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Strategic Thinking & Organisation Culture; Insights from a Public University Context

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Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences of management level staff in the application of strategic thinking within a public university context. Employing a qualitative research design and criterion-I sampling, 26 participants directly involved in strategic planning and implementation processes were interviewed. Findings reveal that, during strategy implementation, the institution relies heavily on elements rooted in an indigenous organisational culture. These include "fire-fighting" management, freestyle systemic knowledge practices, managing by looking to government, and navigation of a highly politicised institutional environment. These culturally embedded practices stand in stark contrast to the university's formally espoused organisational values articulated across three successive five-year strategic planning cycles. The study concludes that this cultural–strategic dissonance has significantly impeded the consistent application of strategic thinking at the implementation stage. The findings highlight a critical misalignment between declared institutional values and the actual managerial practices shaping strategic outcomes.

Keywords

University, Organisation Culture, Strategic Thinking, Strategic Planning, Organisation Values

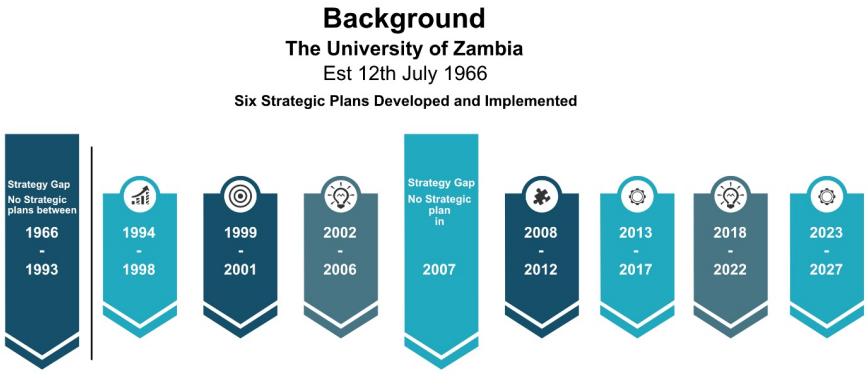
1. Introduction

In its strategic plans, the University of Zambia (UNZA) has outlined specific behaviours deemed essential for achieving its strategic objectives. Since its establishment in 1966, the University has developed and implemented seven strategic plans covering the following periods as outlined in **Figure 1**: 1994-1998, 1999-2003, 2002-2006, 2008-2012, 2013-2017, 2018-2022, and 2023-2027.

However, despite these efforts, the University has continued to experience tech-

nical insolvency (UNZA, 2018). What remains unclear is the nature of the Organisational Culture that has shaped the strategic thinking and implementation processes over the years.

UNZA was chosen for this study due to its historical significance and leadership role in Higher Education. As the first and oldest Public University, UNZA carries a national mandate reflected in its motto, "Service and Excellence". It is, therefore, expected to exemplify sound Management practices that can be emulated and transferred across other sectors through capacity building and skills dissemination.



Source: Field Data.

Figure 1. Strategic Plan development and implementation at UNZA.

This study looked at the organisational culture embedded values spanning the strategic planning cycles 2008-2012, 2013-2017, 2018-2022 and 2023-2027. The values of the organisation espoused in the mentioned strategic planning cycles are listed in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. UNZA Organization Culture embedded values.

UNZA Strategic Plan Cycle	Organisation Culture embedded values
2008-2012	Equity, Accountability, Transperancy, Social Justice, Integrity, Inclusiveness, Excellency, Academic Freedom, Search for new knowledge, Service and Innovation
2013-2017	Innovativeness, Integrity, Accountability, Academic Freedom, Green Environment, Equity and Excellence
2018-2022	Academic Freedom, Excellence, Innovativeness, Eco-Friendliness, Integrity and Equity
2023-2027	Innovativeness, Integrity, Academic Freedom, Green Environment, Equity and Customer Care

Source: Field Data.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

To interpret from Management level Staff, their lived experiences in the application of Strategic Thinking at the University of Zambia.

1.2. Research Question

What are the lived experiences of Management level Staff when applying Strategic Thinking elements?

In this research question, the study followed the norminalist ontology while benefiting from two types of logic namely abduction, when collecting data and induction when analyzing and categorizing the data for thematic analysis purposes. The author socially constructed the reality of management level staff using interpretivist and constructivist lens of post positivism.

2. Statement of the Problem

Organizational culture, as articulated in the strategic plans of universities, plays a critical role in shaping strategic thinking among university managers. However, there is often a disconnect between the espoused cultural values presented in official strategic documents and the lived experiences of university managers. This misalignment can undermine the cultivation and practice of strategic thinking, which is essential for the realization of long-term institutional goals.

While existing literature has extensively explored various factors contributing to strategic goal attainment failure within organizations, limited attention has been given to the role of organizational culture particularly its practical enactment in influencing strategic thinking processes. The persistent disjunction between formalized cultural ideals and the operational realities experienced by Managers may inhibit the development of coherent and adaptive strategic practices. Such misalignment poses significant risks to the University's capacity to effectively implement its strategic vision and respond to complexity and a dynamic Higher Education environment.

The under-researched intersection of organizational culture and strategic thinking raises Important questions about how culture, as a lived and dynamic behaviour, either enables or constrains strategic action within the University context. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding how Universities can foster a culture that genuinely supports strategic thinking as a core competency in achieving Institutional success.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking (ST) is characterized as a creative and innovative approach that emphasizes exploration and a user-centric perspective. It represents a process of synthesis and creativity that is closely linked with strategic planning. Strategic planning involves the systematic analysis and evaluation of relevant information to support informed decision-making and facilitate the achievement of organizational objectives (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2001; Magistretti, Dell'Era, & Verganti, 2021; Henríquez-Calvo & Martínez, 2023).

