

## Strategic Thinking And Decision Making In Higher Education Institutions In Nigeria

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### Abstract

*This study was focused on strategic thinking and decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. The study was a survey which involved 153 as respondents selected with purposive sampling technique and administered with copies of questionnaire. The study recoded 71% response rate. In the study, it was hypothesized that strategic thinking dimensions of systems perspective, intent-focused, intelligent opportunism, thinking in time and hypothesis-driven would not significantly influence decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. Data analysis was done with multiple regression with results showing that strategic thinking dimensions of systems perspective (Beta = 0.133,  $t = 2.4630$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ), intent-focused (Beta = 0.069,  $t = 2.2259$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ), intelligent opportunism (Beta = 0.107,  $t = 2.9722$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) and hypothesis-driven (Beta = 0.323,  $t = 2.7845$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) significantly influenced decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. However, thinking in time (Beta = 0.128,  $t = 1.2673$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ) indicated insignificant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. The regression model reported an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.538 (53.8%). The  $F$  value (13.521) was significant at 0.05 level with its  $P$  value = 0.000. Based on these findings, it was recommended that higher education institutions in Nigeria invest in developing their administrators' strategic thinking competency through relevant training exposure; that leaders and administrators of higher education institutions in Nigeria be proactive in making decisions and so be more likely to deal with development in the environment and that higher education institutions in Nigeria integrate the dimensions of strategic thinking which influence their decision making – systems perspective, intent-focused, intelligent opportunism and hypothesis-driven to bring about effectiveness in their decision making for their improved performance.*

**Keywords:** Strategic Thinking, Decision Making, Higher Education Institutions, Nigeria

### Introduction

Especially in the last three decades, strategic thinking as a concept has attracted the attention and research interest of scholars and practitioners alike worldwide. In their different circumstances, these individuals have made various efforts to enhance a better understanding of the concept in organizational setting. While it could be said that the phenomenon is gaining interest by the day, Jelene (2008) expresses disappointment that it remains an under-research

area. There is a dearth of research on the subject area and that has made Liedtka (1998) to hint that on account of this, leaders are merely left with little guidance as it relates to the concept.

This issue has been compounded by inability of authors to have in place a common definition for this concept. It is therefore, not surprising that Mintzberg (1994) would lament that some theorists and practitioners in their ignorance equate strategic thinking with other related concepts of strategic management such as strategic planning and strategic making: Recent studies have however, refined related literature on the concept (Markides, 2012; Goldman, 2012; Haycock, Cheadle and Bluestone, 2012). The rather uncertain, complex and turbulent posture of contemporary environment of organizations places a demand on leaders and managers in organizations to think and act strategically so as to survive (Haycock *et al* 2012).

Strategic thinking explains an approach to addressing strategic problems at both individual and institutional levels through a combination of both generative and rational thought process (O' Shannassy, 2006); it showcases an organization's capacity to systematically develop and maintain a shared perspective concerning its future which informs its decisions and plans made today (Conway, 2014); it is a process leading to creation of strategically relevant insight even in context of high competition and ambiguity (Tovstiga, 2013). Liedtka (1998) defines strategic thinking in terms of five attributes; having a systems perspective, a focus on intent, being time-based, hypothesis-driven and intelligent opportunism, a view that current research effort aligns with. The process of strategic thinking targets organizational improvement via creative and innovative activities (Goldman, 2012). Shirvani and Shojaie (2011) believe that inability of top leaders in organizations to promote strategic thinking is seen as critical detractor in respect of their performance.

Decision making involves the process by which alternatives are both developed and analyzed and results in the making of choice; it involves selection from a number of available alternatives so as to address a given problem or realize a given goal. While decision making is considered executives' primary responsibility, it is inevitable since not making decisions itself implies a decision made (Al-Tarawneh 2012). The author maintained that in order for executives to be effective in environments that are highly competitive as seen presently, it was necessary for them to devote an appreciable amount of skill, knowledge as well as attention to making decisions. This signals the fact that effective decisions are likely to offer articulated outcomes as it translates thinking into visible actions; this by extension denotes change which supports decision making in spite of risk and uncertainty in the environment of operation.

