short and long term management approach. It is identified and described on the basis of three main elements: Strategic analysis, strategic choice and strategy implementation. Hence, the current and future educational environment is analyzed and the use of technology and other resources as well as the role of employees are examined. These are followed by an analysis of the competitive advantage and organizational sustainability, quality and continual improvement and economic and overall organizational capacity. This analysis is accompanied by proposed strategies and tactics for implementation (i.e. how things will be done and by whom in the short- and long run). As expected, the thorough analysis of the internal and external environment and the effective and efficient use of all resources available is the only way for successful implementation of any chosen strategy.

Περίληψη

Το Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο αποτελεί ένα μέρος του Ελληνικού συστήματος δια βίου μάθησης και, όπως άλλα πανεπιστήμια που προσφέρουν εκπαίδευση από απόσταση, λειτουργεί με έναν πιο ευέλικτο τρόπο συγκρινόμενο με τα άλλα, «παραδοσιακά» Ανώτατα Εκπαιδευτικά Ιδρύματα στην Ελλάδα. Ωστόσο, αποτελεί μια νέα οντότητα και η διοίκησή του αντιμετωπίζει μια πληθώρα προκλήσεων και ζητημάτων που απορρέουν από το συνεχώς μεταβαλλόμενο περιβάλλον. Κατά συνέπεια, χρειάζεται ένα όραμα και μια αντίστοιχη διοικητική προσέγγιση. Σε αυτή την εργασία, προτείνεται ένα όραμα όπως και μια βραχυπρόθεσμη και μακροπρόθεσμη διοικητική προσέγγιση. Προσδιορίζεται δε και περιγράφεται στη βάση τριών κύριων στοιχείων: της στρατηγικής ανάλυσης, της επιλογής της στρατηγικής και της εφαρμογής της στρατηγικής. Συνεπώς,

αναλύεται το τρέχον και το μελλοντικό περιβάλλον και εξετάζεται η χρήση της τεχνολογίας και των άλλων πόρων όπως επίσης και ο ρόλος των εργαζομένων. Αυτά ακολουθούνται από την ανάλυση του συγκριτικού πλεονεκτήματος και της οργανωσιακής βιωσιμότητας, της ποιότητας και της συνεχούς βελτίωσης και της οικονομικής και συνολικής οργανωσιακής δυναμικότητας. Αυτή η ανάλυση συνοδεύεται από προτεινόμενες στρατηγικές και τακτικές εφαρμογής (δηλαδή, πώς θα πρέπει να εφαρμοστούν βραχυπρόθεσμα και μακροπρόθεσμα και από ποιον). Όπως είναι αναμενόμενο, η ενδελεχής ανάλυση του εσωτερικού και εξωτερικού περιβάλλοντος και η αποτελεσματική και αποδοτική χρήση των διαθέσιμων πόρων είναι ο μόνος τρόπος για την επιτυχή υλοποίηση οποιασδήποτε επιλεγείσας στρατηγικής.

Key words: *Hellenic Open University, Life long learning, Strategic management.*

Introduction

This paper attempts to formulate the strategies and tactics the Hellenic Open University (HOU) needs to follow so as to achieve its mission and goals as proposed by the authors. A specific management approach is described taking into account the current and the future educational environment. A strategy for the efficient use of technology and other resources is suggested while the importance of the employees' role is stressed. The sources of potential competitive advantage and the requirements for organisational sustainability are stated followed by suggestions for quality and continual improvement. The part describing the ways and priorities to ensure economic and overall organizational capacity completes the picture.

The context - The Hellenic Open University (HOU)

The Hellenic Open University (HOU) was established in 1992 and its full-scale operation started in 1999. Its establishment was a response to the changing social, economic, political and technological conditions in Hellas during the previous twenty years. It is a part of the Hellenic life long learning system (Eurydice, 2010). The way the University is managed (by a Management Committee) is quite flexible due to its structure that has benefited from drawing from other open universities' experience. The provision of its academic Programmes has adopted the modular structure.

The Programmes offered cover the whole spectrum of undergraduate and postgraduate education qualifications. Student admission criteria are very easy for the undergraduate Programmes and more selective for the postgraduate ones. The openness of the institution is much higher than the other universities' since there are no entrance exams (only a draw as demand exceeds supply) (Zondiros, 2002).