According to Lee et al. (2025), strategic thinking, when viewed through the lens of organizational ambidexterity, requires ongoing adaptation in both thought

processes and organizational structures. This dynamic enables organizations to enhance efficiency and flexibility by balancing routine, repetitive operations with non-routine, creative initiatives. When strategic approaches are designed to be adaptive, organizations can cultivate capabilities that both exploit existing strengths and explore new opportunities. This dual capacity is encapsulated in the widely recognized framework of "exploitation and exploration" (March, 1991).

ST can also be applied to innovation through the concept of "innovative ambidexterity," as described by Sims et al. (2022). This approach involves organizations simultaneously exploiting existing innovation capabilities while exploring new ones, all in pursuit of broader sustainability objectives. The concept is illustrated through a case study of a global technology firm that successfully transitioned from a traditional technology business model to a cloud-based digital platform.

Historically, ST has evolved as a key component of strategic discourse, aimed at guiding organizations toward achieving their desired performance outcomes through effective planning and adaptability. In this study eight core elements that define strategic thinking are outlined as: systems thinking, thinking in time, focused intent, reframing skills, environmental analysis, hypothesis-driven, reflecting and intelligent opportunism.

According to Bibu et al. (2016), strategic thinking reflects the accumulated skills and experiences of Managers. They emphasize that a Manager's ability to think strategically is shaped by three critical factors: a culture and processes oriented toward the market, strong market sensing and learning capabilities, and customer-centric operational processes.

Asobee (2021) further underscores that strategic thinking is a continuous process that enables organizations to create value and gain a competitive edge. Across societies, there is a shared belief in the importance of cultural norms that shape and guide behavior, reinforcing the relevance of strategic thinking as both a practical and culturally embedded process.

Systems thinking involves identifying distinctions and recognizing systems, relationships, and perspectives within an organizational context (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2023). The systems perspective is conceptualized as a Mental Model of an organizational system, emphasizing an in-depth understanding of the interactions and interdependencies among its constituent elements (Bonn, 2001). The implementation of systems thinking prioritizes consideration of how various units and schools influence organizational processes. Furthermore, operationalizing systems thinking requires the engagement of all stakeholders who affect the organization's strategic objectives, facilitating collaborative value creation.

The concept of being intent-focused pertains to the deliberate pursuit of a defined strategic position or vantage point within the protracted trajectory of organizational performance, wherein the cornerstone is the sustained and consistent pursuit of competitive advantage. An intent-focused orientation privileges a pervasive optimism regarding the success of strategic initiatives, and this orientation is manifested through leadership's demonstrable commitment to problem resolution and the cultivation of an organizational culture conducive to success (Jelenc,

2008; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998).

Reframing skills denote the capacity of organizational leaders to fluidly shift cognitive focus across multiple interpretive frames, mental models, and paradigms, thereby facilitating the generation of novel strategic visions and alternative courses of action (Pang & Pisapia, 2012; Pisapia et al., 2009). This cognitive agility is especially critical in deciphering complex, ambiguous, and unprecedented challenges through the synthesis of fresh insights.

A hypothesis-driven organization is characterized by leadership's capacity for adaptive responsiveness to dynamic environmental contingencies. Such an organization engages in the formulation of fundamental, long-term corrective strategies and structural modifications aimed at achieving substantive, sustainable performance improvements. The generation of strategic hypotheses is predicated on the systematic deployment of counterfactual inquiry, "what if" questions which serve to catalyze creative cognition and augment the problem-solving capabilities of organizational members (Goldman et al., 2015).

Reflective capability encompasses the integration of analytical, logical reasoning with experiential and experimental cognition, drawing upon accumulated information and perceptual data to inform judgment regarding past events. This synthesis gives rise to intuitive principles that guide present decision-making and future strategic actions (Mintzberg, 1994; Bonn, 2005).

In any intelligent organisation, analysis of its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) never ends; the search for opportunities from different perspectives is ongoing (Liedtka, 1998; Nasabee et al., 2009).

Environmental analysis looks at organisational strengths and opportunities, places at its centre internal and external analysis, emphasises the importance of recognising the internal and external dynamics in the environment and encourages understanding of the strategic issues the organisation is faced with (Alkalibi & Idrees, 2009).

Thinking in time denotes the ability to assess the past and the present in order to determine the future to pursue. Thinking in time is about using the information available to establish existing gaps and how to address them (Liedtka, 1998; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998).

3.2. Organizational Culture

It has been suggested by some scholars, that organisation culture embraces understandings, shared beliefs, norms, standards and values shared by members of an organization (Altiok, 2011) that guide sense making and action (Ott, 1989). The idea of a corporate culture pre-supposes existence of organizational values, which in a study by Allio (2006) has been demonstrated as a crucial ingredient in strategic thinking as it influences Managerial perceptions.

Organizational culture is fundamentally conceptualized as the collective set of shared assumptions, beliefs, and values held by members within an organization. These beliefs develop and are continuously reinforced through both individual

and collective experiences, embodying underlying assumptions about the nature of reality (Mohammed et al., 2025). Organizational culture significantly influences how an organization responds to change and acquires new competencies (Lam et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2020; Kwantes & Boglarsky, 2007). Additionally, the system of rewards and punishments embedded within corporate culture plays a critical role in shaping employee morale, potentially serving to either enhance or hinder motivation (Farndale, 2017).

