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Strategic Management Approaches for Improving Educational Quality and Accountability in Public Universities

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Abstract

This study examined how strategic management practices (SMPs) influence educational quality and accountability in Ethiopian public universities. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, data were collected from six universities representing research, applied, and comprehensive types. Quantitative data from 436 respondents and qualitative insights from 26 institutional leaders were integrated to capture both breadth and depth. Findings revealed that well-structured SMPs-particularly strategic planning, resource alignment, performance monitoring, and data-driven decision-making-strongly predict perceived quality and accountability. However, their effectiveness is moderated by contextual enablers such as leadership style, data capacity, and organizational structure. Research universities demonstrated more systematic implementation than applied or comprehensive institutions. Qualitative evidence underscored the importance of participatory leadership, transparent communication, and feedback systems in translating strategy into results. The study concludes that institutionalizing evidence-based strategic management can significantly enhance higher education quality and accountability across diverse university contexts. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and university leaders aiming to strengthen accountability systems through strategic management.

Keywords: *Strategic management, higher education, organizational structure, public universities*

INTRODUCTION

Across the world, higher education systems are under increasing pressure to demonstrate quality, relevance, and accountability while managing limited resources, increasing access, and responding to swiftly shifting labor and technological market demands (Camilleri, 2020; Islamiyah et al., 2022). These dynamics make strategic management essential for improving performance, student outcomes, and stakeholder satisfaction in public universities (Wahyudi & Mulyadi, 2018). Strategic management in higher education involves articulating institutional vision, aligning organizational structures and resources, and implementing coherent processes for performance improvement in teaching, research, and community engagement (Garad et al., 2025). However, numerous public universities-especially in low- and middle-income countries-struggle to translate strategic plans into sustainable improvements due to weak monitoring systems, insufficient data infrastructures, and limited managerial capacity (Ali et al., 2022; Kambuga, 2025).

Empirical evidence suggests that effective SMPs can enhance institutional performance and educational quality when they are supported by clear planning, participatory implementation, and performance monitoring mechanisms (Garad et al., 2025; Taroum & Masaud, 2024). For instance, a study in Libya demonstrated that strategic planning significantly improved service quality in higher education (Taroum & Masaud, 2024), while research in Indonesia found that strong strategic and financial management systems positively impacted institutional performance (Garad et al., 2025). These findings augment the argument that strategic planning, resource allocation, and monitoring are crucial devices for institutional effectiveness (Pandi, 2014). Yet, studies also disclose persistent implementation gaps, especially when plans remain detached from faculty practices or when resource constraints and governance challenges undermine execution (Kambuga, 2025; Ali et al., 2022).

Strategic management in higher education draws on several related theories. Stakeholder theory highlights the role of several groups and individuals in shaping and overseeing institutional strategies (Freeman, 1984). This engagement is essential for universities as they traverse their independence while becoming accountable to the public (Fitriani & Muljono, 2019). Institutional logic theory looks at how conflicting norms-academic, market, and regulatory-affect the understanding and execution of strategies (Friedland & Alford, 1991). The resource-based outlook focuses on the significance of internal strengths for translating strategies into successful outcomes

(Barney, 1991). Together, these viewpoints show how universities convert their strategic aims into improvements in quality and accountability Leadership is a critical mediating factor in this process. Distributed and transformational leadership styles are often connected with positive strategy execution because they engage middle executives and faculty in realizing institutional goals (Jinga et al., 2024). When leaders cultivate collective ownership and align decision-making with data-informed evidence, they help set in strategic priorities in daily academic practice. Conversely, hierarchical or compliance-oriented approaches can hamper innovation and diminish faculty motivation (Fitriani & Muljono, 2019). Studies in Ethiopia, for instance, show that leadership behaviors meaningfully influence organizational performance and change management in public universities (Jinga et al., 2024).

The rise of digital governance and analytics further redesigns strategic management in higher education. Data-driven decision-making enables universities to evaluate program effectiveness, monitor student progress, and ensure accountability through transparent performance indicators (Camilleri, 2020). The Balanced Scorecard (BSC), as discussed by Camilleri (2020), offers a structured approach to translating strategic objectives into measurable performance outcomes across internal process, financial, and learning domains. However, institutional cultures resistant to data use and partial technical capacity often undermine its effectiveness, mainly in developing contexts (Ali et al., 2022; Kambuga, 2025). For data-based systems to enhance accountability, they must be coupled with adequate training, integrated information infrastructures, and supportive leadership.

