

Characterising Strategic Thinking in a Public University Setting: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Background: Universities face challenges in the current dynamic higher education sector. As a result, university managers have to contend with finding ways that will help increase revenue to enable adequate provision of the core services covering teaching and learning, research and publishing, community engagement and promotion of beneficial partnerships. This calls for developing strategic plans by employing strategic thinking skills. The University of Zambia has not been meeting the targets in all its previous strategic plans in the period 2008-2022 as expected. The aim of this paper is to characterise strategic thinking with a view of rendering an explanatory understanding of strategic planning actors in the University of Zambia from their point of view. **Methods:** This paper is part of a larger qualitative case study which examined the applicability of strategic thinking at the University of Zambia from a sample of 175 participants. However, 26 strategic planning actors were enlisted as participants for this qualitative paper using criterion *i* type of sampling. **Findings:** A characterisation of the strategic thinking skills, which inform the mindset of strategic planning actors in their motivation to participate in the planning and implementation of strategic plans shows the use of environmental analysis, systems thinking, reframing and intelligent opportunism more than focused intent, thinking in time, reflecting skills hypothesis generation and testing and professional capabilities. This is shown by the first four strategic thinking skills exhibiting AV.FR ratios that are more than or equal to 1. There is a weak practice of strategic thinking in the strategic planning actors as shown by the AV.FR values especially when implementing strategic plans. **Conclusion:** There is a wide gulf among strategic planning actors in being consistent when it comes to applying strategic thinking skills. There is a weakening in the mindset of strategic planning actors in strategic thinking during the implementation phase of the strategic plan than during the devel-

opment phase as the AV.FR ratios are less than 1 in the former. At the same time, the application of knowledge and practice gap exhibited by the executives in terms of professional capability has been recognized suggesting the need to develop programmes that will enhance the exposure of strategic planning actors to building strategic thinking ability which they can, in turn, pass on through mentoring of others.

Keywords

University, Strategic Thinking, Strategic Planning, Motives, Erklärendes Verstehen

1. Introduction

There have been misunderstandings in the conceptualisation of strategic thinking and strategic planning. The two concepts are totally different. Strategic planning which is the channeling of business insights into an action plan to achieve goals and objectives has nothing to do with strategic thinking, which is a more creative divergent thought-process embracing, visionary and reflective process (Mintzberg 1994a; Heracleous, 1998). Strategic thinking provides a broader and better knowledge of the firm and its business and allows a general improvement of management especially for the long-term Mintzberg (1994a, 1994b). Firms that do not embrace strategic thinking in their organisations end up having bad or poor strategy. In most instances, when firms go bankrupt or fail to fulfill the vision of the strategic plan, one of the elements which could have been lacking at both the design and implementation stages of the strategic plan is the application of strategic thinking. Nearly all the consequences of its non-application are avoidable (El-Balawi, 2016; Ashammari & Akhras, 2017). There are numerous advantages related to the application of strategic thinking. *Inter alia* the creative activity, intellectual, holistic and multi-dimensional nature of strategic thinking, helps to investigate the various domains and manifestations of reality by drawing future visions. Strategic thinking helps in developing practical programmes and plans to achieve the desired future (Al'Attar & Afifi, 2017: p. 33). Strategic thinking is a sense, perception, and deep vision of the future and does not ignore previous lessons and past actions (Al-Basel, 2015).

The research problem under investigation stems from the failure by the University of Zambia to achieve the targets of its previous strategic plans (Plan 1 from 1994-1998; 1999-2003; 2004-2007; 2008-2012; 2013-2017 and 2018-2022). There has been widespread discontent among staff of the University regarding the non-performance of these strategic plans. It has been argued that the failures of previous University of Zambia strategic plans have given rise to many issues, such as missing many opportunities to benefit from the comparative advantages it has as a premier University, and opportunities for expansion available in the

external environment. The University has been encountering problems and crises because of lack of early awareness of constraints and threats in the external environment. The strategic planning actors have had unclear bases and criteria for performance evaluation due to the inability to turn the goals into measurable objective results, plans, and programmes. It has been assumed that at the centre of all this has been the non-application of strategic thinking. Lack of application of strategic thinking has been noted to be often absent or, at least, lacking as shown in previous research (Zabriskie & Huellmantel, 1991; Liedtka, 1998a, 2000; Bonn, 2001, 2005; Essery, 2002). If an informative study was not undertaken, it was feared by the researchers that the University would continue to fail to meet its strategic planning mandate. Therefore, the aim of this qualitative paper is to characterise strategic thinking with a view of rendering an explanatory understanding of strategic planning actors in and from the University of Zambia's point of view.

There is justification in conducting this study because contemporary strategic management practice require rethinking of what strategic planning actors do and why they do it. Leaders capable of thinking strategically in this ever-changing age are urgently needed. Universities, as key community organisations, deviate their mission and benefit if they do not meet future needs. Therefore, they need skillful leaders who can cope with change, technological revolution (Ashamari & Akhras, 2017) and new realities according to the universities' goals and roles.

