

# **Revisiting the Missions and Educational Strategic Management of Universities**

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## **Abstract**

Observing successful management of business corporations, an increasing number of universities look to the SWOT analysis and the strategic management as essential tools for the development and implementation of their missions. However, it is recognized that universities differ in some respects from business and they still need a unified source of direction and guidance in order to address factual truth, students' needs and stakeholder concerns, and produce good management.

This paper aims at presenting that the universities' internal and external environments exercise significant influences on their mission contents and practices. The article is based on the writer's synthesis of a number of articles and researches regarding the use of SWOT analysis and strategic management in educational institutions. A specific element of the university mission involves the universities making significant contributions toward reaching their functions of knowledge searching, knowledge creation and dissemination, and their objectives in sustainable human resource development, academic achievement and student-oriented service provision. The roles of university missions are that they route the universities' objectives and implementation plans, and provide assessment criteria for evaluation. However, collaborative efforts of as many stakeholders as possible in the development process of mission statements promise to yield even greater results for the university strategic management.

## **Introduction**

A major characteristic distinguishing universities from other types of organizations is the philosophy guiding the educational ventures. The realized functions of higher education are teaching, researching, and providing services to society (Birnbaum, 1988). In Thailand, education presumes an additional function as to preserve and promote national heritages (ONEC, 2000). According to strategic management concept, no matter what functions does the university pursue, it is important to clearly communicate them through a mission statement (Drucker, 1974; Foley, 1995; Peeke, 1994; Quinley, 1991).

This article aims at presenting not only the components of the mission statement but also the process of mission development and implementation where the SWOT analysis and the strategic management are the keys to its success. The article is based on the writer's synthesis of a number of articles and researches of others as well as that of my own regarding the use of SWOT analysis and strategic management in educational institutions.

It is noticeable that an increasing number of universities look to the SWOT analysis and the strategic management as essential tools for the development and implementation of their missions. Although universities differ in some respects from

business, they still need a unified source of direction and guidance in order to address factual truth, students' needs and stakeholder concerns, and produce good management. The strategic mission can function as an invaluable tool of the university management if the university is striving for more competitiveness and effectiveness, now and in the diverging future.

### **Mission Statements of Universities**

Campbell and Tawady (1990) viewed that a mission is a statement responding to the questions regarding "what people are doing, why they are doing them, what they are proud of, what they are enthusiastic about, and what they believe in" (as cited in Stacey, 1994, p. 329). According to Stearns and Borna (1998), and Bart and Baetz (1998), the emphasis on strategic management in college and university has resulted in the introduction of the institutional mission statement which is considered as the guiding philosophy of education and the navigator for institutional direction (Quinley, 1991). The institutional mission statement generally influences and shapes overall campus environment and culture (Kuh et al., 1991). It determines core activities that occur on campus, such as hiring, training, university events and decision making (as cited in Foley, 1995).

The university mission statement is a statement defining the university's strategic position and offering a visionary view. An increasing number of colleges and universities pay attention to their mission statements and use them as foundations for management process and criteria for analysis of the institution's effectiveness. In such a case, the institutional missions significantly help in higher education management (Birnbaum, 1988).

### **The Influences of Internal and External Environments**

The colleges and universities of higher learning actually operated among the context of external and internal environments that affect the educational implementation and management. The environments determine essential elements that compose the university mission statements, or even influenced their choosing particular wording components. Certain driving forces affect the universities' articulation of their missions. On the other hand, the missions should conform to environments. Thus, it is important to recognize the underlying values and culture of the university, and to realize the mission establishment and applicability in relation to its environments.

The external environments that presently affect the university's affairs are the needs of external stakeholders, a knowledge-based society, quality of education, and supervisory institutions. The universities are operated within the modern knowledge-based society where the stakeholders' needs are in education, lifelong learning, and quality and effectiveness in education. They have realized the importance of information and communication technology in that it exercises dramatic impacts on the knowledge-based society within which the universities operate. Hence, the universities of today are committed to serve their students' needs for computer technology, worldwide access to information, and English language proficiency. The function of developing ability to apply and adapt learned knowledge is emphasized.

