



**GAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
MANAGEMENT: EXPLORING STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AT  
THE UNIVERSITY FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (UDS), TAMALE, GHANA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In recent times, gaining competitive advantage in higher education management has received the deserved attention from School Managers and Scholars globally. However, in Ghana, much has not been done beyond benchmarking, and gaps still exist both in literature and practice in the area of inimitable strategies employed by public universities in the quest to gain competitive advantage. This study investigated strategy formulation and implementation at the University for Development Studies within the context of quality higher education management. Specifically, the study examined internal stakeholders' expectations of strategic management practices in quality higher education delivery using questionnaires, interview and focus group guides to collect primary data from students, principal officers and members of staff who were randomly and purposively selected. The findings revealed that internal stakeholders expect management to have a clear vision and mission for the university which should incorporate the interests of all relevant groups, especially those of students. The findings further revealed that the quality of strategic plans, policies, projects, and decisions of management to a large extent determined teaching, learning and research outcomes. To this effect, the UDS' Pedagogy of the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) makes the university unique.*

**KEYWORDS:** Competitive advantage, internal stakeholders, strategic management practices, quality higher education, University for Development Studies, Ghana.



## INTRODUCTION

Every institution, whether public or private, for profit or not for profit, sets goals that define the purpose of the organisation or why it exists (Mission Statement) and where it wants to get to (Vision Statement). The organisation in question has several interest groups or stakeholders who have varying degrees of expectations. From owners or shareholders to customers or clients, the stakes are high and challenging.

According to Owolabi (2010), the survival or continuity of the organization and future income depends on stakeholders' satisfaction, which in turn is derived from the quality of goods and services the organization offers customers. He argues further that excellent service quality could be an organization's competitive advantage as it attempts to set itself apart from others in the industry.

Strategic management is a key component of effective corporate governance which has been touted globally as the key to organizational success, irrespective of the industry specific. The primary role of corporate governance is to formulate and execute strategy bearing in mind the need for effective internal controls, with a view to attain resource efficiency for the benefit of stakeholders (Badu, 2012).

Whether the decisions are taken by managers or a board of directors, there is always an element of strategy in consonance with the overall direction of the organisation. In recent times, public universities have been forced to re-strategise and account for the quality of education that they provide. The concept of self-reliance or less reliance on government subvention has also compelled public universities to take a second look at their strategic direction with a view to generate funds internally to finance their operations and stay relevant in a highly competitive sector (Oldfield & Baron, 2000). This requires putting proper systems and personnel in place to implement and deliver quality service with recourse to the needs and expectations of key stakeholders.

The University for Development Studies (UDS) which was established in 1992 has clearly defined mandate and well-established organisational structure, systems, and quality personnel to achieve its mandate of blending academic work with that of the community (University for Development Studies, 2003).

These notwithstanding, UDS like most public universities continues to grapple with the challenges of inadequate capacity to admit a good number if not all qualified applicants into the university. It is also faced with over-reliance on central government subvention to support its operations (University for Development Studies, 2003).

Against this background, it is imperative that empirical evidence is adduced to ascertain how the University for Development Studies has or is positioning itself strategically to gain competitive advantage from the perspective of key internal stakeholders. This study thus evaluated internal stakeholders' expectations of strategic management practices at the University for Development Studies and attempted to answer the question: What are stakeholders' expectations of strategic management practices at the University for Development Studies?



## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Several theories and concepts underpin strategic management. This study draws heavily from the Resource Based-View. The Resource Based-View (RBV) is arguably one of the dominant contemporary and universally accepted theories in the strategic management field. It was initiated by Penrose (1959) and popularized by Wernerfelt (1984), Barney, (1991) and Priem and Butler (2001). RBV marked a paradigm shift from attributing a firm's performance to industry conditions to organizational specific factors. And as noted by Peteraf and Barney (2003), the view conceptualizes the firm as a set of resources and competencies which must be harnessed to distinguish a firm from another and make it possible for such a firm to offer goods and services in a manner that other firms cannot imitate. They argue further that RBV operates on two assumptions: the first assumption is that firms within a given industry may be heterogeneous with respect to the bundle of resources they control. Secondly, resource heterogeneity may persist over time since the resources employed to execute the firm's strategies cannot easily be moved across firms. Trading some resources in factor markets is almost impossible and such resources are difficult to imitate. An over-riding consideration for a resource bundle to contribute to competitive advantage is resource heterogeneity or uniqueness, because "if all firms in a market have the same stock of resources, no strategy is available to one firm that would not also be available to all other firms in the market." (Cool et al., 2002, p. 57).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Key Concepts**

