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Is strategic planning relevant to non-governmental universities; Experiences from Islamic Azad University, Iran

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Abstract

Strategic planning in turbulent and changing environments is always in debt. The aim is investigating application of strategic planning models to a great non-governmental university over Iran. Methodology was a R&D in two phases (a- comparative research for reviewing experiences of other universities through the world and b- designing and developing a comprehensive model relevant and fit for the circumstances of non-governmental universities in Iran. The strategic planning team involved key stakeholders like groups of managers, staff and also graduate student's representatives via Focus Discussion Groups to develop important organizational identities as well as strategic components; Mission, Values and Vision.

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1. Introduction

Today, most of countries are faced to waves of the globalization on their industries and business sectors as well as higher education sectors or universities. Countries cannot respond to this competition simply by reducing their expenditures or making efficient their costs. Instead they must take an active role in transforming their traditional strategies toward more sophisticated strategies and much more knowledge based enterprise. This is especially important for developing countries, in which over 99% of the industries, representing over 70 % of employment opportunities, are small manufacturing enterprises (SMEs).In these countries higher education sectors and universities are going out from government dominance. Such a transformation will also need to go hand-in-hand with the development of a culture that encourages creation of the next generation of companies and organizations, building on today's emerging technologies. It is clear that they must learn how to translate their academic excellence into added value and employment opportunities. This will necessitate bringing together different actors on the innovation scene and taking much more efficient and concerted approach to achieve and maintain competitiveness in an increasingly challenging global environment (EPFL, 2006; Peterson, 1980; Lerner, 1999; Dooris, Kelley &

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Trainer, 2004; Newman, & Couturier, 2002; Matt, 2010). For this reason, most of organizations are designing and developing programs and projects for improving their quality level. Despite taking general advantages of each quality project for organizations, while decision making to choose and apply strategic planning model, they should consider organizational context, level of people maturity, constraints and limitations as well as efficiency and effectiveness (EPFL, 2006; Haghshenas & Yarmohammadian, 2009; Anagnostopoulos, 2010; Mosadegh Rad & Yarmohammadian, 2006).

Strategic Planning has a tendency to encourage people to think about the future. This is extremely important since many organizations are inward thinking, focusing too much on the short-term. Strategic planning looks at the long-term vision and achievable mission as well as strategic issues and directions. It has been expressed that organizations which focus on the long-term through strategic planning increase their quality level rather than other organizations. Consequently, one of the benefits of strategic planning is long-term performance, quality and growth. Another benefit of strategic planning is communication. Strategic Plans communicate the intentions of management to employees, stakeholders, and others that means strategic planning process is a strong instrument for organizational dialogue and communication (Mahoney, 1997; Lerner, 1999; Anagnostopoulos, 2010; Hayward, Ncayiyana & Johnson, 2003; Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Newman & Couturier, 2002; Yarmohammadian, Bahrami & Foroughi Abari, 2008; Yarmohammadian et al, 2006).

The fundamental purpose of strategic planning in higher education is to provide an ongoing process of examination and evaluation of an institution's strengths, weaknesses, goals, resource requirements and future prospects, and to set out a coherent plan to respond to the findings and build a stronger, more effective institution. It has been defined as '... a conscious process by which an institution assesses its current state and the likely future condition of its environment, identifies possible future states for itself, and then develops organized strategies, policies, and procedures for selecting and getting to one or more of them'.

Strategic planning is designed to strengthen and enhance the performance and quality of an institution. However, it should not be used as a vehicle to conduct reductions in staff or programs considered unproductive. While one of the results of strategic planning may be the loss of staff or programs, this should occur only as the result of careful institutional analysis that occurs throughout the strategic planning process. In fact, if staff reductions are anticipated, these should occur prior to launching the strategic planning process. Failing this, the process will be linked to the resulting losses, thus undermining its potential for success. (Haghshenas & Yarmohammadian, 2009; Lerner, 1999; Anagnostopoulos, 2010; Hayward, Ncayiyana & Johnson, 2003; Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Newman & Couturier, 2002; Ansari et al, 2009).