Culture manifests in and directs desired behaviours, shaping employees' perceptions of their identity and organizational image, which in turn fosters commitment. It presents a distinctive organizational identity, unique to each entity. An in-depth understanding of an organization's culture is essential for comprehending its work practices and the degree of employee commitment. This understanding is also crucial when evaluating organizational effectiveness and overall performance (Muneer et al., 2022). Moreover, organizational culture can be defined as a collectively held vision that integrates individual, group, and systemic organizational elements, alongside shared behavioral patterns. It encompasses a set of commonly experienced attributes that fundamentally characterize the organizational environment.

The attitude of top management is also a part of the corporate culture, and thus influences the market orientation of the firm, Seah and Hsieh (2015) and this approach encourages strategic thinking inside the organization (Moon, 2013). According to Masood, Dani, Burns, and Backhouse (2006) organization culture is the "glue that holds organizations together". Thus, corporate culture helps in guiding the strategic thinking process of the firm. A company, which has a valuable, rare and imperfectly imitable culture is successful in having a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991).

Organizational culture is increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of both sustained competitive advantage and employee retention, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors (Sadri & Lees, 2001). The interaction between employees and corporate culture fosters the development of core organizational capabilities, which in turn enhance strategic thinking (Jalal & Toulson, 2018). Empirical evidence has identified culture as a central factor in the successful implementation of manufacturing strategies (Bates, Amundson, Schroeder, & Morris, 1995) and as a determinant of outcomes in mergers and acquisitions. Organizational culture is manifested and perpetuated through shared language, narratives, rituals, and symbolic practices (Trice & Beyer, 1984), and its influence on organizational performance has been well documented (Saffold, 1988; Denison, 1984).

The effective implementation of strategic thinking within an organization is critically contingent upon the commitment of its top leadership. As Bonn (2001) notes, when senior managers recognize and endorse the value of strategic thinking and creativity, they embed these principles into the organizational ethos, shaping them as foundational to organisational culture. Leadership thus plays a pivotal role not only in modeling strategic behavior but also in cultivating a climate that

motivates engagement in strategic thinking across all levels of the organization.

Effective strategy implementation necessitates alignment across multiple organizational dimensions including culture, structure, reward systems, and resource allocation. Without such internal coherence, even the most rigorously formulated strategies are prone to failure (Isaboke, 2015). Research on ST has gained increasing prominence within both for-profit and not-for-profit contexts, marking a growing area of inquiry in strategic management (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992).

The conceptual foundations of ST draw upon a diverse body of literature, including studies of rational and bounded rational decision-making processes (Eisenhardt, 1989), the influence of power dynamics and organizational politics (Pettigrew, 1975), and the role of serendipitous change and path-dependent developments (Bonn, 2005; Cohen et al., 1972).

Strategic thinking constitutes a distinct cognitive and linguistic framework, through which organizational actors engage with the reality of strategy formulation and execution. As articulated by Nasi (1999), this framework encompasses a repertoire of concepts and norms including mission, vision, corporate planning, management by objectives, leadership, organizational culture, business models, value chains, action logics, and strategic paradigms that collectively shape how strategy is conceived and operationalized. Top of Form.

4. Methodology

The study drew respondents from respondents who had participated in the development and implementation of three previous strategic plans. These were deans, executive management staff and heads of academic and non-academic departments. The study employed criterion *i* sampling which is a variant type of purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2001). The respondents enlisted played various roles in the phases of strategic planning and had specific experience. The essence of conducting this phenomenological study with homogenous participants was to get a better gauge and a "better understanding" of the overall perceptions among the participants' from "lived experiences".

Creswell (2018) states that "It is essential that all participants have [similar lived] experience (planners and implementers of the strategic plan) of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 155). Criterion *i* type of purposive sampling fits the phenomenological inquiry like this one as the study desired to bring out lived experiences (Chandler & Munday, 2011) on strategic thinking only from strategic planning actors who had an experience in developing any one of the previous strategic plans as well as implementing any one of the previous strategic plans.

Thematic saturation for this study was reached at 26 respondents. At this number, additional data collection did not yield new themes or insights, signaling that analytical sufficiency had been achieved. Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020) propose a straightforward method for assessing thematic saturation, emphasizing its role in determining data adequacy. Empirical studies by Hennink, Kaiser, and Weber

(2020), as well as Squire et al. (2024) suggest that saturation in homogeneous samples often occurs between 9 and 17 interviews or 4 to 8 focus groups. Recent conceptual work by Yang et al. (2022) highlights the multidimensional nature of saturation, distinguishing between code, thematic, and meaning saturation. However, Leese et al. (2021) criticize the uncritical use of the term, calling for greater transparency and consistency in how saturation is operationalized and reported. Despite these concerns, saturation remains a foundational concept in qualitative research, shaping sampling strategies and reinforcing the credibility of findings.

The study analysed data using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The aim of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in this study was to explore in detail how participants were making sense of their personal and strategic planning as well as their strategic thinking world. The study ensured that it focused on the main currency for an IPA study. The focus was meanings of particular experiences and events in the course of developing as well as implementing the strategic plans. During this stage, the study also conducted a co-occurrence semantic analysis by looking for semantic relationships.