The course team approach (Hawkrigge, 1994) has been adopted for Module development. Modules are delivered through print, audio-visual material and, in some cases, electronic material and this option is justified taking existing constraints, pedagogical considerations and priorities into account (Mason, 1994). A tutor-counsellor and administrative staff support students. Staff development is a high priority matter. The assessment is both formative (Tutor-Marked Assignments – TMAs that count towards final grade) and summative (final exams). No sufficient data are available for learner success rates, media effectiveness and credit transfer policy as the university is at its “infancy”.

A part of students may be supported through financial scholarships. The University is basically funded by European Union (EU) programmes and fees paid by students. It has developed collaborations with selected foreign institutions and hopes for a more active collaboration with its Hellenic counterparts. The inflexible legal framework for the higher education sector and the limited number of places now available are among the major issues to be dealt with.

A proposed management vision for the Hellenic Open University (HOU)

The challenges are great, as is the case for open and distance teaching universities all over the world. If the following do happen:

- harmonious operation of University's systems and sub-systems,
- sense of a common purpose among all employees,
- appropriate use of technology (both for internal use and external delivery),
- collaboration with other partners so as to gain synergies and
- effective system of knowledge management

Then the University will be able to address the growing needs for:

- personal fulfilment through enhanced forms of learning
- living with new technology and using it sensibly
- educating and supporting larger cohorts of population (e.g. the older one)
- Life Long Learning (LLL)
- new concepts regarding production and new forms of organization of the human work
- creation of people that will be aware of the developments in the world by helping them to play an active role in these developments.

Thus, a proposed management vision for the HOU is:

“The Hellenic Open University as a dynamic, innovative, life long learning institution offering a great range and variety of programmes that embody enhanced forms of learning and using delivery systems that cater for the needs of all citizens”.

A management approach

The main issue here is to conceptualize and describe an approach appropriate for the management of the HOU. As this refers to strategy formulation, the need for a distinction between two dimensions of time is great. Therefore, a short and a long-term approach are needed. In the short run, strategies and tactics that can be implemented and have an expected outcome in a six-month to one-year period will be suggested. In the long run, strategies and tactics that can be implemented and have an expected outcome over a two-to-five-year period will be suggested, too.

The most difficult thing in the case of HOU is that it is very new and it does not have a management culture. Academics from other institutions (HOU Study Guide, 2002) created the initial structure and supported its operation. This means they brought with them the “mentality” of the older higher education institutions. This mentality has its positive and negative aspects. The positive ones (desire for sustaining academic freedom, experience in dealing with large student numbers, etc.) made an important contribution while the negative ones (support of older and tested structures and procedures, inability to deal with adult learners, failure to adapt to new ways of marking assignments, etc.) caused some problems.

On the other hand, there is an opportunity to formulate the institution's strategy as structures are not so "rigid" yet and many issues are negotiable. This will be the starting point for the management approach suggested for the HOU. In the following sections, this management approach will be identified and described on the basis of three main elements: *Strategic analysis* (environment, resources, stakeholders' expectations and strategic capability) – *Strategic choice* (generation of strategic options, evaluation of strategic options and selection of strategy) – *Strategy implementation* (planning and allocating resources, organization structure and design and strategic change management) (Johnson and Scholes, 1993).

Current and future educational environment

A strategic analysis or audit must start from the organization itself. This internal analysis will reveal the nature of its environment (e.g. is it relatively static or does it show signs of change, and in what ways; is it simple or complex to comprehend?). This analysis will provide the main characteristics of the organization, which give the answer to first crucial question: "Who are we?" The use of *systems approach* will enable the HOU to determine the nature of its structural elements and the relationships that exist among them (Moore and Kearsley, 1996).

The analysis of the political, economic, social and technological environment must be the second priority. All this in the light of education and education- related variables. This audit must reveal the main constituents that will or may have an impact on the institution. The creation of scenarios may help management to formulate assumptions and find alternatives to different proposed "futures".

An initial analysis of the competitive rivalry based on Porter's work (1980) will serve as a guide to assess the organization's competitive position (at a later stage). The threat of potential entrants to the education market (e.g. non-university institutions), the bargaining power of suppliers (e.g. information technology suppliers), the bargaining power of buyers (e.g. if other "conventional" universities offer similar distance education programmes) and the threat of substitutes (e.g. extensive use of self-education packages without tutorial and administrative support), are variables that will influence the institution's competitive strategy. Moreover, competitor analysis will answer the following questions:

1. What are the objectives of the organization?
2. What resource strengths do competitors have, and what are their weaknesses?
3. What is the record of performance of each competitor? and
4. What is the current strategy of competitors? (Johnson and Scholes, 1993).