Accountability itself is multidimensional, encompassing both internal mechanisms-such as self-regulation and internal audits-and external processes involving accreditation, funding agencies, and societal expectations (Fitriani & Muljono, 2019). Strategic management can strengthen these dimensions when strategic goals are linked to measurable indicators and performance reports are integrated into governance routines. Yet, the balance between compliance-oriented accountability and continuous improvement remains a persistent challenge (Garad et al., 2025). Many universities adopt monitoring frameworks primarily to satisfy regulatory demands rather than to promote learning and innovation (Wahyudi & Mulyadi, 2018). This tension underscores the need for

models of accountability that emphasize performance enhancement rather than bureaucratic conformity.

Although research confirms the relevance of strategic management for institutional governance and quality, methodological limitations persist. Much of the available literature is based on single-institution case studies or leader-focused surveys (Islamiyah et al., 2022). These approaches often overlook variations in perceptions and experiences across hierarchical levels-leaders, teachers, and students-which can significantly influence how strategies are implemented and perceived (Ramaditya et al., 2023). Moreover, the link between strategic management, institutional capability, and perceived accountability outcomes remains underexplored, particularly in the context of public universities in Sub-Saharan Africa (Jinga et al., 2024; Kambuga, 2025).

A conceptual model informed by the resource-based and stakeholder perspectives suggests that strategic management practices-strategic planning, resource allocation, performance monitoring, and data use-operate as independent variables that influence educational quality and accountability (Barney, 1991; Freeman, 1984). Institutional capabilities-such as technology, leadership, and governance autonomy-mediate the effectiveness of strategic practices on measurable outcomes(Ali et al., 2022). Furthermore, stakeholder perceptions moderate these relationships, as teachers, leaders, and students may vary in how they perceive and enact strategic initiatives (Islamiyah et al., 2022). Together, these theories explain how strategic management influences institutional outcomes through internal capabilities and stakeholder impact.

Empirical studies back-up these propositions. For example, in Indonesia, Fitriani and Muljono (2019) proved that effective leadership and academic culture improved good governance and transparency, leading to better quality of human resources. Similarly, Taroum and Masaud (2024) found that organized strategic planning had a substantial impact on service quality in Libyan universities, while Garad et al. (2025) confirmed that strategic and financial management together enhance institutional performance. However, Kambuga (2025) underlined that limited weak data systems, funding, and governance issues often hinder these positive effects. Collectively, these results reveal that while strategic management embraces strong potential for enhancing higher education outcomes, its effeciveness depends on contextual and institutional circumstances that determine execution fidelity.

Despite growing scholarship, substantial gaps remain as there is limited comparative evidence on in what way different stakeholder groups perceive strategic management and its influence on institutional outcomes within multiple universities. Studies rarely mix quantitative and qualitative data to assess both perceived and measured aspects of quality and accountability. Moreover, few studies include institutional capabilities-such as data systems and leadership quality -as mediating variables in explaining how strategies affect performance (Ali et al., 2022; Garad et al., 2025). Addressing these gaps is essential for developing context-sensitive models of strategic management that are both evidence-based and relevant to public higher education systems.

In this context, public universities provide a compelling focus because they face intense accountability demands while pursuing access, equity, and national development goals (Wahyudi & Mulyadi, 2018). Their dependence on government funding, evolving governance reforms, and digital revolution initiatives make them fertile ground for exploring how strategic management practices form institutional quality and accountability. Understanding these dynamics through a multi-stakeholder, multi-institutional lens is therefore crucial for informing policies that strengthen higher education governance in comparable socio-economic settings.

In spite of the growing body of literature on strategic management in higher education, numerous gaps remain. First, much of the available empirical work depends on single-institution case studies or stresses predominantly on senior leadership perceptions, restricting comparative and varied stakeholder understanding of how strategic management practices are enacted and experienced across institutional levels. Second, previous studies often employ either quantitative or qualitative approaches in separation, offering limited insight into how supposed strategic practices align with available institutional realities. Third, while strategic management is frequently associated to institutional performance, the strategies through which contextual and institutional capabilities-such as leadership style, data capacity, and organizational structure-form the effectiveness of these practices remain underexplored.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how strategic management practices influence educational quality and accountability in Ethiopian public universities, using a mixed-methods design to capture multi-stakeholder perspectives. The findings are expected to contribute to the

literature by developing a context-sensitive understanding of strategic management in higher education governance.

