A primary investigation of strategic management in further education (FE) in the small island state of Malta: quo vadis?

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Abstract: This paper investigates the presence of a strategic management regime in the further education (FE) sector in Malta using data gathered in 2012. In this way the type of strategic systems followed (if present) and their implementation is delineated. A qualitative approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of strategic management issues in Maltese FE organizations. Data were collected from seven FE organizations via interviews with senior management team (SMT) officials. The use of strategic management is limited, since only one FE organization has a fully-fledged strategic planning system. Important aspects of strategic planning, like mission statement formulation and performance measurement regimes, are also lacking. An interpretative approach makes it possible to uncover particular nuances in specific sectors in small states. The findings indicate that FE organizations in the Maltese FE sector have a low locus of control, meaning that SMTs may have to shift from strategic planning to strategic thinking.

Keywords: strategic management, further education, qualitative method, mission statements, small island states, Malta.

This paper assesses the strategic management regime in the Maltese further education sector (FE) sector (excluding university). Strategic management has been, and still is, regarded as the

hallmark of the best organizations,[1] even though evidence for this is still nebulous[2] and, at times, completely unfounded.[3] This paper describes and explains the strategic management regime in the Maltese FE sector.

Literature review

The word 'strategy', derived from the Classical Greek *strategoi* meaning 'general',[4] has come to refer to a 'game plan' with some kind of future intent. Since future conditions may rarely be completely known, strategies should exhibit flexibility so that they become means whereby an organization's operations are aligned to its mission[5] and are deemed necessary. Strategy establish priorities and increases staff confidence.[6]

Strategy has also been defined pragmatically as 'management's action plan for running the business and conducting operations'[7] and as the 'major courses of action (choices) selected and implemented to achieve one or more goals'.[8] Real strategic management is proactive rather than reactive in nature.[9] Such practicality is one of the managerialist criticisms of twenty-first-century organizational leadership but this is helpfully lessened by those who envisage an ethical dimension added to strategy.[10] In a world where the only certainty is change, strategic

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1   A.A. Thompson, A.J. Strickland, and J.E. Gamble, *Crafting and executing strategy: The quest for competitive advantage* (New York, 2007).

2   H. Mintzberg, *The rise and fall of strategic planning* (New York, 1994).

3   J. Lumby, 'Strategic planning in further education' in D. Middlewood and J. Lumby (eds.), *Strategic management in schools and colleges* (Wiltshire, 1998), 91–104.

4   J.B. Bury and R. Meiggs, *A history of Greece*, 4th edition (Hong Kong, 1978).

5   S. Eacott, 'Strategy in educational leadership: in search of unity', *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46 (2008), 353–75.

6   E. Sallis, 'Corporate planning in an FE college', *Educational Management and Administration*, 18 (1990), 30–4.

7   Thompson, Strickland, and Gamble, 3.

8   D. Hellriegel, S.E. Jackson, and J. Slocum, *Management: a competency based approach* (Singapore, 2005), 182.

9   D. Middlewood, 'Strategic management in education: an overview' in Middlewood and Lumby (eds.), 1–17.

10 C. Holme, 'Business ethics – part one: does it matter?', *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 40 (2008), 248–52.

formulation and implementation have a central place in theoretical and practical management. This is witnessed in both business and education. From a review of the literature, it emerges that education has borrowed heavily from business management.[11] However, strategic planning should encompass the specificities of educational organizations, namely, that they deal with

> various interests and values, determined by educational policies; where there are power plays and where strategy is the result of compromises negotiated between educational actors; in which strategic choices are constrained by the bureaucratic burden of a centralized administration; in which the objectives are sometimes subject to ambiguous formulations and, therefore, cannot be quantified and controlled numerically.[12]

Strategic planning may be visualized in diverse ways. While linear[13] and cyclical[14] models have been proposed, strategic planning may also be perceived as a way of enhancing institutional effectiveness with strategic alignment being part of such planning[15] given ever-restricted budgets. In this scenario, strategic planning is considered in terms of policy alignment.[16] Alignment between a school district's strategy and budgeting may lead to better outcomes whereby money is spent according to the goals detailed in the strategic plan.[17] Such planning is subject to differing power relations amongst different stakeholders

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11 B. Davies, 'Developing the strategically focused school', *School Leadership and Management*, 24 (2004), 11–27.

