

REVIEW ARTICLE

Influences on strategic functioning of the public universities of Sri Lanka: challenges and ground realities

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Abstract: It is considered that the university system of Sri Lanka is less efficient in providing degree programs to suit contemporary societal, economic, and political needs and fails to face the current dynamic environmental changes precipitated by issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers have realised that the recent pandemic highly affects the execution of universities in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, experts have noted the severe lack of focus on identifying the causes of university administration failures. Amidst these claims, this study, as its primary objective, strives to explore the factors that affect the implementation of the strategic initiatives made by public universities in Sri Lanka, adopting a qualitative approach with a multimethod sequential design under a thematic model developed based on a detailed literature review. Accordingly, the first qualitative phase of the study was conducted using archival sources, and the second phase used in-depth interviews. The purposive sampling method was used to conduct the seven interviews with the Registrars and Strategic Directors of selected universities. As a result, the study explores and confirms sixteen factors that affect the implementation of strategic initiatives by public universities in Sri Lanka. The theoretical contribution expected from this exercise is to explore new factors that affect the strategic functioning of public universities, with the support of the Open System Theory (OST) and Resource-Based Theory (RBT) that have monetary value in institutional analysis mechanisms, and help to streamline the universities' decision-making processes with a focus on enhancing the strategic management practices.

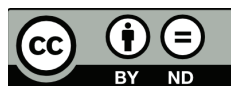
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INTRODUCTION

Public universities worldwide are expected to develop strategies to perform in rapidly changing environments (George, 2021). Technology runs a new world, creates opportunities for efficiency, growth, and scalability within our businesses, and assists in strategic execution (Mcgee & Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). Thus, the policies enforced and implemented in the face of various environmental challenges lay the foundation for an organisation's growth and development. To innovate, grow, and develop, every organisation requires a well-developed plan focusing on the strategies and its execution. However, globally, two-thirds the contemporary public-sector educational organisations fail to execute their strategic plans due to various factors (Elbanna *et al.*, 2016). As found previously, improper resource allocation, poor communication, and lack of administrative skills are common reasons for failure in executing strategic plans. Studies on the problems faced during the implementation of the strategic plans help understand the issues involved in strategic management.

Based on the understanding that the failure of many significant strategic initiatives taken by public universities are due to the lack of understanding of factors that contribute to failure. Gunawardena (2015) observes that the public sector of Sri Lanka needs to realign the

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mission and operation of government agencies to meet the dynamic changes in the environment. According to Kasturiarachchi (2017), graduates recruited to lower-level administrative positions in the public sector and the low quality of academic publications by some academics are evidence to the failure of the public university system of Sri Lanka. Compared to the private sector, government institutions have created a monopoly on the job market in Sri Lanka (Amarathunga *et al.*, 2022). However, the degree of acceptance and recognition for public university graduates are at a lower level in the private sector due to their inability to meet the expected skills and performance standards (Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003). This shows the importance and necessity of exploring the factors that affect the implementation of strategic initiatives.

Drawbacks of the Sri Lankan university system to provide degree programmes to suit the contemporary societal, economic, and political needs (Rameez, 2020), include outdated-faculty curriculums, the skill disparity identified among students, low-quality classroom management strategies used by teachers (Amarasuriya, 2015), an indefinite number of strikes/union actions by the academic and non-academic staff for extended periods, undue bureaucratic interferences made by the government in the administration of public universities (Weeramunda, 2008; Dushmantha, 2020), the dependence of the universities on the government for solutions for the issues of administration, setting timelines for activities, and clearing unrest in the system (Stork *et al.*, 2018). The setbacks experienced by the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka to fulfil of quality requirements is one such evidence. Moreover, the most tragic element in the job market is the unavailability of suitable jobs for fresh graduates (Ariyawansa & Perera, 2005; Jayasingha, 2020). Overall, these problems create a bad image of public universities as an entity wasting government funds and losing opportunity costs. It is clear that to overcome these problems, proper strategies are required in the university system (Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003). Therefore, the main aim of this research is to explore the factors that affect strategy implementation in public universities in Sri Lanka.

Although there are many studies conducted to identify the factors affecting the strategy implementation in various public sector institutions in different countries (Rajasekar, 2014; Gachua & Orwa, 2015; Waithaka & Waiganjo, 2017; Bett, 2018), in the Sri Lankan context, there is a significant gap in the research concerned with identifying the factors that affect the strategy implementation in the public universities. Hence, this research may be advantageous in identifying the gap

through the theories brought from strategic perspectives on the failures and successes of the internal and external factors in accomplishing their strategic goals and expected performance indicators. The most important output of a university is the graduate, and the government expects the universities to produce high-quality graduates to develop the country and uplift the living status of citizens. Thus, it is critical to achieve the desired output equally from all public universities in Sri Lanka (Nickel, 2011; Weerasooriya *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, exploring the factors that affect strategy implementations in Sri Lankan public universities is necessary. Thus, the main question to deal with in this study is: “What are the factors that affect strategy implementation in the public universities in Sri Lanka?”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategy and strategy management

A strategy is a planned course of action designed to achieve long-term objectives. Strategy management means planning and marshalling resources for their most efficient and effective use in a changing environment (Johnson *et al.*, 2008). The strategy of a business enterprise consists of what management decides about the future direction and scope of the business in terms of planning, monitoring, analysing and assessing all that contribute to achieving the organisational goals and objectives (Mcgee & Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). It can be perceived through two approaches: the prescriptive approach, which reflects how strategies should be formulated, and the descriptive approach, which refers to how strategies should be put into practice (Mcgee & Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). Its implementation is studied under the strategic management or collective management approach of formulating, implementing, and evaluating cross-functional decisions that empower an organisation to accomplish its objectives (Fang & Chen, 2016). It systematically analyses the factors associated with the external and internal environments and attains an appropriate match between an organisation’s environment and its strategy, structure, and processes (Charles *et al.*, 2015) to cope with it. Consequently, it helps achieve a better arrangement of corporate policies and strategic priorities in the three major steps: strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Strategic planning concerns formulating strategies that give a holistic view of the organisation by adopting long-term vision goal analysis, and subjectively evaluating values, goals, and priorities (Bogers *et al.*, 2019). Further, it is a process in which organisational leaders determine their vision and identify their goals and objectives in a

sequence in which the organisation is enabled to realise the stated vision. Strategic intent involves determining the organisation's vision, mission, and objectives, and strategy formulation includes an environmental and organisational appraisal. Moreover, strategy implementation means converting a chosen strategy into a reality to accomplish the strategic goals and objectives in a series of activities and choices made in developing, utilising, and integrating the organisational structure, the management systems, and the cultural norms, focused on earning a competitive advantage (Mišanková & Kočišová, 2014). It consists of five steps: activating the strategy; designing the structure, processing and systematising the behavioural implementation, launching the functional implementation, and operationalising the strategy.