#### **Corporate Mission**

A mission statement is one of the most appreciated strategic management tools used by corporate institutions. Mission statements are supposed to outline the focus of the organization, taking into consideration the expectations of stakeholders and should answer the question 'what do we exist to do'? (Johnson et al., 2008). They argue further that mission statements do a good job in capturing corporate level strategy in terms of scope, boundaries, and value creation.

According to Bartkus et al. (2004), the main purpose of a mission statement is to enlighten stakeholders to the strategic direction of the organization and to facilitate strategic planning. They go on to say that the relevance of mission statements stems from the high levels of motivation and inspiration which they deliver to employees, which in turn leads to improved performance.

Lynch (2000) posits that mission statements create the enabling environment for other strategic tools, such as vision, philosophies, strategic models, targets, and competencies to combine effectively.

#### **Vision Statement**

A vision is a statement of what or how you would like things to be, a sensory impression of the future which is conceived today. A vision creates and sustains business entities (Papulova, 2014). He opines that the development of vision and mission forms part of strategy formulation,



which steps also specifies strategic objectives and strategy development. Vision guides and perpetuates corporate existence. It is viewed as a mental picture of a compelling future situation. Vision talks about a future that is based on ideas outrunning present time and that often motivates generations of managers (Evans, 2010).

Papulova (2014) recommends that a vision statement should be easily understood, easily remembered, positive, motivational, inspirational, attractive, challenging and future oriented.

### **Goals and Objectives**

Goals and objectives create the road map towards attaining the mission, make the vision a reality and chart the course for the business or corporate entity. In most literature and corporate parlance, the two are used interchangeably. Bryan and Dimartino (2010) underscored the need to create solid, attainable goals with related objectives and strategies to significantly enhance an organisation's chances of success.

In their strategic plan (2012-2016), the University of Edinburgh outlined strategic goals and objectives to include excellence in education, excellence in research and excellence in innovation. Similarly, the University for Development Studies enumerated as its strategic goals vigorous resource mobilisation and income generation activities, increasing access to UDS programmes, improving the quality of teaching and learning, expanding the infrastructure base, and improving overall efficiency (University for Development Studies, 2003).

### **Strategic Capability**

Strategic capability is concerned with the resources and competencies that an organization can use to provide value to customers or clients. Unique resources and core competencies are the basis upon which an organization achieves strategic advantage and is distinguished from competitors (Johnson et al., 2008).

### **Strategy**

It is the long-term direction of the organization. It is likely to be expressed in broad statements, both about the direction that the organization should be taking and the types of action required to achieve the objectives. For example, it may be stated in terms of market entry, new products or services or ways of operation (Johnson et. al., 2008).

### **Strategic Planning and Strategic Plans**

Strategic planning is the task of defining an organisation's intents for attaining its goals and objectives. The outcome of a strategic planning process is typically a document (a strategic plan) that connotes a high degree of strategy and clearly spells out the component that influences it; it is an elaboration of the organisational environment and aspirations (Cassidy, 2006). He suggests further that a strategy serves as a guide which does not only focus on the present but has the tendency to change the status-quo, since strategy typically incorporates some elements of change in the planning and decision-making processes. Ideally, as a matter of organisational policy, it is usually strongly recommended that right from the beginning, the entire planning process should involve the full participation of all stakeholders. Thus, a Strategic Planning Steering Committee (SPSC) is set up comprising representatives from all sections of the organization. (University for Development Studies, 2003).