1.1. Literature Review

Strategic thinking is an individual activity influenced by the context within which it takes place (Liedtka, 1998a). However, this activity tends to be applied in group settings. Literature covers a horde of conceptualisations of strategic thinking and these include strategic thinking as an essential component to strategy development, as mental processing; and as perspectives and activities (Goldman, 2012). The main concern for this study is group based strategic thinking. This is due to the fact that the process of strategic thinking in groups is dynamic, interactive, iterative, messy, and informal learning (Goldman & Casey, 2010; Mintzberg, 1994a, 1994b). Individual differences such as personal habits (Ohmae, 1982; Sloan, 2006) and learning styles (Kolb, 1984), are contributing factors; but workplace experiences have a major impact (Goldman, 2008a, 2008b; Goldman et al., 2009). Also considered important contributors to learning to think strategically are factors such as organisational typology (Miles & Snow, 2003), work team composition (Bonn, 2005; Levi, 2007), and organisational culture (Bonn, 2005; Goldman & Casey, 2010).

Strategic thinking's purpose and desired outcomes have been noted as cornerstones in the development of novel strategies (Heracleous, 1998). To this end, strategic thinking is described by its characteristics as compared to operations thinking: longer-term, more abstract, issues-oriented and reflective (Hanford,

1995). According to Graetz (2002), strategic thinking is a creative endeavour fused with “dynamic, responsive, and often intuitive” influence on an enterprising goal. Liedtka (1998a) highlighted the degree to which strategic thinking is crucial to business organisations, she defined strategic thinking as a combination of analytical, conceptual, visionary and synthesising skills utilised to formulate strategies and strategic decisions that will make the organisation competitive even with limited resources.

O’Shannassy (2003) described strategic thinking as a deep nonlinear, creative, innovative, intuitive, divergent, synthetic, rational, analytical, and imaginative (long-term) way of thinking. Strategic thinking is a set of competencies that impacts strategy formulation and strategic actions leading to business performance, of which characteristics include: conceptual thinking ability, visionary thinking, creativity, analytical thinking ability, learning ability, synthesising ability, and objectivity, Nuntamanop et al. (2013).

There were attempts by Edwards & Sam (2014), Edwards et al. (2017) to encourage feedback in a strategic thinking loop, whether positive or negative, whereby its effects are cumulative in an appreciative enquiry. The duo urges that strategic thinking in higher learning institutions must be guided by the “Brain Powers” of the institution. It is perceived that their collective “Brain Power” in strategic thinking will impact results if solicited systematically and efficiently. According to Nicholson II (2007), what is missing in most African literature on strategic thinking is how institutions can encourage “the engagement of people in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality”, through the process of strategic thinking for institutional change (Edwards & Sam, 2014).

Despite the already known positive attributes of applying strategic thinking in strategic plans, Bonn (2005) calls our attention to the fact that “there is a need for more research that can help us to better understand strategic thinking. Such understanding would provide an important missing link in strategic management research and enable us to obtain a more realistic picture of strategic decision-makers and decision-making. In addition, it would help strategic planning actors to develop initiatives for improving strategic thinking in their organisations.” (p. 337). Bonn’s own definition of strategic thinking is taken as “a way of solving strategic problems that combine a rational and convergent approach with creative and divergent thought processes. Such process orientation focuses this investigation on how chief executives, senior managers and academic members of staff attempt to understand and take strategic action in an environment that is highly complex, ambiguous and competitive. It represents an important antecedent to strategic decision-making and may provide a key to better understand organisational change phenomena and ultimately, organisational performance and survival” (Bonn, 2005: p. 337). Researchers posit that strategic thinking can be used in different domains as shown below in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Strategic thinking skills.

Strategic Thinking Skill	Description
Systems Thinking Approach	The systems perspective refers to a mental model of an organisational system with a proper understanding of the interaction and interdependence of various elements (Napier & Albert, 1990; Liedtka, 1998a; Bonn, 2001, 2005; Khalafallah, 2015; Alebbini, 2018).
Reframing	Reframing skills relate to the capability of leaders to switch attention across multiple viewpoints, mental models, and frames, as well as paradigms in order to create new visions and choices for actions (Pang & Pisapia, 2012; Pisapia et al., 2009) when trying to understand complicated and unfamiliar situations from new insights (Pisapia et al., 2005).
Focused Intent	Intent-focused implies attaining a particular position or point of view in the long-term performance of an organisation. It is about consistency in pursuing competitiveness. Focused intent places a premium on optimism about success of initiatives and its leadership demonstrates consistency in where the organisation should be by demonstrating commitment to resolve problems and encouraging organisation culture that allows for success (Jelenc, 2008; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998).
Reflecting Skills	Reflecting is the capability to combine rational and logical thinking together with experimental thinking through experience, information and perceptions to produce judgement in relation to what has happened to create intuitive principles which direct what is happening in the present time to help in directing their future actions (Mintzberg, 1994a; Bonn, 2001, 2005; Pang & Pasipia, 2012).
Intelligent Opportunism	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, 1998a; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998; Jelenc, 2008; Nasabee et al., 2009).
Thinking in Time	This denotes the ability to assess the past and the present in order to determine the future to pursue. It is using the information available to establish existing gaps and how to address them (Liedtka, 1998a; Jelenc, 2008).
Hypothesis Driven Thinking	This denotes the leadership's ability to adjust their organisation's to respond to environmental challenges (Daft, 1998; Liedtka, 1998a; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998; Jelenc, 2008; Goldman et al., 2017).
Environmental Analysis	Environmental analysis places at its center internal and external analysis, emphasizes 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	Thinking in time is about using the information available to establish existing gaps and how to address them (Liedtka, 1998b; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998).
Professional Capabilities	Professional mastery, seen as knowledge of the technical processes in the firm. Brushing up their ability to manage strategic issues with the help of publications, books, seminars, workshops or consultancy (Bonn, 2001; Gaglio & Katz, 2001; Gaglio, 2004).