Strategy implementation also brings a change to the organisation by inculcating perseverance in the stakeholders as an essential in gathering all necessary resources, skills, and competencies relevant to execute decisions (Johnson *et al.*, 2011). The process followed is composed of operationalisation, institutionalisation, monitoring, and controlling (Vlcek *et al.*, 1997). Operationalisation emphasises to the responsible parties the nature of the organisational structure, which could either facilitate or hinder successful strategy implementation (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Through institutionalisation, strategy implementation aligns with the influential elements such as day-to-day operations, leadership, and the organisational culture (Ansoff *et al.*, 1990). Finally, mentoring and controlling are the processes that assure the realisation of the expected results while reviewing the gaps and changes in the environment (Yabs, 2007). Thus, strategy implementation includes an expansive scope of endeavours that energetically focus on changing vital goals (Lee & Miller, 1996). According to Noble (1999), strategy implementation is characterised by communication, adoption, interpretation, and depiction of strategic plans, and according to Wheelen & Hunger (2012), it comprises turning the ideas, plans, decisions, policies, objectives, and other features of the selected strategies into action.

In the strategic implementation process, the first step is to align the best formulated strategy with the organisational initiatives, while conducting the relevant activities (Mišanková & Kočišová, 2014). The second step is to streamline the budgets along with the relevant departments to utilise them wisely in implementing a chosen strategy. Synchronising the organisational structure to the strategy is the third step, where the organisation's structure will contribute towards the successful implementation of the strategy. Building awareness among the stakeholders and the workers

engaged in the implementation of the strategy is the fourth step. Finally, keep continuous monitoring of the implementation process until the final objectives are achieved. (Mišanková & Kočišová, 2014; Mcgee & Sammut-Bonnici, 2015).

The strategy evaluation process comprises three steps: evaluating, monitoring, and reviewing (Freeman, 2022). Strategy evaluation involves assessing the process followed and the successful implementation of the formulated strategies. Here it is required to realise the expected goals of the organisation with the fullest contribution of the management and employees (Freeman, 2022). It is also compulsory to determine the effectiveness of their activities and investigate whether the expected output is achieved.

Theoretical underpinnings in strategic management

The strategic perspectives successfully practised in the private sector improve their performance and ensure competitive advantage in the market (Kotler *et al.*, 2016). These perspectives may support public and non-profit organisations to sustain themselves and perform well for an extended period since they operate in similar competitive and complex circumstances in the current scenario (Rosenberg & Ferlie, 2016).

Over the past three decades, there has been a tremendous increase in the thinking about strategic management (Gibbons *et al.*, 2015). The evolution of strategic perspectives is drawn mainly from Penrose (1999), Ansoff (1965), Porter (1979), Shapiro (1989), Rosenberg & Ferlie (2016). Among them, two underpinning theories make it possible to study the factors affecting strategic implementation: the Open System Theory (OST) and the Resource-Based Theory (RBT).

The OST refers to creating an environment that deliberately impacts organisations (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). The OST explains that the survival of organisations depends on their relationship with the external environment (Kurendi, 2013). The OST is a recent development from the system-based management theory designed to create healthy, innovative, resilient communities and organisations in today's changing and unpredictable environments. Organisations are perceived as open systems where many actors exist, have a mutual relationship, and interact with each other (Freeman, 2022). Looking at the levels of organisational processes, mainly focusing on the input and the output processes, it is observed that the external environment influences its performance by providing resources and

absorbing the company's outputs (Waithaka & Waiganjo, 2017). In strategic management, the formulation and implementation of strategies are shaped significantly by the changes in the environment so that strategies can be achieved successfully.

The unique resources conducive to achieving superior performance and competitive advantage in an organisation include human resources, physical assets, unique processes, procedures, technology, intellectual resources, and finance (Johnson *et al.*, 2011). The resource-based theory considers the firm a cognitive system with distinctive and context-dependent skills central to the strategic purposes. These skills are dependent upon hierarchical capabilities or routines which contribute to the management of the corporate core business processes that help create value. Competencies often allow specific expertise to be developed, so firms should adhere to short- to medium-term strategies that cannot be modified frequently (Andersén, 2010). The concept of RBT is that successful firms draw on their future productivity characteristics; they are often unique and different which also may be tangible and intangible. The competitive edge is the collection of knowledge, abilities, resources, and commercial properties that a business holds or the intelligent use of physical and intellectual capital as part of a company's core competence (Andersén, 2010).

Factors in strategic implementation in public sector universities

As strategic management has been identified as a crucial part of successful organisations, public sector universities have started paying attention to the applications of strategic management (Mišanková & Kočišová, 2014), considering that strategic implementation is a vital part of strategic management (Weerakkody *et al.*, 2009; Menike, 2016). In this context, the following factors have been identified by scholars as those that affect strategy implementation in public universities.

In Sri Lanka, politicisation in public universities is significantly high, with increased political stress. According to Samaranayake (2015), the education system in Sri Lankan universities encourages political activities. The situation becomes evident in the findings made by Weeramunda (2008) that politicisation and youth unrest greatly influence the political activities of university students and that affects functions.