12 M.M. Pereira and N.F. Melão, 'The implementation of the balanced scorecard in a school district: lessons learned from an action research study', *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 61 (2012), 921.

13 Thompson, Strickland, and Gamble.

14 Davies, 11–27.

15 R.S. Kaplan and D.P. Norton, *Alignment: using the balanced scorecard to create corporate synergies* (USA, 2006).

16 G.J. Skolits and S. Graybeal, 'Community college institutional effectiveness: perspectives of campus stakeholders', *Community College Review*, 34 (2007), 302–23.

17 J. Kettunen, 'Strategy and quality maps in higher education', *US–China Education Review*, 8 (2011), 149–56.

resulting in 'suppression or promotion of different interests within the organization'[18] illustrating how communication is important during and after planning.

However, linear and cyclical modelling may seem too simplistic at a time where the external environment may have a huge influence on managers' behavioural range leading to irrationality.[19] Furthermore, strategic planning is also a political process where the power of influential groups may eclipse other groups.[20] Besides, the Maltese context presents constraints attributable to small nation states: close-knit communities where everyone knows everyone, lack of financial and human resources, diseconomies of scale, and a continual perception that outside sources of knowledge are inherently better than local ones.[21] Additionally, most models are formalized and omit the subconscious which may be important for 'insight, creativity, and synthesis',[22] leading to other methods of visualizing strategic planning, such as grounded theory.[23]

This may bring about a shift from strategic planning to strategic thinking[24] eventually leading to strategic alignment.[25] Such strategic thinking is premised on the concepts of systems thinking (viewing the system holistically), reflection (the use of rationality leading to

18 A.P. Spee and P. Jarzabkowski, 'Strategic planning as communicative process', *Organization Studies*, 32 (2011), 1218.

19 N. Keung Pang and J. Pisapia, 'The strategic thinking skills of Hong Kong school leaders: usage and effectiveness', *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 40 (2012), 343–61.

20 H. Thomas, 'Strategic planning' in D. Warner and D. Palfreyman, *Higher education management: the key elements* (Buckingham, 1996), 33–46.

21 M.K. Bacchus, 'The education challenges facing small nation states in the increasingly competitive global economy of the twenty-first century', in P. Mayo (ed.), *Education in small states: global imperatives, regional initiatives and local dilemmas* (New York, 2010), 26–40.

22 Mintzberg, 227.

23 R. MacIntosh and N. Beech, 'Strategy, strategists and fantasy: a dialogic constructionist perspective', *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, 24 (2011), 15–37.

24 Keung Pang and Pisapia, 343–61.

25 F.M. Duffy, *Moving upward together: creating strategic alignment to sustain systemic school improvement* (USA, 2004).

prospective actions), and reframing (interchanging across various viewpoints).[26] Empirical data demonstrates that school principals in Hong Kong were more likely to use systems thinking and reflection.[27] There is also a positive correlation with school size: principals in larger schools (that is operating in a more complex environment) tended to practise reframing skills.

Strategic planning should involve as many stakeholders as possible.[28] New perspectives, research interests, expert knowledge, and fresh motivation may enhance planning and implementing FE organizations' strategic plans.[29] It may also be perceived as a response to decreased funding, increasing the organization's reputation and student retention.[30] The inclusion of faculty may help develop a richer strategic plan rooted in organizational mission.[31] The organization's management should be aware that academics are involved in scholarship, teaching, and service to the community.[32] This may help build communication between management and academics to enhance strategic efforts.[33]

The implementation of strategy is generally perceived as the key to organizational success,[34] since it aligns resources and people with the strategies in question.[35] While strategy may be viewed as 'doing the right things', implementation is seen as 'doing things right'.[36] The

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26 J. Pisapia, D. Reyes-Guerra, and E. Coukos-Semmel, 'Developing the leader's strategic mindset: establishing the measures', *The Leadership Review*, 5 (2005), 41–68.

