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The Role of Middle Managers in Strategy Execution in two Colleges at a South African Higher Education Institution (HEI)

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Abstract. This research examined the role of middle management in executing strategic plans in two colleges in a South African higher education institution (HEI). Strategy execution is a complex operational process. Flawed sense-making of the strategy could lead to strategy breakdown, and challenges may occur concerning understanding and executing the strategic plans. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to examine how middle management in the two colleges at the HEI engaged in the sense-making of the strategic plan. The study set out to: examine how middle management participated in the sense-making of the two colleges' strategic goals; determine how middle management communicated the strategy to employees at the two colleges, and identify the challenges middle management faced with strategy execution at the two colleges. The research employed a qualitative research approach. Interviews were conducted with a purposive non-probability sample of ten middle managers in the two colleges at the HEI. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The interviews were conducted at the middle management's offices and lasted between 20-45 minutes. The study findings revealed that each college engaged in the sense-making processes differently and that there are different understandings of the role of middle management in executing strategic plans. The study highlights the need for middle management in the two colleges in the HEI to engage in training in executing strategic plans. The findings may help us understand how middle management in the two colleges executes strategy and how sense-making occurs. In addition, it could assist with role clarification of university service units in implementing the strategic initiatives, as most literature focuses on strategy formulation rather than execution.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); middle management; South Africa; stakeholders; strategic plans and execution

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa were a major part of the post-apartheid social transformation process that changed the landscape of the South African education system through mergers of various institutions in the higher education sector (Popescu, 2015). This transformation was implemented to fulfil the criteria for the sector to compete with higher learning institutions locally and internationally, thus contributing to the internationalization of the education system. Badat (2017) states that post-1994, various transformative advantages have been pursued to transform South African institutions of higher learning. Transformation is an indication of social progress (Mzangwa, 2019). One of the changes in implementing strategic plans is to guide the transformation process. In delivering well-structured strategic plans, universities align with the institutional annual performance plan, contributing to national higher education policy.

Middle management in organizations are the primary drivers of strategic plans; however, they often do not execute these as they should because of misinterpretation of the objectives of a strategic plan, or sometimes having limited knowledge (Van Rensburg et al., 2014). Challenges exist regarding understanding and executing strategic initiatives by middle management in the two colleges. Consequently, misunderstanding and unguided descriptions of their role occur in each college institution. The misconception influences their ability to influence subordinates to comply. Previous studies indicated that a lack of direction and alignment of a strategic plan with higher education policy hinders progress and success, which are crucial in highlighting the role of higher education in national development (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2022). This study plays a vital role in contributing to the body of knowledge on management. It will assist in understanding how middle management in the university context executes strategy and how flawed sense-making may lead to strategy breakdown.

The South African HEI considered in this study embarked on a new strategic plan that builds on the HEIs historical strengths and allows for further improvements to be made. The latest strategic plan provides an aspirational and robust framework for the HEI to continue to thrive in the uncertain but exciting period that lies ahead for the higher education sector in South Africa. Furthermore, the plan is a basis for developing annual operational strategies in South African HEIs. Though, there are challenges faced in middle management's understanding and execution of the HEI's strategic initiatives. A lack of contextualisation of strategy and validation of roles in middle management occurs. These challenges call for new models of leadership that will withstand the changes in the higher learning institutions and intricate systems implemented.

Middle management executes strategy by interpreting established strategy into action plans and objectives (Van Rensburg et al., 2014). However, middle management translates the information top management gives and should make available the resources needed to execute the strategic plans properly. According to Davies and Davies (2004), there is a growing need for middle management to exercise a decisive influence on organizations. Middle management at the two colleges of the HEI comprises administrative and technical staff members who

run the university's strategic plans. Like corporate organizational structures, middle management is treated as front-line supervisors in the two colleges (John et al., 2019).

Middle management's lack of understanding and their inability to execute the HEI's strategic initiatives influenced their ability to persuade subordinates to comply. The strategic goals might not have resonated with all staff members' values (Sutphen et al., 2018), and it was suggested that the strategy lacked context. In addition, middle management could not validate their roles due to the challenges they faced during strategic execution, neither could they exercise vital power during strategic execution because executives held the power and dictated the strategic direction (Burgelman et al., 2018).