According to literature review, there is a need for nongovernmental universities like Islamic Azad University-Khorasgan Branch (IAUK) to take advantages of strategic planning models, making a strategic vision and aim for improving quality of its services. A strategic planning model which is modified and adopted from integrated strategic plan (Yarmohammadian et al, 2009_a) the first version was experienced in IUMS and reported by Yarmohammadian (2009_b) has been tried to revise, install and establish into IAUK.

2. Scope of project

The foundation of the Islamic Azad University Khorasgan Branch (IAUK) was approved by the Islamic Azad University Board of Trustees on 1987. This Branch commenced majoring 510 students in 4 disciplines in the same year and it is currently hosting 12000 students majoring in 81 different fields of study. So far 34792 students have graduated from this university.

IAUK with more than 20 years of experiences in education, research and development has gotten its appropriate position in the regional level as well as national area. Presently, with the purpose of achieving its future prospect, which is to attain the highest national position, to achieve appropriate indices of higher education in international levels, to reach the highest leading status among the universities of Isfahan province and to increase the scientific products indexed in international levels, the university has developed its short and long term programs (Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch, 2009).

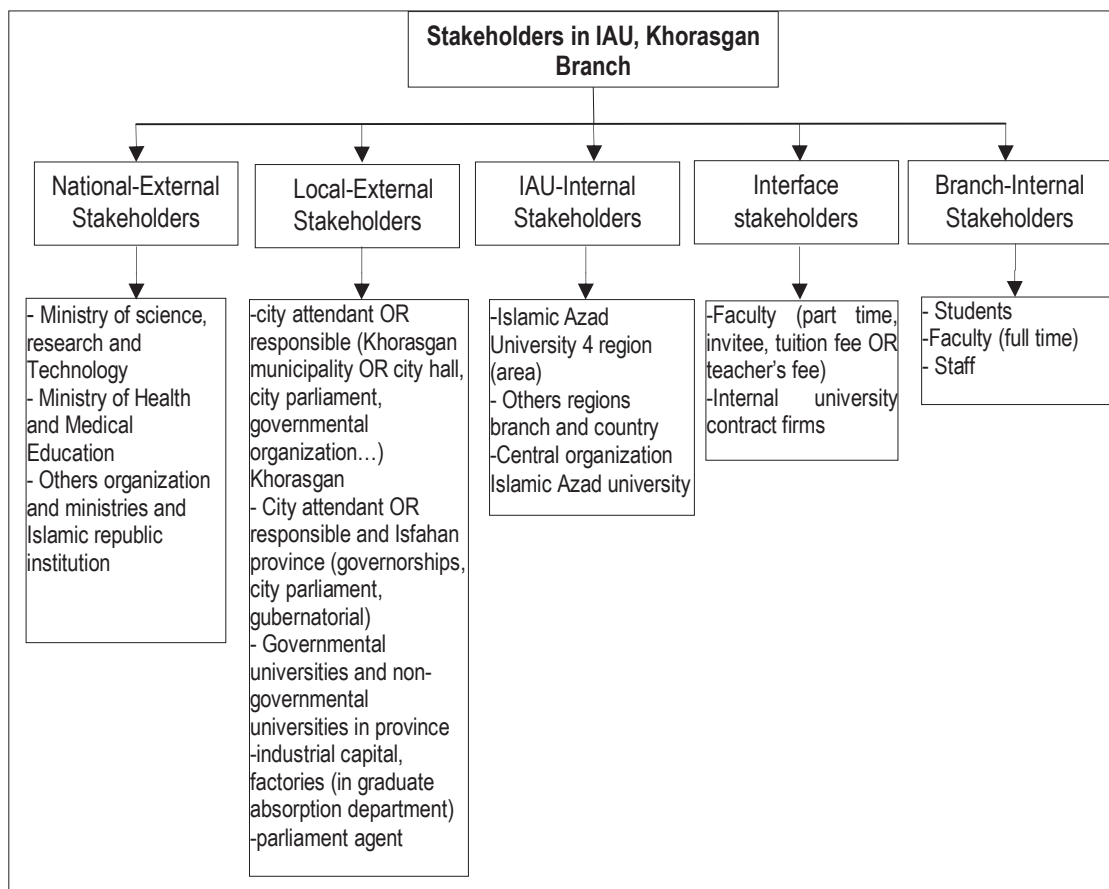
IAUK Branch also is one of the none-governmental universities in comprehensive rank over Iran. IAUK is committed to continuing its progress among the very best non-governmental universities in Middle East. We have articulated our ambitions around a well-defined strategy, which fully takes place within IAUK's prime missions toward students and the scientific community as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran people and society. The Branch is in a phase of continuous quantitative and qualitative growth. The challenge awaiting us will be to sustain this growth by enhancing our positive impact in the life of the society, as well as on the economy in IRI.

