Nor Abdul Kadir

Durham University, UK

ABSTRACT:

The study provides an empirical evidence of strategy management in a Malaysian higher education context, an area which has been rarely researched. It discusses the used of substantive and symbolic management in the university strategy. It further explains the substantive management through coercive working environment and managerialism. At the same time symbolic management was also applied in managing the conflicts in its strategy implementation. The mechanisms used in symbolic management which include the institutionalisation of expectations; strategy monitoring that was decoupled; and the emphasis on ISO certifications are also discussed in this context. This paper is hoped to provide insights into the body of knowledge of higher education strategy.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study provides insights into a Malaysian higher education. It is hoped to contribute to the knowledge in higher education strategy, an area considered to be strategy difficult (Fumasoli and Lepori, 2011). It addresses the pertinent need of studies on strategy management in universities (Jarzabkowski and Fenton, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The findings are made based on a case study. A case study allows the researcher to focus on the production of meaning, assessment of impressions, and deliberation of events within the context (Stake, 1998). It provides the opportunity for a direct observation of events and interviews of individual involves in the events (Yin, 2012). A semi structured interviews conducted allows the researcher to delve into a more detailed issues encountered during the process (Denscombe, 2003). The flexibility of

the semi structured interviews enable the researcher to explore into the details of strategy management of the context.

The interviews were audio taped and transcribed words-by-words. There were 30 interviews conducted based on the trail of discovery and the point of saturation. The trail of discovery is a process of verifying the findings made in the prior interview and continues until it reaches the point of saturation, a point where no further knowledge will be gained. A total of 22 hours of interviews were recorded which contributes to 288 single spaced pages of transcriptions. There were 4 Executive Management Team; 16 Operation and Management Team; and 10 Academic Staff interviewed in the process. These participants were selected based on their involvement and knowledge of the strategy management in the university.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Substantive Management

Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) suggest substantive management is conducted through role performance. The role performance claims that organisations meet the performance expectations of societal partners upon which they depend for critical resources (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). In this study, the government is the societal partner as the university is mainly funded by them. Thomas (1980) suggests the reliance on government for resources had contributed to the greater accountability for their deployment.

The evidence of role performance is apparent in the themes: government led strategy; top down strategy; managerialism; institutionalisation of university strategy; the existence of multiple strategy directions; lack of resources; time constraints; and intensification of work.

The implementation of the strategy despite its limited resources further suggests the existence of role performance. For example, the strategy to increase students enrolment had caused pressure on the infrastructure and the staff. This led to the acceptance of overflowing students in classes; and night classes conducted to overcome the constraints in classrooms. It was observed that the role performance

had contributed to the coercive working environment and managerialism in the university.

Coercive Working Environment

A statement like, "*there are some who can do it, why can't you",* are used by the management whenever there is a resistance from the staff. Staff adherence to management directive has been ingrained in the university culture and therefore they should not be questioning any tasks given to them. This is an example of disciplines of power bloc that has encouraged coercive working environment in university (Prichard and Willmott, 1997). As suggested by Parker and Jary (1995), the changes in political, institutional, and funding environments have increased the power of the management and diminished the autonomy of academics.

The coercive working environment is evident in the strategy formulated, where the basis of the strategy had never been clearly articulated thus had left with no opportunity for discussions. This is transparent in the statement, "*you do not want to actually articulate the strategic thinking so publicly or so clearly, because it might eer...lend itself to scrutiny,"* which claims the management efforts to protect the government led strategy from being questioned by its staff.

Suchman (1995) states an organisation that conforms does not question, change, or violate the social structure. The need to conform to the government had encouraged the taken for granted attitude among the university management. The attitude derived from the need to legitimise the university also explains the strategy which was formulated regardless of its resources. The conformity had led to the lack of openness in discussing strategy matters with its staff. The strategy was only discussed among the management, and then cascaded as a directive that was expected to be followed.

The findings support the existence of biases in 'structures, cultures and strategies' to protect the interests of dominant groups which aims to reduce challenges in the strategic decision (Pettigrew, 1987, p.659). The culture of the university which emphasise on hierarchical position and management power had encouraged the biases and served as a means to not questioning the strategy formulated.

The political nature is evident in the use of power to produce outcomes that favour the interest of the management (Elwood and Leyden, 2000). This had encouraged the practice of managerialism which was apparent in the increased control over its staff. This trend also reflects the government expectations of university leaders to strengthen their leadership (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007).