Strategic plans are implemented in all South African higher education sectors. Strategies are indicative of the differences between organizations and institutions, showing how competitive they are and highlighting the institutions' uniqueness (Burgelman et al., 2018). Higher education institutions need to indicate to their stakeholders their uniqueness through their strategic plans by outlining their objectives to take advantage of the opportunities that globalization and internationalization have to offer, and consequently increase global competitiveness. Internationalization was identified as the critical goal of the strategic plan linked with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Higher education institutions throughout the country are undergoing reorganization to align their strategic plans with globalization and internationalization. As a result, the HEI concerned has positioned itself by investing in initiatives that respond to the global changes and the economic landscape so that it can contribute in the form of research and resources. Although there are challenges with executing strategic goals, South African higher education has been striving to be visible in Africa and globally. The challenges also affect the staff in charge of strategy execution. In this light, strategic plans often look good on paper, but fail at the execution level, because of lack of resources, poor participation from all stakeholders, and the lack of understanding of the reasons for the strategic goals (Adobor, 2019). This study is relevant because it exposed the roles of middle management in strategy execution as they are supposed to be part of the critical stakeholders for implementing strategic plans at higher education institutions.

Therefore, the main aim of this study was to examine how middle management in two colleges at this South African HEI engages in making sense of the University's strategic plan. Middle management in HEIs generally executes strategy by interpreting established strategy and implementing action plans based on the strategy's objectives. According to Netz et al. (2019), there is a growing need for middle management to make fast strategic decisions under extreme pressure in organizations. Thus, challenges are experienced regarding understanding and executing HEI strategic initiatives by middle management, especially under the forms of pressure that may be experienced in HEIs.

2. Literature Review

The definition of strategy has changed over the decades because of the evolution of organizations and their values to the point where the concept of strategy has now replaced policymaking and organizational behaviour. Moreover, scholars' lack of unanimity has led to ambiguity in defining strategy concepts. In addition, there is a lack of understanding and analysis in the evolution of strategy, especially in the HEI context, because the idea of strategy in the past was based solely on operational effectiveness.

There are generic modes of vital application tools to implement strategy, used differently based on the problem. Examples of strategic tools are resource-based approaches, competitive analysis, balanced scorecards, and portfolio analysis models (Rengarajan et al., 2021). But, of course, a good strategic planning process does not guarantee success until it is implemented (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021). These vital tools encapsulate all the concepts, ideas, strategies, and techniques used for strategic decision-making. Making a long-term strategic decision in the Volatile, Unpredictable, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment requires ownership of the strategic goals (Putro et al., 2022). Strategic decision-making also requires significant resources that relate to organizational changes.

Over the years, managers have adapted strategic tools, such as Mintzberg's Five P's and Porter's Five Forces, to facilitate strategy interactions. "Strategic thinking is a distinct way of thinking that utilizes intuition and creativity, with the outcome being 'an integrated perspective of the enterprise'" (Shaik & Dhir, 2020). Porter's strategy model is widely used because of the belief that competition is aligned with strategic decisions (Kemp, 2021). Further, Nurlansa and Jati (2016) discuss Porter's model of strategy based on microeconomics, which, despite criticism from Mintzberg and others, is still used in HEIs. Porter's five competitive forces model of strategy is grounded on understanding a firm's business-level strategy.

One of the core roles of middle management is to implement organizational strategy; thus, a strategy is a practice made possible by middle management. According to Thompson and Wolstencroft (2018), corporate organizational strategy takes an operational view compared to when discussed within an HEI because of the level of accountability that middle management has to take on in the corporate workplace to the educational sector. Furthermore, middle management's role resonates more with the organizational expectations of what they are required to perform. In addition, middle management administers and focuses on systems, accepts the status quo, and takes a short-term perspective (Thompson & Wolstencroft (2018).

Several perspectives of what middle management is, have been explored in the literature. According to Van Rensburg et al. (2014), middle management's roles depict them as potential strategy drivers and mediators between individuals from different organizational units. On the other hand, when strategic plans do not succeed, middle management is viewed as hesitant to change, despite their role in staff continuity and chaos prevention (Mair & Thurner, 2008). Furthermore, Kazmi and Naaranoja (2015) confirm that senior management's inability to apply

strategic thinking may create issues with executing strategic plans; thus, these functions are delegated to middle management. Despite their crucial roles, it is not common to find a position termed as 'middle management' in an organization; instead, the positions may be termed as 'operational manager' or 'supervisor.'