1.2. Motives

Weber's type of social science aims at understanding (*verstehen*) the motivations that lie behind human behaviour, a matter that cannot be reduced to any pre-defined element but must be placed within a cultural perspective, where culture

denotes a web of shared meanings and values (Della Porta, 1995; Keating, 2001). Motives as elements that *verstehen* covers in social science research has had mixed scholarly positions as a result of checkered history. There have been misunderstandings regarding its operations with some attributing motives in *Verhehen* as having to do with relating the behaviour of others to “our personal experiences” (behaviour that is unfamiliar or unexpected and it is a source of “hunches”, which can help us in the formulation of hypotheses (Abel, 1953). Whatever other scholars espouse what *Verhehen* is, whatever Weber says it is, that is the case. Weber argues that we use *aktuelles Verstehen* to understand meanings of actions and what is spoken by others (from their points of view italics ours for emphasis) and we use *Erklärendes Verstehen* to place human action with justifications. With *Erklärendes Verstehen*, Max Weber maintains by arguing that it consists of placing an action into “a relation of which the actor or actors can be said to have been aware and to which their actions have been oriented” (Weber, 1947). To do this is to understand actions in terms of motives. *Erklärendes Verstehen* is a key contributor to the development of interpretivist thought and the qualitative research tradition. Wilhelm Dilthey (1991) for instance, emphasised the importance of “understanding” (or “verstehen” in his native German) and of studying people’s “lived experiences”, which occur within a particular historical and social context. This explains the demand to study the application of strategic thinking in the University of Zambia as regards strategic planning and implementation of strategic plans. Dilthey (1991) and Weber (1978), for instance, proposed that social research should explore “lived experiences” in order to reveal the connections between aspects of people’s lives and to see the context to which motives for particular actions take place. Usually *Verstehen* is described as something related to the explanation of human action as grounds or motives for human action (Weber, 2012b). To Max Weber, “motive” is the meaningful context (*Sinnzusammenhang*) which appears, to the actor himself or to an observer, as the significant “reason” for a mode of behavior’ (Weber, 1947). The grounds for human action in *Erklärendes Verstehen* are either categorised as because of motives (those motives arising from historical circumstances or experiences in an individual or collective instance) or in order to motives (those motives linked to the future based on the perceived or likely intentions or circumstances. Roth (1981) supported Max Weber by stating that motivation is an attribute of a factor having an inner logic accounting for an action.

In trying to understand motives or grounds of an action or even the meaning of an action (Weber, 1947) depicts this symbolically in the following way. Let us take (A to B) where A is the action (*explanandum*) and B is the motive (*explainer*). A common example that is rendered is about Jones. “Jones went down to the basement of Strong Hall” the *explanandum* (writers borrow this term from Hempel). And let us call the claim “Jones wanted a cup of coffee” the *explainer*. These two claims do, in fact, stand in the relation of explainer to *explanandum*,

that the one claim, in other words, does indeed explain the other, because the two claims are indeed connected together in a rational means-end schema. That this is so, according to Weber, is for there to be a meaningfully adequate level of understanding of the phenomenon in question (Weber, 2012a, 2012b). It should be noted that in particular motivational sequences oriented to purposive rationality, Weber explained that when eliciting motives one may see links in form of a chain of causation that, for instance, begins with “external” circumstances and in the end, again leads to “external” behavior (Weber, 2012b).

2. Methodology

To collect the required data, we obtained necessary permissions and approvals. The process of data collection was twofold: firstly a permit was obtained from the Office of the Registrar for research to be conducted in the University and to use strategic planning data. Secondly, HSSREC, a local institutional review board, granted permission for the research to be conducted after meeting the required university research ethical standards under Protocol ID No. 20211203099.

This is a qualitative case study where we drew participants for the study from an initial sample of participants who took part in the development and management of three previous strategic plans covering the period 2008 to 2022. These were Deans, Executive Management, Senior Management and Heads of Departments.

We employed criterion *i* sampling which is a variant type of purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2001). In this sampling technique, the study relied on the researcher’s judgment for selecting persons, Berndt (2020), to interview from the total sample of 175 participants who filled in the questionnaire, The researcher’s judgement was based on who seemed to be knowledgeable and among the knowledgeable and who were Deans, Principal Officers and Heads of Department.

A summary of the sample is presented as follows:

Description	Number
Executive Management	4
Deans & Directors	10
Heads of Department	12
Total	26

The participants we enlisted played various roles in the phases of strategic planning and had specific experience. We employed this technique in order to also provide a range of variation on strategic thinking skills that were analysed from the initial questionnaire. Participants of interest were selected to obtain information about the significance of strategic thinking skills that were selected

in the questionnaire (e.g. three to four cases that are very different on selected dimensions). The essence of conducting this phenomenological study with homogenous participants is to get a better gauge and a “better understanding” of the overall perceptions among the participants’ from “lived experiences”.