Strategic thinking and decision making would be expected to be in a relationship. In stressing the importance of strategic thinking to organizations, Steiner (2010) posits that the concept empowers leaders in organizations to come up with better decisions bothering on what they supposed to do concerning their future operations, in the light of opportunities and threats rather than wait until developments take place making the organization to merely react at best; strategic thinking offers a framework for organization-wide decision-making; more so, it facilitates obtaining, compiling, analyzing and offering information for effective decision making. Strategic thinking and decision-making target organizational survival in difficult and competitive environment. This happens as the organization is steered along the most suitable

direction(Warren, Douglas and Hume, 2011). Strategic thinking provides critical insights towards making decisions logically (Shirvani and Shojaie, 2011).

Faced with difficult times, challenging environment, staff industrial action, students' protest, competitive operating environment and the like, higher education institutions require strategic thinkers capable of thinking through and translating their thoughts into actions for the benefit of its stakeholders. These days, with aforementioned issues confronting higher education institutions in the world and Nigeria in particular, strategic thinking should come in handy more than ever otherwise such institutions' survival may be threatened.

Strategic thinking as a phenomenon is better known in the business world than in educational management. Indeed, very little is heard about the concept in educational setting. However, higher education institutions that have in their midst, leaders who are strategic thinkers and who can effectively think through, and ultimately translate their thoughts to actions in managing their institutions are likely to do better than those that lack such administrators.

In Nigeria, very little is known about strategic thinking and decision making in the context of higher education institutions. Hence, much effort is being required in the institutionalization of strategic thinking in such an environment considering its importance in today's world of increased environmental dynamism. Sound decisions would strengthen the survival of higher education institutions and its ability to realize goals. Having the capability to make sound decisions in higher education institutions would however, need administrators who are quite aware of their environment and how their programmes have been influenced or are likely to be influenced by it. This research effort being new in Nigeria has the capacity to stimulate further studies owing to the importance of the research area in the drive by higher education institutions to achieve their goals and survive in a competitive environment. The rest of this paper is by structured as follows: First, the research objectives, questions and hypotheses are presented. Second, literature review is presented on variables of the study, strategic thinking and decision making. Third, methodology used in the study is highlighted. Fourth, data analysis and discussion are presented. The last part, takes care of conclusion and recommendations.

### **Research Objectives**

Generally, the study investigates strategic thinking and decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

- i. To investigate the influence of systems perspective on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria
- ii. To examine the impact of intelligent opportunism on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria
- iii. To establish the effect of intent-focused on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria
- iv. To determine the influence of thinking in time on decision making on higher education institutions in Nigeria
- v. To investigate the impact of hypothesis-driven on decision making on higher education institutions in Nigeria

## Research Questions

The following questions have been posed in the study:

- i. What is the influence of systems perspective on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria?
- ii. What impact has intelligent opportunism on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria?
- iii. What is the effect of intent-focused on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria?
- iv. What influence has thinking in time on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria?
- v. What is the impact of hypothesis -driven on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria?

## Research Hypothesis

The following research hypotheses have been formulated in this study:

H<sub>01</sub>: Systems perspective has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

H<sub>02</sub>: Intelligent opportunism has no significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

H<sub>03</sub>: Intent-focused has no significant effect on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

H<sub>04</sub>: Thinking in time has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

H<sub>05</sub>: Hypothesis-driven has no significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

## Literature Review

Rapid changes occurring in the present-day environment signals the need for organizations, both private and public, business and non-business to strive at being compatible with the environment so as to survive and succeed in their operations; this is the idea behind strategic thinking. However, being an emerging area whose meaning is yet to be unanimously agreed upon, Fairholm and Fairholm (2009) see strategic thinking as a work in progress in the literature of strategic management.

As developments worldwide continue to introduce changes to corporate environment at a rather furious pace, strategic thinking would be useful to managers of organizations in understanding as well as differentiating between what is effective and what is not given their efforts at achieving set goals. In giving support to strategic thinking, Byrson (2011) argues that as a concept, strategic thinking is aimed at creating public value, enhancing the capacity of

organizations to meet mandates and so be able to fulfill their mission, organizing for effective organization-wide participation and building an effective and winning coalition.