Hambrick and Lovelace (2018) argue that the concept of *sense giving* was discovered after the challenges that face leaders in the organization in a change management task began to be recognized. Hambrick (2007, p. 335) explains sense giving as "the process of attempting to influence the sense making and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality." The *meaning construction* implies that how middle management's information is interpreted and communicated to subordinates is the organization's decision. Logemann et al. (2019) emphasize that leadership shapes and directs the interpretation of new strategies and realities.

Middle management's roles involve communicating and translating the information from the organizational strategy to the organizational staff. Van Rensburg et al. (2014) state that the strategy often needs to be broken down and filtered to the team. This includes using slogans and catchphrases to highlight the essential aspects of the strategic goals which guide middle management when presenting ideas to employees. Rouleau (2005) defines sense making as a method whereby middle management constructs and reconstructs strategy to make sense of it for themselves and then interprets the same to the staff. This definition suggests that middle management must first break down the themes from a strategy and then apply it to relevant areas of concern. Logemann et al. (2019) add that sense-giving attempts to affect sense making and meaning construction of others towards a model redefinition of organizational reality. It is a crucial stage before the execution of the strategy. If issues arise during implementation, middle management can resolve them efficiently because they would have understood the basis of the strategy.

Rouleau and Balogun (2011) argue that sense-making requires not only middle management's input and expertise, but multiple stakeholders are involved in sense making of the strategy. Therefore, stakeholder analysis should occur to understand how stakeholders make sense of strategy and how they affect middle management decisions during the sense-making process. McKiernan et al. (2018) concur that stakeholders are essential in the strategy process and contend that stakeholders' impact and influence on strategy are not discussed thoroughly enough in the strategy research. While stakeholders can be invisible during strategic execution, McKiernan et al. (2018) argue that stakeholders are essential in strategic management and that their influence should not be ignored.

Globalization has led to growth in interdependence, interconnectedness, and flexibility across global communities. Xing (2019) argues that HEIs must be innovative in addressing specialized skills and creating excellent research opportunities driven by private and public partnerships. Universities exist in changing environments with a need to be adaptive and to respond with

exceptional strategies to meet external pressures (Ahmed et al., 2015). Rotaru et al. (2019) state that managers know the importance of strategic objectives on performance.

Strategic planning is about implementing organizational changes and creating a valuable environment to excel in a specific field. However, Vuorinen (2018) highlights limited literature on the strategic tools, models, frameworks, and methods used to form strategies. In addition, strategy execution is an even less researched topic than strategy development (Vuori, 2016). Organizational changes, the absence of relevant literature on strategy development, execution and middle management, and a lack of sense-making skills are some of the main issues that lead to the failure of strategic plans.

Organizational change can cause anxiety among employees and result in a reluctance to perform exceptionally towards the strategic plans. McKnight and Hawkrigg (2005) state that the lack of full participation from employees may be due to the lack of understanding of the strategic plans, where employees do not feel a sense of urgency in executing a strategy and thus do not feel inspired to work towards the strategy. Poor communication also may contribute significantly to the collapse of a strategic plan. Change management is crucial as it impacts sense-making processes (Li, 2018). Middle management plays an essential role in change management because they are both recipients and implementers of change (Mair & Thurner, 2008).

The best way to execute a strategy well is to be transparent about the strategic intent. Strategic intent refers to the influential position an organization wishes to take in the industry and the 'roadmap' to achieve this position. Unfortunately, not all organizations deliver their intent clearly to the public because they miss the essential elements of strategic execution and may focus on reorganization and structural changes (Neilson et al., 2008).

The strategic intent needs to be supported by three critical aspects: vision, mission, and organizational values. In an organization, it is essential to clarify the decision flow to ensure that the information flows to all execution levels. Neilson et al. (2008) concur that strategic plans can be executed well if service delivery matches the competitors' level. However, there may be a misalignment between the organization's objectives and the execution of the strategy, which would result in the organization not achieving the position it wants to.