The study relied on the method that Sabina and Mwanza (2022) in their study, "The Ideal Corporate Governance model for state-owned enterprises in Zambia" employed. Due to the familiarity we had with the narratives, which were contained in the interview logs, we used co-occurrence semantic analysis to classify strategic thinking skills concepts from the constructs in the lay accounts (e.g., counting the number of times concepts and their synonyms were referred to, irrespective of the particular words that may have been used by our respondents) to make reference to the application of strategic thinking.

5. Findings

5.1. Thematic Areas I: Managing by Committee Systems

According to Ogbomida et al. (2013) a committee is a device for achieving coordination of activities and sharing information among various departments and divisions of an organisation. Some scholars have argued that because the University is complex, a strong and virile committee system for effective administration is needed (Obayan, 2002; Daudu, 1986). UNZA uses a consultative process through the system of committees to guide its operations. The committee system is aligned to systems thinking and has helped achieve a consultative process in decision-making. It is felt, however, that within this system, there is lack of tolerance for different viewpoints.

While the system had been deemed to be good for collective decision-making, it has had implications on how ST was encouraged and applied in the organisation. Evidence suggests that some participants in Management meetings fear to be more critical or to articulate new ideas because doing so, may be career limiting or that they may simply not be listened to. The longer serving Managers and more so, Senior Academic Staff were known to weigh in on precedence over newer ideas. There is a political power tension between Senior Managers and Younger

Managers, which makes it difficult to apply thinking in time for the good of the organisation and not for preserving personal standpoints, which may have become culturally oriented. Some Managers, therefore, believe that the University should be weary of trying out new ideas an aspect contradicts innovative practices of hypothesis driven thinking.

This consolidates the Hierarchical Cultural Orientation, and this does not give much room for the reframing approach in ST to thrive by offering encouragement to those with multiple Viewpoints and Mental Models to do so. The hierarchical cultural approach gives credibility to seniority in rank when deciding which viewpoint to adopt.

Participant NNDB observed that:

Our committee system of Management has to a certain extent led to a situation where ST is being reduced to a level where if you do not agree with what the presumed consensus should be, you are considered adversely. So, people have ideas, but they would rather keep them to themselves.

Secondly, another participant observed that the culture of Management by Committees meant that Managers spent more time in meetings than in their offices.

Participant BCA amplified as follows:

Meetings are quite disruptive. You are in this meeting today. Tomorrow we are in another meeting. If we were to find a way to go around those meetings, it would help. It is the same person who is supposed to do strategic thinking, but they are always in meetings.

Participant MMSE observed that one of the unintended consequences of the committee system had been that:

Staff would prefer to request for a retreat out of the university at great cost, to undertake work which could be done in an office setting because justifiably so, they would argue that they would focus better away from the office as a committee to deliver work as assigned.

This study observed from several meetings that some aspects of ST were applied albeit in a passive manner during discussions of an agenda item. For a very limited number of cases, this study found that a Manager could have given a lot of thought into what they were talking about. For the other meeting participants however, it was not clear one could merely be speaking from a generalized point of view.

The study found that the financial challenges the Institution faces have had the opposite effect, disturbing Management attention on other strategic issues instead of spurring ST on how to come out of the problem. What has ensued is a culture of firefighting to deal with a myriad of demands for funding. The language of 'the University has no money' is commonly known in the University community. This is because Retirees are often seen making representations over their outstanding contractual obligations and terminal benefits. Some of the employees are owed

contract gratuities and indicate a loss in morale because they feel their dues are losing value with time. The suppliers of goods and services are often following up on their payments, which do get settled but sometimes, not in a timely manner they would want.

5.2. Thematic Area II: Managing by Fire-Fighting

Firefighting in literature typically refers to the allocation of scarce resources to solve unanticipated problems or "fires", (Repenning, 2001). In the strategy development and implementation context, fire-fighting describes the unplanned allocation of different types of organisational resources to fix problems discovered late in strategy implementation. Within the University strategy implementation context, managing by fire-fighting was found to present complications ranging from staff fatigue and burnout, incremental costs, unmet deadlines, and increased chances of strategy execution errors.

Participant NNDB argued by saying:

We do not have a committed process now of how the strategic plan will be financed. We just take it that we will finance as we go on.

To put this in context, University Managers argue that the limited institutional resource wallet and a myriad of financial obligations, makes them find themselves fire-fighting. The fire-fighting culture is re-echoed by **Participant SIIN** who said:

You can have a vision. You can have all the intentions, good intentions, but if there is no funding to implement that to achieve better good, you will not move, you will just be firefighting.

However, other compounding factors emerge. One such is that ST is not widely entrenched in the University. While the practice of preparing strategic plans has been consistent from 2008 to 2023, ST does appear not to cascade upwards to the people preparing the strategic plans and University wide in the day-to-day conversations about the issues that affect the university.

5.3. Thematic Area III: Free Style Systemic Knowledge Practices

Systemic knowledge is a sort of knowing how we know. Systemic knowledge is both a process and a product. As a process, it is expressed by Maturana and Varela (1987) "as a process of knowing how we know". As a product, it is knowledge on how we think. Systemic knowledge has a bearing on the perspectives of individuals in terms of what is seen and how what is seen is perceived. Therefore, in the context of strategic thinking, this perspective generates meaning in terms of how managers make sense of what they do.

The University has developed systems to support its governance and management and has over thirty policies and guidelines, which provide uniformity in the different aspects of the operations of the Institution. A sound system of financial management guidelines and human resource management practices exists. However, there appears to be tensions and contradictions in strategic management

practices, and it is argued that there is a general absence of systemic management knowledge, which is then commonly applied by Managers.