Over the last few years, several programs experienced by Islamic Azad Universities as well as state universities in Iran for improving quality and promoting their situation in higher education business market in regional and national level as well as international level. They have been involved in addressing the challenge of both measuring the performance of their acquisition systems and using performance results to improve their processes and practices to better meet the expectations of their customers for higher quality, lower cost, and improved service.

In 2009, the IAUK created teamwork to analyze the situation of Islamic Azad universities in Iran higher education system, to identify innovative approaches for measuring performance, and to develop strategies and recommendations for promoting situation and in search of excellence. At that time, most IAU Branches did establish some kind of strategic teams. Most of them developed a similar kind of strategic plans that were very generic and adopted from a simple classic model. That model was found to lack a focus on the outcomes of the processes used and largely in effective in obtaining dramatic and sustained improvements in the quality of the operations. IAU, Khorasgan Branch through research and site visits to leaders in performance measurement, identified critical success factors for acquisition organizations and developed an integrated approach known as Strategic Planning Model.

In 2009,IAUK chartered IAUK-Strategic Planning Teamwork to create, document, and maintain a strategic quality framework for acquisition that builds upon the Model (Yarmohammadian et al, 2009b). The framework was designed with sufficient flexibility to address IAUK special needs and have sufficient cohesion and commonality to identify key quality measures and appropriate benchmarks. The IAUK Team researched, designed, produced, and will facilitate implementation of the system, processes, and procedures necessary to meet the IAUK objectives of an effective management system in an ever-changing and turbulent environment. Various Focus Discussion groups (FDGs) including Research, Education, Resources, Cultural and Student affairs groups established. Groups started their tasks with Strategic planning Workshops and then during a period of 6-9 months they had regular meetings and produced SWOT analysis, identify stakeholders, make strategies ,set strategic goals and design objectives and action plans for the universities.