## **Strategic Leadership**

In a study of school leaders, spanning over three years, Quong and Walker (2010) stated that strategic leadership goes beyond formulating vision statements and developing strategic plans. This was in reaction to an assertion by earlier strategic leadership writers such as Cheng (2000, p. 17) that strategic leadership focused on leaders involved in strategic planning and had been viewed as a practice that was exclusive to only top executives, who often took decisions in secret.

Robinson (2007) also writes, "...we have found that studies centered on transformational leadership, closely related to the theory of generic leadership which is very popular in education, showed no or weak impact on students. Transformational leadership has demonstrated minimal impact on staff, but these impacts do not flow through to students...."

In espousing their new thinking on strategic leadership, Quong and Walker (2010) emphasized seven principles of strategic leadership, to wit, strategic leaders have a long-term orientation, they have a long-term strategy, they are results-oriented, and they are research biased. Strategic leaders are fit to lead and they do the next right thing. These principles according to them should inform focused leadership action, especially to position schools to gain competitive advantage.

There has been a significant change of focus from the traditional functions of management, planning, organizing, leading and controlling. Managers are expected to think and act, as well as react strategically (Schoemaker et al., 2013). They prescribed such skills as anticipation, challenge, interpretation, decisiveness, alignment and learning for strategic managers. According to them, strategic leaders must be constantly vigilant, scanning the environment for signals of change. They must also encourage divergent views and challenge their own and others' viewpoints before arriving at a conclusion on managerial matters. The ability to interpret ambiguous data, explore multiple choices or decision points, achieving buy-in among stakeholders and serving as the focal point for organizational learning are some of the key skills strategic leaders must demonstrate (Schoemaker et al., 2013).

## **Strategic Control**

It involves monitoring the extent to which the strategy is achieving the objectives and suggesting corrective action (Johnson et. al., 2008).

## **Dimensions of Strategic Management**

According to Johnson et al. (2008), strategic management issues typically have six identifiable dimensions:

### *Strategic Management Issues Require Top Management Decisions*

The beliefs and values of stakeholders or powerful actors who may be individuals, groups or even other organisations (who constitute top management) will have a greater or lesser influence on the strategy development of an organization, depending on the power of each. They decide whether an organization would be expansionist or more concerned with consolidation in terms of the overall direction of the organization.





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*Strategic Issues Involve the Allocation of Large Amounts of Organizational Resources*

An organization relies on its resources and competencies to provide competitive advantage and/or yield new opportunities. The decision to leverage resources such as technology, skills or strong brands in terms of quantity or quality is an integral part of organizational strategy.

*Long-term Impact on Prosperity*

Strategic issues are likely to have a long-term impact on the prosperity of the firm. Most organisations, whether private or public, pursue strategies with a view to gain advantage over competition in the long term. For example, in the public sector, institutions that provide better value services than others are likely to attract support and funding from government over the long-term.

*Strategic Issues are Future Oriented*

Strategy involves long-term decisions about what kind of organization the business entity should be. It also takes cognizance of the fact that a lot of time is required to change the status-quo.

*Major Multi-functional or Multi-Business Consequences*

Strategy attempts to answer the question, “Should the organization concentrate on one area of activity, or should it have many?” Major strategic decisions affect nearly every function or area of activity of the organization. Thus, strategic decisions are said to have multi-functional or multi- business consequences.

*Analysis of External Environment*

Strategy aims to achieve a strategic fit with the business environment. The ultimate aim may not be to meet industry standards, but to either find a niche in a market or attain growth by seeking to buy up businesses that have already found successful market positions.

**Strategic Management in the Public Sector**

Strategic management is highly relevant in public organisations in view of New Public Management (NPM) changes (Johansson, 2009). He notes that most of the earlier scholarly work has been more oriented to introducing the tools of strategy implementation in the public sector rather than elaborating on the nature of strategy itself. Moreover, strategic management has so far been studied in a context of the private sector, and the main concern in public sector research on strategic management has been on how to translate the concepts of competitive advantage, growth and profitability into a public sector context (Johansson, 2009).