Culture and stakeholder expectations must be an object of scrutiny also. Culture expectations will be relatively easy to be found as the HOU is very "young" institution and it does not have a "solid" culture yet. In addition, the (major and minor) stakeholders have to be identified. Kotler and Fox (1995) give a list of "publics" that can be considered as stakeholders also (current students, prospective students, accreditation organizations, parents of students, administration and staff, faculty, trustees, competitors, suppliers, business community, legislature and government agencies, foundations, alumni, local community, generic public and mass media). Then, the organizational purposes (in terms of mission and objectives) have to be formulated so as to provide the guide and the route the institution is expected to follow.

The following table (1) shows the above mentioned actions and the strategies and tactics for execution (i.e. how things will be done and by whom in the short- and long run).

Table 1

| | <i>Strategies and tactics for execution</i> | |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Action needed</i> | Short term | Long term |
| Internal analysis | Management Committee with external consultants and employees (through an elected and representative body of employees) | Continuous updating by Management Committee with employees' body |
| Political, economic, social and technological environment analysis | Management Committee with external consultants and employees (through an elected and representative body of employees) | Continuous monitoring by Management Committee and employees' body |
| Competitive rivalry and competitor analysis | External consultants and Management Committee | Continuous monitoring and data updating by Management Committee with external consultants |
| Culture and stakeholder expectations analysis | External consultants, Management Committee and stakeholder bodies/representatives | Continuous monitoring and data updating by Management Committee and stakeholder bodies/representatives |
| Mission and objectives formulation | Management Committee with employees' body and stakeholder bodies/representatives | Continuous monitoring and change / adaptation by Management Committee with employees' body and stakeholder bodies/representatives |

The use of external consultants in some of these actions is judged imperative, as the HOU does not have the background to conduct these analyses. Furthermore, the pressures exerted on higher education institutions to be more concerned with business and market needs, means that there is room to accommodate business practices adapted to the unique characteristics of education markets (Kotler and Fox, 1995).

Use of technology and other resources

The selection and use of technology and other resources will enable the institution to understand its strategic capability. This includes the resource audit (resources "available" to the organization in supporting its strategies), value chain analysis (e.g. relating resources to the strategies chosen), comparison with competitors' resources, appropriate balance of resources (evaluation) and identification of key issues (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats [SWOT] analysis and core competencies).

Table 2 shows the steps to be undertaken and the corresponding strategies and tactics.

Table 2

| <i>Action needed</i> | <i>Strategies and tactics for execution</i> | |
|--|--|--|
| | Short term | Long term |
| Resource audit | Management Committee with employees' body and stakeholder bodies / representatives (special attention to be given in intangible resources, for example, experienced staff) | Continuous monitoring and data updating by Management Committee – cooperation with employees to establish a knowledge management system (Rowley, 2000) |
| Value chain analysis | Management Committee with external consultants according to Daniel's model (1996) | Continuous monitoring and change / adaptation by Management Committee and examination of exploring virtual value chain potential and alternatives (Bhatt and Emdad, 2001) |
| Comparison with competitors' resources | Management Committee with external consultants according to competitive benchmarking (Weller, 1996) | Continuous monitoring and data updating by Management Committee |
| Balance of resources (evaluation) | Management Committee with external consultants according to internal benchmarking (Weller, 1996) | Continuous monitoring and data updating by Management Committee |
| Identification of key issues (SWOT analysis and core competencies) | Management Committee with external consultants to establish "centres of excellence" | Continuous monitoring and data updating by Management Committee to maintain these "centres of excellence" (e.g. in teaching, in delivery methods, in variety of student groups served, etc.) |

These actions will enable the institution to gain knowledge on what it has at its disposal; its position compared to that of competitors, the opportunities and threats of the external environment as well as the core competencies that are the basis of competitive advantage.

The role of employees

The role of employees as a valuable resource should be emphasized here. It is now considered as an intellectual capital that takes the form of unique competitive advantage. Of course, this applies more to educational organizations. Much of the effort has been directed toward effective collaboration through teams because of the changes in organizational structures (Clifford and Sohal, 1998) and how a team can work effectively (Cacciope, 1999) or how to compose and lead teams that work (Nader, 1999). The precondition for these efforts to succeed is sustainability at all levels. It must be

addressed by respective human resource management policies and practices (Read, 2000). Table 3 deals with these issues.