Studies show that as middle-management roles are redefined, the activities involved will require specific expertise, such as the sense-making process and how best to apply the available resources to communicate the strategy. Communication is the most significant part of strategy execution, and a lack of this skill can result in the collapse of the organization's strategic goals. Organizational changes may affect the strategy, and the inability to involve all stakeholders during the developmental stages of the strategic objectives may lead to failure.

3. Research Methodology

For the study we employed a qualitative research approach, drawing on a case study. A qualitative research approach was suitable as it aligned with the objectives of the study. The aim was to determine the in-depth views and opinions of participants. An interpretivist approach was followed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of ten (10) middle managers at the relevant HEI, namely school operating managers, principal programme officers, and technical managers at their respective campuses in Durban. The interviews comprised open-ended questions, which were developed after analysing the literature. Semi-structured interviews permitted participants to express their opinions and views, and data collected from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a descriptive, qualitative approach to data analysis. The study also focused on identifying themes and patterns of behaviour when middle management executed strategy to gain insight into and an overview of specific areas related to strategy (McTavish, 2006). The first step in collecting data is to draw on transcribed conversations, either in the form of direct quotes or paraphrased.

Thematic data analysis was conducted, (*cf.* Vaismoradi et al., 2013), according to the following steps:

- Transcribe the interview and read the transcripts several times.
- Generate codes systematically across the data set according to the subcategories.
- Collate codes into relevant research themes; the term theme must be associated with a unit or domain.
- Generate a thematic map based on the codes.
- Define and name themes; additionally, discover themes and sub-themes that are part of analysing the text (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).
- Select extracts relating to the objectives and research questions and draft a report.

A covering letter was obtained from the HEI, and the Research Office granted ethical clearance approval for this study at the university. All principles relating to ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly adhered to. Interviews were recorded and then accurately transcribed, facilitating credibility and trustworthiness.

4. Results and Discussion

Four themes were identified, and patterns of behaviour were noted when the strategy was executed by middle management: (1) strategy; (2) position; (3) sense-making; (4) training and development. Each of these themes is discussed below.

4.1 Strategy

Knowledge of the strategy is a theme that was evident because participants could explain the strategic concepts and definitions and knew the details of the strategic plans. Participants themselves needed to comprehend the strategy at the operations level.

The participants viewed the strategic plan as a vision, a five-year plan, with the values of an institute for higher learning and operations aligned to the institution. Participants did not feel the strategic plan belonged to them and they should own it. However, they acknowledged the multiple stakeholders involved in consultation before executing the strategy. Participants expressed the opinion that the more they knew about how the strategic goals fitted in with all employees, the better they could communicate these to the staff confidently. The participants' knowledge of the strategic plan was technical and operational; they did not fully identify it with their positions.

Participation in strategic plans is a sub-theme that emerged after the participants had explained their participation in and inputs regarding the strategic plan initiatives and projects. Middle management in the two colleges highlighted that they had to apply their skills to be full participants in the university's strategic planning, despite little training.

I support this one [strategic plan] because it encompasses both supports of professional staff and academic, previously [it] supported academics, and professional staff would not know how they fit in. (R2)

When the strategic plan was first drafted, the leadership of the university had not shown any interest in including professional service staff in the strategic plan engagements. Engagements related to the planning of the strategy had initially not included middle management; therefore, it was not easy for middle management to participate fully with enthusiasm and to know the roles they then had to play in executing the strategy.

The overwhelming majority of participants indicated that discussing the strategy with staff was part of their job profile and a critical factor in strategy execution. While a process should be adopted to communicate the initiatives taken to implement the strategy between the two colleges, no consistent method was used. Most participants preferred to have meetings to discuss the policies and documents with staff input, using PowerPoint presentations provided by Human Resources, or created their PowerPoint presentations based on the policy documents. One of the respondents said:

We had a meeting to present. Staff was allowed to internalize and ask where they fit in, as leadership, we then explained where each staff fits in and what it means to them. (R2)

Participants felt that the meetings could not be profitable if middle management did not understand the content of the strategic goals and, most importantly, how each staff member could participate in the strategy. Participants confirmed that each college understood the strategic goals' narrative differently and communicated separately to its staff members. Nevertheless, the standard means of communication in both colleges were engagement in different forums and thorough interrogation of the strategic plan with staff members.

