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The role of strategic management and leadership in higher education institutions. The case of public universities in Greece

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Keywords

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Abstract

This opinion piece offers an overview of why innovative practices in strategic management and leadership have an essential role in the long-term success of higher educational institutions. Additionally, it examines the strategies that can help universities maintain a competitive advantage in a complex global environment, opening business opportunities and providing better prospects for students, academics and society. I present the case of Greek Universities, with evidence from interviews with academics and my experience as an academic in several academic institutions for 17 years. For the purposes of this article, innovative practices in universities also engage creativity processes and design how students and academics can and need to share opportunities, co-create and initiate innovative behaviours.

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Introduction

Management and leadership are crucial in the global higher education market (Toker, 2022). Nevertheless, formal managerial concepts still seem to be lacking in higher education in general (Austin et al., 2013; Drew, 2010; Katharaki & Katharakis, 2010).

Especially in Greece, public universities are not used to working with managerial concepts and rules to improve their product and quality of sharing knowledge when their core mission is said to be "the production and transmission of knowledge through research and teaching" (Greek law 1268/1982).

In this study, I explore the role of strategic management in the long-term success of public higher education institutions, with evidence from interviews with academics from Greece and my personal experience as an academic (autoethnographic method). Understanding the strategies and practices that can help public universities in Greece maintain a competitive advantage in a complex global environment can help Greek academia advance and improve its practices in order to survive. The actions and activities that can offer Greek public universities a sustainable future and, at the same time, open their business opportunities and provide better prospects for their students, their academics and society as a whole. Thus, these are essential for them not only to improve their practices and achievements but also to continue functioning.

Universities and management standards

Higher education institutions experience profound changes in their missions and functions due to globalisation, technological progress, and the need for financial independence (Pham et al., 2019). The need for innovation to adapt to the change in institutional and educational procedures calls for the inclusion of management rules and concepts within the university community. Strategic management is essential for long-term business success, as creating clear objectives, finding out how these objectives will be achieved, supporting business activities and allocating the resources needed to sustain these objectives define a business strategy (Amolia & Aghashahib, 2016).

The growing complexity of higher education institutions should lead to a flexible approach towards strategic management, delegating responsibility and empowering individuals for their leadership (Taylor & Machado, 2006). Changing demographics, reduced funding, globalisation, epidemics, environmental issues, a mixed profile of students, competitors from around the world, new technology, and turbulent times are only some of the challenges that higher education institutions worldwide confront (Taylor & Machado, 2006).

Austin et al. (2013) indicate that a formal project management methodology can benefit universities. Using interviews with top leaders from Drexel University, the authors illustrate how difficult it is for universities to implement project management methodology with the given financial elements.

Doyle and Brady (2018) propose four factors that can lead to the HEIs' development and strategic innovation: (a) the difficulty in adapting to changes; (b) the difficulty in adopting a complete organisational model; (c) uncertainties over the effectiveness of management tools; and (d) the fact that world of business moves towards a holistic form of organisational thinking. Universities will have to create the conditions to adapt and expand (Doyle & Brady, 2018).

To be able to adapt and survive, universities need to rethink their organisational structure and management model (Taylor & Machado, 2006). Strategic management is needed for universities to move forward, but there are always some basic principles and rules to respect and follow. We are talking about a holistic process whose components need to reinforce one another (Taylor & Machado, 2006). "Institutional culture, strategic planning, leadership, institutional research, resource allocation and financial management, personnel and human resources management, research and scholarly activity, student and campus support services, academic support services, internationalisation, and external relations" are some of the strategic management components proposed by Taylor and Machado (2006).

In some countries, like Vietnam, higher educational institutions recognise the role of academic managers for effective university performance (Pham et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there seems to be a gap between what universities expect and the competencies of their leaders (Pham et al., 2019). Higher education institutions involve a complicated process, as we have different perceptions of things: knowledge sharing, collaboration, academic projects, etc. An academic leader should take everything into account, using a leadership methodology and rules that would help the specific academic institution based on its own particularities and structure. Talking about leadership, let's now examine some leadership styles that could fit the culture and principles of universities.