It is also observed that in Sri Lanka, trade unions have a significant influence over university activities. A trade union is an association of employees whose intention is to achieve a common goal relating to working conditions

and to represent employees' interests to their employers (Gunawardana & Biyanwila, 2008). The activities of the trade union can have favourable or unfavourable influences on the organisations' performances (Anjani *et al.*, 2021). In the Sri Lankan context, particularly in the public sector, trade unions are powerful and influence strategy implementation in the respective institutions (Amarasena, 2017). Every institution's human resource capacity is the most important factor influencing its strategic execution. That is why effective strategic initiatives are expected to lay the foundation for properly trained staff to execute the plan. Thus, appropriate training options should sharpen the employees' skills or provide new skills to work more effectively in an organisation (Joyce, 2004; Jiang & Carpenter, 2013).

It is also realised that the availability of funds, resources, and different physical conditions limit the strategic implementation capacities of organisations. The general experience is that in public universities, computers, education facilities, and the novelty of technology are poor (Chandasiri, 2020). Weak environment for teaching, lack of teaching aids, and lack of learning facilities cause the low quality of education in public universities (Weerasooriya, 2013). It is understood that language and communication should flow effectively in every university. Effective, transparent, honest communication is not the only factor determining an organisation's quality, but it is an essential factor possessed by the organisation. Lack of communication weakens the effectiveness of strategic implementation (Höglund & Svärdesten, 2015). Proficiency in the English language is poor in the students and academics in the Sri Lankan university system (Ariyawansa & Perera, 2005; Nireesh & Arulvel, 2016). Most of the previous studies reveal that poor English communication is a serious obstacle that prevents students from getting the best out of their university education (Perera, 2013). Therefore, it is considered that language and communication play a crucial role in strategic implementation.

Operational efficiency is the ability of an organisation to reduce wastes of time and effort while still producing a high-quality service. Financially, operational efficiency can be defined as the ratio between the input required to keep the organisation moving and the output it provides (Jeong, 2001). That universities should produce graduates with high-quality competencies is hotly debated by scholars today. Many graduates are unemployed in Sri Lanka; on the other hand, employed graduates have mismatched skills. Additionally, the employability of Sri Lankan public university graduates in the private sector is low compared to those from

private and foreign universities (Ariyawansa & Perera, 2005; Jayasinghe, 2021; Vivek & Nanthagopan, 2020). Therefore, it is confirmed that public universities in Sri Lanka fail to produce competent graduates within the allocated resources. Based on the above literature, in the Sri Lankan context, seven initial vital factors have been identified that affect strategy implementation in public universities: organisational culture, politicisation, trade union activities, human resource capacity, fund and resource availability, communication and language, and operational efficiency. These seven factors are applied to the initial thematic model of this study.

paradigm, deemed appropriate as the study is meant to conduct an in-depth analysis of interviews with a group of strategic practitioners on their experiences achieved during the strategy implementation. Furthermore, since this study seeks to convey the participants’ experiences in their own words, its structure is based on a narrative form. Thus, it tends to be exploratory and sees how the universities view the numerous aspects of their environments. To present an idea about the research format, Figure 1 illustrates the multimethod research approach.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study thus selected a multimethod approach with a qualitative study adopting an interpretative

The purposive sampling method was used in the archival data review and the in-depth interview phases. As per the availability of the respondents, the researcher

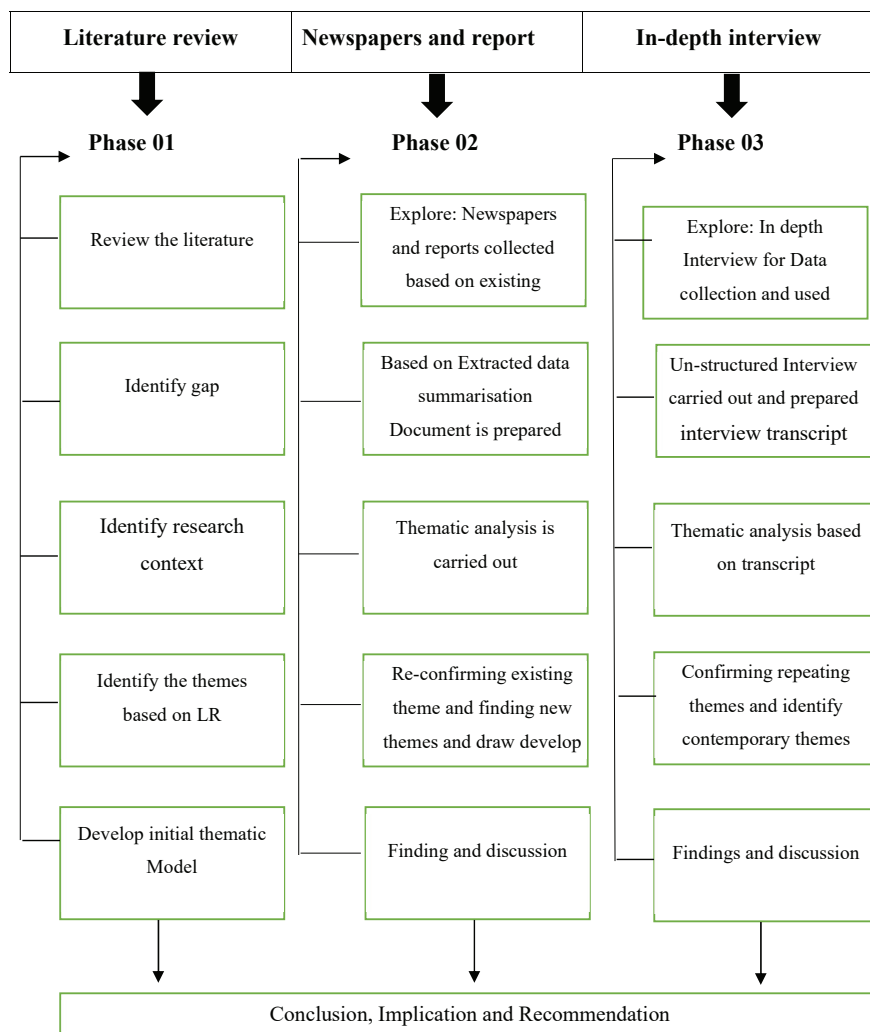


Figure 1: Multimethod study research process
Source: Author created

Table 1: Details of archival sources

Archival Sources	Number of samples	Authored by
Daily Mirror	30	University academics, government ministers, administrative staff
Daily fit		
Journals		
Lank first		
University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka (UGC website)		

Source: Researcher's data (2020)

Table 2: Participants

University	Participant role
University of Jaffna	Registrar
Rajarata University of Sri Lanka	Strategic Director
University of Colombo	Strategic Director
Eastern University	Registrar
Uva Wellassa University	Strategic Director
Open University	Strategic Director
University of Peradeniya	Registrar

Source: Researcher (2020)

selected seven participants from the top-level positions in the university system, as shown in Table 2.