27 Keung Pang and Pisapia, 343–61.

28 R. Whitney, 'Involving academic faculty in developing and implementing a strategic plan', *New Directions for Student Services*, 132 (2010), 63–74.

29 P. Brown, 'Strategic capability development in the higher education sector', *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 18 (2004), 436–45.

30 Whitney, 63–74.

31 C. Aleong and J. Aleong, 'A qualitative study of the strategic plans of three higher education institutions', *Journal of Business and Economics Research*, 9 (2011), 17–28.

32 Whitney, 63–74.

33 Brown, 436–45.

34 C.D. Fogg, *Executing strategy* (USA, 2009).

35 Kaplan and Norton.

36 D.J. Collis, *Strategy: create and implement the best strategy for your business* (USA, 2005).

concept of ownership and responsibility for strategy execution by middle management and employees is deemed imperative.[37] Resources for strategy execution typically includes teaching staff, technology, classrooms, support from non-academic staff, time, and training.[38] Different departments within an organization, and amongst different organizations, may depend on each other to successfully implement the strategic plan.[39] For example, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, implementation included student advisory services, creating learning communities, and new learning opportunities.[40]

In spite of the various models accounting for strategic management, many British FE colleges and HE organizations in the 1990s up till the present have found it very difficult to build coherent strategic plans and to implement them.[41] Some of these difficulties stemmed from a lack of experience on the part of management, a lack of ownership of the strategic plan by staff, the climate whereby FE colleges had to orchestrate and implement strategic plans, the lack of hierarchical objectives within strategic plans, and a lack of awareness regarding the difficulties in implementation.[42] In the case of UK universities, resource allocation, operational processes, lack of cooperation and student support, organizational culture, and the external environment were cited as problems in implementing strategy.[43] Lack of ownership of the strategic plan, extremely detailed strategic plans, and lack of formal approval mechanisms for the endorsement of school-development plans, were cited as problems within strategic planning

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37 J.J. Herman, 'Action plans to make your vision a reality', *NASSP Bulletin*, 523 (1990).

38 Duffy.

39 Fogg.

40 K.A. Paris, 'Moving the strategic plan off the shelf and into action at the University of Wisconsin-Madison', *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 123 (2004), 121–9.

41 N. Jiang and V. Carpenter, 'A case study of issues of strategy implementation in internationalization of higher education', *International Journal of Higher Education*, 27 (2013), 4–18.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

and implementation in the UK HE sector[44] and which may be worsened by ambiguous missions.[45]

The problems mentioned in the previous paragraph may be due to the role of individual organizations. This is corroborated by evidence which may demonstrate that educational organizations, including colleges and universities, have a low internal locus of control[46] owing to these organizations' reliance on external funds, accreditation, and links with business. Other problems related to strategy may exist in small states,[47] since the small number of post-secondary students may be 'incompatible with the creation of a university'[48] and the complexity of strategic management, coupled with a central policy-making regime, may lead to ambiguities, contradictions, and unintended outcomes. In Malta, for example, government ministers may have a direct say in the way policies are implemented.[49] Moreover, such intrusions may be perceived as 'patronage and nepotism', and this is evident in other small Commonwealth states.[50] To partly counter these problems, small states generally employ streamlined governance.[51]

Until now, no work has been done detailing the kinds of strategic plans and processes of Maltese FE organizations and the types of strategies employed to achieve organizational goals. While micro-data on FE organizations have been collected by the National Commission for Higher and Further Education, this is not publicly available. Therefore such information should be collected, given the focus of this paper.

44 S. Pidcock, 'Strategic planning in a new university', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 25 (2001), 67–83.