Findings reveal that middle management in the two colleges emphasized specific strategic goals because of the drive that came from each college's leadership team and their passion for a particular purpose. Higher education changes are

revolutionary; globalization and internationalization are significant drivers for developing and executing strategic goals. Deans and heads of schools in the two colleges are driven by these trends of advancing research regionally and globally. However, other strategic goals involving professional service staff should also be operated with the same passion.

This subtheme emerged when participants spoke about the challenges middle management in the two colleges experienced during the strategy execution. Initially, challenges were encountered when the strategy was planned and introduced. One of these was that staff unions had opportunities for input and made their views known regarding some of the strategic goals, which posed a threat to the strategic plans. Afterward, participants also encountered challenges in selecting from the action list during execution of the strategy, because leadership of the two colleges did not consider how each member contributed to the strategic plan's success. Participants indicated that the staff was only doing the bare minimum because there was mixed information from the unions and their line managers. For instance, one of the participants said:

There are some members of staff that take it seriously, there is a staff who do the bare minimum, and those are problematic ones, they take it to the unions, and they are supported. (R3)

4.2 Position

The theme was to show how much consultation was done across all middle management and how many participated in formulating and implementing the strategic goals. Institutions of higher learning are faced with challenges of delivering excellent service to all stakeholders: students, government, and communities. Participants mentioned that as drivers of strategic plans, they recognized that they were under pressure to participate fully in the plans to achieve the university's goals. All these plans spoke to the university landscape, which was unstable and problematic. Participants added that full participation of middle management is integrally linked to teaching and learning excellence.

Participants mentioned the leadership of the two colleges, as the core participants in the implementation of the strategy, and they revealed the role of leadership in the execution of strategic goals as paramount. They believed that college leaders should play the role of facilitators and guides in strategy execution. Participants assumed that for a strategic plan to materialize, leadership should have been visible and open about their plans. Also, the two colleges' leadership at the HEI needed to take centre stage in communicating and providing as much information and direction as possible for middle management to better execute the strategy. Transformational leaders act as a bridge between leaders and followers to develop a clear understanding of followers' interests, values, and motivations.

The strategy was well thought off because we were involved; the VC was more involved and did campus visits, and looked at the challenges... review company goals. (R7)

It was evident that participants understood their role, specifically school operations managers, and why they were part of the strategy execution. However,

they felt much more responsibility than the college deans and heads of school who were part of the strategy development.

As School Managers, we double as Dean's assistants. Deans should run with the strategy, [as] I take the baton from the Dean and make sure there is buy-in with the staff. He communicates with me as his assistant and [I] communicate to various schools. (R2)

Role clarification was a subtheme developed when it became clear that middle management endured extra workloads and a lack of clarity on how the service units contributed to the strategic goals. It was evident that participants understood their role, specifically school operations managers, and why they were part of the strategy execution. However, they felt that there was much more responsibility in their position compared to the Dean/HoS, who was part of the development of the strategy.

4.3 Sense-making

Interpretation of the strategy was recognized because of the explanation of sense-making as a concept and a process that middle management in the two colleges had to operationalize. Participants engaged in forums or cluster meetings during staff meetings to interpret what was communicated by top management. The participants in one of the colleges applied the same method of meetings and forums, during which they went through the strategic documents sent by human resources and corporate affairs. Nevertheless, they did not understand the concept of sense-making.

I meet with my staff frequently at once and present whatever is important from the strategy because not all the information there is relevant to all staff. I then send emails and a reminder as we go over the year. Constantly, the staff needs to be reminded of what is happening in the University and how they can benefit and be of help to the strategy. (R9)

However, participants were expected to interpret a concept they did not understand. One of the participants indicated that they did not fully understand the viewpoint of the college is regarding the comprehensive university strategy. The respondent felt there was no indication of the link between the college-specific strategies and the university strategy.

It is difficult, because most of the time they say, 'management said', so staff members lose sight from CHS, we should have the vision to support the university vision and filter it down to our school Even though we have an overall strategy, CHS needs to have our vision aligned with the University. It must be unique from other colleges. (R7)

4.4 Training and Development

Most participants had to convince staff that the new strategy was inclusive across all staff. However, this was proven difficult because the communication or information provided was mainly geared to academic staff. Additionally, the emphasis on research outputs excluded professional staff in the two colleges, because they did not understand how it concerned them.