Research Questions

1. What aspects of strategic management-such as strategic planning, resource allocation, performance monitoring, and data use-are currently implemented in the six public universities, and how do leaders, teachers, and students differ in their perceptions of these aspects?
2. How are strategic management practices linked to measures of educational quality and institutional accountability across universities?
3. What contextual factors support or hinder the effective translation of strategic plans into improved teaching, learning, and accountability outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Management Practices in Higher Education

Strategic management in higher education refers to an orderly process through which universities define organizational vision, set long-term objectives, allocate resources, and monitor performance to attain academic quality and public accountability (Bryson, 2018; Camilleri, 2020). Unlike corporate organizations, institution of higher education operate in pluralistic environments characterized by numerous stakeholders, rival institutional rationalities, and public accountability obligations, making strategy implementation particularly complex (Bryson, 2018; Friedland & Alford, 1991).

Empirical studies often indicate that strategic management practices-mainly strategic planning, resource arrangement, and performance monitoring-are clearly associated with institutional success in higher education (Garad et al., 2025; Taroum & Masaud, 2024). However, research also shows that the simple presence of strategic plans does not assure improved outcomes; efficiency depends largely on in what way strategies are executed, communicated, and monitored through institutional levels (Ali et al., 2022; Mintzberg, 1994).

Strategic Planning and Educational Quality

Educational quality in higher education is generally assessed through teaching effectiveness, curriculum importance, learning resources, and student outcomes (Harvey & Green, 1993). Strategic planning plays a determinant role in improving these dimensions by aligning academic programs, infrastructure investment, and faculty development with institutional priorities (Camilleri, 2020).

Studies from various contexts show that universities with coherent and participatory strategic planning practices incline to report higher stages of perceived educational quality (Fitriani & Muljono, 2019; Taroum & Masaud, 2024). Nevertheless, some scholars caution that top-down planning models often fail to impact classroom practices, mostly when faculty members are left out from decision-making processes (Mintzberg, 1994; Wahyudi & Mulyadi, 2018). These results put forward that strategic planning advances educational quality only when it is inclusive, well-communicated, and reinforced by ample monitoring mechanisms.

Performance Monitoring, Data Use, and Institutional Accountability

Institutional accountability in universities incorporates both internal accountability strategies-such as performance appraisals and quality assurance mechanisms-and external accountability needs from governments, accreditation organizations, and the public (Burke, 2005; Ramaditya et al., 2023). Strategic management reinforces accountability if institutional goals are interpreted into quantifiable indicators and systematically appraised through performance monitoring systems. The rising implementation of data-driven decision-making frameworks, including performance dashboards and balanced scorecards, permits universities to connect strategic objectives with operational results (Camilleri, 2020; Kaplan & Norton, 1996). Empirical evidence shows that institutions with vigorous data infrastructures disclose greater transparency, responsiveness, and accountability (Ali et al., 2022; Islamiyah et al., 2022). However, partial technical capacity, non-continuous information systems, and resistance to data usage remain significant barriers in many universities, mainly in developing countries (Kambuga, 2025).

Leadership and Institutional Capability in Strategy Implementation

Leadership capability is widely understood as a central determinant of effective strategy execution in higher education institutions (Bryman, 2007; Jinga et al., 2024). Transformational and distributed approaches of leadership foster shared possession of strategic goals, boost communication, and encourage organizational learning (Bolden et al., 2012).

From a resource-based viewpoint, leadership competency, organizational structure, and data systems comprise strategic assets that permit universities to translate strategic plans into better performance outcomes (Barney, 1991). Research in African higher education settings illustrate that weak leadership commitment and inadequate managerial autonomy often limit strategy execution, even when official plans exist (Jinga et al., 2024; Kambuga, 2025). These findings emphasize the importance of investigating institutional competencies as conditions shaping the success of strategic management practices.