The researcher made a thematic analysis of the data in an independent qualitative and descriptive approach because the thematic analysis is mainly effective for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

Qualitative study 1: a review of news sources and reports

The findings of the qualitative study are based on the initial data obtained to discuss the broader topic of strategic planning and implementation through the published archival sources. Table 3 shows the data sources of the study.

Table 4 shows the seven factors identified from the Sri Lankan archival sources, confirming that they have already been identified from the literature that affects the strategic implementations of the public universities in Sri Lanka. These seven factors are common to all public universities for configuring the strategic implementation system.

Table 5 shows the five new factors identified from the Sri Lankan archival sources that affect strategy implementation in Sri Lankan universities.

Twelve factors were identified in the qualitative study; of them, seven factors were reconfirmed with the factors found based on the initial thematic model; and five new factors were identified based on the news sources and reports. Finally, the initial thematic model is expanded based on the multimethod sequential qualitative study.

Qualitative study 2: in-depth interviews

Phase two is the project's qualitative phase and aims to explore the factors of strategy implementation in the public sector universities in Sri Lanka. This phase explores the relevant factors in depth through unstructured interviews. The data were collected from seven Sri Lankan public sector university staff interviews, as identified in Table 2. Twelve identified factors are confirmed, and four new ones are identified, as shown in Table 6.

Expanded thematic model

Combining the themes identified through the literature review (academic sources), the archival review (news

Table 3: Data sources

Author and Publisher	Year	Title
Sunil, W. A.	2019	Sri Lankan university unions threaten indefinite national strike over wages and benefits
World socialist web News		
Gunatilaka, H	2019	Ragging; its evolution and effects: a literature review with a special reference to Sri Lanka
Amarasuriya, H.	2015	Current issues in university education
Colombo Telegraph		
Priyadarshani, H.& Jesuiya, D.	2021	Teacher's perception of online teaching method during covid-19: Concerning school-level teachers at the faculty of education, the Open University of Sri Lanka
Weearsooriya R.	2013	Major problems and issues in the Sri Lankan university system
Arulvel K.	2016	A conceptual review on the strategic planning for universities in Sri Lanka

Table 4: Reconfirmed factors from the literature review in news sources and reports

No	Reconfirmed factor	Number of sources
1	Organisational Culture	5
2	Politicisation	7
3	Trade union activities	3
4	HR capacity	8
5	Fund and resource availability	4
6	Communication and language	2
7	Operational efficiency	2

Source: Researcher (2020)

Table 5: New factors identified from news sources and reports

No	New factor	Number of Sources
8	Strategic planning process	16
9	Student violence and ragging	4
10	Quality assurance	14
11	Stakeholder engagement	5
12	Digital infrastructure	6

Table 6: New themes based on interviews

New theme	Frequency
Project management applications	22
Media	10
Risk factors	8
Supportive management	10

Source: Researcher (2020)



Figure 2: Expanded thematic model

sources and reports), and the interviews (university staff), the thematic model is expanded, as shown in Figure 2.

DISCUSSION

Organisational Culture

The findings revealed that within the present organisational culture, many public universities do not directly support the successful execution of strategies (Perera, 2013). They perceive that the existing culture of the universities can be highlighted as a factor that impacts the effectiveness of their strategic implementations (Senaratne & Sivasegaram, 2012), while the organisational culture remains one of the predominant factors in strategic execution.

“Social harmony is important in the university level. It will reduce cultural issues in the university. Somehow, yes, we have been doing time to time. However, unbiased sound practices are required to work together” (Respondent 01, Organisational Culture).

The above response reveals that universities require significant cultural and psychological changes to make them succeed in their strategic execution. The employees are compelled to dedicate themselves to implementing strategic decisions. The university staff has highly adapted to the existing university culture, and the newcomers may automatically get used to it over time. Therefore, there is an excellent necessity for promoting a performance-based culture that the decision-making bodies could recognise for strategic implementations.

Organisational culture is characterised as underlying beliefs, assumptions, values, and ways of interaction that contribute to an organisation’s specific social and psychological climate. While treating universities as organisations, there should be a serious procedure in managing them with an understanding of what universities should follow in terms of organisational culture in their context. The cultural stereotypes that bring into the universities by students of varied home environments pose barriers to strategic implementation. The students maintain a specific substitute culture with a registration-wise defined seniority order as one of the critical factors of its sustainability. Various rivalries and

protests occur due to the subculture behaviour within the university system. Despite the facilities and procedures provided within the university system, students are not willing to accept them and adapt to their ethos. The so-called student subculture has been created under the influence of various political parties, which needs to be evaluated along with culture, as culturally biased issues and arguments broadly impact strategic implementations within public universities. Fundamentally, cultural mismatches cause misunderstandings and hinder teamwork. Implementing actions to mitigate ethnicity-based prejudices support controlling the negative impacts of the student subculture-created issues.

Politicisation

The political background of the students is another critical factor that needs to be addressed when taking action to enhance the quality of strategic implementation in public sector universities (Samaranayake, 2015). In the university system, internal and external politics plays a significant role in strategic execution.

“When it comes to other factors, external politics play a major role in decision-making and execution” (Respondent 01, Politicisation).

Most of the respondents agree that politics play a significant role in the execution of strategies within universities but are not willing to explain. Political factors mainly affect the university system in decision-making and cadre recruitment. Violations such as unruly behaviour within the university premises always pave the way to less productivity, where the root cause is the political background of the students, which also provokes them to have aggressive confrontations rather than reaching an amicable solution.

