

Strategic Planning Process in Public Universities: Critical Issues and "Loosely Coupled" Practice

Anna Arcari

Anna Pistoni

Economics Department
Insubria University
Varese (Italy)

Introduction

Beginning in the late 1980s, the university system in Italy underwent an unprecedented process of change that, 40 years later, is still evolving. With the aim of aligning the Italian system to European standards and being more competitive, several legislative provisions have been enacted during the last 30 years that have revolutionized many of the *established practices regarding university management*.

However, it must be highlighted that regulations alone have not always been able to generate *substantial changes* in the governance *practices of universities* (Cantele et al. 2012). Often, the impact has merely been a sterile adhesion to *legislative obligations*.

With regard to the topic of this paper, compliance with the legislator's intentions would require considering *strategic plans* as real *managerial mechanisms and practices*. This imposes a shift of focus from the *document* that must be produced to meet quality assurance requirements to the *organizational process* that must be carried out to make the plan a tool that can effectively support governance in strategic management.

Many universities, not just in Italy, have a strategic plan, but this is not sufficient to say that a *good management practice* has been introduced. Proponents of strategic planning emphasise the importance of *process* in improving strategic thinking. In particular, process studies assume that the key to understanding the effectiveness (or otherwise) of strategic planning may lie in seeing it as a *complex, longitudinal approach to knowledge and action* (Mintzberg 2007; Ferlie and Ongaro 2015), where governance engagement is key (Wahyudi, 2009).

Unfortunately, in most Italian universities, governance shows mistrust towards these practices, due to a widespread resistance to change in defence of the old bureaucracy, which is, moreover, contested, feeding a vicious circle that undermines the development of an *effective strategic planning process*.

In light of this premise, the objective of the paper is to propose an approach to effectively manage the strategic plan development process in public universities.

The paper is articulated in 6 paragraphs. In the first paragraph, the peculiarities of public universities are presented, and in the second and third paragraph, the relevant literature is analysed. In particular, we refer to the literature on *strategic planning and control in universities*, focusing on the *conditions of success/failure of strategic planning* found in reality. Having identified the most recurrent anomalies and making use of the theories of organization that consider errors as real learning opportunities (McClamorch et al. 2001; Senge 1990; Schein 1985; Weick and Sutcliffe 2007).

In the fourth paragraph, the research project is presented. The research method is detailed and the case of an Italian medium-sized university is described. This case seems particularly interesting because the university was completely lacking a strategic plan and, in proximity to the visit of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research (ANVUR) for periodic assessment and accreditation (October 2019), needed to produce a credible and defensible plan in a relatively short time. The evaluation of the strategic plan submitted to ANVUR was very positive, and its implementation at this institution (2020) is currently (2021) under total control by the monitoring team. In the last two paragraphs, the case discussion and some concluding remarks are presented.

1. The peculiarities of public universities

Strategic planning may appear to be relatively simple system to design and implement in a public institution, but in reality, it is the result of a *very complex process* that must take into account the prerogatives of these organizations, the interconnections between the different elements that constitute them, and the impossibility of standardizing behaviour (Schön, 1987).

The specificities of these particular organisations, which we believe may affect the success of a planning process, are summarised here (George et al., Lee et al. E Johnsen.; Burby 2003 ; Bryson 2011; Poister, 2010). First, public universities are non-profit *organizations*, and any attempt to forcefully adapt the management practices prevalent in private companies exposes these practices to the risk of rejection (McClamorch et al. 2001). Universities, moreover, are *multiform organizations*, where alongside activities typical of *mechanical bureaucracies* (tasks and duties carried out by technical-administrative staff according to standard procedures and codified behaviours) coexist activities characteristic of *professional bureaucracies* (research and teaching congruent with the skills possessed) that, in some cases (e.g., for activities performed by research groups), take on the distinctive features of *adhocracies*. These are organizations characterized by little bureaucracy whose functioning is not based on standardized procedures but on mechanisms of mutual adaptation, that is, on *practices of communication and modes of control that are primarily informal* (Mintzberg 1993).

Moreover, public universities should be considered *loosely coupled* organizations whose *members, while bound by common interests, enjoy independence of action* (Weick, 1976). We define universities as *loosely coupled* systems because they are composed of people who all have learning and research objectives but whose positioning in different scientific-disciplinary fields requires separate and independent goals and actions¹. In these organizations, therefore, there is no room for rigid and standardized procedures.

Collegiality is another feature of the decision-making processes of public universities that dramatically slows the ability to respond to requests for change at every organizational level, just as the absence of adequate incentive-based *remuneration systems* makes it difficult to motivate staff, both researchers and technical administrative personnel. Finally, in public universities, the *political function* is kept distinct from the *managerial function*, and innovations at the managerial level are often hindered by political reasons.