According to Hines and Bishop (2008), the process of strategic thinking can be split into six involvements in which organizations and their leaders must of necessity do concerning the future. These involvements include framing, scanning, forecasting, visioning, planning, and acting. Framing deals with the identification of problems clearly as well as having an understanding of their cost and solution cost. Scanning involves having relevant information on trends in the industry and line of activity, hence current state of affairs in the environment. Forecasting implies having a consideration for a number of possibilities for the future, hence having a possible picture of tomorrow. Visioning is concerned with making a decision in respect of what the organization wants to be futuristically as well as a determining whether the organization by its actions is working forward or nor. Planning deals with the creation of pathway to the future. Acting is what translates thinking to real action continuously.

In x-raying strategic thinking, Liedtka (1998) identified five dimensions of the concept which when combined depicts a strategic thinker who sees the entire setting and their interrelatedness. These dimensions are: Systems perspective, intent-focused, intelligent opportunism, thinking in time and Hypothesis-Driven. Systems perspective is anchored on systems theory. It is a unique approach to thinking which holds that in making effort at solving problems, certain issues are considered as aspects of the whole organization. According to this thinking, different units of a system would be moving separately given that the system is out of connection. Understanding organizational issues requires emphasizing the need to identify all elements as a whole, hence a holistic approach to dealing with issues. Intent-Focused is an element of strategic thinking which offers the focus that allows organizational members to both marshal and leverage their energy in concentrating their attention on realizing deliverables such that they are able to resist distractions. Intelligent opportunism, stresses the need for rooms to be created to make it possible for new strategies to emerge even when remaining intent-driven; it stems from the natural curiosity and creativity of leaders. Thinking in time explains the capacity to utilize the memory of the organization contextually in creating the future. This is achieved through the use of information available regarding the organization's past and present so as to ascertain what to do in respect of creating its future. Hypotheses-Driven is a hypothesis-driven process which explains ability of leaders to necessarily adjust the operations of their organizations to issues in the environment.

Every organization is engaged in making decisions. Decision making is the process of deciding what should be done or what action to take and usually involves the making of choice(s) from available options. Managers make decisions for their organizations. When they plan, organize, lead and control, they are involved in decision making. Each of these areas requires leaders to make decisions such as which of the plans to select for implementation, what objective should be pursued, who to employ among others. The quality as well as timeliness of decisions and the process undertaken in making such decisions can materially influence the effectiveness of organizations (Roggers and Blenko, 2006). The authors concluded that successes recorded, mishaps experienced, opportunities seized or missed resulted from decisions individuals made or failed to make hence should be contextualized in the case of organizations.

Thomas (2004) provides guidelines in making effective decisions; they include, defining the objective, obtaining sufficient information, identification of options that are feasible, evaluating the options considered, making decision by choosing an option; and then testing its implementation. Wheelen and Hunger (2012) posited that the three most likely approaches to making strategic decisions are those of entrepreneurial, adaptive and planning. The first, entrepreneurial approach involves the crafting of strategy by someone that is powerful and centres on opportunities that are available while problems are treated as being secondary; it is guided by the decision-makers' vision, which is primarily that of growth. The second, adaptive approach portrays a reactive approach to problems facing the organization. The third, planning approach involves systematically gathering relevant information to know the current situation, come up with feasible action plans as well as being rational in selecting the strategy considered most appropriate. It combines proactive and reactive approaches in addressing current problems of organizations. The types of decisions made by individuals are dependent on the amount of information or knowledge they have concerning the issues. Render (2012) identifies decision making environments: Decision making under certainty, decision making under uncertainty and decision making under risk. In the first category, decision making under certainty, makers of decisions are aware with certainty the outcome of all the alternatives or decision choices and will naturally go for the option that maximizes their wellbeing (best outcome). In the second category, decision making under uncertainty, there are many possible outcomes for every option; the maker of decision is not aware of the probabilities of the various outcomes. In the third, decision making under risk, the maker of decision is aware of the probability of each alternative occurring; it is a more difficult situation when making decisions. Strategic thinking facilitates decision making through the provision of relevant details of information in the environment. It offers useful insights in relation to logical decision making even as it steers the organization in the direction that is most suitable (Shirvani and Shojaie, 2011; Warren *et al*; 2011).