Participant DLTI put it this way:

The academic managers in universities are not selected to the non-academic positions they hold in the same way as non-academic staff. The strategic management capabilities are not normally the same. For example, an academic member of staff may be appointed to a senior position to which all they bring are their science or social science training and experience and not some much hard-core training in management science. At this point, it is like their management skills used in the new role are free style or based on resolutions of meetings.

The reality is that Managers in Universities are well educated normally with a minimum of a Master's Degree Certificate, but the context is that they often lack a complementary qualification which would help them to speak the language of finance, strategic management, human resource management, marketing, and ST with the same level of clarity as counterparts trained in these areas. One would argue that perhaps the University needs an Institutional Framework of ST that conforms to the ST philosophy, which every Manager must be coached into.

The variations in ST skills from one University Manager to another may suggest that employees are using different lenses to look at issues that confront the Institution. You need to have a way of looking at success that is consistent across Units. Units that have an ST approach find it easy to work with other Units because it is just a matter of sharing methodologies on how to arrive at success factors.

Participant MMGW hinted that:

Managers in the University must be compelled to comply with a standardised methodology of strategic thinking. So, if managers are using a freestyle approach to arrive at their internal departmental issues, that will bring problems.

5.4. Thematic Area IV: Managing by Looking to Government

The higher education environment has not helped much to the need for ST particularly, in public higher education institutions. For a long time, Zambia did not have laws that support higher education. As a result, commentators on financing to higher education in Zambia were more inclined to the Goma (1989) Report, which outlined at the time, the new policy measures on the financing of higher education. They argue that its provisions are the hallmark of how the University should be funded notwithstanding the changing higher education environment. In a status report of the University, a manager noted that it was the responsibility of government to fund the University fully. Comparisons have been made with sister Universities in the region that are adequately funded to cover their full payroll costs. These narratives offer justification to the norms and values of the University where the Government is the key player in providing funding for its operations.

The funding envisaged by looking to Government is one that covers the full

payroll costs and not a percentage thereof. The funding that exists is a grant to the overall operational costs. To fund the full payroll costs may imply assumption by Government of the full human resource function of the public university covering recruitment, wage determination and direct payments of employee costs and related statutory payments. While this may be ideal, it may not be attractive to public university managers who wish to have a differentiated pay structure from the mainstream of government given the unique pool of highly qualified and talented staff in the public university setting. Here lies the polarization of ideals of the managing by looking to government between government and university managers.

To give meaning to the looking to government culture in the application of strategic thinking, Respondent **SWR** observes that:

The culture of the University right now in terms of its impact on ST is one where employees on average think government must take all the responsibility for the University operations. So, the culture of the University, the values and beliefs are that we are a government funded institution, the government must take responsibility one hundred percent. All we do ourselves is to teach and produce the students. So, in the process, we create costs and someone-else pays. So, that is the culture that is there. People think our job is to teach, and government must bear the costs.

Arising from the looking to government culture, it does not cause anyone loss of sleep if the enrolment targets are not met in a particular academic unit. To the contrary, over enrolments in some Schools in the 2020/2021 was a source of stakeholder concern given the limited infrastructure to the extent that in the 2021/2022 academic year, the University was persuaded to restrict student enrolments. A strategic shift beyond 2022 is noteworthy, a growth is e-business through online learning.

Although the Strategic Plan 2018-2022 has a dedicated strategic direction on creating financial sustainability, managers believe the idea has not been sold well enough for employees to show a deep sense of passion to take the University from a financial position of being technically insolvent. **Participant JMDS** noted**:**

If the environment is not providing the policy direction, the people in the operations are not enabled to think out of the box.

Some Managers felt that this culture was being compounded by various forms of employees putting self-interests ahead of organisational interests in work practices such as moonlighting and overall use of University time to pursue non-university goals.

Participant MKAL put it this way:

We have not been able to properly address the practice by some academic members of staff who teach and supervise postgraduate students in other universities across the country. The reality, however, is that our own students are not receiving

the attention they deserve to complete their programmes on time.

Another human resource practice, which is associated with encouraging the culture of looking to government was the award of permanent and pensionable contracts to all staff. Traditionally, employees are recruited into permanent and pensionable roles. One would argue that only academic staff who have achieved a track record of merit in teaching, research, publications, and community service should be tenured. Similarly, one would say that Senior Manager roles should be contractual and not permanent to encourage organisational renewal and career development for the future young and talented managers.

Participant CKNIL highlighted as follows:

So, if you have an organisation culture where once I come and am 21 years, I can just be loitering until I retire. I can just be doing a bare minimum. I think it is the bare minimum which has been a hindrance to ST because employees are now more inclined to thinking they can fold their hands and pressure government to fund the University.

Embedded in the looking to government culture is the practice by managers of being risk averse. The corporate culture is that which punishes employees for failure. This has been seen in the challenges that relate to new projects. It is preferable to rely on experience than to attempt new initiatives. Reasons that came up to support this from the study suggest a fear of failure and a preference to work within a particular comfort zone. Employees who come up with new ideas are viewed with suspicion.

Participant AMSDR observed:

Many Managers fear the disciplinary consequences of failure. The fear to take risks. Not stepping out from the comfort zone and so on. So, that becomes a barrier to think outside that space.

Because Managers fear to take risks, the easier option is to transfer the risk to government to fund the Institution.