Stakeholder Perspectives and Perception Gaps

Stakeholder theory underlines that universities must balance the expectations of diverse groups, comprising students, governments, leaders, faculty, and society at large (Freeman, 1984). Research indicates that strategic initiatives are often understood differently across stakeholder groups, leading to cracks in understanding, commitment, and accountability (Islamiyah et al., 2022; Ramaditya et al., 2023). Faculty and students often report incomplete awareness of institutional strategies and performance indicators, which weakens engagement and accountability mechanisms (Ali et al., 2022). Addressing these awareness gaps requires clear as crystal communication, participatory leadership, and feedback systems that mix stakeholder voices into strategic cycles.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design to examine how strategic management practices (SMPs) impact educational quality and accountability in Ethiopian public universities. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then combined to offer both depth and breadth of understanding. This design was suitable for capturing

quantifiable relationships among SMP variables but also exploring contextual experiences, processes, and challenges underlying strategic management through governance levels.

Study Context and Rationale for Site Selection

The study was carried out in six Ethiopian public universities, selected purposively to mirror institutional variety within the Ethiopian higher education system. Based on the national university category, the sample comprised two research universities (U1, U2), two applied universities (U3, U4), and two comprehensive universities (U5, U6). These types differ in governance autonomy, resource allocation, mandate, and performance expectations. Including all three categories allowed the study to capture contextual variation in strategic orientations and governance systems, thereby increasing the validity, transferability, and comparative worth of the findings.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

A multi-level purposive sampling strategy was used to capture perspectives from vital institutional stakeholders involved in academic delivery and strategic management. Participants involved six vice presidents (VPs), twenty deans or directors (DDs), fifty department heads (DHs), 110 teaching staff (TS), and 250 students (ST). This approach ensured representation across leadership, management, academic staff, and learners. All participants were anonymized by means of coded identifiers (e.g., VP1–VP6, DD1–DD20) to support cross-case analysis while upholding confidentiality.

Instruments

Quantitative data were collected via a structured questionnaire modified from validated instruments on institutional performance and strategic management. The instrument measured four SMP dimensions-strategic planning, resource distribution/allocation and performance monitoring and data-informed decision-making-together with perceived educational quality and accountability. Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale. A pilot test with 30 respondents yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.82 and 0.91, indicating strong internal reliability. Qualitative instruments comprised semi-structured interview guides for vice presidents, selected department heads, deans/directors, and students, as well as a document analysis for reviewing strategic plans, quality assurance records, and annual reports.

Procedures

Quantitative questionnaires were administered to staff and students across the six universities. Concurrently, qualitative data were gathered through interviews with all vice presidents, selected department heads, deans/directors, and students. Institutional documents were reviewed to triangulate findings and contextualize survey and interview data. Data collection occurred simultaneously to support convergent integration.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative analysis involved data cleaning, descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc tests, Pearson correlation and hierarchical multiple regression to assess the predictive effects of SMPs on educational quality and accountability, controlling for university type. Effect sizes (η^2, Cohen's d) and multicollinearity diagnostics (VIF < 5) were reported. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Integration occurred by comparing quantitative and qualitative results to identify convergence and divergence. Methodological rigor was enhanced through expert validation, member checking, and an audit trail.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent, participated voluntarily, and retained the right to withdraw. Confidentiality and anonymity were warranted through coded identifiers and protected data storage, with no personal identifiers reported.

RESULTS

Strategic Management Practices

Quantitative analysis of the survey data showed that the six universities (U1–U6) reported moderate to high use of strategic management practices, although there was variation based on institutional type and stakeholder group. Table 1 summarizes the average scores for the four areas of strategic management: strategic planning, resource allocation, performance monitoring, and data-driven decision-making.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Strategic Management Practices by University

University	Planning	Resource Allocation	Monitoring	Data Use	Overall SMP
U1 (Research)	4.35	4.20	4.05	3.90	4.13
U2 (Research)	4.10	4.00	3.95	3.85	3.98
U3 (Applied)	3.75	3.60	3.55	3.40	3.58
U4 (Applied)	3.80	3.65	3.50	3.35	3.58
U5 (Comprehensive)	3.95	3.85	3.75	3.60	3.79
U6 (Comprehensive)	3.90	3.80	3.70	3.55	3.74

The results show that research universities (U1 and U2) perform better in all aspects of strategic management. In contrast, applied universities (U3 and U4) display lower adoption rates, especially in performance monitoring and data-driven decision-making. Comprehensive universities (U5 and U6) lie between these two groups, with moderate adoption levels. The average scores reveal that although strategic planning is generally strong across institutions (M = 4.05), data-driven decision-making is the weakest area (M = 3.61).