The prominence of these peculiarities gives rise to a number of potential organisational conflicts that need to be addressed through the use of a planning process capable of preventing or effectively managing them. This is why it is necessary to develop a *practice or reference model* that can be adapted contingently to different contexts. *Practices* are nothing but *a set of interconnected elements that guide routinized behaviours; that is, they are cyclically repetitive—as is the cycle of planning and control—but not standardized and not mechanically activated* (Reckwitz 2002, Shove et al 2007). In this sense, strategic planning should be understood as a process that can be formalized into a tailor-made practice to be adapted to contextual conditions. Practices that take the form of cyclical or routine behaviours, insofar as they are assiduous, also make those who implement them acquire skills, ultimately promoting *organizational learning* (McClamorch, et al. 2001).

Therefore, universities that systematically adopt these practices will be able to appreciate a multiplicity of the benefits provided.

2. Literature review

The starting point is the assumption that *strategic planning* (SP) is "*useful*" in many institutions, including public administration (PA), and contributes to creating "*public*" value because it helps management understand what their organizations should do as well as how and why (Barzelay and Colin 2003; Borins 1998; Boyne and Gould-Williams 2003; Bryson and Bromiley 1993; Bryson et al. 2009; Bryson and Einsweiler 1988; Frentzel et al. 2000; Hendrick 2003; Wheeland 2004). The problem, however, is that strategic plans are not always effective, i.e. they help governance in strategic management.

With specific reference to the Italian context, some researchers have analysed the strategic plans available on the websites of state universities to identify their characteristics and best practices (Bronzetti et al. 2012). This study focuses on the analysis of both process and content aspects of the plans. The choice of descriptive variables² was

¹In universities, all the ties that are established between researchers and technical-administrative staff are "*loosely coupled*" because these parties perform different and relatively autonomous jobs; this is also the case among researchers themselves, because of the different methodologies that each one can adopt, and in teacher-student relationships, because of the specificity that each group/class brings to the relationship with the teacher that forces it to adapt its own method.

²The "process" analysis included 5 variables: the form of document presentation and web-based access to meet transparency requirements; the level of participation/involvement in defining the mission, vision, strategy, and goals; the specifics of how the process would unfold; the synchronization of the strategic plan with other planning documents and available financial resources; and the dedication and expertise of the committee charged with supporting the development of the plan. Eleven factors were used to profile the "content" of a plan: the level of formalization of the mission, vision, and values; the construction of SWOT analysis to identify expectations and strategies to be adopted; the definition of strategic plans and their consistency with ministerial guidelines (MIUR); the presence of ministerial indicators; the presence of performance indicators unrelated to those defined by the Ministry; the temporal consistency of the data analysed (series of historical values); the definition of targets; the indication of responsible parties; the analysis of

made by drawing on previous research that examined the issue related to the characteristics of SP (Bouckaert and Halligan 2008; Otley 1999). The *main* evidence of the study shows a plurality of situations where good practices, characterized by a high quality of process and content, are circumscribed to a few cases (6 out of 59 universities analysed). Beyond some inevitable limitations of the study (e.g., it is not sufficient to assess the quality of the formal requirements of a process and/or the contents of the plan to determine the actual validity of a practice; it is also necessary for the implementation of the plan to lead to appreciable results), the suggestion of researchers, which we have taken, is to work in the direction of developing and disseminating good practices within the Italian university system to improve the effectiveness of planning processes as well as the performance of individual universities and the system as a whole (Kallio et al. 2017).

In this study we will focus on the definition of the "process" aspects and, more generally, on the "organisational factors" that condition the effectiveness of a SP, without dealing with the "contents". The reason for this choice lies in a knowledge gap that the analysis of the literature has shown us. Many of the available studies, in fact, point to the need to investigate in greater depth the conditions of the organisational context, and of the process that is grafted onto it, which can influence the effectiveness of SPs.

3. The strategic planning “process”

Few studies of public sector have investigated aspects of the SP process in detail (Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006; Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Ferlie and Ongaro 2015). Exceptions include Wheeland (2004) and Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson (2009). The latter authors show that terms such as process steps, role of planners, role of stakeholders, as well as mission, vision, goals, strategies, actions and performance indicators, are all relevant to any study of strategic planning in practice, not as rigidly defined terms, but requiring adaptations to the different contexts in which they are used. Some studies have emphasized the importance of intermediate outcomes, such as participation (Lee, McGuire, and Kim), commitment to the plan (George et al.) visioning (Helling 1998), situated learning (Vigar 2006), and communication and conflict management strategies (Bryson and Bromiley 1993). It follows that, the public-sector SP, is not one thing, but is a set of concepts, procedures, tools, and “practices” that must be applied sensitively and contingently in specific situations, in other words recurring “adaptive” organisational processes, if the presumed benefits of strategic planning are to be realized (Bryson, J.M, at all 2018).

There are a variety of generic approaches to strategic planning, the boundaries between them are not necessarily clear, and SP in practice typically is a “hybrid”, that combines formal elements with logical incrementalism (Poister, Pasha, and Edwards, 2013). In addition, it is unclear how best to conceptualize context and adapt processes to this last in order to produce desirable outcomes. For example, should context be viewed as a backdrop for action or as actually constitutive of action (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015). Hendrick's (2003) research, which discusses the external and internal contextual variables that influence performance and strategic planning efforts, shows that certain *processes*, such as *communication*, *monitoring*, and *coordination*, have a positive impact on the quality of the plan and on the level of performance. In particular, align the goals of different organizational levels towards a common strategy (Hendrick 2003) positively influences the efforts and performance of all individuals as well as the degree of *participation of individuals* in the process of strategy formulation and implementation.