Creswell (2012) 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 (Lisa, 2008; 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. Participants were selected on the bases that they had in the questionnaire demonstrated to either have limited knowledge and practice or had demonstrated sufficient knowledge and practice of strategic thinking. This was deciphered from the responses of the survey questionnaire which assessed strategic thinking skills. The logic of applying criterion *i* sampling was to get “information-rich cases, from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the evaluation” as opposed to “gathering little information from a large statistical significant sample” (Patton, 1987, 2001).

The study is referring in this qualitative phenomenological research, lived experiences as a representation of the experiences and choices of given persons and the knowledge that they have gained from these experiences and choices they made in constructing their own strategic thinking attributes. We then determined the sample size by phenomenological inference. Various authors have suggested different sample sizes for interview based studies ranging from 5 to 36. We also opted to employ the rule of thumb in determining the optimum sample size for this study. We support our position since there are a number of authors who have proposed rules of thumb for sample size in qualitative research, based on methodological considerations and past experiences (see Guest et al., 2006; Creswell, 2012; Marshall et al., 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). Qualitative research does not necessarily mean that the sample ought to be small. Larger sample sizes can occur, for example, in framework analysis. However, the pandemic situation and practical issues such as access to participants limited the sample size of this study, and we could have enlisted up to 40. However, this study is covered 26 respondents.

The study interviewed respondents when they felt comfortable to vail information. Further, the study used a loose structure of phenomenologically developed questions to allow each participant to offer a rich reflective account of their experience/s and represent their own perspective/s on how they went about developing the strategic plan and how they implemented the strategic plan. The aim of the interview in interpretive phenomenology is to facilitate participants to share the experiences that are important to them; while the interview topic guide was applied to lead the direction of the interview (Bweupe & Mwanza, 2022).

The role of the researcher in the interview was to guide the discussion in a way that focuses on the lived experiences of strategic thinking which the phenomena of interest was.

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. We ensured that we focused on the main currency for an IPA study. The focus was meanings of particular experiences and events on the course of developing as well as implementing the strategic plans. The following steps were applied in the analysis.

1) Analysis began with reading and re-reading the close examination of the first transcript in the field and then second transcript and so on. This reading and re-reading allowed us to immerse ourselves in the data or transcript of each case (Husserl, 2001; Smith et al., 2009; Bweupe & Mwanza, 2022).

2) The study took notes of what we were able to make out as we read each case looking for phenomena that were being discussed. We wrote what we observed in the margins of each transcript. We called this as immediate analysis (Luputa & Mwanza, 2022).

3) The study then set to delineate general meaning units. Meaning units included words or phrases or statements that we saw illuminated the researched phenomenon of strategic thinking. We isolated these relying as much as possible on the advice rendered by Creswell (1998) and Hycner (1999). We sorted out meaningful units carefully by searching for essences and reflecting on each meaningful units and its intentionality (Moustakas, 1994).

4) The study then developed a list of units of relevant general meaning, which we extracted from each interview. We did this by bracketing our experiences or applying Husserlian phenomenological *epoché*. To do this, we considered the literal content and the number (the significance) of times a meaning relating to motives of the application of strategic thinking skills was mentioned. We were then able to reduce the data by leaving out unnecessary statements, or phrases or words. To us, this was a critical phase of explicating the data. We did this individually for every case and this led us to the development of case themes and consideration of themes across other data sets or cases.

5) The study then sat together using a round robin approach to compare notes, search for what appeared to be common codes. This helped us to elicit connections of emergent themes across all cases. We clustered these units into sets based on similar and dissimilar meanings and using this process developed categories, which were then conceptualised into broad themes after further discussion. Cluster common themes, if significant differences existed, were also taken care of. Since we were rendering strategic planning skills that were employed as expressed by our respondents in lay terms, we employed inductive and abductive

research strategies (Blaikie, 2010) as we sought to understand and categorise emergent empirical findings.

The themes that were common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations were identified (Hycner, 1999) and then several patterns of themes and categories were developed. The notable categories were based on: a) mentions of strategic thinking skill, b) the circumstances when a particular strategic thinking strategy was applied and c) the type of motive. We agreed that these themes ought to fit the key concepts of strategic thinking skills (see **Table 1**). Diagrams were used to focus on what was emerging and transcripts were read “horizontally”. This involved grouping segments of text by theme (Marshall, 1999).

Abductive reasoning helped us to account for surprises, anomalies, or puzzles in the data collected. This type of reasoning invoked constructive interpretations because we were in a position to link concepts with the observed data to arrive at the most plausible interpretation of the observed data (Reichertz, 2004; Rosenthal, 2004; Charmaz, 2006, 2007) that had a close fit with the strategic thinking skills in **Table 1**. Inductive reasoning allowed us to assess correspondence between the extant constructs of strategic thinking (as shown in **Table 1**) and what was emergent and coded.

During this stage, the study also conducted a co-occurrence semantic analysis by looking for semantic relationships. We relied on the method that Luputa & 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.