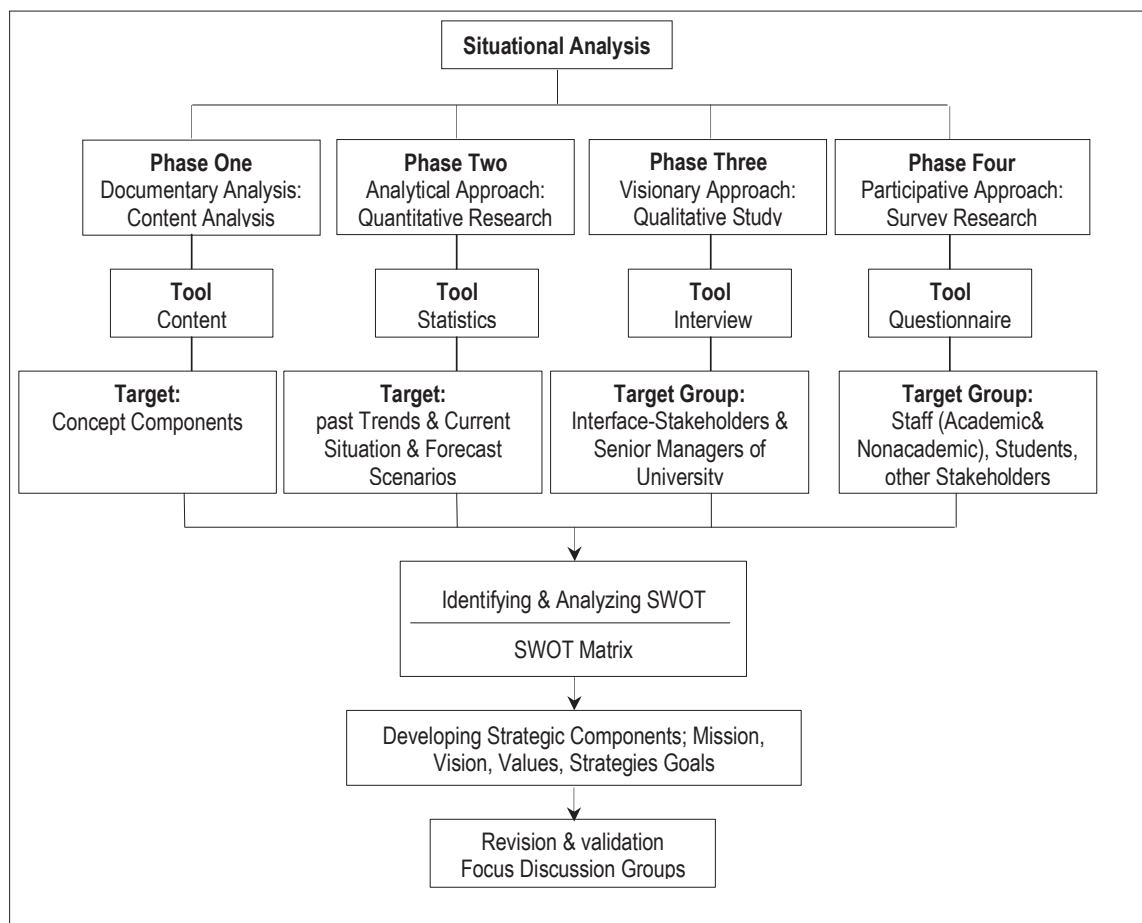
Figure 1. Stakeholders identification for IAU, Khorasgan Branch



3. Methodology of project

Methodology of this article was a kind of research and development (R&D) in two phases (a- review and comparative research for reviewing and analyzing experiences of other universities through the world and b- designing and developing an applied and comprehensive model that was relevant and fit for the circumstances of non-governmental universities in Iran specifically Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch as a great level university in national level. The strategic planning team involved key stakeholders like groups of managers, staff and also graduate student's representatives via Focus Discussion Groups in year 2009-10 to develop important organizational identities as well as strategic components such as Mission, Values and Vision. Figure 1 describes phases of strategic planning model in this research.

Figure 2. phases of strategic planning model



4. Results and conclusion

Applying strategic planning models for nongovernmental universities as well as other industrial and business sectors showed a great deal benefit and relevance. The following are some benefits of application of strategic planning model taking advantages of FDGs in IAUK that we attained during the process of implementation of this model:

- a systematic approach to unify all planning effort through organization.
- a quality improvement tool for assuring quality actions and programs.
- an instrument for reengineering business processes.
- a training tool to educate all staff (academic as well as nonacademic) emphasizing on learning and growth, internal business processes as well as customer and financial measures.
- a communication tool to translate strategy of top managers to lower levels of management and participatory management.

- a tool to monitor, evaluate key control indicators formative or summative.
- a tool to manage unwanted tradeoffs and correct unimportant action plans.
- a goal deployment approach for driving strategic goals down through the organization.
- a management system for focusing scarce resources on the most strategically leveraged improvements needed for successful strategy implementation.

The strategic plan which is developed and applied and examined as a system for linking strategy to action for IAUK, it took much mind and labor work during the process of designing and implementing in this university but it is strongly worth of work and helpful for higher education sector system in general as well as universities specifically Non-governmental and private universities. It is considered that a strategic planning that is combined and integrated with FDGs Technique can help organizations such as universities on their journey of quality, to greatness and to excellence.

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