Leadership in universities

University leaders are called to keep the university functioning effectively, responding to the needs of a complex environment where students, staff, and other stakeholders are involved (Doyle & Brady, 2018). Strong leadership is an important and complex element in orchestrating a stable and viable environment in a university (Taylor & Machado, 2006; McCaffery, 2018; Doyle & Brady, 2018), aiding the application of strategic management. In this study, I am concerned with leadership in public universities, which are different from other enterprises.

Leadership is needed for a successful management process in universities, like in any other organisation. The difference between management and leadership is that management is a structured process while leadership is more interpersonal, inspiring and motivating others (Taylor & Machado, 2006). Interpersonal engagement is indeed critical to meeting some key challenges of educational leaders (Drew, 2010).

Effective universities need purposeful leadership as they need proper strategies to deal with the actual competition (Sallis, 2014). Along with effective teamwork, leadership and strategy help quality development. To do this, we need a) a clear mission, b) a strategy to achieve that mission, c) the participation of all in strategy development, and d) the evaluation of the university's effectiveness (Sallis, 2014).

Educational leaders are directly determining their students' performance, having different roles inside the university (Toker, 2022). The accommodation of institutional development alternative paradigms in higher education, integrating strategic management and leadership, is an emergent process (Doyle & Brady, 2018). The researchers (Doyle & Brady, 2018) explain the requirement of a different mindset "when dealing with a scenario of continuous change, one that is cyclical, with constant ebb and flow of ideas, created by interaction and conversations between people for which there can be no predictable outcome and no end-state, and in which multiple solutions are often at play".

There are many different leadership styles and variables that differentiate one university from another (missions, circumstances, cultures, external environmental factors), and this is why there is no simple formula to follow. An effective leader, in general, can view situations from different perspectives before deciding the correct option to choose (Taylor & Machado, 2006). Effectiveness as a university leader requires managers to know their environment well (McCaffery, 2018). A university leader needs to develop a flexible mindset in accordance with their university culture, review their course portfolio and subject area, improve student outcomes, and manage projects to be able to make a difference in their strategic planning role (McCaffery, 2018).

Practices of distributed pedagogical leadership and generative dialogue are tools that universities can use to better operate (Jappinen & Sarja, 2011). Distributed pedagogical leadership includes the fact that educational actors share a common mission, which means that all stakeholders take collective responsibility for students' learning (Jappinen & Sarja, 2011).

Adaptive leadership, which clarifies competing goals and values, can contribute to community change and knowledge sharing (Preece, 2016). Sart (2014) revealed that the participatory democracy leadership model and intensive collaboration with industry managers also have a significant role in the advancement of university practices and conditions.

Yielder and Codling (2004) propose a model of shared academic management and leadership, which develops the responsibilities of both the academic leader and the manager and explores their symbiotic relationship. A dean may be considered both a leader and manager of a higher education institution (Arntzen, 2016), which can be a conflict point. Indeed, the need for strategic leadership, flexibility, creativity and change capability can respond to competing tensions to maintain academic quality (Drew, 2010). Arntzen

(2016) explains that a dean is influenced by structural changes and public management needs in the system of higher education.

Education systems around the world have remained resilient, surviving very important crises like the COVID-19 crisis (Kefalaki et al., 2021a; Rudolph et al., 2024a, 2024c). Crisis leadership is a needed tool for universities around the world to face various crises that they will most probably experience in the future. COVID-19 was a catalyst for the management ideological change of a university (Al Mahameed et al., 2024). More particularly, academic identity in universities has moved away from traditional research and teaching toward revenue-generating customers, giving a power shift away from academics to managers (Al Mahameed et al., 2024).

Rudolph et al. (2024a), in their *Palgrave Handbook of Crisis Leadership in Higher Education*, ask scholars how types of leadership might play a role in influencing higher education navigation through polycrisis among the mess. Authors also describe how each university, even when having the same tools to deal with a crisis, has its own way of functioning: "Universities and tertiary institutions are not purely unique in their regular and frequent engagement with multiple simultaneous crises, but their resilience in response, their capacity to engage, and the nature of the crisis are different" (Rudolph et al., 2024b).