From this the study, the findings 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 frequencies (AV.FR) as metric units to guide on what to focus on in the presentation of the findings. The A.FR is taken as the frequency or number of times the concept or construct befitting a strategic thinking skill 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). The AV.FR is like how much each participant in the sample mentioned the strategic thinking concept or construct from the overall mentions. The values of AV.FR ought to be more than or equal to 1. A value more than or equal to 1 shows a better distribution of mentions of the phenomenon to the sample elements and when it is lower than 1, the poorer the distribution the mentions to the sample.

Researcher Positionality

Positionality, according to [Bettez \(2015\)](#); [Milner IV \(2007\)](#) is put forward to qualitative research to emphasize that the production and understanding of knowledge in research is shaped by and also shaping the way researchers see themselves and are seen by others and the agentive role researchers play within varied social contexts and structures. [Özkazanç-Pan \(2012\)](#) suggests that positionality addresses differences in position, privilege and power in fieldwork concerning, for example, gender, ethnicity, class and other social, economic and demographic factors that impact researcher-participant relations.

The relevance of the study may be questioned purely around what [Scheyvens & Storey \(2014\)](#) point out as ethical issues, corporate politics and responsibility in academic knowledge production. These issues were contextualised given our geo-political location in the work place and our academic and professional status in relation to the community that we desired to be researched.

The study was alive to [Lu & Hodge \(2019\)](#) observation on positionality. The duo argue that researchers encounter tensions in the interactions with the researched when there is a matter that concerns a shared value. Tensions have the positive effect of initiating researchers to rethink, re-adjust and recalibrate the methodological tools which we did. There were tensions that emerged in this study because as researchers, we had our firmly held views about the underlying causes of tensions in the strategic planning process with reference to the recurrent under performance of the University of Zambia strategic plans. However, we were also mindful of the world views and position, we had adopted in relation to the study ([Delamont, 2018](#)).

In order to minimise the dangers as framed here and optimise research output in this study and in the whole practice of inquiry, we grounded our practice in the Framework for Researcher Positionality (FRP) proposed by [Milner IV \(2007\)](#) and four guides are proposed. The first guide being to research the self so as to bring to ourselves as researchers, the researchers' consciousness potential and cultural milieu matters that had a bearing on this study. The second guide was to research the self in relation to others with a view to develop cultural knowledge that could inform negotiation of interests with the researched later on. This fits Heideggerian phenomenology embracing *Dasein*. *Dasein* is taken as our temporal situatedness in the strategic planning process world, as distinct from our consciousness of the world of strategic planning out there. Due to the fact that a human being is the only being capable of asking the question: 'What does it mean to be?', any examination of being must, therefore, proceed by way of an inquiry into the human self as a being-there (*Dasein*), as a being who is concretely submerged in the practical affairs of the everyday world. This helps to explain the title of Heidegger's magnum opus of 1927, *Being and Time* (1962). The third guide was for the researchers and the research participants to engage in reflection together and present both narratives and counter-narratives, in the process, to prevent researchers' voice from overshadowing the voice of the re-

searched. The fourth guide was to shift the process of inquiry from self to the system, to develop a broader understanding of the pervasiveness of power differentials between the researchers and managers and to identify ways of fulfilling the moral imperative of confronting tensions (Lu & Hodge, 2019).

3. Findings

All the participants were ascribed a generalised descriptor in order to protect their identity. Each participant had a unique set of experiences of how they applied strategic thinking in the life of the strategic plan. They described circumstances where they applied a distinctive set of strategic thinking skills and motives of their application in their own languages. From the interviews, 677 codes were generated. However, following data reduction, we present the findings. We express our findings in two ways. The first is to account for what we call mentions of the constructs of strategic thinking skills. We do so by using absolute frequencies (A.FR) and average frequencies (AV.FR) while undertaking. The second is using lay language and we show the motive for applying strategic thinking skills, so that our readers could understand the phenomena within a broad situational context. In a number of instances, we show absolute frequencies (A.FR) and average frequencies (AV.FR). We present our findings based on three categories as presented below.

Category I: Mentions of Strategic Thinking Skills

The study now presents the mentions of strategic thinking skills using quantitative method to help in presenting grounds for interpretations. It was observed in this study that strategic thinking might occur before, during, or after strategic planning and this is shown in **Table 2**. When the strategic thinking skills are assessed, it is evident that environmental analysis was the most applied during the planning phase and professional capabilities were the least applied. There is indeed a wide margin in the interval differences between environmental analysis and systems thinking which is second in ranking when the planning phase is assessed. As for the other skills, there is marginal interval difference in mentions. Depending on the respondent's experiences, strategic thinking might occur before, during, or after strategic planning, or not at all. In **Table 2** 1q below, the study revealed a weakening in the mind-set of strategic planning actors in strategic thinking during the planning phase in five domains which are focused intent, thinking in time, reflecting skills, hypothesis driven thinking and professional capabilities. This is shown by AV.FR-ratios that are below 1. In the implementation stage, all strategic thinking domains had values less than 1, implying that the mentions were very eligible and not considered.

Category II: Circumstances when a particular strategic thinking skill and motive was applied

Strategic thinking skills were applied based on situated action and wide range of a "swarm of contingencies". This implies that the motives in particular individual actions could not be understood without first understanding its context.