Stakeholder Perceptions

Table 2 shows a clear and significant difference in perceptions of SMPs among stakeholder groups. A one-way ANOVA found notable differences between leaders, teachers, and students, $F(2, 433) = 24.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, suggesting a moderate effect size. Post-hoc Tukey HSD comparisons confirmed that leaders reported the highest perceptions of SMPs (M = 4.02, SD = 0.45), followed by teachers (M = 3.64, SD = 0.42). Students reported the lowest perceptions (M = 3.30, SD = 0.40). These findings show a clear perception gap, with higher-level stakeholders holding more positive views of SMPs compared to those involved in classroom-level implementation.

Table 2

Overall SMP Scores by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Mean SMP (M ± SD)	Post-hoc Comparison
Leaders (VP/DD/DH)	4.02 ± 0.45	a > b, c
Teachers (TS)	3.64 ± 0.42	b < a, b > c
Students (ST)	3.30 ± 0.40	c < a, b

Note: Groups sharing different letters (a, b, c) differ significantly (Tukey HSD, $p < .05$).

Table 3 below shows the mean ratings of SMPs across leaders, teachers, and students in four areas: Planning, Resource Allocation, Monitoring, and Data Use. Leaders consistently rated SMPs highest, followed by teachers, with students rating them lowest. This indicates a clear perception gap, suggesting that SMPs are more visible or appreciated at higher organizational levels.

Table 3

Mean SMP Scores by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Planning	Resource Allocation	Monitoring	Data Use	Overall SMP
Leaders (VP/DD/DH)	4.22	4.05	3.95	3.85	4.02
Teachers (TS)	3.85	3.70	3.55	3.45	3.64
Students (ST)	3.50	3.35	3.25	3.10	3.30

The qualitative analysis identified four main themes: (1) structured strategic planning and monitoring, (2) leadership engagement and communication, (3) data capacity and decision-making, and (4) stakeholder awareness and participation. Leaders in research universities emphasized structured planning, data-based monitoring, and evidence-driven revisions: “Our strategic plan is revised every three years with clear indicators and quarterly reports” (VP1, U1). In contrast, applied universities reported weak data systems and limited follow-up: “Our plan mostly stays on paper; monitoring is manual and slow” (DD7, U3).

Faculty in research universities described active involvement in planning, while those in applied universities felt excluded: "Most decisions seem top-down" (TS45, U4). Students across universities showed little awareness of strategic processes or data use: "It all seems administrative" (ST5, U3). Document reviews confirmed these disparities as research universities maintained comprehensive plans, dashboards, and reports; applied universities lacked systematic monitoring, and comprehensive universities showed uneven application. Overall, SMPs exist formally across institutions, but implementation quality varies widely. Research universities benefit from structured governance and participatory systems, while applied universities face resource and communication challenges.

SMPs and Quality/Accountability Outcomes

To examine the connection between SMPs and educational quality and accountability, survey data from 436 participants (leaders, teachers, and students) were analyzed. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the overall SMP score, perceived educational quality (EQ), and institutional accountability (IA) across all six universities.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of SMPs, EQ, and IA

University	SMP Mean (SD)	EQ Mean (SD)	IA Mean (SD)
U1 (Research)	4.13 (0.35)	4.25 (0.32)	4.18 (0.30)
U2 (Research)	3.98 (0.40)	4.05 (0.35)	4.00 (0.38)
U3 (Applied)	3.58 (0.42)	3.60 (0.40)	3.55 (0.43)
U4 (Applied)	3.58 (0.41)	3.62 (0.39)	3.50 (0.40)
U5 (Comprehensive)	3.79 (0.38)	3.85 (0.36)	3.80 (0.35)
U6 (Comprehensive)	3.74 (0.36)	3.80 (0.37)	3.75 (0.38)

The descriptive statistics show that SMP score is positively related with higher educational quality and accountability outcomes. Research universities have the highest values across, applied universities have the lowest, and comprehensive universities are in between.