45 M.L. Machado and J.S. Taylor, 'The struggle for strategic planning in European higher education: the case of Portugal', *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 6 (2010), 82–102.

46 D.J. Rowley, H.D. Lujan, and M.G. Dolence, *Strategic change in colleges and universities: planning to survive and prosper* (San Francisco, 1997).

47 D. Atchoarena, *Educational strategies for small island states* (Paris, 1993).

48 Ibid., 31–2.

49 R.M. Azzopardi, *Social policies in Malta* (Hampshire, 2011).

50 Ibid., 7.

51 Atchoarena.

Methodology

The above literature review has led the researcher to ask the following research question: *How do FE organizations' senior management teams (SMTs) perceive the effectiveness of FE organizations' strategic planning?*

A qualitative/interpretative approach was utilized to answer this research question. Traditionally interpretative research is distinguished from positivism since the former does not produce numerical outputs based on hypothesis testing.[52] This conceptual shift means that in modern social science research interpretative approaches are viewed as a particular research strategy rather than a group of methods, as a critique of positivist investigations and that it may produce theory out of research.[53] The ontological premise of interpretative techniques is relativism while emphasizing that reality is not objective but rather socially constructed. The richness of information is thus predominant.[54]

Methods

Judgmental sampling was used to choose informants.[55] Judgmental sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher selects units to be sampled based on their knowledge and professional judgment.[56] Out of the diverse types of judgmental sampling, the researcher used maximum variation sampling.[57] Maximum variation sampling is a judgmental sampling technique used to capture a wide range of perspectives related to the research question and might be perceived as a way whereby democratic values are included in research.

52 J. Philamore and L. Goodson, 'Progress in qualitative research in tourism: epistemology, ontology and methodology)', in J. Philamore and L. Goodson (eds.), *Qualitative research in tourism* (Cornwall, 2004), 3–29.

53 Ibid.

54 A.J. Veal, *Research methods for leisure and tourism: a practical guide* (Dorset, 2006).

55 M. Carcery, 'The research audit trail – enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry', *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 7 (2009), 11–24.

56 K. Fogelman and C. Comber, 'Surveys and sampling', in A.R.J. Briggs and M. Coleman (eds.), *Research methods in educational leadership and management* (Gateshead, 2007), 125–41.

57 Carcery, 11–24.

The basic principle behind maximum variation sampling is to gain greater insights into a phenomenon by looking at it from all angles.[58] This can often help the researcher identify common themes that are evident across the sample. Probability sampling was excluded as there are few FE organizations in Malta and therefore few top government officials working with them. Senior FE organizations' SMT officials were approached (nine). However, permission to interview the SMT officials at independent organizations (two) was not granted, with no reason given. As a result, data from independent FE organizations is non-existent, although they represent a very small percentage in terms of students and academic staff. Figure 1 illustrates the pseudonyms used by interview respondents.

Figure 1: Pseudonyms used by interview respondents

Pseudonym	Organizational type
Noel	VOCATIONAL 1
John	VOCATIONAL 2
Nigel	State-funded academic (SFA 1)
Jane	State-funded academic (SFA 2)
Kevin	State-funded academic (SFA 3)
Antonia	Academic Church (CHURCH 1)
Michael	Academic Church (CHURCH 2)

Data analysis

Data analysis included coding and recoding units into categories to develop patterns and themes. Pattern codes were developed during the interview process and those codes were 'tried out' on subsequent interviews to see if they 'fit'.[59] Following this procedure, 'next, the

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58 Ibid.

59 B.M. Miles and A.M Huberman, *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, 1994).

most promising codes to emerge from this exercise are written up',[60] then these pattern codes were checked in all subsequent interviews. Analysing the data in this way may be considered reflexive because it obliged the researcher to question informants' statements, while trying to suppress, as far as possible, any personal prejudices. This form of analysis might also have helped inspire concepts and themes to emerge which could have been unnoticed.[61]

The coding process proceeded in the following way: first of all the interviews were coded, based on the research questions and interviews were then reconsidered to make sure that the coding process had not overlooked data pertinent to the study. During this coding process, hard copies of the interview questions and policy attributes were used to ensure coding accuracy within the context described by the participant. This enabled the researcher to describe an organized and detailed story of the phenomena under investigation.