According to Hansen-Rosenberg and Ferlie (2014), strategic management has proved to be an important tool for shaping the performance of public organisations, especially in the light of New Public Management reforms. They also espoused the applicability of strategic management theories such as the Resource Based View (RBV) and Porter’s three strategic typologies of ‘cost leadership,’ ‘differentiation,’ and ‘focus strategy.’

Most of the public sector reform programmes that have taken place in developing countries during the last three decades were introduced as part of the Structural Adjustment Programmes



(SAPs) of the World Bank in the 1980s (World Bank, 2002). However, most of the more recent reforms, under the influence of the New Public Management have been driven by a combination of economic, social, political, and technological factors which have triggered the quest for efficiency and for ways to cut the cost of delivering public service (World Bank, 2002). Particularly for Africa, increasing emphasis has been placed on good governance (including corporate governance), and the paradigm extended to a belief that it would be better for the public services if they could be organized and managed much like the private sector as possible (World Bank, 2002).

The focus of the New Public Management movement has been on creating institutional and organizational contexts which are to mirror what is seen as critical aspects of private sector modes of organizing and managing. Strategies for improving public sector performance include Total Quality Management, Organisational Strategic Management and Training, Human Resource and Capacity Building, and Decentralisation (World Bank, 2002).

Reforms are also evident in public universities which, according to Paswan and Ganesh (2009), must consider themselves as commercial concerns competing for resources and students, locally and globally, in the light of the recent wave of public funding cuts and anticipation of future decreases in the number of student applications. Darbi (2012) found that public universities were repositioning themselves to match competitors in the higher education sub-sector of Ghana. According to him, one way that was achieved was to wean themselves of government subvention like the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) and operate like a public institution with a profit-making orientation.

### **Role of Strategic Management in Quality Service Delivery**

According to Baron et al. (2009), service managers have recognised the urgent need to improve service quality as a yardstick for gaining competitive advantage, given the constantly changing environments in which they operate. Most strategic managers tend to focus on deploying strategies to increase market share and profitability and ultimately gain competitive advantage. However, increased profitability, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer retention, customer alteration and positive word of mouth are tangible outcomes of the provision of good service quality (Abdullah, 2006a; Nadiri et al., 2009; Voss et al., 2007). Thus, it can be inferred that, invariably, strategic management concentrates efforts or directs strategy at improving quality service delivery to gain competitive advantage. This is particularly true, taking into consideration the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) which is considered a strategic tool that places emphasis on achieving customer satisfaction through delivering superior service quality. Research suggests that organizations that adopt TQM boast of improvement in corporate performance, better employee relations, higher productivity, greater customer satisfaction, increased market share and improved profitability among others (Aluko et al., 1998, pp. 90-97).

In proposing strategies for gaining competitive advantage, Porter (1985) suggested a strong brand that clearly communicates how effective an organization will deliver benefits much better than anyone else – differentiation. In other words, the products or services are unique in terms of the benefits customers derive from consuming or using them, thus increasing their perceived value (Johnson et al., 2007). These views according to them emphasize the need for a strategy which guarantees high quality service which must be difficult to imitate, and thus informs the role of strategic management in the formulation of mission and vision statements,



strategic goals and objectives, and the need for a continuous process of strategic planning and reviewing strategic plans.

### Stakeholders of Public Universities

Freeman (1984) posits that a stakeholder is any person or group of persons who are either influenced by the company or are able to influence the attainment of organizational goals. Eden and Ackerman (1998), cited in Bryson (2004), identify stakeholders as persons or groups who wield the ability to directly influence the future direction of an organisation.

According to Jongbloed (2009), the quality of the Higher Education Institution's dedication to different stakeholder groups (beyond keeping a list of contacts) underscores the role higher education plays in the society.

It denotes a conscious effort to involve stakeholders with a view to appreciate their perceptions of the organization's offerings and how these can be improved. Dobui and Luffman (2003) note that identifying and satisfying the needs of stakeholders are important steps towards gaining competitive advantage for higher education institutions.

Table 1.0 (adopted from Burrows, 1999) is an illustration of the community of stakeholders of a typical higher education institution.