5.5. Thematic Area V: Managing in Highly Politicized Workplace

The study found that the University operated in a highly political context. The charging of non economic fees in student accommodation is attributed to the political nature of the university. In the appointment of strategic managers, the political context emerges. A recent strategic attempt to convert staff housing into student accommodation has been nested in a political landscape delaying the convergence of thinking in time and intelligent opportunism. Attempts by managers to implement a number of far-reaching financial sustainability measures that would around the institution must be negotiated with various stakeholders who include employees and labour unions. To the extent that the best management practices existing that are transformational cannot find immediate application in the university context, reveals that perhaps a public university such as UNZA has

its own unique culture which this study discovered.

Thus, the study also established that the organisation structure for the University had not changed as much across the three strategic plan cycles in the period 2008 to 2022 mainly due to organisational politics. However, there has been success in the 2023 to 2027 strategic planning cycle where a new staff establishment was developed and approved for implementation from 2025. The significant question for strategic thinking is whether the

existing culture will allow university managers to re-align and fine tune the structure and reward systems where challenges have emerged in the implementation process.

Ideally, every new strategy must be followed by fine tuning of the organisation structure to align with the strategy. In the absence of an appropriate structure, there will be execution holes in the desired strategy. The real issue established from this study is that there lies within the culture of high workplace politicization, manifests of sub-cultures of lack of cooperation when major change initiatives are proposed by managers. Employees feel threatened by any change of the status quo.

There is also a lack of technical strategic management understanding of the significance of immediately revisiting the organisation structure when organisational strategy is being changed.

The study found that the diversity present in the University workforce and nature of roles, made the Institution more complex than a homogenous product or service institution. Arising from this, the University may have sub-cultures. The tension in these cultures brings about a lack of cooperation. Employees are known to bring down an initiative or slow down its timely implementation.

Speaking about how the performance appraisal system has as an example, been slowed down through a culture of general lack of internal politics, **Participant ENMT** observed that:

The Schools and Units are at different levels of implementation and yet it started a long time ago. The reason could be perhaps that some of the Heads of the Unit may not be very conversant with that system. The University has had this conservatism. Some people have had issues with trying to move forward.

Some participants argued that the achievements made in strategic plan implementation were in soft areas, which were administrative in nature where the orientation to apply ST was neither here nor there. **Participant NNBV** argued that:

If you pick out the critical strategic areas of the University, the achievements made against the strategic goals is less than 50 percent. Where we have achieved, it is because someone took it personal to do so.

For example, there is a requirement for all university academic programmes to be accredited with the Higher Education Authority (HEA). But there are still quite several programmes not accredited. If programme accreditation was important, academic managers could have focused on that. The aspect of Management buy

in and commitment from colleagues was raised by some participants too. Sometimes, it is politics about where the work to align the programmes should be done from. One **Participant JCKL** made the following submission:

There is a work culture that has evolved among both academic and non - academic staff at UNZA where they believe that some work tasks should be done by way of camping at a hotel. This is a cost to the University, the individual employee benefits in terms of per diem. This has resulted in lack of cooperation to complete certain tasks on time such as preparing papers for accreditation unless money is released to work out of station.

This presupposed that the strategic leader understood ST variables and was able to see opportunities from complex highly interdependent problems**.** However, the data collected characterised employee experiences differently.

Results of this study showed that the University of Zambia was a highly politicised institution both internally and externally. From the internal front, the study found that the University was polarized between academic and non–academic staff Another participant **(CBLB)** put their lived experience about the UNZA organisational politics in this way:

To say that the CEO has powers to help the University navigate through UNZA's problems by utilising ST is a fallacy. The reason is that there are various constituencies within and outside the University who wield sufficient power to overrule the Vice-Chancellor. Senate is one such example. The labour unions are yet another. Council may not think in the same strategic way as management. Past governments have also politicised the University too.

6. Discussion

From the data that emerged in the in-depth interviews, the study ascribed meanings using thematic analysis. The meanings conform with the characterisation of organisation culture as defined by Pettigrew (1975) as the system of publicly and collectively accepted meanings, operating for a given group, at a given time. Cameron and Quinn (2011) illuminate this definition of organisation culture as the values, dominant leadership styles, language and symbols, procedures and routines, and definitions of success that make an organisation unique. Five organisational culture constructs emerged from the data as follows:

- Thematic Area I. Managing by committee system
- Thematic Area II. Managing by firefighting
- Thematic Area III. Free style systemic knowledge practices
- Thematic Area IV. Managing by looking to government
- Thematic Area V. Managing in a highly politicised workplace

In **Table 2** below, the study presents the mentions of each construct of organisation culture that emerged from data. The results are presented as a coherent analytic account including pertinent participant quotes and a detailed interpretative commentary. This relied on absolute frequencies (A.FR) and the average fre-

quencies (AV.FR) as metric units to guide on what to focus on in the presentation of the results. The A.FR is taken as the frequency or number of times the concept or construct befitting an organisational culture construct was mentioned by the participants in the interviews. From the A.FR, the study then computed the average to arrive at the average frequency (AV.FR). Values less than 1 represent a weakening of the organisational culture's construct impact on the organisation, while values more than 1 show a very strongly entrenched practice of the organisational culture construct in the organisation.

Table 2. The Lived Experiences of Managers in the development and implementation of strategic plans.

CORPORATE CULTURE CONSTRUCT	PLANNING PHASE		IMPLEMENTATION PHASE	
	(AF.F)	AV.F	AF.F	AV.F
Managing by committee systems	74	2.846	75	2.888
Managing by firefighting	21	0.807	64	2.461
Free Style systemic knowledge practices	71	2.730	73	2.807
Managing by looking to government	56	2.153	68	2.615
Managing in a highly politicised workplace	51	1.961	69	2.653

Source: Field Data.