The second stage involved the identification of sub-categories as a guide for coding. The research question was broken down to form sub-categories to aid the organization and coding of interview data. These were:
1. Crafting, review and perception of mission statement;
2. Presence, crafting, and implementation of strategic plan.

Results

To elicit responses to this research question FE organizations' SMT officials were asked: how their organizations' respective mission statements were crafted and reviewed (if at all); what was needed from academic staff to achieve organizational mission; how they perceived their organization's mission statement; whether they had a strategic plan (if any), and who was involved in crafting and implementing it. Respondents' answers for the various FE organizations are displayed in Figure 2.

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60 Ibid., 70
61 J.A. Holton, 'The coding process and its challenges' in A. Bryant and K. Charmaz (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (London, 2007), 265–90.

Figure 2: Alignment of strategic processes with organizational mission: perceptions from interview respondents, 2012

Interview question	Mission statement crafting and review	What was needed from academic staff	Presence of written strategic plan
Informant			
Noel	Crafted 10 years No review yet	Dedication and commitment	Written strategic plan
John	Crafted in 2012	Professionalism	No written strategic plan
Jane	Crafted 20 years ago No review	Qualified and well-trained	No written strategic plan
Nigel	Crafted in 1995 No review	Professionalism	No written strategic plan
Kevin	Crafted in 2007	Qualified and well-trained	No written strategic plan
Antonia	Crafted at least 10 years ago No review	Qualified and well-trained	No written strategic plan
Michael	Crafted by the Frères; No review	Qualified and well-trained	No written strategic plan

Source: interviews

Crafting, review, and perception of mission statement

Maltese FE organizations' mission statements were crafted in different ways. For example, VOCATIONAL 1's mission statement was crafted ten years ago with the input of the government, the Board of Directors, the Institute directors, and industry. Lecturing staff were not involved. Conversely, VOCATIONAL 2's SMT crafted a new mission statement in 2012. SFA 2's mission statement was crafted when the organization was set up over 20 years ago. There was no documentation regarding how it was crafted or who crafted it. SFA 1's mission statement was crafted in 1995, following consultation among the MUT, the university, and some SFA 1 members. This was accomplished keeping in mind the

problems that existed before the SFA 1 was set up. At that time, students at sixth form would generally sit for foreign examinations and would leave after the first term of second year.

Unlike vocational organizations, SFA 3's mission statement was crafted at a professional development session where staff and the SMT met. Academic staff had a chance to make their voices heard. Mission-statement crafting at the two Church organizations differed. CHURCH 1's mission statement was crafted by the SMT without staff involvement while CHURCH 2's mission statement was crafted by members of a religious order. However, at CHURCH 2, the organization's mission statement was used to drive the sixth-form prospectus.

The mission statements of Maltese FE organizations were never reviewed. Reasons for this included too short a time (Noel VOCATIONAL 1), the belief that the organization was following its mission (Jane SFA 2), and the fact that the organization's mission statement depended on internal stakeholders. For example, at CHURCH 1, mission statement review was perceived to be virtually impossible, since the mission statement was based on a 'set of [a religious order's] principles which cannot be deviated from too much' (Antonia), thus following the basic rationale behind the creation of faith schools, that is, to provide religious instructions to their students.[62] At CHURCH 2, while there had been no review of the mission statement, the prospectus was reviewed every three years. The crafting of Church FE organizations' mission statements did not indicate the presence of government pressure seemingly contradicting the external driver hypothesis.[63]

To achieve its mission, VOCATIONAL 1 needed

dedication and commitment together with a good knowledge of mission, vision, strategies, principles, clients (e.g. learners), stakeholders, external customers (e.g. apprentices' sponsors), goals, objectives, responsibilities, and skills (Noel).