**Table 1.0: Stakeholder Categories and Constitutive Groups**

Stakeholder Category	Constitutive groups, communities
Governing entities	State and federal government; governing board; board of trustees; buffer organisations; sponsoring religious organisations
Administration	President (Vice-Chancellor); senior administrators
Employees	Faculty; administrative staff; support staff
Cienteles	Students; parents/spouses; tuition reimbursement providers; service partners; employers; field placement sites
Suppliers	Secondary education providers; alumni; other colleges and universities; food purveyors; insurance companies; utilities; contracted services
Competitors	Direct; private and public providers of post –secondary education potential: distance providers; new ventures Substitutes: employer sponsored training programmes
Donors	Individuals (includes trustees, friends, parents, alumni, employees, industry, research councils, foundation.)
Communities	Neighbours; school systems, social services; chambers of commerce; special interest groups.
Government regulators	Ministry of Education; buffer organisations; state & federal financial aid agencies; research councils; federal research support; tax authorities; social security; patent office.
Non-governmental regulators	Foundations; institutional and programmatic accrediting bodies; professional associations; church sponsors.
Financial intermediaries	Banks; fund managers; analyst
Joint venture partners	Alliance and consortia; corporate co-sponsors of research and educational services.

Source: *Barrows (1999)*





As contained in the strategic plan of the University, UDS has identified its stakeholders to include members of the governing council, government, university management, regulatory bodies such as the National Council on Tertiary Education (NCTE) and the National Accreditation Board (NAB), the Ministry of Education, Local and International Research Institutions, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), staff, students, alumni and the public.

To this end, management of the university engages these groups in periodic dialogues and through the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) interacts with communities across the length and breadth of Ghana in fulfillment of its goal of 'blending the academic world with that of the community' (University for Development Studies, 2003).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The stakeholders in this study have been operationalized to include management, staff, and students at the University, whereas the expectations of management and staff were solicited using interview and focus group guides. Students' expectations of strategic management practices by the University were obtained using a Likert scale questionnaire.

Students were asked to respond to statements on the university's strategic management practices using the Likert scale: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5). The Perceived Expectation Index for each statement was then computed by averaging respondents' responses to the statement. The closer the PEI to 1, the stronger students disagree to the statement and the closer the PEI to 5, the stronger students agree with the statement.

Simple random and purposive sampling techniques were used to select samples for the study. Using Krejcie and Morgan's Table (1970) for determining a sample size for the study targeting a population of 17,135 students, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, the ideal sample size for student respondents was 374. Six top management personnel were selected for key informant interviews using purposive sampling method, while focus group discussions (involving 7-12 persons) were held with senior members and senior and junior staff of the university. Secondary sources of information which proved to be relevant to the research included a strategic plan of the UDS as well as the University's statutes, Vice-Chancellor's Report and the 16<sup>th</sup> Congregation Basic Statistics.

### **Maintaining Reliability and Validity**

The researchers used a triangulation approach in the collection of data, with a view to enhance the reliability and validity of the research process. Saunders (2009) posits that triangulation is the combination or use of two or more different data collection techniques within one study of the same phenomenon. This is buttressed by Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010) who opine that when correctness or precision is contemplated, it is logical to collect information using different methods and angles. To this effect, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected, using such instruments as questionnaires, interview and focus group guides.



The questionnaires were tested for reliability, using Cronbach's Alpha Value analysis, to test how closely the questionnaire measured the variables while the interview and focus group guides were designed with the objectives of the research in mind and were also subjected to peer review.

A Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.585 indicates that the questionnaire measures the Likert scale adequately.

### Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.585	.498	14

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study obtained empirical evidence from internal stakeholders on their expectations of strategic management practices employing such variables as the need for clear vision and mission statements; communication of vision and plans to key stakeholders; effects of the strategic plan, policies, decisions and projects on teaching, learning and research; the quality of the university's programmes; leadership style of management, provision for feedback mechanisms; and the uniqueness or otherwise of the university's pedagogy (the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme). The findings are presented in Table 2.0 below and discussed accordingly.