Table 3

| <i>Action needed</i> | <i>Strategies and tactics for execution</i> | |
|--|---|---|
| | Short term | Long term |
| Employee (all teaching, administrative and other staff) participation in decision making | Management Committee through collaboration with employees | Continuous monitoring and assessment of employees' participation and quality of their contribution to decision making |
| Establishment of employee incentives and rewards | Management Committee through collaboration with employees – most importance to be given in non quantified objectives (for example, effectiveness of teaching at a distance or by benchmarking activities) | Management Committee through collaboration with employees – find new ways to foster morale and rewards |
| Employee “usage” as the most efficient tool to bring about change | Management Committee through collaboration with employees – involve employees actively in the change process (Weller, 1996) and use staff development as a tool for this (Spratt <i>et al.</i> , 2000) | Management Committee's and employees' continuous self assessment and evaluation as a basis for transformation and adaptation (Weller, 1996) |
| Establishment of a sense of common purpose among all employees | Management Committee asks for, value and acknowledge employees' contribution to institution's governance | Management Committee through collaboration with employees – find new ways to sustain this sense (e.g. through hiring persons that share the same values and beliefs for the role HOU aspires to play) |

Competitive advantage and organizational sustainability

The core competencies will be the basis of competitive advantage. Besides Porter's (1980) market-based generic strategies for sustaining competitive advantage (cost leadership, differentiation or focus strategy) there are other more suitable strategies for HOU (see Table 4). In the short run, market development can include entering new market segments and spreading into new geographical areas (thus fulfilling the aim of distance education provision to larger parts of the population). Of course, market development and service (product) development may go hand in hand since the move into a new market segment may require developments or variants of the existing service range (Johnson and Scholes, 1993).

In the long run, the joint development and strategic alliances may be a good alternative since they can work perfectly with educational organizations on the condition of mutual beneficially relationships and appropriate changes within the partners (Kanter, 1994). The main reason lies in the inability of an organization (such as the HOU) to cope with increasingly complex environments by using internal resources alone. The HOU may see the need to obtain materials, skills, know-how, finance or access to markets, and recognize that these may be as readily available through co-operation.

Table 4 deals with strategy selection, assessment of their suitability and evaluation.

Table 4

| | <i>Strategies and tactics for execution</i> | |
|---|--|---|
| <i>Action needed</i> | Short term | Long term |
| Decision on strategies for competitive advantage | Market and service (product) development | Joint development and strategic alliances |
| Assessment of the suitability of strategies (on the criteria of suitability, feasibility and acceptability) | Management Committee through collaboration with employees and other stakeholders | Management Committee through collaboration with employees, stakeholders, external consultants and members of the (potentially) collaborating institutions / organizations |
| Evaluation of the selected strategy | Management Committee through collaboration with employees and other stakeholders | Management Committee through collaboration with employees, stakeholders, external consultants and members of the (potentially) collaborating institutions / organizations |

Quality and continual improvement

Based on the European quality model (or European business excellence Model in McAdam *et al.*, 1998), table 5 summarizes the proposed strategies and tactics for continual improvement.