Student politics in has been started in the early days of the university system. Although the students' unions were initially directly focused on protecting student rights, the present goals of such unions and students must be evaluated from a different angle to understand whether they genuinely address student rights. The findings indicate that the external political forces which manipulate student unions directly impact the process of implementing the strategic decisions of the universities. The students are often used for narrow political agendas by various political parties, which should be primarily identified by the responsible university authorities to prevent becoming victimised by various outsiders.

Trade union activities

Union strikes disrupt the smooth functioning of the public university system of Sri Lanka (Wijewantha, 2011) leading to the smooth of universities for short to long periods and decreasing their productivity (Sunil, 2019).

“Degree programs are getting delayed due to strikes, and it is highly affecting university system” (Respondent 05, Trade Union).

The academic calendars and the timelines set for the degree programmes change due to trade union actions in the form of strikes led by the academic or non-academic staff. Such incidents directly cause poor efficiency within the overall procedure of the university system.

The contribution of trade unions is essential for the successful strategic implementation process within public universities. Academic and non-academic staff unions play a critical role within the university system and always show highly sensitive responses to new developments. The findings do not condemn the unions' operations within the university system but help streamline their growth and effectively improve strategic implementation within the existing system. The unions have contributed to staff well-being, and the presence of a strong union continues to support the staff within the working environment. Therefore, the findings suggest that their contribution should not be biased toward political agendas or parochial developments within the university systems.

Human resource capacity

Human resource management is needed to engage the skilled workforce efficiently and adequately. In the context of the public universities of Sri Lanka, the HR capacity is declining in different functions, such as training, recruitment process, and addressing employee shortages (Nireesh & Arulvel, 2016). Training is the key requirement in an organisation's effort to improve its workforce's knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes.

“Training should be given regularly for the academic and non-academic staff. Then only they motivate to work. It can increase the performance and sound execution” (Respondent 07, Human Resource Capacity).

In terms of training, the universities have to focus on modern technological applications, skill development

strategies, and performance-based training that are highly required in the academic and administrative aspects of the university system. In addition, the training should focus on enhancing the working attitudes of the staff with the expectation of a cultural change within the system.

The public universities in Sri Lanka are deemed failing in human resource planning:

“In most instances, most departments request for recruitment without a dire need, whereas another department is in real need” (Respondent 03, Human Resource Capacity).

Accordingly, HR departments within universities should pay more attention to recruitment policies to avoid strategy implementation issues. The importance of having proper recruitment processes is identified in this study. The HR capacity is directly impacted by the effectiveness of employee performance.

Fund and resource availability

It is universally understood that in the context of universities, fund allocation and resource availability determine the success of strategy implementation ventures (Weerasooriya, 2013). However, it is noticed that even the best strategies could fail in Sri Lankan public sector universities due to the lack of financial strength (Weerakoon, 2020), while the public sector universities face significant problems in generating funds.

“We have two types of finances. One is treasury allocation, and the other is generated funds. Treasury allocation is minimal. Some departments have been struggling due to this, and it plays a major role in execution” (Respondent 01, Funding Resources).

“When it comes to treasury funds, it is inadequate. Inadequate! If we move to plan! strategic planning! For example, we need to purchase certain goods, which are budgeted under treasury allocation. We are going to make a plan for the next year too. Every plan we carry out will be based on allocation. Hence, fund allocation is a critical factor affecting our actions” (Respondent 02, Funding Resources).

“We have building complexes in various locations, but I think these building spaces are not utilised for student purposes. The lecture hall could be shared within faculties, but they are not shared. In some faculties, even though ample spaces are

available, lectures are being cancelled due to unavailability of lecture halls in other facilities” (Respondent 04, Funding Resources).

“The main issue is inability release of funds on time. For instance, in the case of a project, the budget of the project is forwarded to the Cabinet of Ministers for approved. However, the funds have not been received in the specific time frame. Therefore, it affects our operations” (Respondent 06, Funding Resources).

The above responses reveal that inadequate funding and poor resource allocation create critical issues within the existing university system of Sri Lanka. The success and the continuation of their strategic implementation depend on the fund allocations they enjoy regularly. The effectiveness of the final output of public universities is directly challenged by the ineffectiveness of their strategic implementations, which are directly proportionate with the financial and other inputs. Overall, the real reason behind this is insufficient fund allocation.

Language and communication

The previous data sources mentioned in the literature review and the news sources contacted during the study confirm that language and communication significantly affect strategic implementation within Sri Lankan universities (Ariyawansa & Perera, 2005). Therefore, it is perceived that effective communication is a primary requirement for successful implementation (Peng, 2001).

“There is no proper support in schools for English language skills. How a child is expected to speak when most teachers cannot communicate in English properly? After completing their school education, they directly come to a university with a lack of language skills. Some students come to the university without having any basic knowledge of the English language, but the university gets the blame. Language skills play a major role in completing degree programmes” (Respondent 01, Language and Communication).

Neither the public university system, which provides higher education, nor the public school system in Sri Lanka, which provides primary and secondary education, focuses adequately on linguistic and communication skills in English; hence, the pressures from the secondary education system continuously affect the university system. Most often, language barriers badly affect the academic calendar of the universities by disrupting their timelines for the completion of their academic programs.

“Speaking in different dialects is difficult for me to understand, so I have to approach others for help. Therefore, communication becomes one of the main barrier for proper implementation of strategies” (Respondent 06, Language and Communication).

In the context of Sri Lanka, people communicate in different dialects, significantly affecting the working style and communication among the populace. Some universities face language barriers in this concern while working with different ethnic groups. Communication barriers that exist within public universities highly impact strategic implementation. To solve the problems arising from this situation, Language Skill Development Centres are established within the public universities across Sri Lanka to cater for the student and staff needs for English language competency. Additionally, as a preliminary course, the English language is taught to all undergraduates during the first year. The findings of this study further imply the need to evaluate these programmes’ effectiveness.

Operational efficiency

The inefficiency of the existing operational mechanism is directly indicated as the barrier to implementing strategic decisions within the public university system of Sri Lanka (Ariyawansa & Perera, 2005).

“Graduate output does not match the job market expectation. Specialised degree courses do not match the actual requirement of the market. Therefore, we need to think about output efficiency. There are no chances for him or her to apply his/her knowledge in practice. As a year passes, he or she is unaware of the real subject matter. This is a critical situation when they are appointed to work under someone unqualified employees. Hence, high-level focus on producing efficient graduates to our county is essential” (Respondent 02, Operational Efficiency).