SMPs and Outcomes Correlations

Pearson correlation tests found SMPs to have high positive correlations to both quality of education and accountability. Specifically, SMPs correlated most significantly with EQ ($r = .72$, $p < .001$) and IA ($r = .68$, $p < .001$). Sub-dimension analysis revealed that performance monitoring

and data-based decision-making were the most highly correlated with both outcomes, showing that institutions that have effective monitoring systems and application of data have better perceived quality and stronger accountability. To explore the predictive relationship while controlling for institutional types (nature and size), hierarchical multiple regression (Table 5) was conducted. SMPs were employed as predictor variables, institutional type as control variable, and EQ and IA as outcome variables.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Educational Quality and Accountability

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Educational Quality	SMP	0.65	0.08	.69	8.13	<.001
	University Type	0.12	0.05	.14	2.40	.018
Institutional Accountability	SMP	0.58	0.07	.63	7.90	<.001
	University Type	0.10	0.04	.12	2.25	.025

Results show that SMPs are strong predictors of both educational quality and accountability, even when considering the type of university. The standardized beta values (.69 and .63) indicate a significant practical impact. University type had a smaller effect, suggesting that while context matters, SMPs are the main influence.

Stakeholder Differences

A one-way ANOVA was done to look at differences among leaders, teachers, and students regarding their views on educational quality (EQ) and institutional accountability (IA related to SMPs). Significant differences were found for both EQ, $F(2, 435) = 18.45$, $p < .001$, and IA, $F(2, 435) = 16.22$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey tests showed that leaders rated both EQ and IA much higher than teachers and students, while teachers rated both outcomes significantly higher than students. This pattern shows a clear gap in perceptions among the groups, similar to the findings from Q1, with higher-level stakeholders having more favorable views.

Table 6

Mean Ratings of EQ and IA Associated with SMPs by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	EQ (M ± SD)	IA (M ± SD)	Post-hoc Comparison
Leaders (VP/DD/DH)	4.15 ± 0.42	4.08 ± 0.45	a > b, c
Teachers (TS)	3.78 ± 0.40	3.70 ± 0.38	b < a, b > c
Students (ST)	3.42 ± 0.37	3.35 ± 0.36	c < a, b

Note. Groups with different letters differ significantly (Tukey HSD, $p < .05$).

In addition to what the table illustrates, interview and document analyses revealed that effective strategic management practices (SMPs) enhance educational quality and institutional accountability when supported by monitoring, data use, and stakeholder engagement. University leaders emphasized systematic performance tracking to link departmental indicators with teaching quality and student satisfaction (VP1, U1). Deans and department heads noted that aligning resources with strategic priorities and maintaining feedback loops strengthened accountability (DD12, U5). Faculty highlighted participatory planning and transparent evaluation as key to teaching improvement (TS67, U2), while students observed better facilities and learning support but remained unaware of the strategic processes behind them (ST8, U4).

Moreover, document reviews confirmed these patterns. Research universities implemented dashboards, annual reviews, and performance-based evaluations connecting goals to outcomes. Applied universities lacked structured monitoring and accountability frameworks, resulting in lower educational quality (EQ) and institutional accountability (IA) scores, while comprehensive universities showed partial adoption and moderate results. Integrating all evidence confirmed that SMPs emphasizing monitoring, resource alignment, and data-driven decision-making most strongly predict institutional performance.

Contextual Factors

Survey responses and document analyses highlighted several key contextual factors affecting the effectiveness of strategic management practices (SMPs) at six universities (U1–U6). These factors included organizational structures, data capabilities, leadership styles, and availability of resources (Table 7).

Table 7

Mean Scores for Contextual Factors

Contextual Factor	Leaders Mean (SD)	Teachers Mean (SD)	Students Mean (SD)
Organizational Structure	4.10 (0.30)	3.70 (0.35)	3.50 (0.32)
Data Capacity	3.95 (0.35)	3.50 (0.40)	3.20 (0.38)
Leadership Style	4.20 (0.28)	3.85 (0.33)	3.60 (0.35)
Resource Availability	3.80 (0.38)	3.40 (0.42)	3.10 (0.40)