The managerialism is evident in the heighten performance evaluation practice; and the various rules and regulations imposed on academic staff. For example, research and publication had been included as one of the criteria for promotion. Ogbonna and Harris (2004) state teaching and research performances have been assessed to provide tangible and comparable measures of academic staff performance. This suggests the change towards managerialism (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004). The evidence of managerialism was also apparent in the periodical strategy monitoring conducted in each department.

Symbolic Management

The findings also suggest the adoption of symbolic management in the university. Suchman (1995) states organisation instrumentally manipulates and deploys evocative symbols in order to obtain societal support for legitimacy. The symbolic management in higher education has been observed and includes a skilful use of communications and symbols in motivating stakeholders to act in favour of the organisation (Maassen and Potman, 1990).

In this study, the symbolic management is evident in the attempt to institutionalise the university strategy that conforms to the government expectations; the strategy monitoring that was decoupled; and the emphasised on ISO certifications.

Institutionalisation of University Strategy

Themes like "Innovative University"; "Entrepreneurial University"; "Apex University"; were used to describe the university strategy. This was considered ceremonial due to its lack of substantive meanings. In the context of research university strategy, the teaching hours had not been reduced to allow more time for its staff to be involved in research. Therefore, it was felt that the strategy was not reflected in the way things

were done. The strategy was claimed as a change in expectations which were not supported by any changes that could assist its implementation.

It was also argued that the strategy to increase student enrolment which was made simultaneously with the research university strategy as conflicting due to the difficulties arises in coping with the demands of increasing students and doing research at the same time.

As such, themes like *"corporate poetry"; "terminologies"; "slogan", "tagline",*

"politicised"; "...more interested in telling the world"; "we want to be in a good book" had emerged to describe the university strategy.

The ceremonial nature of the strategy suggests the use of verbal account, known as impression management to harness the university legitimacy with the government (Elsbach, 1994). This was also apparent in the various documentations being published. The university had produced its own 9th Malaysian Plan (RMK9), a university strategic planning document which was based on the government's 9th Malaysian Plan [RMK9]. The similarity was obvious in the title and the contents of the documents. It suggests the act of espousing the acceptable goals and efforts of ceremonial conformity (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992).

The adaptation of RMK9 into the university strategy documentation presents the vocabularies of structure which are isomorphic with institutional rules and provide legitimate accounts of the strategy. It is clear that the effort to institutionalise the university strategy is evident in the relentless efforts in communicating the strategy, and its formalisation through documentations. It confirms to Pidcock (2001) suggestion of an increased emphasis on documentation in making strategy happens in Universities.

Strategy Monitoring that was Decoupled

Another example of symbolic management practise is apparent in the strategy monitoring that was decoupled. The university had used strategy monitoring to justify and support its implementation rather than for providing feedback on improvements. The 'students to lecturers' ratio had been withdrawn from the

evaluation as it was feared that the outcome would not support the strategy to increase student enrolment. Suchman (1995) suggests the conduct as a means to prevent miscues in organisation. This is claimed to be a matter of legitimacy which is secondary to actual performance (Meyer and Rowan, 1977;Scott and Meyer, 1983).

Legitimisation can be described as a game where leaders deceive, mislead, misinterpret and exercise self-serving control over the performance of their organisation (Neilsen and Rao, 1987). This is clear from the removal of elements which were not consistent from its monitoring criteria. Issues pertaining to classrooms, and staff workload had been deliberately excluded as it would jeopardise the university's legitimacy effort.

Emphasis on ISO Certifications

The pressure of becoming more efficient has led to the introduction of quality assurance mechanisms in universities (Lee and Gopinathan, 2007;Mok, 2010). It suggests the presence of managerial legitimacy through series of performance measures and practices (Townley, 1993).

The ISO certification in the university provides the ceremonial criterion of worth which is important in maintaining its legitimacy. It serves as a 'favourable reputation'; and 'sedative on constituents' (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p.183). The ISO certifications demonstrate the university's fitness in delivering the government expectations as it provides assurance of the ability to deliver without jeopardising its quality.

CONCLUSIONS

The government plays an important role in the university strategy. The government led strategy had contributed to the coercive working environment and managerialism. The strategy which was followed without due consideration to the university's own resources had created the challenges to its implementation.

In manoeuvring this position, the university had adopted substantive and symbolic management. The substantive management had contributed to the conflicts

experienced by its staff. This is understandable as substantive approach requires real change despite its challenges.

At the same time, a symbolic management was also applied to camouflage the discrepancies in the strategy implementation. This was not helpful in improving the situation as it did not encourage the university to address the real issues behind the implementation. This is because symbolic management encourages impressions management, denial and concealments, rather than tackling the real issues (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). In spite of the challenges, the university portrays that 'all is well' (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p.183).

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