Other authors (Lee et al., 2018) confirm that *collaboration* in strategic plan design contributes to better performance. Broad participation, in general, can also improve the process, as well as the resulting plan, by giving various stakeholders a sense of ownership and commitment. Employees at all levels of the organisation may need to be included in strategic planning for their input and knowledge of their respective areas of the organisation (Wheeland 2004; Donald et al. 2001). That said, we also know that there is a great variation in how stakeholders are engaged, and at least two studies show that the participation of key stakeholders (internal and external) often remains superficial and elitist (Vigar et al. 2006; Vidyarthi et al. , 2013). Future studies on this topic would greatly contribute to a current deficit in the wider literature.

Anomalies in universities' strategic planning

Considering the importance of the process in decreeing the effectiveness of a strategic plan, in this paragraph we will focus on the most widespread anomalies that we have found in the SP processes adopted by universities all over the world, apart from the Italian ones:

The analysis of a number of case studies available in the literature identified a long list of “anomalies” found in SP processes (Buckland 2009). These are *design choices* that have negatively impacted SP and that mainly depend on *three factors that characterize the university context*:

benchmarks; explicit expectations related to monitoring; and the description of the framework and dynamics of the strategic plan process.

1. ministerial policies and regulatory constraints;
2. governance commitment and attitudes;
3. process management style.

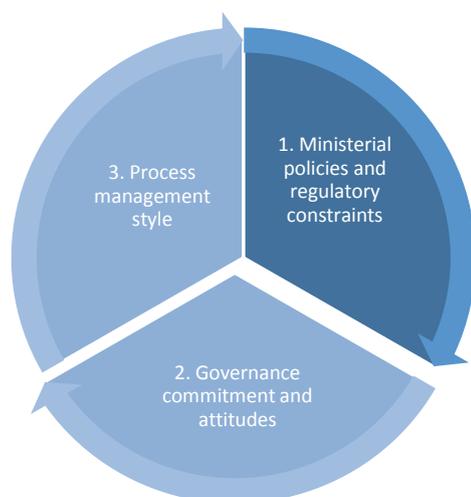


Fig. 1: The factors influencing anomalies in university strategic planning

With specific reference to the Italian context (but also in other countries), the process of the managerialization of public organizations, and consequently of state universities do not always succeed in foreseeing and uniformly managing the organizational complexity that derives from them, leaving areas of discretionary action. Within this discretion, there are some "choices" that can compromise the effectiveness of SP. Because of these (often recurring) anomalies, it is necessary to define and disseminate "best practices".

Among the errors attributable to "regulatory vacuums" that have prevented a successful outcome of strategic plans in the university system are the following:

- the incautious application of practices used by private companies that ignores the peculiarities of universities, especially the public ones (Buckland 2009), or is chosen from outdated practices (Miller et al. 2004; Whittington 2001);
- the tendency to focus on the information that the plan must contain to respond to ministerial requests, for example, in relation to the programmatic lines of development of the system³ without concern for how it will be translated within the university to make it a strategic management tool.

In Italy, the programmatic lines of development of the ministry system are issued by the MIUR (Ministry of Research and University) every three years.

Currently, the 2019-2021 planning is in effect, which was only made known by the ministry at the end of 2019, i.e., one year late. These delays make it cumbersome to update university plans to take into account the *system's lines of development*, with the risk of generating mismatches between the objectives of the system and the individual university.

For these and other reasons, the abovementioned anomalies or regulatory gaps have contributed to the drafting of strategic plans whose implementation has not produced positive effects on strategic management. The implementation of the legislation, in fact, has been limited to impacting the way in which universities are funded, the role of academics and their workloads, and the need for new professionalism among technical-administrative

³The Ministry's guidelines for the university system are one of the most important acts of planning. The ministerial planning provided for in article 1-ter of Law 43 of 2005 defines the development objectives of the university system every three years after consultation with CUN, CRUI and CNSU. These objectives provide a coherent overall framework within which each university can enhance its autonomy in policies of internationalization, educational offerings, student services, development of personnel and research. For these purposes, as of 2014, the fund for planning the development of the university system (established by article 1, paragraph 5, letter c of Law 537/93) is part of the ordinary financing fund (FFO).

staff, including the imposed presence of external audits (Deem and Brehony 2005), without significantly *effecting change and improving the performance* of many universities.

Governance commitment and attitudes

In general terms, management scholars agree that the *attitudes and explicit statements of governance* are important in determining the success of new management practices introduced by organizations. Top management and managers of varying degrees and levels must devote time and have the expertise to initiate and follow through managerial innovation processes, communicating and transferring their commitment to successful implementation to the organization's stakeholders.

In many failure cases cited in the literature, recurrent abnormalities in this area are attributable to the following:

- *poor commitment* of the university governing bodies, such as rector, department/faculty/research centre directors, general manager and executives, both in defining and, above all, implementing strategy;
- *The inability of governance to shape, coordinate, support, and manage strategic potential* in such a way that decentralized units independently align with defined guidelines
- *a lack of willingness* on the part of the governance to allocate resources to implement the strategic plan in accordance with defined priorities.