Leaders ranked contextual factors higher than faculty and students, revealing perception gaps in how such factors influence SMP implementation. Resource availability and data capacity were rated weakest, especially by students, suggesting barriers to translating strategy into measurable results. Pearson correlations showed strong links between contextual variables and SMPs ($r = .52–.71$, $p < .001$), indicating that effective structures, leadership, resources, and data systems enhance strategic management. Hierarchical regression, controlling for institutional type, confirmed that contextual factors significantly moderate the impact of SMPs on educational quality (EQ) and institutional accountability (IA). Detailed results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Moderation Effects of Contextual Factors on SMP-Outcomes Relationship

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Educational Quality	SMP	0.48	0.07	.51	6.86	<.001
	Organizational Structure x SMP	0.15	0.05	.16	3.00	.003
	Data Capacity x SMP	0.12	0.04	.13	2.75	.007
	Leadership Style x SMP	0.14	0.05	.15	2.90	.005
	Resource Availability x SMP	0.10	0.04	.11	2.45	.015
Institutional Accountability	SMP	0.42	0.06	.46	6.30	<.001
	Organizational Structure x SMP	0.13	0.05	.14	2.60	.010
	Data Capacity x SMP	0.11	0.04	.12	2.50	.013
	Leadership Style x SMP	0.12	0.05	.13	2.55	.012
	Resource Availability x SMP	0.09	0.04	.10	2.20	.028

The findings show that leadership style, data capacity, and organizational structure most strongly moderate the relationship between strategic management practices (SMPs) and institutional

outcomes. Even well-designed SMP frameworks succeed only when supported by organizational contexts that enable implementation. While resource availability matters, its effect is weaker-strong leadership and data systems can offset financial limits through efficient resource use.

Similarly, interviews highlighted how leadership and institutional design drive results. A research-university leader explained, “Our decentralized structure links departments to strategic priorities, with dashboards ensuring accountability” (VP2, U1). In contrast, an applied-university dean noted, “Our IT systems are not integrated, limiting performance monitoring” (DD10, U4). Faculty valued participatory leadership for improving teaching and accountability, while students observed that better monitoring and resourcing led to more equipped labs and timely feedback. Overall, transparent structures, participatory leadership, and solid data infrastructures amplify SMPs’ impact on educational quality and accountability.

DISCUSSION

Overview of Key Findings

This study examined how strategic management practices affect educational quality and accountability in Ethiopian public universities. It used a mixed-methods approach. The findings indicate that strategic management practices are significant predictors of educational quality and accountability, even when seeing diverse types of institutions. However, the success of these practices differs significantly amid university categories and stakeholder groups.

Quantitative data showed that research universities reported enhanced implementation of strategic management practices than applied and comprehensive universities. Performance monitoring and data-driven decision-making were the most influential predictors of educational quality and accountability. Qualitative results elucidated these inclinations by underlining differences in leadership involvement, institutional capability, and stakeholder participation.

Strategic Management Practices and Educational Quality

The strong association between strategic management practices and educational quality supports earlier research that emphasizes strategic alignment's importance in curriculum delivery, improving teaching, and learning resources (Camilleri, 2020; Taroum & Masaud, 2024).

Performance monitoring systems permitted institutions to identify shortcomings in teaching quality and distribute resources more effectively. This supports the view that strategic planning is not enough without ongoing evaluation and feedback (Mintzberg, 1994; Pandi, 2014).

Qualitative findings indicate that universities with participatory planning and transparent monitoring were better at translating strategic objectives into classroom-level improvements. Faculty members in such institutions described a clearer understanding of institutional priorities and better alignment between their responsibilities and strategic goals. This supports stakeholder theory, which states that a group's success depends on significant engagement from internal members (Freeman, 1984; Taroum & Masaud, 2024).

Strategic Management Practices and Institutional Accountability

The results also suggest that strategic management practices significantly improve institutional accountability by reinforcing internal reviews and external reporting mechanisms. Institutions with advanced data systems and regular evaluations indicated higher transparency and responsiveness to stakeholders. This aligns with studies linking data-driven management to enhanced accountability in public organizations (Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Islamiyah et al., 2022).

However, qualitative findings emphasized ongoing accountability issues, particularly in applied universities, where fragmented data systems and limited analytical capacity hindered effective monitoring. These barriers restricted the use of performance data in decision-making, weakening the practical impact of formal accountability measures (Barney, 1991). This suggests that accountability reforms in higher education require investments in institutional capacity rather than relying only on policy mandates (Kambuga, 2025).