The themes that emerged from the data on the lived experiences of management level staff in the application of ST have far-reaching implications on the attainment of strategic goals of the UNZA. The themes stand in the way of the applicability of ST at both the strategic plan development stage and at the strategic plan implementation stage. This development stays true to the assertion that workplace experiences have a major impact (Goldman et al., 2009) on the applicability of strategic thinking. The very high average frequency loadings in the corporate culture constructs of "managing by committee systems," "managing by firefighting," "free style managerial practices," "managing by looking to government" and "managing in a highly politicised workplace" illuminate the cultural orientation of University Managers when it comes to the application of strategic thinking.

There are tensions and contradictions in the corporate culture constructs. For example, managing by ***committee systems*** is good for the practice of systems thinking. But then, the narrative of participants shows that this is not used for the ideal purpose, which cuts across constructs of systems thinking such as "searching for causes to some phenomena and taking action," "making changes to the organisation structure to drive significant improvements" and "engaging all stakeholders to jointly create value." To the contrary, results show that systems thinking is used to "over consult" "run away from the risk of the office holder making decisions" and to "centralise decision-making".

Such thematic variation is of interest because it demonstrates a different con-

ceptualisation of systems thinking, which is not aligned to theory. Participants in the study described the increased competition in the market for University education as having helped to motivate for strategic thinking. The competition for the limited funding to public universities and better service delivery were the key driving forces to the need to apply strategic thinking.

Another human resource practice that contributes to a culture of dependency on government institutions is the blanket awarding of permanent and pensionable contracts to all staff, regardless of role or performance. In many public sector institutions, there is no structured pathway to tenure based on merit for academic staff. Instead, employees are routinely appointed into permanent roles from the outset. This practice runs counter to global best practices in higher education, where tenure is typically earned through a demonstrable record of excellence in teaching, research, scholarly publications, and community engagement (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

The absence of a merit-based tenure system can undermine academic motivation and institutional performance. A more effective approach would be to reserve tenure for academic staff who have met rigorous, transparent criteria of professional achievement. This would promote a culture of accountability and continuous improvement (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

Furthermore, senior management positions should ideally be offered on fixed-term contracts rather than permanent appointments. Fixed-term roles not only support organizational agility and renewal but also create opportunities for younger, highly skilled professionals to advance into leadership positions (OECD, 2012). This is particularly important in contexts where institutional stagnation is a risk due to long-serving leadership and limited avenues for upward mobility (World Bank, 2002). Reforming these human resource] practices is essential for fostering a performance-driven culture and aligning human resource policies with strategic institutional goals.

ST at UNZA has not really been a big issue mainly because of where the higher education sector was coming from. For a long time, UNZA was the only public university alongside the Copperbelt University. Employees did not see the need for ST because the environment in which they were operating was relatively stable. It was not a priority to improve the services – products on offer. With regard to the curriculum, the Institution did not prioritise curriculum review and change, so that it could respond to the environment.

Therefore, the University has been helped to begin to apply ST arising from the competitive pressure. The literature discusses competition in higher education from a perspective of competition for international students, research grants, professors, and budgets (Musselin, 2018). The nature of Zambia's higher education landscape does place the UNZA under competitive pressure for both local and international students.

From a ST perspective, the University identified the reality that there is a risk that this student enrolment goal may not be achieved. The problem was how

UNZA intended to respond to this risk. According to UNZA (2021), the Institution would respond by applying for a grant from government to mitigate the shortfall in student numbers. This does align with literature. The literature (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996) advocates for competitive aggressiveness as the motivational dimension that should characterise an entrepreneurial organisation, which is aligned to strategic thinking. Therefore, by looking to government as a mitigation measure for not achieving the student recruitment goals, the University is not demonstrating preparedness to be aggressive against competition through proactive innovation. This can be explained by the organisational cultural orientation that it is not UNZA's responsibility to generate revenue.

Based on emerging themes from the results, ST is applied differently at the University of Zambia arising from the lived experiences of management level staff. This has implications on how the University performs. For example, the ***looking to government culture*** by the University's managers and employees is justified on the premise that the Institution is public in nature and cannot adequately fund some activities and programmes, which may be in the national interest although not profitable to be provided by private universities.

Is the culture of looking to government working? The reality is that this particular value orientation is dysfunctional and it becomes necessary to strategically think about revenue opportunities to supplement funding from government and cost reduction initiatives to stop activities that are destroying value. The negative net outcomes could be viewed as a strategic thinking gap which needs to be addressed through university changes in organisation culture.

The culture of ***free style management practices*** presents performance dilemmas characterised by a mismatch between best practice in what competencies managers should bring to the table and what they are articulating. The corporate structure ***gaps in the strategic management competencies*** also emerged from the lived experiences of managers. Speaking to both aspects, the theory of learning to think strategically points out in Casey and Goldman's (2010) that if the institutional leaders can modify the organisational culture across the spectrum of beliefs about organisational competencies, vision, goals, market, competition, differentiation, and product/service performance, the realm for ST among managers could be expanded. This observation also finds expression in the eight constructs of ST, which underpin this study Systems thinking, thinking in time, hypothesis driven, environmental analysis, focused intent, intelligent opportunism, reflective thinking, and reframing). The argument then is that for UNZA to improve its performance, the culture of managerial practice must change from free style to a standardised application of strategic thinking.