The internal conditions that the universities adhere and reflect in their missions include the university's position, structure, culture, values, and skills and

capacities. These factors affect the ways in which the university determines its contribution and implementation directions. The university's contributions are in academic, social, and international dimensions, which the university mission statement expresses.

A number of mission statements express expectations for the future that the universities will be a highly accepted institution in the academic industry and beyond, to be an expert in the most divergent fields, and to be responsive to current needs of information technology and English language literacy. The missions reveal the universities' vision, intention and interests, while the mission implementation reflects their resources, competencies, potential, and strength in responding to the threats and opportunities imposed by the external environments.

### **Mission Statement, SWOT Analysis and Strategic Management in University**

An analysis of the institution's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threat (the SWOT analysis) helps clarify the current strategic situation and determine the key success factors, institution's abilities, resources and skills when developing or revising mission statements (Thompson, 1997). My study on the mission statements of university in Thailand reflects the mission statements' elements, factors influencing the mission establishment, and certain functions of the mission statements in university management. Conducting SWOT analysis allows us to know "where the institution is now" and determined "where the institution want to reach". This facilitates identification of needed contents when composing a mission statement.

Either the mission development process or the implementation within the institutional strategic management emphasizes the strategies of participation, commitment, and evolution. They involve the incorporation of all stake groups so that they would support them and be committed to them. The process ranges from initial preparation to final adoption and dissemination. Campus-wide involvement, and appropriate committee discussions, with a firm and enthusiastic endorsement of the top management is essential (Chadwick, 1996). The process of securing agreement and support is important because it gives meaning and importance of the university mission statement.

In the management perspective, the mission statement is one of the strategic tools in the strategic planning process, as well as an assessment tool for improvement purpose (Conway, Mackay, & Yorke, 1994; Stearns & Borna, 1998). The mission application, as a core element in the strategic management process, grants meaningful and important to the mission statement. After an organization has established its mission statement, the strategic planning assumes the role as a process to develop plans for carrying out and achieving the specified missions (Bredley & Vrettras, 1990; Drucker, 1974; LeBaron & Markuson, 1991). The SWOT analysis helps identify the mission statements' strategic elements; the use of university mission navigating the strategic planning process reflects how meaningful the mission is within the university management.

### **Components of University Mission Statements**

It is important to note that most universities have one or more statements that reflected their missions. They may have a "philosophy" which provides the principle

concept for the mission statements' composition. The institutional founding "objectives," the "quality policy" of the universities, and the "missions" of each academic faculty and department explicitly represent and support the universities' missions, especially those of teaching, research, social services, and national heritage preservation focuses.

Analyzing SWOT of the universities make overt identification of important elements of the universities' mission statements. The elements deriving from internal factors include the universities' educational philosophy, historical background, and function of knowledge provision, with regards to their capability, perceived value, and culture. An institution's history, traditional self-concept, and an intuition of the founder have significant influences on messaging the mission statements. The universities' vision toward quality in educational services, and their contributions to academic, social, technological, and international benefits are the unique qualities reflected in their statements of missions and their mission implementation.

The university's position and business is generally perceived as a higher education provider. Its privately-owned or public status affects its direction as is designated by the governing board. The board members take important roles in decision-making and policies establishment. The historical and originally chartered philosophy of the university is a grounded concept presented in the university mission statement.

The universities' missions address the influences of external conditions. Knowledge-based society, the needs of external stakeholder, quality assurance in higher education, and the supervisory institution are challenges the universities have confronted and responded. Society, employers, and professional and academic accreditation agencies anticipate much from university graduates that they should acquired qualifications consistent with market requirements. The graduates are expected to possess internationally recognized qualifications.

The ultimate element that the universities in Thailand are obliged to attain is the mission to develop human resources by fulfilling four missions of teaching, researching, social servicing, and preserving national heritages with their concerns in quality. The government authorities as supervisory institutions and the related professional associations inserted essential influence on the universities' missions and implementation. All universities in Thailand, therefore, adopt the role and responsibility to fulfill those four missions and incorporate them into their mission statements.