Interviewing the staff of an Australian university to learn the most significant challenges, Drew (2010) clustered five themes of significant challenges: a) fiscal and personal resources, b) flexibility, creativity and change-capability, c) replying to pressures, d) maintaining academic quality, and e) effective leadership. Thinking and acting creatively were also cited by the participants in the study (Drew, 2010). The theme of creativity and innovative practices is very important in the educational process, not only in university leadership but also in the university as a whole.

What innovative practices for higher education institutions?

At this point, I propose some specific ideas from innovative practices, based on the literature review, that can be used in a university, depending on its culture, needs and future projects. Regarding management education, innovative teaching strategies are needed to engage students more effectively in the classroom (Clack & Ellison, 2018). Innovative teaching strategies are generally required not only to more effectively engage students in the classroom, but also to engage teachers' interest to interact, share knowledge, and communicate with their students and other colleagues as well. For example, flipped classrooms and role-play can help educators innovate their teaching techniques (Clack & Ellison, 2018).

It is also important that young people, especially students, should be introduced to and involved in innovative projects and ideas (Kefalaki, 2021). Universities should include personal examples of educators' actions and projects to encourage younger ones to take their own creative journey. Such actions should be a part of their curricula. Universities

must also provide the necessary means and facilities to engage students in such opportunities for inspirational development (Kefalaki, 2021). Imitation of inspirational projects proposed by academics and students is a great way for innovation to be produced in the education environment.

University spin-offs (USOs) are an important instrument for science-based innovation. For Park et al. (2023), a mechanism for science-based innovation is a framework that identifies the resource categories that may or may not improve science-based innovation through university spin-offs (USOs).

An innovative practice that we deal with on a worldwide level and that can become, with the correct use, a great innovative practice for universities in the future is Artificial Intelligence (AI). Rudolph et al. (2024b) argue that even if generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) offers potential in education (pedagogy, research, administration, and student support), a critical approach is needed while speaking of academic integrity, labour dislocation, prejudices, environmental sustainability, commercialisation, and monitoring gaps. The effective incorporation of AI in higher education should be proposed based on the principles of ethics, justice, and the benefit of education. Higher education institutions should also ensure that such technological advancements can help all stakeholders while maintaining all the important academic values (Rudolph et al., 2024b).

Below are ten opportunities and threats posed by Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI).

Table 1: Ten opportunities and threats of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), proposed by Rudolph et al. (2024b).

	Opportunities	Threats
1	Teaching Assistant	Academic Integrity Challenges
2	Feedback and Assessments	Dilution or Automation of University Teacher Roles
3	Adaptive Curriculum Development	Quality, Accuracy, and Ethical Concerns
4	Research Assistant	Technological Colonialism, Mono-Culturalism, and the Concentration of Power
5	Automated Grading	Erosion of Graduate Attributes
6	Collaborative Circles	Graduate Employment
7	Student Intervention	Privacy and Surveillance
8	Administrative Support	Bias
9	Inclusive Education	Sustainability
10	Wellbeing Initiatives	Regulatory and Policy Challenges

It is true that fast developments in the chatbot space have a great impact on higher education, as many students and academics use bots like ChatGPT, Bard/Gemini, Bing Chat/Copilot, Ernie and many others (Rudolph et al., 2023b). ChatGPT can create impressive prose within seconds (Rudolph et al., 2023a). Major variations to traditional higher education assessments are needed to address the existence of increasingly powerful AI (Rudolph et al., 2023a).

Universities need to transform and adapt, moving from the science-based model into the Third Generation University (3GU). The three forces that lead to this change are: a) top universities seeking alternative funding, b) technology-driven enterprises cease carrying out research themselves, and instead they work jointly with universities of a high standard, and c) globalisation provides more opportunities

to study abroad and increases student mobility and competition among universities (Wissema, 2009).

The case of Greek universities

Greek universities are owned and funded by the Greek government and have strong conservative policies (ESG, 2015). Thus, they are defined as public institutions and enjoy institutional autonomy. There are no student fees, and national legislation determines university budgets, procurement, financial oversight and employment (Katharaki & Katharakis, 2010; Bourantas et al., 2001). Nevertheless, public universities in Greece have negligible funds and have to adapt to the global competition among universities to be able to continue functioning and offer quality knowledge and opportunities to their students, academics, personnel and society at large.