These aspects are outside of the control of the SP designer, but they represent the keystone to ensure that, in both design and implementation, the complicity of governance/management generates and continually feeds a *virtuous circle* capable of counteracting the resistance that can inevitably arise at all levels and in all areas of responsibility.

Process management style

The most common errors encountered in this area include:

- *atop-down approach to the strategy definition*. This is consistent with the analyses of Jarratt (1985) and Dearing (1997), who argue that *"public sector companies require a direction and centralization of strategic leadership and responsibility in the top figures of the organization"*. This approach penalizes participation, the sense of belonging and the contribution that decentralized units can give to the strategic design and doesn't take into account the different development needs showed by the different departments; "Loose coupling" implies that the strategy process must be bottom-up, although resource constraints impose selectivity at the "steering core" among projects from the "academic heartland". It may be that the imperative to decentralize strategy is less acute in universities with less reliance on research activities. For example, it might be argued that teaching institutions are more similar to "machines" than to "loosely coupled" knowledge-based organizations (Clark, 2004; Eckel and Kezar, 2002) or to state-dominated European practices (Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt, 2005; Pettersen and Solstad, 2007);
- the adoption of *standardized and rigid procedures* that privilege the needs of integration, to ensure the efficiency of the process, over those of differentiation. The specificities of *loosely coupled* organizations, to which we have associated universities, are therefore ignored;
- the *claim to homologate local strategies*. "Loosely coupled" organizations, and therefore universities, have a "cell" structure whereby interior teams, individuals or segments can devise innovation and experience strategic success or failure without coherence with or compromise of other interior units. For example, there may be research teams attempting breakthroughs in certain areas, but within a portfolio of weakly connected research initiatives. The success or failure of their work will not compromise other teams' abilities, nor is the degree of their success directly related to the financing of the activities (Weick 1976; Orton and Weick 1990).

It is on the basis of these recurrent "mistakes" that we have set up our research. The resulting "loosely coupled" model outlines the characteristic features of planning "processes" that should contain the risk of incurring "fatal errors" for the success of strategic planning. This is an approach that respects the organisational and cultural specificities, recurrent in public universities, and which, in any case, requires adaptation to the organisational characteristics of the individual institutions. Attempts at standardisation and homologation, which, as we have already pointed out, are the cause of the many failures of the SP processes, must be avoided.

4. The case study analysis

The research method

The aim of our work is to define a "practice" to help university governance adopt a strategic planning "process" that takes into account the peculiarities of "loosely coupled" organizations.

This is a type of research in which researchers are not called upon to understand quantitative aspects of a complex and little-known phenomenon. This is why we have favoured a "qualitative" approach for the construction of a practice that we tested in the "case study" described below, pending subsequent validation.

Particularly, the conditions that make the case-based qualitative research method suitable are confirmed for the following evidence:

- the need to study the phenomenon in a real context due to the scarce and recent diffusion of these practices;
- the influence of exogenous (eg. ministerial directives) as well as endogenous factors (university policies) that are intertwined, making it impossible to study the attributes of the former separately from the latter one;
- the complexity of the phenomenon determined by the impact of academic and political power on the management choices.

For this type of research is needed creative intuition that leads to the construction of a method of analysis *in itinere*, that is, subject to adjustments during the course of the investigation itself.

For all these reasons, the analysis or experimentation of a practice in a wider range of case studies is the most appropriate way to find answers to the research questions. The case-based method involves the study of several significant cases but also admits the analysis of a single case (Yin, 2014). Our research work, at this stage, is limited to the application of the practice to a single case.

Particularly, we analysed the case of a university that operates on several territorial poles (Varese, Como, Busto Arsizio), with 7 departments, approximately 12,000 students, 400 professors and 320 administrative staff. As described below, the strategic planning process involved different organizational levels and different actors: the departments and the university as a whole together with the central and decentralized units providing services, managers and administrative staff.

The "loose-coupling" approach applied to the case study

In this paragraph, we illustrate the characteristics of the SP "organizational process" defined and tested in the case study. As mentioned, it is based on the "loose-coupling" approach (Fig. 2).

The peculiarities of loosely coupled organizations, well clarified by Mintzberg (1994; 1998), Hardy (1991) and others in their criticism of the "strategic planning classical school", in fact, are similar to those of public universities.

As already mentioned, the "loose-coupling" model incorporates the concepts of professional bureaucracy and adhocracy (Mintzberg 1994) and suggests the need to adopt "systemic" practices for the SP process (Chandler, 1962; Mintzberg et al. 1998; Whittington, 2001).

Loose coupling organizations operate without "mechanical" relationships among their constituent parts as well as actions and processes within the organization can change or progress (or decrease) without obvious initiative or control by other unrelated parties (Glassman, 1973; Weick, 1976).

