

**Society for Research into Higher Education - SRHE**  
**SRHE Annual Research Conference 2010**

**2010 Conference Proposal:** Individual Paper

**Research Domain:** Management, Leadership, Governance and Quality

**Title of proposal: Convergence and Divergence Issues in Strategic Management:  
Cross-National Perspectives on Ibero-american Universities (0081)**

**Girotto** Michele<sup>1</sup>, Francesc Xavier Llinàs<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain*

**Abstract**

This article draws on university management experiences in different ibero-american countries. As we look at these countries, we ask: to what extent the universities that make up the Ibero-american context are able to compete in the framework of the "World-Class Universities"? Which models of governance and management should be put in place to effectively support the changes needed? What is the overall vision and what are the specific objectives that the Universities are trying to accomplish? How might strategic planning assist in achieving these goals? What does experience in these nations suggest? What are the results to date? For this we have applied a survey to university top managers. We next provide a discussion of the involvement in strategic making across each analyzed country, fostering the bountiful challenges and changes drivers that are bringing many transitions and challenges within the governance and management of the higher education.

**Outline**

Financial constraints, proliferation of information and communication technologies, and the gradual professionalization of university management, constitutes a set of challenges which are leading higher education institutions worldwide to undertake a process of profound changes both in its internal organization and external projection, in order to

meet the demands that society requires. However, the degree of evolution that universities in different geographical areas have given answers to these challenges, do not suggest a similar balance or intensity, considering that the management aspects of higher education institutions are closely related to the structures and processes through which decisions are adopted and implemented at the government level or at the institutions themselves.

A quick review of the literature on the topic of strategic management applied to the higher education sector, discusses the progress that has experienced the process in recent decades. As a consequence, for many years literature has discussed and taken note of change in the university system (Hellstrom 2004; Henkel 2005; Jarvis 2000; Margolis 2004), and within this context, studies dealing with the ever increasing attention paid to university management are particularly interesting (Bryson 1988; Buckland 2009; Clark 2003; Martinez and Wolverson 2009). In this manner, the need for effective strategy making was critical for public universities, yet there remains a predominance of few systematic studies dealing with the process of generating strategies and putting them into practice within the university sector in their particular contexts. In many countries, with the widespread financial decentralization, the responsibility related to decision making about how to manage resources, has been passed to the institutions themselves, which has highlighted some implications for the internal governance and management structures. This challenge gave rise to a need for more research on strategizing in the higher education sector, and some studies have made strides towards the recognition of culture and context in the university strategic management (Gioia and Thomas 1996; Gioia et al. 1994; Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2002).

The concept of "market" and the recognition that higher education may be subject to market forces, however, moderated by the State, has entered the vocabulary of university managers at all levels. Universities have found themselves competing for research funding, both from the state and industry, to increase student fee revenues and state funding. The rankings, accreditation systems, quality, reputation and excellence have become key factors in institutional success. According to Shattock (2000) the keywords with which to highlight the characteristics that successful universities would

have to demonstrate are competitiveness, opportunism, income generation and cost reduction, relevance, excellence and reputation.

Taking these discussions to the Iberoamerican context, the report on Higher Education in Iberoamerica (CINDA 2007) indicates that this debate is not being contemplated with the same intensity. In most OECD countries, which are associated to the concepts of "entrepreneurial universities and business" (Clark 1998), questions of how to organize community participation and ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of government appear as central aspects, nevertheless in Iberoamerica, the fundamental debates have to do at one hand, with the democratic principle of collegiality and ways of its implementation and impact on public universities and at other hand, to the principle of forming corporate governance in the case of private institutions. In this sense, to what extent the universities that make up the Iberoamerican context can compete in the framework of the "World-Class Universities? The term "World Class University" means developing the ability to compete in the global market for higher education through the creation of knowledge acquisition and excellence. According to Salmi (2009) the superior results of these institutions (highly sought graduates, leading-edge research, and technology transfer) can essentially be attributed to three complementary sets of factors at play in top universities: (a) a high concentration of talent (faculty and students), (b) abundant resources to offer a rich learning environment and to conduct advanced research, and (c) favourable governance features that encourage strategic vision, innovation, and flexibility and that enable institutions to make decisions and to manage resources without being encumbered by bureaucracy.