Table 2. Characterisation of the strategic thinking embedded in mentions.

Strategic Thinking Skill	Planning Phase		Implementation Phase	
	AF.R	AV.FR	AF.R	AV.FR
Environmental Analysis	76	2.92	11	0.42
Systems Thinking Approach	32	1.23	13	0.50
Reframing	29	1.11	17	0.65
Intelligent Opportunism	28	1.07	14	0.53
Focused Intent	18	0.69	9	0.34
Thinking in Time	14	0.52	13	0.50
Reflecting Skills	11	0.42	5	0.19
Hypothesis Driven Thinking	9	0.30	6	0.23
Professional Capabilities	7	0.26	8	0.30

There were five thematic areas that emerged and demonstrated the circumstances when a particular strategic thinking skill and motive was applied and these included:

- a) Theme I: Applying strategic thinking in response to financial resource scarcity;
- b) Theme II: Applying strategic thinking in response to the changing higher education environment;
- c) Theme III: Applying strategic thinking in response to determining elements to be considered in strategic planning;
- d) Theme IV: Applying strategic thinking in response to the need to drive culture change management.

Below are illustrations under this category.

Thematic Area I: Applying strategic thinking in response to the changing higher education environment

Some strategic planning actors indicated that their motivation to apply what they considered as strategic thinking was in order to futuristically respond to the changing higher education environment. The changes in the education sector which they alluded to were: 1) the then proliferation of universities both public and private; 2) the declining real value of the funding from government; and 3) the competition for student enrolments in some disciplines. While some strategic planning actors did not show any response to this, those that did, demonstrated strategic thinking by way of undertaking reflective thinking and environment analysis. The motive for undertaking an environmental analysis was a result of previous experiences and to meet the needs of the future. Therefore, the University's strategic planning actors had been helped to begin to apply environmental analysis because of competition and in order to respond going into the future. Below is an excerpt linked to how strategic thinking was applied due to the changing higher education environment. We select the application of en-

vironmental analysis as a strategic thinking skill. One manager spoke about the motive of profiling threats which is an aspect of environmental analysis by looking into the consequences futuristically.

This proliferation of universities may choke us... You have seen that we have low enrolments in the school of education. We need to do something to increase the numbers... This will require that we do a SWOT and see where we stand.

BHSV

This position led to including activities in the strategic plan to focus on enhancing the University's comparative advantage.

Thematic Area II: Applying strategic thinking in response to financial resource scarcity

The strategic planning actors are concerned about scarcity of financial resources which have been a perennial problem contributing to non-achievement of strategic goals. Strategic planning actors wanted to address financial resource scarcity futuristically based on past experiences. The study found that the past experiences show that the University's debt had been increasing as follows: 1 January 2018: K477 Million; 31 December 2021: K521 Million and the growth in the debt was at 44.1% per annum (UNZA, 2022a). It would seem from the sentiments of the strategic planning actors that the sources of UNZA's financial resource constraints have been identified as coming from the low government grant, inadequate revenue generation from some academic units and the business ventures, legal fees, contract and retirement liabilities and statutory debt covering amounts payable to the Zambia Revenue Authority and the National Pensions Scheme Authority respectively. As such, strategic planning actors opted to consider financing innovation. This was demonstrated by the use of the strategic thinking skill of intent focused as illustrated below.

We discovered opportunities that we could transform some of our units into business units and we developed a strategy to pave way for the creation of UNZA Holdings Limited

DRWU

Another Manager opined:

We introduced new programmes and revised our curricular to raise money. What drove us to do this is that our goal was to have in future a school financial breakeven point and to achieve our goals. We were looking at how best we could perform to achieve what we wanted.

SWFR

Although the motives of strategic planning actors demonstrates an application of some aspects of strategic thinking, not all of them are applied consistently and across all the units. There has been little effort to take advantage of focused intent and compliment it with intelligent opportunism as it relates to making decisions. The excerpt below points to the non-use of intelligent opportunism even when focused intent could be applied.

We did seem to have a sense of direction and destiny. Some of our strategies

and policy documents could not be implemented. We could not finance our plan and we delayed to undertake monitoring of our plan.

LMPE

Thematic Area III: Applying strategic thinking in response to the need to improve graduate employability

Strategic planning actors observed that UNZA graduates were beginning to face challenges finding employment because of the mismatches in some instances between their skills and the competencies the labour marketing was looking for. To illustrate the significance of UNZA graduate numbers, the 51st graduation ceremony held in May 2022 recorded 4053 graduates compared to 5575 at the 50th Golden jubilee graduation ceremony held in 2021 and 3691 graduates recorded in 2020 (UNZA, 2022b). Improving graduate employability for these numbers points to thinking in time from a strategic thinking perspective. The University recognised that the employability of its graduates enhances the profile of the Institution. Thinking in time has helped to establish the gaps in curricular and to ameliorate them for a good fit with industry as show below.

We did a baseline and saw the need to modify the curriculum. If you look at some of the programmes we have, you will see some change. We have corrected errors of the past and integrated them with the demands of industry. We hope our graduates are not finding it difficult to gain employment.