With reference to SP processes scholars of loosely coupled organizations suggest the following:

- a. *proceed from the bottom up in the formulation of strategy and objectives at different levels (from departmental strategy/objectives to university strategy/objectives);*
- b. *promote a seamless adaptive process;*
- c. *ensure the independence of the decentralized units while recognizing them as part of a whole;*
- d. *meet, accordingly, the need for integration between the central and local units and vice versa;*
- e. *create the conditions for governance that are as shared as possible;*
- f. *generate consensus about the usefulness of strategic planning inside the whole organization.*

Our practice has therefore been designed in light of these guiding principles, defining aspects of process and structure (the latter not described in this article) that must be partly adapted to the specificities of the contexts in which they may be applied.

The strategic planning process: the organizational starting conditions

The key role in designing and implementing the university SP process has been assumed by the delegate to the strategic plan specifically appointed by the Dean.

The delegate is a full professor of the Department of Economics with specific knowledge and competence about Performance Measurement Systems.

To guarantee the necessary effectiveness and efficiency in the development of such a complex project, the delegate formed a working group, which supported the drafting of the strategic plan and the development of the entire process. The working group was composed by two professors of the Economics department with experience in university planning and management issues. The working group started working in early November 2018 and completed its work of drafting and presenting the strategic plan to the university governance in June 2019.

Before becoming operational, the working group conducted some preliminary activities and promoted initiatives aimed at creating the “best” organizational conditions for the beginning of the planning process.

Among the *activities* were the following:

- *study of the available literature* about planning in universities, which has been discussed in the previous paragraphs;
- *development of the "loose-coupling" practice.*

The *initiatives* included:

- *training workshops* addressed to all actors that would be involved in the process on the technicalities related to practices of strategic analysis, strategy formulation, definition of objectives and targets;
- *meetings with quality assurance (QA) bodies* to share the choices that the working group would make and align them with QA protocols.

In the next paragraphs, the choices made regarding the process aspects are detailed.

Process steps

The protocol designed by the working group envisages the development of *four phases* according to a precise sequence: two planning phases (*strategic analysis and strategic planning*), one programming phase (*annual programming and three-year programming*), and one coordination and control phase (*monitoring*).

The process flow underlying the “loosely coupled practice” is illustrated in Fig. 2.

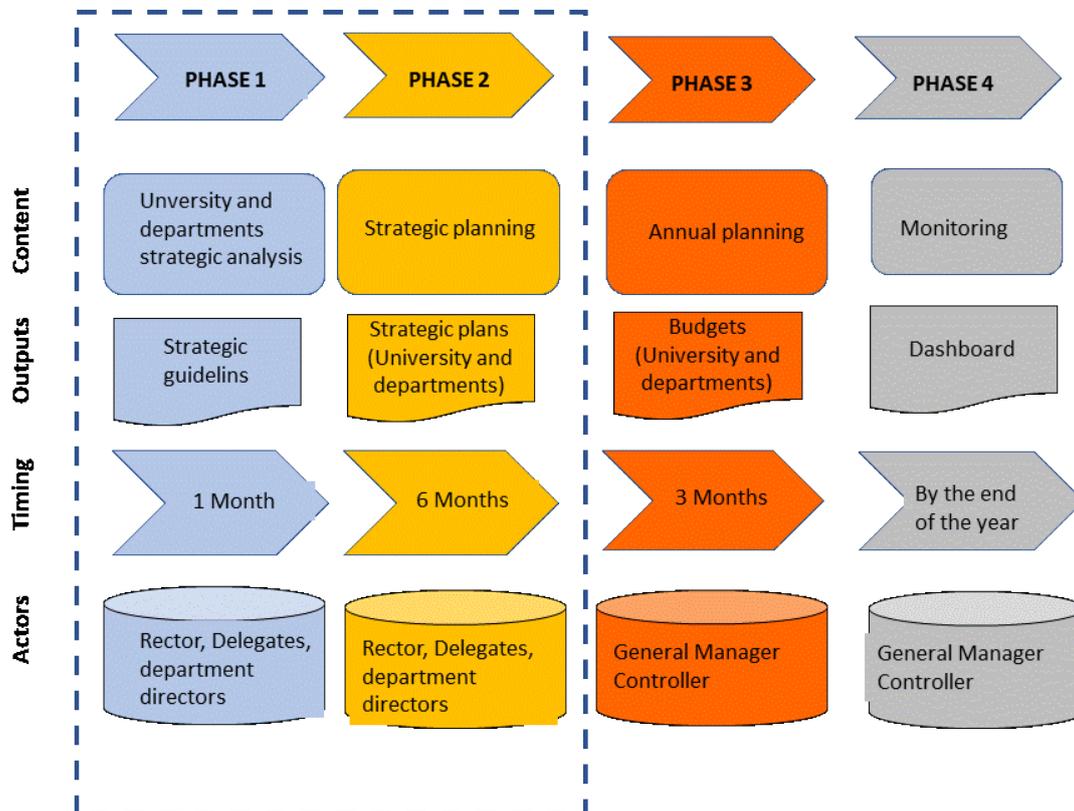


Fig. 2 The strategic planning process: phases, actors and outputs

For each phase, the *contents, outputs, timeframes, actors and approval procedures* by the bodies deemed competent were preliminarily defined.