**Table 2.0: Students' Expectation on Strategic Management Practices in UDS**

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	PEI
Management should have a clear vision and mission for the university	15 (4.0)	68 (18.1)	95 (25.5)	58 (15.5)	138 (36.9)	3.63
The university vision and plans should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders, including students	14 (3.7)	132 (35.3)	65 (17.5)	66 (17.6)	97 (25.9)	3.35
The strategic plan, policies, decisions, and projects pursued by management must impact positively on teaching, learning and research	2 (0.5)	58 (15.5)	54 (14.5)	103 (27.5)	157 (42.0)	3.81



Students needs must adequately be addressed by management policies, decisions, and projects	12 (3.2)	50 (13.4)	43 (11.5)	110 (29.4)	159 (42.5)	3.95
Students should be involved in the strategic planning process	20 (5.3)	138 (36.9)	97 (26.0)	42 (11.2)	77 (20.6)	3.04
I chose UDS because of the quality of its programmes	13 (3.5)	55 (14.7)	42 (11.2)	108 (28.9)	156 (41.7)	3.90
UDS is competing favourably with other universities locally and globally	4 (1.1)	55 (14.7)	93 (24.8)	75 (20.1)	147 (39.3)	3.94
I expect a good leadership style from the UDS management	14 (3.7)	99 (26.5)	105 (28.1)	52 (13.9)	104 (27.8)	3.36
Management should provide for effective internal student feedback systems	9 (2.4)	20 (5.3)	92 (24.7)	82 (21.9)	171 (45.7)	4.03
The TTFPP makes UDS unique	0 (0)	36 (9.6)	107 (28.6)	10 (2.7)	221 (59.1)	4.11

*Note: Figures in parentheses are in percentage*

Source: *Field survey, 2016*

### **Vision and Mission for UDS**

When students were asked whether they expect management to have a clear vision and mission for the university, 22.1 percent (4.0%+18.1%) of the students disagreed while 52.4 percent (36.9%+15.5%) of students agreed. 25.5 percent of the students were indifferent and remained undecided. The PEI of 3.63 implies that on average, most students agreed that management must have a clear vision and mission for the university. This is given credence by Lynch (2000) that mission statements create the enabling environment for other strategic tools such as vision, philosophies, strategic models, targets, and competencies to combine effectively.

University management was unanimous that the Act establishing the university (PNDCL 279) gave it a clear mandate to 'blend the academic world with that of the community to provide constructive interaction between the two for the total development of northern Ghana in particular, and Ghana as a whole.' From this mandate, management carved a vision for the university to be 'a home of pro-poor scholarship.' This according to them is reflected in its motto: 'knowledge for service' as well as its methodology of teaching, learning, research, and outreach programmes.



### **Need to Communicate Vision and Plans**

Meanwhile, 43.5 percent (17.6%+25.9%) of students agreed to the need for the university's management to unambiguously communicate the university's vision and plans to all stakeholders including students. However, 39.0 percent (3.7%+35.3%) of students disagreed to this statement and 17.5 percent of students were undecided. The PEI of 3.35 implies that on average, most students were undecided on the need for the university's management to unambiguously communicate the university's vision and plans to all stakeholders.

### **Strategic Plans, Policies, Decisions and Projects must impact on Teaching and Learning**

About 69.5 (27.5%+42.0%) percent and 16 percent (0.5%+15.5%) of students respectively agreed and disagreed that the strategic plan, policies, decisions, and projects pursued by management must impact positively on teaching, learning and research in the university. The PEI score of 3.81 further confirms that on an average, majority of student respondents agreed that the strategic plans, policies, decisions and projects must impact positively on teaching and learning. The level of consumer's satisfaction with the service quality can be determined by how much the service provided to consumers exceeds their expectations (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011).

### **Management's Policies, Decisions and Projects Addressing Students' Needs**

On whether management's policies, decisions and projects should be fashioned to adequately address students' needs, 71.9 percent (29.4%+42.5%) of students agreed that their needs should be adequately addressed by management's policies, decisions, and projects, with only 16.6 percent (3.2%+13.4%) disagreeing to this statement. The PEI of 3.95 suggests that majority of the students agreed to the fact that their needs should be addressed by management's policies, decisions, and projects.