Studies in this area are not many. Bonn (2001) whose study was on developing strategic thinking as a core competency established that lack of strategic thinking was a major inadequacy in today's organizations and recommended that senior managers have a holistic knowledge concerning their firm and environment. Abraham (2005) who was interested in how managers can stretch company thinking found out that stretching strategic thinking by managers was possible using five approaches; being differently successful, doing what entrepreneurs are doing, looking for new opportunities, always thinking about the future and being ready to collaborate.

In a research by Tavakoli and Lawton (2005) which focused on strategic thinking and knowledge management, it was discovered that there was a significant relationship between the two variables and that it was necessary to improve upon strategic thinking by tapping from insights from different units of the organization. Moon (2013) whose study was on factors that influence strategic thinking at the level of the organization showed that managers' attitude toward risk was a key variable. Furthermore, Shirvani and Shojaie (2011) in their study which was on leaders' role in creating a culture which would encourage strategic thinking revealed that leaders' lack of strategic thinking competency was a key detractor of the performance of organizations.

**Research Methodology**

The survey research design was used in conducting current research. The questionnaire was utilized in obtaining data. The population of this study was made up of administrators and academic staff of Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic and Akwa Ibom State College of Science and Technology which included departmental/unit heads, directors, deans and chief executives. The number was officially put at 153 as at October, 2019. A census study was conducted. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in data analysis. A response rate of 71% was recorded by the study. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the reliability of the questionnaire. Results of the reliability tests are as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Reliability test of instrument**

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Systems Perspective	0.77	7
Intent-Focused	0.73	7
Intelligent Opportunism	0.71	7
Thinking in Time	0.63	7
Hypothesis-Driven	0.74	7
Decision Making	0.76	7

The study used multiple regression model in the form:

$$Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + b_4X_4 + b_5X_5 + e$$

Where:

Y = dependent variable (Decision Making)

a = the y intercept

b = regression coefficient

X<sub>1</sub>-X<sub>5</sub> = independent variables

X<sub>1</sub> = Systems Perspective

X<sub>2</sub> = Intelligent Opportunism

X <sub>3</sub>	=	Intent-Focused
X <sub>4</sub>	=	Thinking in Time
X <sub>5</sub>	=	Hypothesis -Driven
e	=	error term

### Test of Hypothesis

The hypotheses formulated in this study were tested with multiple regression with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 at 5% significance level.

**Table 2: Model Summary on Strategic Thinking and Decision Making in Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate	ANOVA F-Value	Sig
1	.773 <sup>a</sup>	.598	.538	9.308	13.521	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Systems Perspective, Intelligent Opportunism, Intent-Focused, Thinking in Time, Hypothesis-Driven

b. Dependent Variable: Decision Making

**Source :** Statistical Package for Social Sciences

Table 2 shows results of model summary between strategic thinking and decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. The R<sup>2</sup> of 0.598 shows the relationship between dependent, decision making and independent variable, strategic thinking. The adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.538 (or 53.8%), indicates that the five independent variables of systems perspective, intelligent opportunism, intent-focused, thinking in time and hypothesis-driven together explained 53.8% of variation that exist in the dependent variable, decision making . The remaining 46.2% could be attributed to other variables not included in the model. The F value (13.521) is significant at 0.05 level with its P value = 0.000, indicating a good predictive power.

**Table 3: Coefficient of Multiple Regression Model for Strategic Thinking Variables**

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	211.013	9.206		4.325	.000
Systems Perspective	.133	.054	.142	2.4630	.000
Intent –Focused	.069	.031	.227	2.2259	.000
<b>1</b> Intelligent Opportunism	.107	.036	.164	2.9722	.002
Hypothesis-Driven	.323	.116	.293	2.7845	.000
Thinking in Time	.128	.101	.139	1.2673	.336

a. Dependent Variable: Decision Making

In Table 3, presentation on multiple regression analysis is made.