Currently, Greek Universities do not appear to be at all familiar with the concept of a 'professional manager' (Whitchurch, 2007) working for the university. To be more precise, they preserve an outdated educational system, as they are not adapted to the changing environment, the knowledge society and the new 'rules' at an international standard (Trivella & Nasiopoulos, 2012). Some small changes are just starting to appear at the time, as university leaders and academics cannot but follow the flow. If not, they will cease to exist.

For now, Greek universities are forced to keep up with the European university's standards and quality guidelines (ESG, 2015). These guidelines reflect an agreement among all the organisations and ministries involved on how to engage with quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. This is how it provides a basis for the successful application of successful management rules. These standards for quality assurance involve internal and external quality assurance, as well as quality assurance agencies (ESG, 2015).

There is a great need to reform Greek universities' management and administration system, and to prove this, Katharaki & Katharakis (2010) examined the efficiency of 20 public universities in Greece. This study showed the inefficiency in terms of human resources management while recognising opportunities to increase research activity and research income. The researchers proposed an evaluation process that can more consistently and reliably evaluate public universities' resource management efficiency (Katharaki & Katharakis, 2010). It is remarkable how the need to reform the management and administration system of Greek universities remains unchanged 14 years after their research and how little has been done towards this direction.

With the help of the open interviews, inspired by Austin et al.'s (2013) application of Project Management in Higher Education, I created research questions that I asked directly. These guiding interview questions were used for the interviews I conducted in Greek.

1. Do you think it is important to integrate strategic management into higher education?

2. What is the use of strategic management within your university?
3. Do you think your university needs to improve the use of strategic management?
4. If this is the case, please give us concrete examples.

During the interviews with the academics, I explained that for this study, strategic management refers to the decisions regarding goals, resource allocation and the overall performance of a university, which is essential to the university's strategic planning.

All academics explained that their university does not seem to use any kind of strategic management, although academics believe it is important for universities to innovate their practices and adapt to the new actual needs. Strategic management and leadership, as far as academics are concerned, are very important for the university to be able to move forward. Nowadays, more than ever, a public university in Greece needs to maintain a competitive advantage in a complex global environment, which means opening business opportunities and providing better prospects for students, academics and society.

There are some public universities in Greece that use managerial concepts to adapt to the needs of universities as a business. These universities have started to use some sort of innovative technological tools for strategic management, or at least this is what I learned via the interviews. In particular, I learned that the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) has a Quality Assurance Unit (MODIP, n.d.) with a role (according to Article 14 of statute Greek law number 4009/2011) to a) develop policies, strategies and processes to improve the Institution, b) organise the quality assurance system, c) coordinate and support the processes of units and studies programs evaluation. As we can read on the official page of MODIP, this tool aims to improve the quality of the educational and research work and of the processes and services of AUTH. It is also important to note that AUTH has installed Blackboard since 2003 (Veglis & Pomportsis, 2005).

The members of AUTH (students, academics and staff) can access the system using their institutional account. The academics whom I interviewed confirmed that there is a written evaluation process completed by the academics and the students at the end of each academic year. The university takes this written type of evaluation into consideration to ameliorate its 'services'. Then, it is the Greek Ministry of Education that organises the process.

It is important to indicate that the new law (law 4957/2022) (Government Gazette, 2022) for education (Article no 18) refers to the existence of an executive director/ manager (εκτελεστικού διευθυντή) who ensures the efficient administrative and financial operation of the university and is also responsible for the implementation of the strategic plan and the annual target setting (Article 18 of the law 4957/2022) (Government Gazette, 2022). It seems, though, that universities in Greece and university leaders are aware of the tools and the processes needed to put

in place innovative processes and be able to adapt in an advancing world. Nevertheless, judging from the general actual situation, universities have not yet turned theoretical knowledge into action.

The question is what actions and activities can offer Greek public universities a sustainable future to open their business opportunities that are essential for them to continue functioning. Based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG, 2015) in the European Higher Education Area (Figure 1), institutions should first of all assure the competence of their academics. More particularly, "they should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of their staff". This is not the case for Greece, especially when talking about the university's academic staff. When we search the records of most of the academics, we will see that most of them have a sort of relation with other members of the academics or the administrative staff of the university.