As previously stated in this paper, we particularly analyse phases 1 and 2 since they were directly linked to the development of the strategic plan. Phases 3, was mainly addressed by the administrative staff because it must be carried out according to legislative and ministry requests. Phase 4, monitoring, is now in progress.

Each phase was conducted according to an *iterative process* in which the activities of the working group alternated with those of the decentralized and central structures, always under the coordination of the working group led by the strategic plan delegate.

Phase 1: Strategic analysis

The first step was devoted to pursuing the strategic analysis of the university. It was conducted by the working group and aimed to define the *mission, vision and values* that should inspire the entire planning process, from the formulation of the strategy to the definition of the objectives for the different organizational levels, and the related action plans. It took the working group approximately one month. Once defined, they were shared with the Dean.

Subsequently, the working group asked the departments to conduct an internal *SWOT analysis* with two very precise aims:

- to acquire awareness of the presence of *strengths* and, above all, of *weaknesses* as well as the existence of *opportunities* and *risks and threats*, factors from which starting to identify "gaps" to be filled through the formulation of precise departmental strategy;
- to identify, at the university level, the "*strategic priorities*", areas on which to concentrate efforts in the coming years to clearly communicate the "*basic strategic orientation*" to which all should be aligned.

To facilitate the task of the departments, in addition to specific training for the strategic plan delegates, a comprehensive document drawn up by the working group was made available. It collected data (*composition and dynamics of the faculty, training offer and students, research activities and assessment, number and composition of nonteaching staff, financial data*) and calculated a number of indicators (*sustainability indices divided into teaching, research, support activities and financial sustainability*) considered useful for outlining the qualitative and quantitative profiles of the university's seven departments.

The outcome of the departmental *SWOT analyses* (to which were added those requested from the rector's delegates and the managers of the central administration and decentralized units) needed approximately a month of work by those involved.

After an additional month of work, the working group, starting from the *comparative analysis of the gaps* emerged from the *SWOT analysis*, was able to identify "*five strategic priorities*" for the university:

- *quality*
- *internationalization*
- *interdisciplinarity and innovation*
- *roots in the territory*
- *distinctive identity*.

These priorities, disseminated and communicated within the university have represented the guiding lines for the development of departmental strategic plans, declined in the three areas of teaching, research and third mission. Consequently, the seven departments could refine their *local strategies* and draw up their own plans, which would then be consolidated. To steer the process towards common interests, the working group gave the departments *three slogans*, one for each area of activity, which would be applied in the different realities. Thus, for research, everyone's orientation was aligned with the idea of improving the university's positioning in national and international rankings in order to strengthen its reputation as a "*research university*". For teaching, local strategies focused on "*standing out*" to attract quality students and lecturers. Finally, for the third mission, the common commitment was to "*ally*" to enhance the research and social role of the university.

Only at this point was it possible to formulate the *strategy and plan of the university*. The latter are, in fact, the outcome of a process of synthesis of local strategies and plans, which are unquestionably congruent with the central strategic orientations (the five strategic priorities).

This approach is aligned with the organizational principles suggested for *loosely coupled organizations*:

- *proceeding from the bottom up* in the formulation of strategy and objectives at the various levels (from the strategy/objectives of the departments to the strategy/objectives of the university),
- *promoting a seamless adaptive process*,
- *ensuring the independence* of the decentralized units while recognizing them as part of a whole, meeting the need for *integration* between the centre and the periphery and vice versa
- *creating the conditions* for governance that is as *shared* as possible.

Before proceeding to the next step, the work performed was presented to the governance: the rector, rector vicar, rector's delegates, department directors and general manager. Once the contents and documents of this first part of the work had been approved, it was decided to further expand the discussion to better prepare the people involved in the next steps to face future tasks with full awareness.

Within *loosely coupled organizations* where informal and fluid relations prevail (i.e., those that adapt to specific circumstances), it is important to activate *effective communication processes* to ensure maximum coordination, an indispensable condition for drawing up a university plan that respects the expectations expressed in the plans of the decentralized units. Therefore, the working group wished to broaden the debate on the outputs of this first phase by promoting a *series of meetings* with the managers, the quality assurance bodies, the delegates of the departmental

strategic plan, etc. *Sharing the choices* made with important players in the university's governance also made it possible to reduce the ever-present risk of "rejection".

Phase 2: The strategic plan development

The second step of the SP process aimed to develop strategic plans both for the departments and the university as a whole.

Given that a bottom-up approach was adopted for the identification of the department's strategic objectives to foster consensus and commitment at the formal level, this phase was significantly guided by the working group.

This approach ensured the standardization and homogenization of departmental plans while safeguarding their specificity and was functional to the subsequent consolidation of departmental plans within the university plan.

To this end, a rather analytical format was sent to the departments containing the structure of the plan document that the departments had to complete. Each department was identified with a different colour.