### **Mission Process**

The university's missions are determined by a consideration of the university's history, resources, distinct competencies, and environmental constraints. The scanning of internal and external conditions at which the universities and their mission statements have addressed, thus, reveal that verification of certain elements in the mission statements is in accordance with the universities' competencies and the influences of external environments.

The composition and interpretation of a university's mission statement, as well as its implication are more or less affected by on-going social, economic and cultural forces, and the advancement of information technology and globalization. At the other end, the internal environments include the university's perceived position, capacities, resources and skills, values, and culture is the factors that acquired major concerns for mission development. The nature of the universities implied a broad and comprehensive

mission. A desired characteristic of the mission is clarity and balance between generic and specific mission statements. Different levels of organizational operation required a different degree of mission statements' specificity. The university mission statements have to be general, broad, and encompassing enough to include all of the schools' tasks and responsibilities and not to block the institutions to gain benefit from new opportunity. Yet the mission statements of academic faculties and departments should be more specific enough to provide a clear picture of what is to be done and to express their specialization in particular fields.

Participatory and involvement of organizational members in the university management are discovered throughout the establishment process, ranging from initiation, composition, announcement, and implementation. The management requests comments from the committee, expresses their willingness to make changes according to the obtained comments and suggestions, and seeks consensus agreement on the contents and wording of the statement. The process allows the statement to be exposed to as many people as possible—getting as many people as possible involved in the mission establishment process to achieve mission awareness and acceptance, and implying two-way communication in the universities. Presidential leadership is considered the critical element in the mission development and application processes.

### **Roles and Functions of Mission Statement in University Management**

The university mission statement is defined as a statement about the type of services the university wishes to provide, the specific objectives and needs to be fulfilled, and the means or technologies by which it fulfills these needs. Establishing a mission statement enables the university to realize the focus of its business and also to identify its environmental constraints. Additionally, the study reflects that the SWOT analysis, which employs an underlying concept of strategic thinking, is important for mission development. It helps determine the competencies of the university, clarify its purpose, and identify the current strategic situation within which the university is operated. Consequently, this step can be considered important to the selection of appropriate elements when composing a mission statement.

With regards to the uses of the mission statement in the strategic planning process, the statement appears to assume an important function as a tool for guiding and navigating the university management. Especially in strategic planning processes, implementation, and evaluation activities, the statements are one of the core components that the administrators should take into account. Such managerial activities as setting goals and specific objectives by which performance is measured, designing plan of actions to achieve the objectives, asserting the criteria for the evaluation process, and identifying benchmarks for quality improvement should be responsive to the institutional missions.

The roles and functions of the university mission statement within the university strategic planning are in determining and prioritizing core activities in such areas as personnel and faculty development, educational administration function of program offering, and curriculum design and revision, academic function, and financial planning function of budget allocations, marketing function, publicity and customer attraction. The mission statements let the university's personnel, both academic and

administrative, and the students know what is expected of them, thereby increasing the likelihood that missions will be implemented successfully.

In short, the strategic planning is needed in order to make the mission work. The mission statements guide the universities' directions of where they want to reach and identify plans and actions to reach the targets. Both academic and administrative practices establish support and encourage work toward stated goals deriving from the mission statements. Performing the roles and functions as planned can confirm that the mission statement is vital to the university's operations, leading to its future and mission fulfillment.

## **Conclusion**

The need for higher education is undergoing profound changes. As an educational institution, the university will undoubtedly be affected by many transformations. The look at the mission statement in relation to other management tools is important to the strategic management process where flexibility in addressing influences of dynamic environments is needed. The strategic thinking of SWOT analysis for the purpose of mission content selection, the strategic planning process in the mission implementation, and certain management style as involvement and participation in the mission establishment process are concerned. Whether the mission statement is a mere group of words or a practical driving statement, and whether it suits for the present or the future conditionally depend on the mission statement's contents in relation to its environments or context, the strategic approach of the mission establishment, and its application process.

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