### Hypothesis One

Systems perspective has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

By inspecting Table 3, it can be observed that systems perspective has a significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions Nigeria, where (Beta = 0.133, t= 2.4630, P< 0.05). The hypothesis that systems perspective has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria is thus rejected. This implies that systems perspective has significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

### Hypothesis Two

Intelligent opportunism has no significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

By inspecting Table 3, it can be observed that intelligent opportunism has a significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria where (Beta = 0.107,  $t= 2.9722$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). The hypothesis that intelligent opportunism has no significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria is thus rejected. This implies that intelligent opportunism has significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

### **Hypothesis Three**

Intent-focused has no significant effect on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

By inspecting Table 3, it can be observed that intent-focused has a significant effect on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria, where (Beta = 0.069,  $t= 2.2259$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). The hypothesis that Intent-focused has no significant effect on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria is thus rejected. This implies that intent-focused has significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

### **Hypothesis Four**

Thinking in time has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

By inspecting Table 3, it can be observed that thinking in time has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria, where - (Beta = 0.128,  $t= 1.2673$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ). The hypothesis that thinking in time has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria is thus upheld. This implies that thinking in time has no significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

### **Hypothesis Five**

Hypothesis-driven has no significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

By inspecting Table 3, it can be observed that hypothesis driven has a significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria, where (Beta = 0.323,  $t= 2.7845$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). The hypothesis that hypothesis-driven has no significant impact on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria is thus rejected.

## Discussion of Findings

The main objective of this study was investigating strategic thinking and decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. Analyses carried out in the study suggest that strategic thinking has an influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. Findings of this study have shown that systems perspective, intent-focused, intelligent opportunism and hypothesis-driven have significant influence on decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. By these findings, it is an indication that these dimensions of strategic thinking could facilitate effective decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

In earlier studies conducted in this areas, similar findings were established. In the case of Matar(2015) whose study was on impact of strategic thinking on decision making, it was found that strategic thinking dimensions of systems perspective, intent-focused, intelligent opportunism and hypothesis-driven significantly impacted decision making. Also, Bonn (2001) whose study was on developing strategic thinking as a core competency revealed that lack of strategic thinking was a major inadequacy in today's organizations. Furthermore, in a study by Warren (2011) on strategic thinking and decision making, it was shown that managerial cognition and values of individuals/corporate bodies can impact decision making. Again, in their study, Shirvani and Shojaire (2011) on leaders' role in creating a culture which would encourage strategic thinking revealed that leaders' lack of strategic thinking competency was a key detractor of the performance of organizations hence the need for leaders to pay attention to strategic thinking competency, while Keeney(2009) is of the view that significant creativity and hard thinking are needed in decision making situations. Again, Shirvani and Shojaire(2011) posit that strategic thinking is mandatory for leaders

## Conclusion

At present, strategic thinking is still developing as a concept but its role in management has been widely acknowledged. This study was carried out to investigate strategic thinking and decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. In the analysis that followed data collection, it was revealed that strategic thinking elements of systems perspective, intent-focused, intelligent opportunism and hypothesis-driven significantly influenced decision making in higher education institutions in Nigeria. The findings indicate that if higher education institutions in Nigeria imbibe strategic thinking philosophy, this would bring about more effective decision making that can result in positioning these institutions to be more competitive and with improved institutional results.

## Recommendations

In view of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. There is need for higher education institutions in Nigeria to invest in developing their administrators' strategic thinking competency through relevant training exposure
- ii. In present-day world where changes occur frequently, there is need for leaders and administrators of higher education institutions in Nigeria to be proactive in making decisions and so be more likely to deal with development in the environment
- iii. There is need for higher education institutions in Nigeria to integrate the dimensions of strategic thinking which influence their decision making – systems perspective, intent-focused, intelligent opportunism and hypothesis-driven to bring about effectiveness in their decision making for improved performance of these institutions.

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