Horikoshi (2023) discussed how individuals flourish through engaging with challenges. He coined the term "challenger-ship" to describe the active process of embracing, pursuing, and mastering difficult tasks, framing challenges not just as obstacles, but as opportunities. Admittedly, not every manager will learn to think strategically. Could this be an aspect of competence deficiencies in strategic think-

ing? Literature provides some authoritative answers. Lawler (1994) indicates that there is need for a competency-based approach of managing if the human capital is to be managed in such a way as to help spur growth in the organisation. Vakola et al. (2007) insists that there must be a competency-based approach to drive organisational change.

For the Public University, it was found that these competencies and more so, competencies in scanning, questioning, conceptualising, and testing (SQCT), are not looked for when placing employees in manager roles (Casey & Goldman, 2010). This may portend that the human resource management practices at UNZA may not understand the critical role of ST competencies in driving organisational performance. And yet, Amin et al. (2015) in a study of 300 academic and non-academic employees in a public university setting found that human resource practices: recruitment, training, performance appraisal, career planning, employee participation, job definition and compensation have a significant relationship with university performance.

This competency-based approach can in part be driven by changing the culture of recruitment and selection of University Managers across the different leadership levels. Managers must be screened as part of the recruitment process for competencies in strategic thinking (Mintzberg, 1994). This argument is grounded in the theory of learning to think strategically where it is appreciated that some managers will possess inherent traits, which may stand in the way of their learning to think strategically.

However, it is important that every executive and management level staff is exposed to ST elements. Bouhali et al. (2015) adds that a leader must be a creative strategic thinker not only a strategic planner because plans change frequently. In this study, it was established that managers share the view that it was time they embraced strategic thinking. Therefore, there must be a compelling corporate cultural practice that puts pressure on managers to think through a strategic lens. This approach to strategic management would obviously unsettle the status quo where each manager applies a ST practice that is free style.

The emerging themes in the lived experiences also pointed to ***ambiguity in the staff establishment*** as an organisational structure factor. Ofori and Atiogbe (2012) re-affirm that for strategy implementation to be effective, the structure must be adjusted for each current strategy. In a study of the strategic planning processes in three West African universities, the duo found that universities had made changes to their organisational structures to ameliorate the strategic plan implementation process. In the case of the UNZA, there is no evidence to show that changes were being made to align the organisation structures to the new strategic plans. According to **Participant SWR:**

Attempts to review or implement revisions in the structure failed. The only attempt that happened was way back in 2001 until later in 2018/2019.

Therefore, efforts were made in the 2018-2022 strategic plan implementation

period to adjust the organisational structure into a college system. This received mixed reactions from key stakeholders and could not be implemented, A further attempt was made to have in place a centralised system-based organisation structure. Again, this good not win the support of all stakeholders. At the close of the 2022 strategic plan, the University position was to engage an external consultant to help in the development of an organisation structure. This was achieved and significant changes were made to the structure which have been rolled out from 2024.

Professional development should be viewed as a strategic investment in the future effectiveness of the University, particularly when it includes the deliberate cultivation of strategic thinking skills among employees. Recent research underscores that strategic thinking is not an innate trait but a competency that can be developed through targeted training and experiential learning (Hall, 2020; Keshar, 2022).

Beyond enhancing individual decision-making, such training has a broader cultural impact: it can actively reshape organisational culture by embedding long-term, proactive, and systems-oriented thinking into daily practices (Schoemaker, 2022). Findings of this study are consistent with Alhatmi (2020), who demonstrated that organisations which implemented strategic thinking training saw a statistically significant correlation with high-performance work practices.

This was indicative of both cultural alignment and behavioural change. When employees across all levels are encouraged and equipped to think strategically, a culture of foresight, innovation, and shared accountability begins to emerge. This cultural shift not only aligns behaviours with organisational goals but also fosters agility and resilience in the face of change (Learn Management). As such, integrating strategic thinking into professional development initiatives does not merely enhance strategic thinking capability, it transforms the very norms and values that guide the organisation's functioning.

7. Conclusion

A notable disjunction exists between the organisational culture articulated in the strategic plans of the university and the lived experiences of management-level staff. This misalignment between desired culture and practice has significant implications for the effective application of strategic thinking within the institution. As Weeks (2006) emphasizes, it is imperative for senior leadership to initiate comprehensive change management processes across campus in order to realign institutional culture with strategic objectives.

This study presents a novel insight insofar as the lived culture, a reflection of the prevailing organisational culture typical of public universities. For instance, governance through committee systems is widely accepted as a means to achieve consultative, collective decision-making, resulting in the proliferation of committees within such institutions.

What this study has found aligns with Issa (2019), who identified that market-

oriented culture is minimally manifested within public universities. The market culture paradigm motivates management to engage in strategic thinking primarily to foster aggressive competition and to increase market share through customer-centric approaches. However, such orientations are largely absent from the core organisational values embedded in university strategic plans from 2008 to 2022. While the 2023-2027 strategic plan signals a tentative shift towards a customer-centric ethos, this aspiration is undermined by the entrenched experiences of management personnel, who predominantly respond to financial constraints by advocating for increased governmental funding rather than adopting market-driven solutions. Addressing this cultural incongruence is critical to enhancing the university's strategic agility and resource mobilization.

Further research is warranted to explore the lived experiences of organizational culture across a broader range of public institutions. Should this prove to be the case, additional investigations could focus on strategies to mitigate the adverse impacts of such entrenched cultural dynamics on institutional strategic outcomes.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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