The ultimate aim of universities is to produce efficient graduates for society, but unfortunately, the graduate who passes out from a public university does not match the societal requirements of today. The issue of matching the existing job market requirement and the available degree programmes has not been adequately resolved. Students still face the issue of finding a job after completion of their higher education. They do not have the prerequisites to apply confidently for a preferred job. Based on the findings, one could conclude that operational inefficiency within the university system affects strategic execution within the university system.

Strategic planning process

The findings from various news sources and interviews reconfirm that the strategic planning process is a key theme that affects strategic implementation within the public universities of Sri Lanka. A well-communicated strategic plan gives access to productivity, culture, empowerment, and overall effectiveness. Conversely, when the strategic planning processes are unrealistic, it causes failures in the strategic execution within organisations (Dibrell *et al.*, 2014).

“I realise, in few universities and in my university, the strategic planning is done just to prepare the document, but we must do proper analysis on how to improve our strengths and weakness; how do we co-relate with mission and vision.” But we do not do it hundred percent” (Respondent 01, Strategic Planning Process).

In the context of the universities, there is a lack of understanding about the strategic planning process and its intention.

“A strategic plan is only mandatory but not acting with proper commitment. To be frank, it is going only on face value and not an actual involvement. We do strategic planning for the sake of doing it and not for actual purposes. Here, most of them are unaware of the importance of the strategic plan; that's our major weakness” (Respondent 02, Strategic Planning Process)

It is clearly stated in the above response that the majority of the university staff has not clearly understood the purpose of strategic planning. In the context of the public universities of Sri Lanka, their strategic plans exist only in documents, and actual requirements are not appropriately updated.

“The top management, the council, and Vice-chancellor—are interested in the strategic implementation, but the planning process does not go well. As a result, a strategic plan is often not carried out successfully, as it is very tough and not realistic in a practical sense. Therefore, a strategic plan is not implemented in several areas but just kept in as an enveloped document as an image-building exercise” (Respondent 03, Strategic Planning Process).

Accordingly, the success of strategic implementations is highly dependent on how well they are planned, and it is surmised that the present failures in the strategic implementations can be reduced through a proper

strategic planning process. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance the staff with proper planning skills and motivate them to be dedicated to improving the planning process while implementing the strategies within the public university system.

Student violence and ragging

Student violence and ragging are significantly detrimental to the development of the state universities of Sri Lanka. Together they create a factor that adversely affects strategic implementation within the public universities of Sri Lanka (Gunatilaka, 2019).

“When it comes to main factors, as I understand, I will say the misbehaviour of students during the ragging season play major challenge in execution” (Respondent 01, Ragging).

The previous studies based on various news sources and interviews confirm that ragging is a critical factor that affects strategic execution within the public university system of Sri Lanka.

The findings further reveal that most of the incidents of violence are precipitated by the students even provided with the facilities and technological solutions for their use within the university system. Therefore, although many actions are currently being taken to prevent violence, ensure the protection and continuity of the programmes and enhance their strengths further, new strategies are essential.

Quality assurance

It is confirmed that quality assurance is highly required in the public university system to prevent it from being outdated.

“We have good internal quality assurances. Every aspect, such as teaching, feedback, learning, and examination, is going smoothly. Quality assurance can measure where we stand and what kind of corrective action we can take to improve further” (Respondent 07, Quality Assurance).
 “The curriculum needs to be revised according to the market needs. The curriculum has not revised. They are making minor adjustments. No major curriculum changes have been taken, which is also one major commitment of our staff” (Respondent 04, Quality Assurance).

The responses suggest that in terms of quality assurance, the universities are expected to revise

their curricula as often as required to meet the current demands. Quality assurance does not materialise unless corrective actions are taken whenever necessary.

From the above responses, it is discerned that quality assurance involves the systematic review of educational programmes and the processes followed to maintain and improve the quality and efficiency. While the designs of the quality assurance mechanisms (tools, processes, actors) vary across national contexts, their common objective is to improve the teaching and learning processes to support the best outcomes for the learners. Various news sources reveal that both positive and negative signs emerge in the quality assurance mechanisms followed within the public universities of Sri Lanka.

Stakeholder engagement

The various types of individuals who benefit from the public university system of Sri Lanka are the stakeholders who play a significant role in its strategy implementation exercises

“We should ask for contribution from outside, though it is not done from within. We are a little poor in interaction with the external bodies, but we keep focusing on it. Only if we interact with the stakeholders we understand sound requirements from the external environment” (Respondent 03, Stake Holder).

“Each faculty has the freedom to prepare a sound strategic plan; inviting outsiders for discussions; however, comparatively, stakeholder involvement is low. However, we look forward to creating a good network with the outside world while making this strategic plan” (Respondent 07, Stake Holder).

For better implementation of strategic decisions, according to the above responses, it is essential to have a better contribution from the stakeholders. Their proactive behaviour and support directly bring a positive impact on the desired systemic improvements. Furthermore, adequate mobilisation of the stakeholders will support creating a more favourable environment for the strategic implementation processes to actualise within the universities. However, the findings reveal that many universities have not yet designed and implemented a practical methodology for increasing the stakeholder engagement.

Digital infrastructure

Digital infrastructure is developed in terms of enhancing the usage of technology to support efficiency (Kila, 2015) directly. It comprises the physical resources necessary to use data, computerised devices, methods, systems, and processes within the organisation. Today, digital infrastructure has become indispensable for society's functioning and for ensuring its members' quality of life (Fox, 2020; Suraweera, 2020). The challenges posed during the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to perceive where Sri Lankan public universities stand in the context of digital infrastructure.

“Oh my god! Covid-19 came up with challenges but also gave opportunities. We have shifted from onsite lectures to online lectures. The issues with online lectures; some students will have technical challenges in terms of connectivity issues due to distance, purchasing compatible hardware devices, and paying subscriptions payments due to financial constraints... Thus, it becomes a serious concern” (Respondent 01, Digital Infrastructure).