Institutional Type, Leadership, and Capability Differences

Variations among institutional categories were a crucial factor in this study. Research universities had resilient leadership continuity, better autonomy, and information systems, which resulted in more effective strategy execution. In contrast, applied universities experienced higher leadership challenges, fewer resources, and weaker coordination.

These findings support the resource-based view, which states that outcomes depend on the availability and effective use of strategic resources such as managerial skills, leadership competence, and data infrastructure (Ali et al., 2022; Barney, 1991; Camilleri, 2020)). The findings suggest that strategic management actions are effective only when in line with institutional competences and context (Bryson, 2018; Kambuga, 2025) .

Stakeholder Perception Gaps and Strategy Implementation

The study found noteworthy perception gaps amongst faculty members, leaders, and students regarding the enactment of strategic management practices. Leaders consistently described higher levels of strategic success than other stakeholder categories, indicating possible communication gaps. Such misalignment can hamper strategy implementation by weakening common understanding and ownership (Ali et al., 2022; Camilleri, 2020).

This result supports earlier research showing that limited stakeholder awareness reduces the effectiveness of strategic initiatives in higher education (Ali et al., 2022). Closing these gaps requires clear communication strategies, inclusive governance, and feedback mechanisms that permit stakeholders to engage meaningfully in strategic processes.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the higher education and strategic management literature in numerous ways. First, it expands stakeholder theory by presenting how perception gaps among groups influence the success of strategic management practices. Second, by integrating the resource-based view, the study underlines that strategy success is conditional on institutional capabilities. This aligns with studies by Fitriani and Muljono (2019) and Taroum and Masaud (2024).

Third, the use of a mixed-methods design offers a deeper understanding of strategic management in higher education. It indicates the value of merging quantitative and qualitative evidence to get both outcomes and essential processes. These contributions advance models of strategic management in public universities that think through their specific context.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Future Research

The findings of this study offer real-world implications for higher education policymakers, leaders, and quality assurance organizations aiming to advance educational quality and institutional accountability through strategic management practices.

Implications for University Leadership

University leaders are crucial in translating strategic plans into operational and academic results. The findings show that strategic management practices work best when leaders engage staff and students in planning, implementing, and monitoring processes. University executives should prioritize participatory clear communication of institutional goals, strategic planning, and consistent feedback mechanisms that support stakeholders understand how their work goes with strategic priorities. Moreover, leadership development programs ought to focus on performance management skills and data-informed decision-making. Strengthening leaders' capability to interpret and use performance data can advance evidence-based planning and accountability at both the institutional and department levels.

Implications for Institutional Management and Quality Assurance

The strong influence of data-driven decision-making and performance monitoring emphasizes the need for universities to invest in integrated management information systems. Institutions should go beyond compliance-focused reporting to performance systems that encourage ongoing improvement in learning, teaching, and service delivery. Quality assurance units need to align internal evaluation structures with institutional strategic aims and ensure that appraisal results are systematically used for enhancement rather than for reporting. Creating clear performance indicators connected to educational quality can increase transparency and accountability.

Implications for National Policy and Governance

At the policy level, the results suggest that national higher education reforms inspiring strategic planning and accountability must include different support based on institutional type. Policymakers should recognize that comprehensive, applied, and research universities have different mandates and capabilities. Tailored policy interventions-such as directed funding, and leadership stability initiatives.

Implications for Policy and Future Research

The findings put forward that higher education policy changes/reforms focused on strategic planning and accountability should also incorporate investments in data infrastructure, leadership development, and stakeholder engagement. Policymakers have to recognize institutional diversity and disregard one-size-fits-all methods to executing strategic management. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to investigate how strategic management practices vary or change over time and explore deeper causal mechanisms. Comparative studies across various countries could boost understanding of how leadership environments affect strategic management effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SMPs significantly contribute to educational quality and institutional accountability in public universities. Research universities outshined in planning, monitoring, and data utilization, whereas applied institutions struggled with leadership engagement and technological capability. To address these differences, universities should: (1) institutionalize participatory mechanisms engaging students and faculty in all strategy phases; (2) invest in digital data systems and monitoring tools; (3) promote leadership development emphasizing collaborative and transformational approaches; and (4) establish constant feedback loops connecting strategic plans, teaching practices, and accountability metrics. Together, these measures can align strategic commitment with observable improvements in quality and performance.

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