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62 A. Dagovitz, 'When choice does not matter: political liberalism, religion and the faith school debate', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 38 (2004), 165–80.

63 H. James and J. Huisman, 'Mission statements in Wales: the impact of markets and policy on congruence between institutions', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 31 (2009), 23–35.

VOCATIONAL 1's mission statement was perceived as important and timely by Noel since it provided vocational training and overcame 'artificial barriers' (Noel), by providing support for learners. On the other hand, academic FE organizations (SFA 2, SFA 1, SFA 3, CHURCH 1, and CHURCH 2) focused on good teachers as exemplified by Nigel, 'that is, preparing and delivering a lesson using the present technological devices available', meaning that lecturers had to constantly update their knowledge.

Presence, crafting, and implementation of strategic plan

VOCATIONAL 1 had a strategic plan, crafted by the same stakeholders who were involved in crafting the mission statement. VOCATIONAL 1 was the only FE organization that had such a strategic plan with specific aims: student achievement, equal opportunities, efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability, among others. Noel stated,

> You always have people who oppose change but I think the success that VOCATIONAL 1 has had in such a short time (ten years), not only in student numbers increasing from about 1,000 to 6,000 but also in part-time students and an explosion in the number of courses being offered as well as the quality and level of such courses is dependent on our strategic plan. The way whereby various organizations, government, parents, and students perceive VOCATIONAL 1 in a positive light because we have managed to achieve our mission by setting and achieving our targets is admirable. I think our academic staff, middle management, and top management worked reasonably well to achieve VOCATIONAL 1's targets.

VOCATIONAL 2 had an unwritten strategic plan, which involved building a new campus and developing new and part-time courses. John stressed that the most important resource to implement the strategic plan was money. However, the way money was used differed considerably from other FE organizations. Production and demonstration kitchens, the Chocolate Academy, and food stores were not only a big expense, but also deemed essential for VOCATIONAL 2 to follow its stated mission. John added,

There are certain things that we are doing. We are planning a new campus owing to an increase in student numbers (close to 28%) after we launched the new prospectus. We cannot take on as many students as we would like. Thus we may need a new building and to develop new courses, especially part-time. Till now we only have one part-time course (tour guiding) and part-time modules. We would like to change that and introduce new part-time courses. We would also like to add more bachelor's degrees.

While there was no written strategic plan at SFA 2, the SMT in conjunction with past students and teachers, prepared a SWOT analysis. While students were interviewed, teachers were divided by subject to find ways whereby 'teaching may be improved in each area' (Jane). The SMT was still thinking of ways to implement the results of this SWOT analysis. Interactive whiteboards, laptops for teachers, labs, upgraded gym, health and safety, library, school database, and clerical staff were the resources specified by Jane.

In the past, SFA 1 had a strategic plan, but Nigel perceived that it was now outdated. Nigel acknowledged the need for a new strategic plan, insisting that implementation should not only be dependent on administration, but on every member of staff. Nigel perceived academic staff, IT, and maintenance as the major resources needed to ensure that SFA 1 accomplished its mission.

While there was no written strategic plan at SFA 3, Kevin explained that the organization was pursuing two strategies. The first involved planning a new school with the Education Directorate. Work on this school was supposed to start later in 2013. The second part of the strategic plan involved Matsec which had to ensure that teachers followed the syllabus meticulously. Kevin perceived that SFA 3's strategic plan was controlled by external stakeholders. There were no strategic plans at CHURCH 1 or CHURCH 2. While Antonia would like to introduce a strategic plan, Michael stressed the ambiguous position CHURCH 2 found itself in,

As a school we fall under the education authorities, but at the same time we are told that we fall under the remit of the NCHFE. This is something which will affect where we want to go, because we have to see where our funding comes from.