Majority of the staff also reported that the university had a clearly defined vision and mission, but some of them were indifferent that the strategic plans, policies, decisions, and projects of the management addressed the needs of students or guaranteed quality higher education delivery; to them, there was the need for repositioning to leverage advantage for accessing and exploring newer opportunities.

### **Students' Participation in the Strategic Planning Processes**

The successful implementation of every policy depends on who participated in the formulation and implementation process. Only 31.8 percent (11.2%+20.6%) of the students agreed that students should be involved in the strategic planning process while 42.2 percent of students disagreed. Students participate in the strategic planning process through their leaders who represent the interest of students.

Responses gathered from management and staff indicates that strategic planning and strategic positioning is an integral part of the culture of the university, permeates the managerial decision-making processes and usually involves all key stake holders. For instance, a member of management (Interviewee 1) opined that:

"...Strategic plans guide the operations of the university and direct the allocation of resources for projects undertaken across campuses. For instance, the last strategic plan set out targets



such as increasing access or enrollment, adopting gender mainstreaming policies, enhancing quality of teaching and research, expanding the physical infrastructure to match the increase in student numbers, and improving and sustaining the university's flagship programme (the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme). Today, we can measure our performance against such targets, and the on-going strategic plan review process will provide an opportunity to do so..." (Interviewee 1, Tamale 2016).

Cassidy (2006) provides support for this assertion by suggesting that a strategy serves as a guide which does not only focus on the present but has the tendency to change the status-quo since strategy typically incorporates some elements of change in the planning and decision-making processes.

Another member of management (Interviewee 5) observed that management had put in place structures that adequately catered for stakeholder participation in the decision-making processes:

"...First and foremost, our key stakeholders, including students, are represented on the apex decision making body (the governing council) and other relevant boards and committees. This way, their views on major decisions are heard and considered, and in most cases, they are involved in the implementation processes..." (Interviewee 5, Tamale 2016).

### **Uniqueness of UDS based on the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme**

When asked whether the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) made UDS unique, 61.8 (59.1+2.7%) percent of students agreed while 9.6 percent disagreed. Another 28.6 percent were not sure and remained undecided. The PEI of 4.11 gave a strong indication that on the average, students agreed that the TTFPP made UDS unique. This is buttressed by the views of management and staff, all of whom were unanimous that the TTFPP was the University's flagship programme and made UDS unique. A member of management (Interviewee 4) expressed the view that:

"...The Third Trimester Field Practical Programme run by UDS has proven to be very effective in addressing the training needs of students as it tends to be problem-solving, interactive, and community based. It is a programme that has helped to bridge the gap between theory and practice, as students are obliged under the TTFPP to go and live in selected communities for at least eight weeks, to learn about developmental challenges facing such communities and to propose solutions to such problems. It has enhanced the quality of our graduates and made them a preferred choice of employers, especially NGOs. This programme makes UDS unique and has attracted a good number of foreign students..." (Interviewee 4, Tamale 2016).

This reaffirms the view that an organisation's distinctive capabilities explain its competitiveness in the industry (Peteraf & Barney, 2003).

### **Quality of UDS Programmes**

Empirical evidence from the field survey revealed that 70.6 percent (28.9%+41.7%) of respondents chose UDS because of the quality of its programmes. About 18.2 percent of respondents disagreed with the view that UDS offered quality programmes and that informed their choice of the university for further studies, while 11.2 percent were undecided. With a PEI of 3.90, it can conveniently be stated that on the average, the quality of programmes on





offer determines majority of the students' choice of a university for further studies. This finding further emphasizes the assertion by Brown and Mazzarol (2009) that the success of universities depends on how satisfied students are with the quality of service on offer. Management and staff were unanimous on the provision of quality higher education as a pre-requisite for attracting students to the university. For instance, Interviewee 3 applauded management's efforts at instituting and sustaining academic quality assurance. He observed that:

"...The establishment of an Academic Quality Assurance and Planning Directorate has ensured a systematic improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and research in this university. Teaching and research require continuous improvement to meet both local and global standards, those set by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) and different organizations that rank universities globally, applying rigorous procedures and criteria..." (Interviewee 3, Tamale 2016).