The format submitted was divided into the following sections:

- *Section 1 - The scientific disciplinary profile of the department.* In this section, the departments were asked to present their current activities, the organizational structure of the department, the training offer and the description of the main research areas/strands. Furthermore, they were asked to indicate the third mission activities conducted in the last 5 years.
- *Section 2- The SWOT analysis of the department.* In this section, the departments were asked to include the SWOT analysis, articulating it by the three areas of activity typical of the department: research, teaching, and third mission.
- *Section 3 - The department's strategy.* The strategy was determined along the strategic lines of the department (where we want to go) and with reference to the three characteristic areas of activity. The strategic objectives were related to the 5 strategic priorities identified. Each strategic objective was then associated with a set of programs/actions that the department intended to put in place to achieve the highlighted objectives. Finally, the departments were asked to indicate, for each objective, the set of performance indicators that the department intended to use for the definition of the performance target as well as for the monitoring of the degree of achievement at the end.

For the development of departmental plans, a time interval of three months from January to March 2019 was assigned.

With reference to the central staff, similarly, the architecture of the document provided the following articulation:

- *presentation of the service unit with its activities and internal organization;*
- *SWOT analysis;*
- *main development projects.*

According to the ministry requirements, the central staff prepared the so-called "Performance Plan", which described their objectives and the related KPI in depth. For this reason, the central units participated in the SP process with less involvement than the university departments.

All departments formulated their plans following the outline received from the working group.

There was therefore an excellent and unexpected spirit of collaboration.

However, although the departmental plans reached a good level of analysis and detail on the qualitative aspects, the main problem was the difficulty of obtaining quantitative targets. Furthermore, where present, quantitative targets were defined following a rather prudential approach.

Therefore, with regard to the outputs produced, it can be stated that the documents appear to be rather robust and analytical in their qualitative aspects, while on the quantitative side, the performance targets show several gaps to be filled. This evidence may be linked to the lack of quantitative objectives of the university overall that could guide the definition of the same at the departmental level.

With regard to central structures, the documents prepared were eminently qualitative and rather brief.

At the departmental level, the elaboration of the plans involved the participation of various parties: the chairs of the courses of study for teaching, the members of the research and third mission commissions for the latter two areas of activity, and the delegate to the departmental strategic plan and the department director for the consolidation of the different parts and the drafting of the final document.

The plans, once elaborated, were presented for approval to the departmental council, which represents the decision-making and deliberative body.

Similarly, the plans of the central structures were developed by the managers of the different staff units.

The strategic plan working group continuously supervised the progress of activities by providing methodological support and answers to specific questions. Finally, the working group proceeded to draft the final document, the University Strategic Plan, consolidating the documents developed by the decentralized organizational units. The final document saw the light of day in early July 2019.

The final document was then submitted to the university's governance, which developed the introductory section presenting the university and its overall strategy, for approval. The consolidated strategic plan was presented at a plenary meeting attended by all stakeholders in late June 2019.

The final document was then submitted to the other governing bodies, the Academic Senate and the Management Board, which proceeded with the approval in July 2019. This was followed by the elaboration of an executive summary of the strategic plan that was subsequently published on the university's website for communication to the stakeholders.

In conclusion, we can say that the university succeeded in developing a strategic plan for the first time in its 20 years of activity, and the document was also appreciated by the Ministry's auditors.

Downstream of the preparation of the strategic plan, monitoring dashboards were set up that represent the necessary completeness of the process. The departments and central units were therefore asked to identify the KPIs that could best represent the individual strategic objectives identified and the related target.

With regard to monitoring, the first yearly check was conducted in September 2020. This activity was also requested to produce the targets for 2021. A further element that should be noted concerns the greater awareness induced in governance with regard to the definition of target at the university level, which can constitute the inputs on which the objectives of the peripheral units are consistently grafted.

5. Case discussion

The way in which the process of formulating and implementing a strategy is managed is an intangible but structurable factor. It is intangible because the effective management of a process is often conditioned by soft variables, such as the behaviour of people, their expectations and motivations. It is structurable because it can be traced back to a procedure that aims to capture the specificities of the organizational context in which it is inserted to create the best conditions for its implementation.

The analysis of the literature helped us to distinguish between "enabling" and "hindering" factors for the success of a strategic planning process in public universities and provided useful "planning criteria" for the construction of our practice. In particular, the fact of having associated public universities with "loose coupling" organizations suggested that we adopt an approach aimed at ensuring the following:

- the training of all key players in the process on the technical aspects related to the practices of strategic analysis, strategy formulation, definition of objectives and the related targets;
- the support and coordination with QA bodies to verify the consistency of the practice with the QA protocols and to spread the culture of assessment;
- the development of autonomous strategic plans of the decentralized units congruent with the university guidelines;
- the drawing up of a university strategic plan as the sum of the strategic plans of the decentralized units, proceeding to a harmonious synthesis and to their verification in terms of congruity and feasibility;
- the sharing of performance objectives within the individual decentralized units and with the centre;
- the joint design, not imposed, of performance measures associated with the objectives of the decentralized units and clear definition of the improvement objectives;
- a timeframe for the objectives that respected the actual priorities of the university and the identification of annual objectives to be monitored during the first year of the plan;
- the monitoring activity;
- in case of negative deviations, the explicit request to identify and implement corrective measures or to revise, with justification, the ongoing objectives;
- the start of the subsequent annual planning phase and the definition of new objectives and targets for the year following the first (rolling planning) within each decentralized unit and the university as a whole.