Discussion

Evidence demonstrated that FE organizations, apart from VOCATIONAL 1, did not have a fully developed written strategic plan. The concept of strategic plan was elaborated in rather different ways. The SWOT analysis at SFA 2 and the strategic plan at VOCATIONAL 1 demonstrated the formal managerial definition of strategic planning. While VOCATIONAL 1 seemed to have approached strategic planning using a formal top-down approach, SFA 2 used a more organic approach, involving consultation with teachers and students. Strategic planning at SFA 3 consisted of planning for a new school, work on which was supposed to start later in 2013. VOCATIONAL 2, SFA 1, CHURCH 1, and CHURCH 2 had no strategic plan, but for different reasons. VOCATIONAL 2 had a new SMT, and was still in the process of establishing its authority. SFA 1 had strategic plans in the past and recognized the need for a new plan. On the other hand, CHURCH 1 and CHURCH 2 were Church organizations, and any strategic planning had to take into consideration the secondary and primary sections of these schools.

These results conform to the concept that strategic planning may be a non-linear, political process.[64] Furthermore, results seem to indicate that in the smaller FE organizations, strategic planning was replaced by continuous communication among the SMT, teachers, and other stakeholders.

The linear approach used at VOCATIONAL 1 was done after consultation with various stakeholders (e.g. government and industry). There seemed, however, to be a distinct emphasis on 'strategic planning' rather than 'strategic thinking'. The latter seemed to be absent at least in the way delineated by Keung Pang and Pisapia.[65] The overall lack of strategic planning in Maltese FE organizations seems to mirror

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64 D. Hargreaves, *Education epidemic: transforming secondary schools through innovation networks* (London, 2003); H. Thomas, 'Strategic planning', in D. Warner and D. Palfreyman (eds.), *Higher education management: the key elements* (Buckingham, 1996), 33–46.

65 Keung Pang and Pisapia, 343–61.

the reality found in the UK.[66] Maltese FE organizations may be non-strategic in intent,[67] owing to their low locus of control.[68]

The way FE organizations' mission statements were crafted differed. At SFA 2, SFA 1, VOCATIONAL 1, and VOCATIONAL 2 mission statements were crafted 25, 18, 11, and two years ago respectively. At VOCATIONAL 1 and SFA 1 the SMT, together with various stakeholders, were involved in the process. At VOCATIONAL 2 and SFA 2, only the SMT was involved. In all these cases academic staff was not involved in crafting the mission statement. At CHURCH1 and CHURCH 2, mission statements reflected the Catholic religious values. The mission statements in these organizations have been in place for a long time and the SMTs were not responsible for crafting them. SFA 3 seemed to be the only organization where a bottom-up approach was used to craft a mission statement in 2007. This was done via a series of workshops, where academic staff contributions were taken into account.

None of the organizations studied had reviewed its mission statement, even though CHURCH 2 used the organization's mission statement to launch a prospectus with a slogan based on its mission statement. In this case, the slogan was revised once every two to three years. In the cases of VOCATIONAL 1, VOCATIONAL 2, and SFA 3, the reason given for not reviewing the mission statements was the short amount of time since they were crafted. At CHURCH 1, the reason given was that the SMT had no control over the mission statement, and any review was in the hands of a religious entity. At SFA 2 and SFA 1, informants seemed confident that their present mission statements accurately reflected the current state of affairs in their organizations.

Conclusion

The above analysis has sought to uncover the various strains and pressures that exist within the Maltese FE system. Many FE organizations

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66 Jiang and Carpenter, 4–18; Lumby, 91–104.

67 Duffy

68 Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence.

do not operate under managerialist regimes, the exception being VOCATIONAL 1. This does not mean that strategy is unimportant. Rather, organizational strategy is important if done correctly. FE organizations should engage in strategic thinking rather than strategic planning so that they will be forced to think creatively, rather than linearly, about their existence and what they can offer to stakeholders. Strategic thinking should be done in a climate of collaboration with other FE organizations, rather than in isolation. Data from interview respondents indicated that such collaboration is lacking.

This paper has also revealed how a qualitative approach may be utilized in educational management. Such an approach reaped dividends in terms of understanding strategic management in the Maltese FE sector.