### **UDS Is Competing Favorably, Locally, and Globally**

Reading further from the table, it can be deduced that 15.8 percent (1.1%+14.7%) of respondents, who constituted an insignificant proportion of the entire sample size, disagreed that UDS is competing favorably with other universities locally and globally. While 24.8 percent remained undecided, 59.4 percent (20.1%+39.3) were confident that UDS is competing favorably with other universities, locally and globally. This is reflected in the PEI of 3.94 which gave a strong indication that on the average, the majority of the respondents were positive that UDS is competing favorably with other universities. This is in line with the view expressed by Paswan and Ganesh (2009) that in the light of the recent wave of public funding cuts and anticipation of future decreases in number of student applications, universities must consider themselves as commercial concerns, competing for resources and students, locally and globally.

### **Leadership Style of UDS Management**

Probing further, the study elicited the views of respondents on the leadership style of UDS Management and whether it formed an integral part of their expectations. 30.2 percent (3.7%+26.5%) disagreed and thus did not attach importance to the leadership style of Management while 28.1 percent were indifferent hence undecided. However, 41.7%, representing the majority, agreed that the leadership style of management was a key component of quality higher education delivery. A PEI score of 3.36 suggests that on the average, majority of students were undecided whether or not leadership style of management was important. A participant in focus group discussion bemoaned what he termed:

"...Unnecessary bureaucratic processes at management and administrative levels, as well as the lack of fairness in representative on council and other relevant boards and committees of the university..." (Focus Group Discussion, Tamale 2016). Schoemaker et al. (2013) prescribed such skills as anticipation, challenge, interpretation, decisiveness, alignment and learning for strategic managers. According to them, strategic leaders must be constantly vigilant, scanning the environment for signals of change. They must also encourage divergent views and challenge their own and others' viewpoints before arriving at a conclusion on managerial matters..." (Focus Group Discussion, Tamale 2016).



## Student Feedback Systems

In view of the important role feedback plays in the management of an institution, the study explored stakeholders' views on the effectiveness or otherwise of the feedback systems they expect at the University for Development Studies. Jongbloed (2009) provides support for this by stating that the quality of the Higher Education Institution's dedication to different stakeholder groups (beyond keeping a list of contacts) underscores the role higher education plays in the society. The empirical evidence reveals that 67.6 percent (21.9%+45.7%) of respondents who constitute the majority expected an effective student feedback system to be put in place. About 7.7 percent thought otherwise, while the remaining 24.7 percent were undecided. A PEI of 4.03 implies that on average, most students agreed that there was the need for effective student feedback systems to be put in place. On their part, academic staff lamented the limited contact hours they have with students in view of some challenges which also affected their ability to meet deadlines (feedback loop). For instance, a participant in the focus group discussions (Participant F) expressed frustrations at the virtual lack of office space to carry out academic work. She notes that:

"...It is embarrassing to always meet your students either in your car or on the corridors for an assessment of their project works. This is a fact of life; we go through this everyday because the university lacks office space for lecturers to do their work. Given the exponential increase in student numbers, there is the need to pay attention to this issue, since it impacts negatively on academic quality assurance..." (Focus Group Discussions, Tamale, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that the majority of the stakeholders (especially students) expect management to develop a clear vision and mission for the university which will incorporate the interests of all stakeholders. They also anticipate that relevant stakeholders will participate in the formulation and planning of strategic policies, decisions and projects which should aim at addressing students' needs and positively impact teaching, learning and research as the core activities of the university.

However, minority of stakeholders saw the need for students to be involved in strategic policy planning and related activities of the university. It was further revealed that most students joined UDS because of its Third Trimester Field Practical Programme which makes the university unique and highly competitive both locally and globally.

Most other respondents opined that the quality of its programmes attracted them to UDS. Yet a cross section of students also expected management to exhibit good leadership credentials and put in place effective students' feedback systems. Appropriate recommendations were made to management with respect to the areas that required improvement.



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