NNB

Another Manager put it this way:

You can talk about quality but the market is absorbing graduates from other universities. We had to develop market driven programmes and review the configuration of our existing programmes in order to remain relevant.

DSDC

Thematic Area IV: Applying strategic thinking in response to the need to drive culture change management

Although the motive for culture change management is embedded in the focussed intent aspect of strategic thinking, findings show that the resolve is weak both at the planning and at the implementation stage of strategic initiatives. The Managers are not focussing on what needs to be done to address the UNZA underlying work culture practices that impede achievement of strategic goals. One aspect that emerged in the interviews related to professional capabilities. The University demonstrated less use of professional capabilities following the strategic plan development. The development of the strategic plan embraced a systems thinking approach where experts with the prowess in plan development were engaged. There was, however, evidence of lack of application of professional capabilities in strategic thinking especially among executive officers and some deans when it comes to how to drive culture change. Executives shifted only their own focus and not that of the entire organisation. This could be one reason the University has not shown transformation in the previous strategic plans. Below are excerpts of non-use of professional capabilities.

We have had good strategic plans. The problems we have relate to failure by our leaders in management to utilise properly the developed plans and resources in order to accomplish the mission.

SPM

In agreement with respondent SPM, one respondent had this to say about lack of professional capability as a strategic thinking skill.

The top leaders' absence of giving us clear directions and demonstrating to us how to do things has been a major detractor of university performance. I believe that a top manager needs to be familiar with what is happening in the institution. We need our top managers to manage strategic issues....

TCCR

In **Table 2**, we have shown that the AV.FR values were less than 1 across all the strategic thinking variables. This shows that there is university wide problem professional capability in need of improvement.

Category III: Type of Motive

In this section, the study categorises the motives into ideal types and demonstrate the operation of *Erklären verstehen*. The study brings out an understanding of the interpretative grasp of a) because of motives (those motives arising from historical circumstances or experiences in an individual or collective instance) or b) in order to motives (those motives linked to the future based on the perceived or likely intentions or circumstances). This study shows the two ideal types or themes of motives in the excerpts that follow.

Theme I: Because of Motives

Participants indicated that they acted rationalising the use of a strategic skill by looking at what the things were like in the past in case they needed change at that time or in future. They emphasised actions and elements they were including in the strategic plan as being informed by historical events and as such wanted to change the picture of things, events or processes. Some respondents came to discover during the implementation process that the University was very traditional. The University was focusing more on undergraduate training and was still running some traditional courses which seemed not to be market driven. When developing strategic activities that required innovation of courses, Hypothesis driven as a strategic thinking tool was applied because of the perceived "bad past". A because of motive linked to the need for innovation below shows the link of this aspect of strategic thinking.

We thought that we could re-engineer our programmes and courses. We made sure that we re-aligned our strategic objectives and resources to doing away slowly with the bad past (meaning just focusing on designing and launching courses and programmes).

DSHS

While hypothesis driven was contemplated, the respondent was able to show from the excerpt below that the strategic skill thinking in time was not applied during the implementation phase. The future the School/Unit envisaged during

the preparation of the plan was not attained as the School/Unit could not keep away from its past. In strategic thinking, the future should be created based on today's capabilities (which are the organisation's past achievements). In addition, some innovations could not be implemented because staff were let down by leaders who seemed not to have professional capability which is one strategic thinking skill.

We failed to realise this dream of launching our re-engineered programmes and courses in the last plan. We developed new courses quite well and yet we could not anchor them... We had ignored the consequences of hurried past decisions and problems we had of running traditional courses and found ourselves not doing much. We have not created the future of our school based on today's capabilities. Professional mastery, seen as knowledge of the technical processes in the firm.

MUPLA

Theme II: In Order to Motives

Participants showed that they acted by rationalising the use of a strategic skill by looking at what the things ought to be like in future or their expectations based on current events. They emphasised actions and elements they were including in the strategic plan as being informed by current circumstances focusing on anticipated events or benefits. The study selected the application of environmental analysis as a strategic thinking skill and show how future expectations played out. One manager spoke about the motive of profiling threats, which was an aspect of environmental scanning by looking into the consequences futuristically.

We were very concerned with what is happening in the higher education sector. We are seeing a proliferation of universities... In order to ensure that we remained relevant going forward, during the plan preparation, we made sure that we profiled threats from our potential competitors lest we have a reduced market share.

BHSV

The inclusion in the strategic plan indicators to show improvements in income were informed by the current adverse financial position, which was a threat to the going concern aspect of the University. Some respondents observed that the financial sustainability framework was developed in 2021 by the University of which it was hoped could help achieve a financially sustainable institution but that the reality was different. A manager emphasised the need to look into the future by examining the University as a system and integrating all units whenever there has to be an action to achieve financial sustainability.

The motive really was that going forward, we need to run a sustainable institution. We need to be running efficiently and effectively to have a sustainable Institution. It means we have to think beyond the normal way of doing things. Strategically, you will be looking at issues such as what are the enablers that can help us achieve our strategic intents.

MMUG

The above excerpt points to the application of systems thinking which is characterised by a switch from seeing the organisation as a splintered conglomerate of disassociated parts (and employees) to seeing and dealing with the Institution as a holistic system that has integrated each part in relationship to the whole.