Some operational issues were identified from the responses below:

“Library e-sources available, but awareness is low, and not every student get access to it, especially in [three named] universities of Sri Lanka” (Respondent 02, Digital Infrastructure)

“More than 60% of the students have no access to modern technologies” (Respondent 02, Digital Infrastructure)

Although documentation and data management are crucial within the university system, many universities still employ only manual work systems.

“We have to change the performance appraisal system and document system. If it is digitalised, then it will be good. We should not be carrying any files” (Respondent 05, Digital Infrastructure).

Therefore, it is perceived that poor digital infrastructure facilities have slowed the strategy implementation process within the universities. Further, the respondents believe that this issue may emerge due to the lack of funding and allocating the available finances to various projects without a prioritisation mechanism within the university system to develop a hierarchy of needs in the event of purchasing goods and services.

Therefore, it is concluded that the establishment of a proper management information system within each university is essential for conducting a smooth strategic implementation process.

Project management applications

Organisations continuously face different challenges in the business world. Project management applications are essential in financial management, quality management, procurement, human resources, risk management, research, development, *etc.* They support completing tasks within the specified parameters of scope, time, budget, and quality and enhance the performance of an organisation (Kostalova & Tetreva, 2018).

“Project management applications pave the way for efficient and effective function of universities when implemented systematically. There should be project management tools and techniques in the strategic plans of the university” (Respondent 02, Project Management)

“Project management skills and knowledge can ensure smooth operation and make university betterment. However, individuals connected with a strategic plan with implementation need project management application skills and knowledge” (Respondent 03, Project Management).

“As far as my concerns are concerned,” I was recruited to the post of Head of Project Management. With my experience and knowledge of project management supporting implementation, I had to study what project management is. How to finish it within the time frame, critical path analysis” (Respondent 06, Project Management).

“One is identity, and people are committed to tasks. So they will most certainly perform, and we should accelerate, process, while agile project management application is required” (Respondent 07, Project Management).

The kind of awareness among university project managers about the conceptual understanding achieved, the preliminaries required, the acculturation issues invited, and the benefits enjoyed regarding project management can be traced from the above responses. Accordingly, an agile project management framework uses an empirical process that allows teams to respond

rapidly, efficiently, and effectively to change (Sliger, 2011).

Media

In a study aimed at assessing the effects of planned media interventions, including social media, on the business sector decision-making process, Bou-Karroum *et al.* (2017) point out that integrative systematic review media interventions can potentially play a significant role in influencing organisation policies and practices. In the present study, three respondents talk about the role of media in public university strategic implementation.

“In my view, public opinion about our universities is good, but the media conveys wrong messages about universities, which create bad impressions. For example, if you talk to someone outside the university, he will say good about the university and that may not as bad as people see it. Therefore, media intervention influences people’s perception towards university” (Respondent 03, Media).

“It is good to organise the meetings with the press to avoid fake news. We have to speak about some matters with the press, and we can improve from it. Sometimes we may have faults, but we should approach with the media and not alone” (Respondent 03, Media)

It is realised from the above statements that the media could be lenient with universities when addressing issues related to those universities, as they are meant to produce sound graduates for society. However, media falsification can affect the strategic implementation.

“I do not like to comment 100% on media about this, but I can suggest to media that if they want to get any information from the university itself, it is available with the Registrar, where information should be verified and published. Information can be published ethically using media ethics and consulting the top authority, the Vice-chancellor, or the Registrar. So that we can keep a good image of the university. Media has great influence in the university system” (Respondent 07, Media)

“Yes, the media should concentrate on confirming the messages from the university officers. In line with this, at least the university should conduct the press meeting of what is happening inside the university” (Respondent 07, Media).

These responses confirm that media remains the main factor of strategic implementation within the public sector universities of Sri Lanka.

Risk factors

The uncontrollable risk factors are those that the organisation does not have any control over and that could affect operations: namely, political, economic, climate change and weather conditions, natural disasters, and human-made disasters and activities. Four respondents spoke about the uncertainty and uncontrollable situations that affect the strategic implementation projects within public universities.

“Covid-19 came up with challenges but also gave opportunities” (Respondent 01, Risk Factor).

“University education is delayed due to natural disasters, which play a major role in university execution” (Respondent 05, Risk Factor).

“External factors that affects actions in a university are out of our control; for example, a construction is being affected by heavy rain and landslide” (Respondent 06, Risk factor).

“There are different factors affecting execution. One is the schedule, time frame, and other factors in areas out of control, for example, Covid-19, tsunami, strikes, and several factors may be an influence” (Respondent 07, Risk Factor).

“The major problem is based on the change of government policies. It will affect the entire or at least parts of the strategic plan of the university” (Respondent 02, Risk Factor).

“Government policy changes are an external factor. When the government changes, higher education policies also change with the government changes. Accordingly, we have to change our strategic management planning. It is acceptable to have policy changes, but they should not be drastic. Drastic policy change is a major impact on strategic management implementation” (Respondent 04, Risk Factor).

The responses reveal strategic implementation failures due to various uncontrollable environmental situations. They also emphasise that political changes lead to policy changes in higher education, affecting the strategic implementation plans of public universities. When a new government comes to power, it changes the state policy, invariably influencing changes in the university system.

Supportive management

Experientially, it is realised that providing supportive management is critical to the success of an organisation's new and existing activities. The respondents all agreed that their respective working environments impact strategic implementation. For example, they claim that in public universities, strategic plan preparation and execution are highly affected due to the lack of support from management.

“It will be a great achievement if they do the strategic plan with actual involvement. However, the entire team's support is needed, not one person, which is unacceptable. We lack a supportive environment and teamwork” (Respondent 03, Supportive Management).

Most obviously, having a strategic plan alone does not ensure the execution of it. Therefore, the lack of support is considered a significant burden to reaching expected levels of execution.

In strategic management, top-level intervention and participation is the key to success. But, unfortunately, in the public sector university system in Sri Lanka, top-level support is at lower level in most instances of strategic application practices.

“There is a lack of coordination; the high-level individuals, such as Vice-chancellors and Deans who should be involved in the strategic plan, are not, which is my observation. In addition, there is no involvement from the Management” (Respondent 03, Supportive Management).