The application of these "planning criteria" made it possible to complete the drafting of the strategic plans at the various organizational levels with an articulation appropriate to the organizational and competitive complexity of the unit concerned.

The drafting of the plans, in a single format but with different contents, favoured the comparison and collaboration of all the actors involved while limiting disputes that would be difficult to manage and the concrete risk of rejection.

As mentioned above, the project is still being completed and three fronts are still open.

First, work is underway to complete the link with administrative budgeting procedures that are currently developed exclusively in accordance with ministerial constraints and prescriptions. The allocation of financial resources is still carried out on the logic of the destination of expenditure budgets without a clear association with activities and projects. The working group is working to align the two processes: the strategic planning that necessarily requires financial resources and the budgeting that formally allocates resources.

The second area of the ongoing work relates to monitoring phase through the development of dashboards of indicators at both the departmental and central levels. Finally, a further project is underway with the aim of refining the definition of performance target of the whole university that, although well expressed in qualitative terms, are not yet well formalized under the quantitative profile.

6. Concluding remarks

The strategic plan is confirmed, in public universities and elsewhere, as an excellent tool for managing change, provided that it is drafted in a way that is congruent with the organizational specificities of these institutions. The effectiveness of a plan is subject to compliance with requirements that insist both on "*process*" aspects (involving the way in which the activities of drawing up the plan are carried out within the organization) and on certain "*structure*" aspects (involving the definition of the objectives, measures and targets to be associated with each objective covered by the plan).

In this paper, we have sought to identify and summarize the design criteria of the planning "process" while respecting the operating requirements of "*loosely coupled*" organizations, with which we have associated public universities. Particularly, the aim was to identify the optimum conditions for SP of "loosely coupled" organizations that require horizontal independence (i.e., between the various decentralized units to avoid interference) as well as vertical interdependence (i.e., between the centre and the periphery and vice versa to ensure maximum coordination).

Based on our empirical evidence, the *originality of our research work* consists of having developed the practice starting from the anomalies found in the *cases of failure* reported in the literature, many of which were accumulated by ignoring the characteristics of *loosely coupled* organizations.

The main "*wrong choices*" in the design and implementation of strategic plans can be traced to the following areas:

- a. *regulatory gaps*, which leave room for discretion, are often filled by drawing uncritically from the *experience of private companies*;
- b. *poor governance commitment*, which compromises the sharing of strategic direction and implementation of strategic plans;
- c. *process anomalies*, generated by a top-down approach to the strategy, a lack of organizational (between the centre and the decentralized units) and documentary (between the strategic plan, the performance plan, the operational and investment budgets, etc.) integration, and the adoption of rigid and uniform procedures that do not represent the operating characteristics of the loosely coupled organizations.

In developing our practice, we not only drew from experiences of *failure*, but also sought confirmation in studies that rationalized the most *successful* cases and that encouraged the construction and dissemination of *best practices*.

In particular, we drew upon the suggestions of Shattock (2000, 2004), who defended the thesis that *strategic planning* has become an activity that is not only imposed but also *vital* for all universities, especially as government funding has shrunk, and of Sporn (1999), who supports the idea that the entire university system has become reactive and competitive, a situation that strongly suggests the adoption of *management tools* once considered unnecessary or even harmful as long as they are adapted to the context in which they are inserted.

Our research work is part of this school of thought and proposes a "*planning practice*" for the strategic management of public universities to be tested and disseminated with the awareness that the planning and control practices adopted to date by our Italian universities (and others) have proven, in the vast majority of cases, to be unable to positively affect performance (see research by Bronzetti et al. 2012).

The application of the proposed practice to the case study resulted in the activation of a button-up process, in the adoption of standardized procedures that are flexible to the demands of adaptation and in the recognition of the conditions of local autonomy (the departments) while respecting the need for coordination and integration with the centre (the university).

The application of the "*loose coupling*" practice made it possible to draw up a university strategic plan and departments' plans, which in turn were drawn up in light of the central guidelines to focus attention on issues considered crucial for the university (strategic priorities).

The skilful guidance of the working group also ensured an adequate level of participation of the different organizational levels involved, limiting the risk of rejection of the system and creating the organizational conditions for the drafting (and implementation) of a “quality plan”, confirmed by the positive assessment by the Ministry's evaluators.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, the observation of a single case-study is not sufficient to confirm the validity of a practice. We hope to have the opportunity to test the effectiveness of the "loose coupling" practice in other universities to expand the number of observations and validate the propositions and assumptions underlying the practice itself. Second, the definition of process management methods, which we addressed in this paper, does not exhaust the issues of design and implementation of the loose-coupling practice. If we want to apply this as good practice for public universities, we must complete it and resolve a series of issues linked to technical-accounting aspects, which are inseparable from those of the process. They relate to the structural characteristics of the Performance Measurement and Control Systems, which are considered an integral part of the strategic plan. The process and structural aspects are, in fact, strongly integrated and condition each other. Indeed, on the one hand, the choice of appropriate indicators to measure performance is a condition for measuring progress towards the achievement of strategic objectives (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2010, p. 25). On the other hand, the information generated by this feedback cannot but condition the formulation of future plans by entering fully into the process dimension.

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