They felt like it is for academics, they do not know how they fit into the strategic plan, I tried to explain to them, but they feel not much is said about technical staff. (R1)

The participants mentioned a lack of training and development before executing the strategic plan. Training and development before the execution of the strategy would ensure efficiency in executing the strategic goals. The participants indicated that staff development was strongly linked to executing the college and the university's strategic plans. Middle management in the two colleges required adequate resources and information to execute the strategy efficiently. Participants emphasized the need for training to enable them to execute the strategy well in a standard manner across the university. The training was considered vital to prevent strategic goals from being misinterpreted or interpreted differently across the university.

Capacitate on how to do things and communicate the strategy. (R8)

The responses indicated that performance management in the two colleges was connected to executing the university's strategic goals. A few participants emphasized meeting their crucial performance area (KPA) targets linked to the university's strategic objectives. They stated that they would be viewed as poor performers if they did not meet these. They stressed that college leadership emphasized strategic goals, which put tremendous pressure on middle management to perform optimally.

It will affect performance management in a hard way. Listen, we are judged on how well you execute a challenge or a task. Therefore, I will not get any high scoring if I do not take this strategy seriously. I will not have performed to the expected level, and that can ruin my job in the University. (R9)

The study revealed that middle management in the HEI colleges was a strategy driver and had a strategic role in executing the strategy. Leadership in the two colleges, therefore, should, provide vision and direction to staff at the institution. However, the literature fails to highlight how middle management interprets and codes the information delegated to them by leadership. The study's findings indicate a high responsibility for middle management to excel at their operational duties and execute the university's strategic plans.

The research findings were contextualized by comparison with other studies on sense-making and strategic plans available in the academic literature. This study further showed that the government's institutional arrangements shape how the institution should be structured, regulated, and financed. The concept of sense-giving is mainly understood in an organizational context, with leaders providing a view of reality to their network (Mirbabaie et al., 2020)

It was found that the concept of 'sense-giving' came about after organizational change of management tasks because each time there was a change in leadership, new strategic plans were given to the organization. It was also found that sense-giving changes how information is written and articulated. This information indicates that putting meaning into action needs a collective understanding and cognitive application. The findings further showed that there were planners and

doers in the organization and that a breakdown of information happens if there is no continuous learning and skills development. Failing of strategic plans might be caused by a lack of understanding by executors of the plan, namely middle management.

Communication channels, such as e-mails and staff meetings, were available for middle management. However, understanding the strategic plan was more important, because this allowed the easy flow of information between middle management and staff during engagement sessions. As stated, strategy tools and frameworks are crucial for managers to navigate their business environment and formulate strategies. Middle management at the HEI did not use strategic tools; however, the leadership of the colleges used these when developing the strategic plan. Therefore, some scholars argue that there is a need for tools and decision-making frameworks that would flow to middle management and are suited to these specific changes in the business environment (Rengarajan et al., 2021)

There was no motivation for the staff to participate fully in the strategic plans because they did not understand their roles and how they fitted into the execution of the university's strategic plans. Strategy development should be an inclusive process. Middle management in the two colleges had a big task, especially in explaining how each member was part of the bigger plan and how they could benefit from the strategic plan.

The study findings indicate that not only were the objectives set, achieved, but an understanding was gained of the workload that middle management faced. Further, the study revealed that all colleges differ regarding their information flow. The results showed how much responsibility middle management carried in executing strategic plans.

The study examined the role of middle management during the execution of the strategic plan at an HEI. HEIs throughout the country are undergoing reorganization; increasingly, their strategic plans are aligned with globalization and internationalization. As a result, HEIs have positioned themselves by investing in initiatives that respond to global changes and the economic landscape to contribute to research and resources. Although there are challenges with executing strategic goals, South African higher education has been striving to be visible in Africa and globally. The challenges faced in this reorganization affect staff in charge of strategy execution. In view of this, strategic plans are often sound on paper, but fail at the execution level because of a lack of resources, lack of participation from all stakeholders, and, primarily, poor understanding of the reasons for the strategic goals (Adobor, 2019). This study is relevant because it investigated the roles of middle management in strategy execution in the HEI context. This study is especially relevant as universities have become more 'corporatized' over the years. Middle management should be part of the critical stakeholders in implementing strategic plans at an HEI.