4. Discussion

The aim of the study was to understand the state of manager's motive when applying strategic thinking in the University of Zambia. What we have understood from the study is that strategic planning actors' application of strategic thinking can be characterised using three categories. Category I deals with what in the lived experiences qualifies as strategic thinking skills that are applied. Category II deals with circumstances when a particular strategic thinking skill and motive is applied and Category III covers the ideal types of motives characteristic of strategic thinking.

A characterisation of the strategic thinking skills which inform the mindset of strategic planning actors in their motivation to participate in the planning and implementation of strategic plans shows the use of more of environmental analysis, systems thinking, reframing and intelligent opportunism than focused intent, thinking in time, reflecting skills hypothesis generation and testing and professional capabilities. This is shown by the first four strategic thinking skills exhibiting in AV.FR ratios that are more than or equal to 1.

The study illuminates further the reality that this mindset in the application of strategic thinking is not consistent across the development and the implementation phases of the strategic plan. It was not expected that there would be differences in the use of strategic thinking variables pre and post planning. This perhaps could be explained by the assumption that there is a differential application due to the fact that concept ualisation of strategic thinking involves mental processing and could be based on logical thinking and mental elasticity (Bonn, 2005; Liedtka, 1998a; Ohmae, 1982; Sloan, 2006). We are arguing, for example, that environmental analysis cannot only be applied in the development stage of strategic planning. It ought to be applied in the implementation phase of the plan when monitoring the plan. This fits the position held by Liedtka (1998a) who notes that strategic thinking requires thinking across time (past to future) and specific task completion.

There is a weakening of the practice of strategic thinking in the managers strategic planning actors as shown by the AV.FR values especially. This is consistent with Msusa & Chowa (2020) who found limited evidence of the practice of conceptual flexibility or intelligent opportunism, environmental analysis, reflecting skills, reframing skills and thinking in time over the period 2013 to 2022 of the University of Zambia Strategic Plans. However, a review of main streams in strategy formulation literature shows that "thinking" as an executive skill is one of the least studied aspects of strategic processes and almost ignored in most academic conceptualisations (Torset, 2001: pp. 3-12). Many strategic manage-

ment studies observe that strategic planning actors ought to think about strategy and that their activities must relate to strategy conceptualisation and implementation in a non-linear fashion, but more so randomly and/or continuously (Mason, 1986; Starbuck & Miliken, 1988; Mintzberg, 1994b).

It may not be surprising for us to note that multiple industry studies in three industrialised countries specifically identify the lack of strategic thinking among executives was the major detractor of economic performance (Mason, 1986, Eisenhardt, 1990; Zabriskie & Huellmantel, 1991; Bonn, 2001, Essery, 2002). Like our study, the deficits in strategic thinking could be considered problematic regardless of the organisation's use of the formal planning systems or specific analytical tools (Hanford, 1995; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998; Hartman & Crow, 2002; Schein, 2004).

It was interesting to note that the motives for applying particular strategic thinking attributes were related to a) because of motives (historical circumstances or experiences in an individual or collective instance) and b) in order to motives (motives linked to the future based on the perceived or likely intentions or circumstances).

There is a point worth affirming drawing from the findings. The nature of today's work environments requires individuals to interpret complex information and develop strategies that improve organisational processes and routines (Wheatley, 2006) and this seems not to be the case at the university studied. The low AV.FR values scored during the implementation stage of the strategic plan are a testimony that there is need to do something in the domain of strategic thinking if the University has to achieve its vision and mission. Organisational leaders and their subordinates, ought to acquire and bring to bear strategic thinking skills in and on their areas of responsibility. This requires training and mentorship of key players who are involved in strategic plan development and implementation.

Limitations and Significance

Like all research, there are limitations worth noting. The study did not collect data from key participants who were part of the first strategic plan as most of these could not be traced as they had retired and relocated. In essence, there is a very rich history which could have been captured. However, the study demonstrated both historic and a teleological presentation of actions which most qualitative studies have ignored. Teleology—or purposiveness—is a distinctive feature of human action and so, are historic events. Marx Weber's *Erklären verstehen*, has shown its purpose of making explanatory sense of social behaviour by citing the causes of social behaviour (application and non-application of strategic thinking). Part of what is needed in making sense of human behaviour has been the manner the respondents rationalised the use and non-use of particular strategic thinking skills.

5. Conclusion

There is a wide gulf among strategic planning actors in being consistent when it comes to applying strategic thinking skills. A characterisation of the strategic thinking skills, which inform the mindset of strategic planning actors in their motivation to participate in the planning and implementation of strategic plans shows more the use of more of environmental analysis, systems thinking, re-framing and intelligent opportunism than focused intent, thinking in time, reflecting skills hypothesis generation and testing and professional capabilities. This is shown by the first four strategic thinking skills exhibiting AV.FR ratios that are more than or equal to 1. There is a weak practice of strategic thinking in the strategic planning actors as shown by the AV.FR values especially when implementing strategic plans. At the same time, the application of strategic thinking knowledge and practice gap exhibited by executives in terms of professional capability has been recognised suggesting the need to deepen the strategic thinking ability of those at senior manager levels in the University, who will have to mentor others.

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Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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