At the same time, the overall planning needs to be communicated to everyone within the system to obtain their support to achieve smooth execution.

“When we prepare the strategic plan, academic or non-academic staff should be involved, but comparatively, lack of support from the top management weakens the planning and implementing process” (Respondent 07, Supportive Management).

Based on all the evidence, it is realised that one of the main factors that affect strategic implementation within public universities of Sri Lanka is (un)supportive management. It is surmised from all the responses above that even brilliant strategies fail due to the lack of support from the management.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lankan students face significant socio-economic challenges in receiving a university education compared to other countries (Priyadarshani & Jesuiya, 2021). The unemployment rate is significantly high among students having a degree from a public university. In this scenario, the major challenge for Sri Lanka is to provide employment to young people and meet their aspirations. The current educational system does not adequately provide updated opportunities in the face of rapid or continuous changes. This causes unwanted pressure on students by compelling them to work harder. However, when they enter the job market, factors such as age, skills, and experience make the job-hunting process more challenging for a graduate from a public university compared to a graduate from a private university. Eventually, a graduate from a state university must be satisfied with the position/s available in the public sector with limited opportunities, despite the massive competition in the job market (Sunil, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this study makes several contributions to research on strategic management. Broadly, it contributes to generating new knowledge about the strategic implementation experiences and the factors influencing the procedure. The following sections elaborate on this research's theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

Theoretical contribution

The study contributes to the field of strategic management from the point of an open system theory and a resource-based theory by analysing how internal and external factors affect the strategic implementation of public universities in general. In addition, the study specifically focuses on the Sri Lankan context. It identifies new factors affected by issues related to several conditions, such as anomalies in the strategic planning process, ragging, defects in quality assurance mechanisms, drawbacks in stakeholder engagement, inadequacies in digital infrastructures, weaknesses in project management applications, disparities in media behaviour, the gravity of the risk factors and the lack of supportive management which make a significant influence on the strategic implementations carried out by the public universities in addition to the factors of organisational culture, politicisation, trade union activities, HR capacity, fund and resource availability, language and communication, and operational efficiency which have already been explored in the literature.

Methodological contribution

While the previous studies are mainly focused on a single data source in exploring the factors of strategic functioning of the public universities of Sri Lanka, this study advances them by using qualitative multimethod analysis in its approach to the issues in question, and the multimethod study reconfirms the previous factors based on different sources and extends the results to new ventures of factor exploration.

Practical contribution

This research offers suggestions for key officials from the University Grants Commissions of different countries, decision-makers in public universities of respective countries, and policymakers in higher education in general to support their decision-making processes. It especially contributes to the universities in Sri Lanka. For the officials who wish to operate strategic planning functions in the university system, this study strives better to understand the existing strategic implementation issues and highlights. Therefore, using the research findings, the strategic planners can take appropriate steps to overcome the issues and use new methodologies for effective strategic execution, achieving the public universities' desired organisational objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is highly recommended that the university take a step in managing internal and external forces that could influence the execution of its strategic plan (David *et al.*, 2009). Thus, proper environmental scanning is required in the planning process to derive the appropriate strategies for implementation (Rahimnia *et al.*, 2009). The main focuses of the universities are to produce competent and compatible graduates for the job market, to undertake quality research projects to address national and global issues, and to create and effectively disseminate advanced knowledge among the relevant scientific communities. The universities also need to be prepared to adopt new technologies to provide a good education for students and provide graduates with innovative capabilities and incubator facilities for starting new ventures (David *et al.*, 2009).

Creating an appropriate culture with decent values within the system, promoting harmony and ethnic and religious diversity, and making the universities free from political influences are necessary for effective strategic implementations (Shen & Tian, 2012). Furthermore, universities must focus on self-generating funds and obtaining foreign aid to enhance their resource capacity.

In addition expanding the stakeholder engagement in the universities will generate collaborative efforts for their successful operations. Finally, universities must be concerned with enhancing the staff's capacities in applying project management tools and techniques to achieve operational excellence (Pratt, 2015).

Overall, the university's top management has to play a significant role in supporting strategic implementation in the universities and needs to develop appropriate policies and regulations to manage their functions (Jaradat, 2013). In addition, the management should ensure a healthy interdepartmental relationship among the different units and departments for successful strategy implementation. At the same time, management should handle the external forces: media, trade union activities, political interventions, and external risks for smooth internal operations (Powell & Rey, 2015)

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted with a few limitations. The researcher conducted a series of discussions to collect adequate data related to the established objectives. All the participants were university Strategic Directors and Registrars of public universities. However, Sri Lankan public universities have stakeholders other than the strategic Directors and Registrars. While conducting the data collection process, many respondents expressed their ideas freely about the political interventions from different political parties. Due to ethical considerations, the researcher maintains confidentiality within this study, which is a study limitation. Many trade unions in Sri Lanka are operated for various political purposes rather than for the well-being of their membership. Although such issues were revealed during the discussions, the researcher does not mention them here as these issues need to be further explored through other studies, allowing for situational ethical constraints.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study yields a theoretical contribution focused on creating a new understanding of strategy implementation in the public sector universities of Sri Lanka and presenting an idea about how to manage them more effectively, thus creating new directions for future research. For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct research at the level of the Vice-chancellor as the primary data collection source so that more issues and challenges can be identified and more general results can be generated. Moreover, future researchers can implement longitudinal studies to assess the behaviour of the respondents over a long period. A mixed study method

can be used for future studies. Further, future researchers can use more robust data analysis methods, including qualitative and quantitative methods. It will allow us to obtain a large sample and provide the opportunity to analyse the issues from a mathematical point of view. Further, the university networks in Sri Lanka have been expanded throughout the island, while only a few significant universities are established around the capital city of Colombo. Therefore, the study has a research gap as the university's strategic functioning issues vary from university to university.

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APPENDIX

University Name	Participant role	Respondent Identification
University of Jaffna	Registrar	R1
Rajarata University	Strategic Director	R2
University of Colombo	Strategic Director	R3
Eastern University	Registrar	R4
Uva Wellassa University	Strategic Director	R5
Open University	Strategic Director	R6
University of Peradeniya	Registrar	R7