5.1 Recommendations

5.1.1 Contextualising the strategy and validating middle management's roles

Middle management in the two colleges should attend the management committee meetings with the college deans and heads of school to get first-hand information to pass down to the staff, and should not merely rely on what the college deans and heads of school have passed on to them. Further, middle management in the two colleges can provide insights to these committees on pressing matters, because they have first-hand information on these issues. Middle management in the two colleges was found not to have a competitive mindset aligned with the strategic plans. They ought to be strategic executors based on their position at the university and their position as line managers of professional support staff.

This study revealed that a lack of top management support influenced the drive for executing a strategic plan. Strategic thinking should be applied - a cultivated skill developed and mastered over time. Middle management should combine analysis, exploration, and understanding elements to solve complex issues and build planning capacity. Developing planning capacity guarantees teamwork across all teams and between the colleges' middle management and leadership. A strategy requires a new set of behaviour, resulting from training workshops and engagement with the strategic policy documents. Strategic plans are best executed if the behaviour change has not been initiated by middle management.

5.1.2 Constant communication regarding the stages in the strategic plan

The communication of the strategic plans was conducted on online platforms, and no face was attached to the plans. Institutions of higher learning have advanced technology that can apply operational strategies to communicate with employees consistently. The staff could not identify who was part of the strategic plan. The strategic initiatives and projects are numerous, and employees, therefore, become confused about what other staff do and how they support these initiatives.

Strategic plans applied in different spheres and at different stages should be visible to all staff in the institution. The spheres are from the planning stages until the strategy's complete execution. The stages are embedded in the organizational culture and collective experience of previous and current strategies. Strategies are based on position and resources; therefore, emphasis on objects and people working on particular goals should be visible and transparent. Leaders at HEIs must attach a face to the strategy by doing campus visits and roadshows to show that the strategy is happening. They should also emphasize that all the initiatives require full participation from everyone. However, in this study, there was not enough information provided to staff regarding at which stage the strategic plan initiatives in the colleges were. Some initiatives were not visible to all staff members because they were not communicated fully throughout the colleges.

Constant communication will prevent the challenges ensuing from unclear strategy. Added to the flawed strategic thinking, lack of top management support in the university initiatives, and unclear delineation of planning and executing the strategic goals hamper implementation. A perception exists that there are too many initiatives ensuing from different service units, re-allocation of resources,

and a lack of understanding of the organizational structure and middle management role in the strategic plan.

5.2 Recommendations for future studies

The current study used a purposive non-probability sample of middle management in specific colleges in a higher education institution. For future studies, it will be beneficial to use a mixed-methods approach. A representative sample could examine the role of middle management in other HEIs. There are several focused areas that this study did not address, and they include strategy development in educational institutions and sense-making as a concept. Future studies could be conducted at different universities in South Africa to investigate the main drivers of the strategy and the degree to which middle management is involved in driving the strategic plan.

It will also be valuable to research the importance of leadership visibility or presence during strategy execution. Linked to this is the need to examine how the various stakeholders (academics, administrators, and leadership) should work together during strategy formulation and execution. Finally, it will be worthwhile to research how organizations process the management of knowledge or practices to sustain a competitive advantage during the COVID-19 pandemic and other natural disasters (Mahdi & Nassar, 2021).

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Appendix A: Interview questions

1. What is the University's strategy for the next five years?
2. How informed do you feel about the University's Strategic Goals?
3. Have you attended any of the presentations regarding the Strategic Plan?
What are your thoughts?
4. How does the Strategic Plan fit into your current position in middle management?
5. Do you feel that leadership of the University communicates enough with you about your Strategic Plans?
6. How do you engage in the sense-making of the strategic plan?
7. How do you communicate the strategy to employees?
8. What are the challenges that you face with strategy execution?
9. What recommendations can be provided for middle management to improve the strategy execution process?
10. What are the existing initiatives that are strategically aligned in the University?
11. Do you think the strategy-aligned initiatives are clear to the Schools in your College?
12. What is the level of enthusiasm or participation from your staff in strategic initiatives of the University?