1.5 TEACHING STAFF

STANDARDS:

Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

GUIDELINES:

The teacher's role is essential in creating a high quality student experience and enabling the acquisition of knowledge, competences and skills. The diversifying student population and stronger focus on learning outcomes require student-centred learning and teaching and the role of the teacher is, therefore, also changing (cf. Standard 1.3).

Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively. Such an environment

- sets up and follows clear, transparent and fair processes for staff recruitment and conditions of employment that recognise the importance of teaching;
- offers opportunities for and promotes the professional development of teaching staff;
- encourages scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research;
- encourages innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies.

Figure 1: Photo of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area (ESG, 2015).

Most of the time, or very often, a competent teacher cannot become a university teacher if he/she does not have a relative connection with another member of the university community. Generally, if we examine connections among academics in Greek universities, we will find that most of them are relatives of other academics or university staff members, which is not, of course, a title of academic excellence. Someone should, in many cases, be a relative or have a strong relationship with other university staff to become an academic. This cannot, of course, help public universities grow nor provide the academic staff with the best qualities and competencies of a good teacher.

Even if teaching well (see Brookfield et al., 2023) is also a question of experience and personal development, there are always some basic qualities of what a good teacher means, and this can be examined using managerial concepts and evidence, among other things. Of course, I am not the only one speaking of the dark side or one of the dark sides of academia (Fleming, 2021; Fleming et al., 2021) and, more specifically, academia in Greece. The academics I interviewed referred to this undeniable practice that has governed Greek academia for years, although they did not wish to name persons and situations. It is a secret rule of how most of the academics get their positions in Greece. Unfortunately, this practice cannot help academia grow, and many exceptional

academics leave Greece to pursue an academic career abroad.

Of course, no matter how many changes we try to make in the university sector to obtain the best possible results, there is always the other side of 'excellence'. Many universities fight for 'excellence' using managerial concepts and metrics just to achieve supposed excellence, not really caring about the sharing of knowledge and its positive effects. Andrew (2024, p. 182) speaks of the hidden truth that academic institutions are "content just to get learners 'over the line' and hides a more authentic, bottom-up conception of 'excellence', which appears when the voices of learners and educators are heard above the managerialist chatter and when teaching well is considered".

This is also a very important problem of Greek academia: academics sacrifice their connection with other academic members and students just to get the best possible credit, which, in most cases, does not mean the best possible result to provide knowledge sharing, interaction, and reliable results.

Conclusion

In this study, I examined the use of managerial concepts in Greek higher education. Even if universities in Greece are not used to working with managerial concepts and rules, since their core mission is the production and transmission of knowledge through research and teaching (Greek law 1268/82), some universities seem to be familiar with innovative concepts of strategic management and are able to conform to the global higher education market. Nevertheless, most universities in Greece do not seem to be ready to innovate and advance.

Higher education institutions must adapt and learn to be flexible, innovative and open to change. Rethinking the organisational structure and institutional management model; changing the dean's role to an externally recruited manager who will be flexible, creative, able to take risks and able to adapt to changes and help the university staff do the same; choosing a leadership style depending on the character of each institution (missions, circumstances, cultures, external environmental factors), are some of the important things to take into consideration for higher educational institutions to be able to go further.

Strategic management has an essential role in the long-term success of higher educational institutions, and in this study, I propose a variety of strategies that can help universities maintain a competitive advantage in a complex global environment, opening business opportunities and providing a better prospect for students, academics and the society as a whole.

Specific actions for successful post-pandemic crisis leadership in Greek higher education have been proposed (Kefalaki, 2024). Additionally, training needs for educators during a crisis like the pandemic were met with adaptability and innovative ideas, depending on each country's infrastructure (Kefalaki et al., 2021b). Rather than being defined by the

COVID-19 crisis, universities around the world seized the opportunity to transform higher education from a paradigm that has been to the paradigm of what might be (Bonk et al., 2020). This is what universities and educators should continue to do: create opportunities in difficult situations and adapt to future needs. Higher education institutions that do not adapt will no longer be able to deliver appropriate educational services and will eventually cease to exist.

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