Table 5

| <i>Action needed</i> | <i>Strategies and tactics for execution</i> |
|--|--|
| <p><u>Enablers</u></p> <p>1.Leadership:</p> <p>1.visible involvement in leading Total Quality (TQ) activities;</p> <p>2.a consistent improvement-oriented focus;</p> <p>3.team and individual recognition;</p> <p>4.provision of resources and support for TQ activities;</p> <p>5.involvement with customers and suppliers;</p> <p>6.external promotion of TQ activity.</p> | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <p>1.asks for TQ activities to be implemented</p> <p>2.believes that “the enemy of good is the better”</p> <p>3.aknowledges contribution from everyone</p> <p>4.provides for adequate resources</p> <p>5.establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships</p> <p>6.communicates with the external environment</p> |
| <p>2.Policy and strategy:</p> <p>1.how the business plan is based on the principles of TQ;</p> <p>2.how policy and strategy is based on relevant information;</p> <p>3.how business plans are derived from strategic objectives;</p> <p>4.how policy and strategy plans are communicated;</p> <p>5.how policy and strategy plans are regularly reviewed and updated.</p> | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <p>1.links the business plan on quality management principles</p> <p>2.uses a management information system to ensure sufficient and reliable information for policy and strategy selection</p> <p>3.ensures strategic objectives are the basis of business plans through continuous testing and asking</p> <p>4.ensures all members are aware of policy and strategy plans through active participation</p> <p>5.asks for policy and strategy review through three-month “circles” (groups consisting MC members and employees) – may also be called “project teams” or “task forces”</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>3. People management:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. how TQ in people management is accomplished; 2. how skills and capabilities are maintained and developed; 3. how individuals and teams agree targets and review performance; 4. how everyone is involved in TQ and how employees are empowered; 5. how effective “top down” and “bottom up” communication is achieved. | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. reviews staff policies and procedures to ensure TQ 2. runs staff development programmes after needs assessment 3. asks “circles” to agree targets, review performance and suggest solutions 4. ensures that everybody rotates in “circles” 5. strives to eliminate barriers to effective communication |
| <p>4. Resources:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. management of financial resources; 2. management of information; 3. management of suppliers, materials, buildings and equipment; 4. management of the application of technology. | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <p>See part “<u>Use of technology and other resources</u>”</p> |
| <p>5. Processes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. how processes critical for business success are identified; 2. how the organization systematically manages its processes; 3. how process performance measures are used to set process targets; 4. development of process improvement methodologies; 5. how the organization implements process changes. | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. asks “circles” to define them and compares them with benchmarking results 2. reviews “circle” operation annually 3. reviews and compares measures and targets bi-monthly 4. asks “circles” and external consultants to make suggestions 5. monitors process changes |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p><u>“Results”:</u></p> <p>6.Customer satisfaction:</p> <p>1.the customers’ perception of the organization’s products, service, etc.;</p> <p>2.additional measures relating to customer satisfaction.</p> | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <p>1.conducts surveys on customer satisfaction and institutional image / perception</p> <p>2.repeats surveys in a period of time and determines differences and similarities</p> |
| <p>7.People satisfaction:</p> <p>1.the employees’ perception of the organization;</p> <p>2.additional measures relating to people satisfaction.</p> | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <p>1.conducts surveys on employees’ satisfaction and institutional image / perception and encourages open expression of feelings and beliefs</p> <p>2.repeats surveys in a period of time and determines issues that need improvement</p> |
| <p>8.Impact on society:</p> <p>1.the community’s perception of the organization’s impact on society;</p> <p>2.additional measures relating to how the organization impacts society.</p> | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <p>1.conducts surveys on community’s perception of the organization’s impact on society</p> <p>2. repeats surveys in a period of time and determines issues that need improvement</p> |
| <p>9.Business results:</p> <p>1.financial measures of the organization’s success;</p> <p>2.non-financial measures of the organization’s success.</p> | <p>The Management Committee (MC):</p> <p>1.seek to cover the total cost and use surplus for development purposes</p> <p>2.sets targets such as: enhanced institutional image and awareness, high demand of institution’s programmes, positive quality assessment results</p> |

Economic and overall organizational capacity

The economic and overall organizational capacity of the institution depends on the right planning and allocation of resources. First, the point is to match operational resource plans to selected strategies (market development and joint development and strategic alliances). Second, the configuration of a new organization structure by moving away from the existing simple hierarchical structure (Zondiros, 2002), will enable the HOU to be more responsive to society and market’s needs. Third, the management of strategic change refers mainly to the style by which change is proposed to be managed.

Table 6 contains a concise description of these elements.

Table 6

| <i>Action needed</i> | <i>Strategies and tactics for execution</i> | |
|---|--|--|
| | Short term | Long term |
| Match operational resource plans to selected strategies | Market development: resource identification – fit with existing resources – fit between resources | Joint development and strategic alliances: resource identification – fit with existing resources – fit between resources |
| Configuration of a new organization structure | Network organization in a dynamic environment with senior management and support staff as key parts and networking and relational contracts as the key co-ordinating mechanism (Mintzberg, 1979) | Network organization in a dynamic environment with senior management and support staff as key parts and networking and relational contracts as the key co-ordinating mechanism (Mintzberg, 1979) |
| Management of strategic change | Education and communication approach (requires an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between Management Committee and employees) | Participation approach (to increase ownership of a decision or change process and strengthen commitment to it) |

Conclusion

Strategy formulation is a very difficult and time-consuming task for an organization. This applies to the HOU even more given the stated (personal) management vision and the complexity of the environment this strategy is to be implemented. The effective and efficient use of all resources available is the only way for successful implementation. Employees are not a simple resource; they are what distinguish one organization from the others. This is especially true for higher education institutions as they are “labour intensive” entities. Quality assurance and continual improvement in all organizational aspects ensures viability and prosperity in turbulent times.

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