Along this context, this paper addresses the results of a survey being applied among private and public university top managers of different countries in the Ibero-american context: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Spain, Portugal, Peru, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. The survey has explored how strategy was formulated in the higher education institutions, how the structures and government systems influences in the process of decision making and strategy formulation, which model and strategy tools are being explored and how the strategy projects are carried out and which results are being perceived. The results show that the strategic culture in universities is kept as an increasingly trend, where the need and benefits of having the process seem to be well

assimilated and understood by the institutions of higher education. It has been noted that strategic planning is still the main strategic tool used by the institutions. However, the use of this tool has not been fully explored, and the current reality sets out great challenges and opportunities ahead.

The results highlight that one of the biggest challenges for strategic management would be to strike a balance between the executive power, autonomy and democratic procedures, as well as balancing the economic, administrative and academic mentalities. While the institutions dominate well the strategy formulation, nevertheless the models in use do not bring about significant innovations. Therefore, how to cope with these challenges and how to innovate in strategy making? Making effective strategy requires effective leadership, which must also count with the use of effective tools. As follows, the overall picture shows us that strategic planning based on traditional approaches still have predominance as a strategic tool in the different context. The paper provides further discussion upon the involvement in strategic making, highlighting the convergences and divergences across each analysed country. Results are used to expose reflections upon the current challenges of governance and management of the higher education within the different contexts, presenting implications for the university practitioners and contributions to expand further research in higher education strategy making.

## References

- Bryson, J. M. (1988). "A Strategic-Planning Process for Public and Non-profit Organizations." *Long Range Planning*, 21(1), 73-81.
- Buckland, R. (2009). "Private and Public Sector Models for Strategies in Universities." *British Journal of Management*, 20(4), 524-536.
- CINDA. (2007). *Educación Superior en Iberoamérica Informe 2007*. Cinda - Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo, Chile.
- Clark, B. R. (1998). *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation*, Oxford: IAU Press by Pergamon.
- Clark, B. R. (2003). "Sustaining Change in Universities: Continuities in Case Studies and Concepts." *Tertiary Education and Management*, 9, 99-116.
- Gioia, D. A., and Thomas, J. B. (1996). "Identity, image, and issue interpretation: Sensemaking during strategic change in academia." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 370-403.

- Gioia, D. A., Thomas, J. B., Clark, S. M., and Chittipeddi, K. (1994). "Symbolism and Strategy Change in Academia – The Dynamics of Sensemaking and Influence." *Organization Science*, 5(3), 363-383.
- Hellstrom, T. (2004). "Between a rock and a hard place: Academic institutional change and the problem of collective action." *Higher Education*, 48(4), 511-528.
- Henkel, M. (2005). "Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment." *Higher Education*, 49(1-2), 155-176.
- Jarvis, P. (2000). "The Changing University: Meeting a Need and Needing to Change." *Higher Education Quarterly*, 54(1), 43-67(25).
- Jarzabkowski, P., and Wilson, D. C. (2002). "Top teams and strategy in a UK university." *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(3), 355-381.
- Margolis, E. (2004). "The McDonaldization of higher education." *Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 368-370.
- Martinez, M. C., and Wolverson, M. (2009). *Innovative Strategy Making in Higher Education*, Charlotte, NC: IAP - Information Age Publishing.
- Salmi, J. (2009). *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class University*, Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.
- Shattock, M. (2000). "Strategic Management in European Universities in an Age of Increasing Institutional Self Reliance." *Tertiary Education and Management*, 6(2), 93-104.