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# RESEARCH INTO STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN POLAND

## 1. General comments

Public schools of higher education in Poland are becoming increasingly competitive and, thus, they should be strategically managed. Administration, which is so typical for the public sphere, should be replaced with a management tool, i.e. a strategy. Despite the fact that more and more initiatives are taken in connection with strategic management, still few schools in Poland are actually implementing any strategies.

This article aims to show a broad picture of strategy implementation in public schools of higher education in Poland. It concentrates on key issues related to strategy implementation: cascading, organizational changes, implementation obstacles, monitoring and the most frequent mistakes.

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## 2. Problem justification and comprehension

The problem of implementing strategies in public schools of higher education in Poland is now under discussion as the number of schools currently implementing, developing or planning to prepare a strategy is growing. Along with a steady increase in the number of public schools in Poland with strategies already in place, the number of schools struggling with their implementation is likely to surge.

The analysis of websites of public schools of higher education in Poland in terms of strategy development and implementation proved that, out of 132 schools of higher education in Poland, 35 schools developed strategy documentations (or featured short information about the existence or preparation of such a documentation), which constituted 27% of all the schools, 51 schools developed their missions (39%), and in 9 schools information about visions was identified (7%) [Jasiczak, Kochalski, Sapała 2011, pp. 7–8].

Strategic management highly values strategic analysis. It happens that strategic management is associated with strategic analysis. While the process of strategic management encompasses strategic analysis, it also encompasses strategy development, acceptance and implementation. Figure 1 graphically illustrates the process of strategic management in public schools.

**Figure 1. Process of strategic management in public schools**



Source: Own work.

Figure 1 demonstrates that strategic analysis is one of the initial stages of strategic management in public schools, while implementation is the final stage, which directly defines the extent to which the strategic goals will be attained. It should be stressed that a public school may have a properly developed strategy, but can still

fail to achieve its objectives. Such is the case when a public school cannot effectively implement its strategy.

Strategic management in schools of higher education, including strategy implementation, is meticulously researched in Western Europe, the United States of America, Australia, that is, in countries where the system of higher education is based on public and non-public institutions. In Poland, research into management (including strategic management) in schools of higher education was purely theoretical and any aspects connected with strategy implementation were rarely touched upon. This seems to be the consequence of the fact that, until recently, few schools implemented their strategies.

Although the knowledge about strategy implementation in schools of higher education in Poland is still limited, taking into account the complexity and significance, it must be noted that certain research centers in Poland have been recently addressing the problems of strategy implementation in public schools, both theoretically and practically. For instance, the Poznań University of Economics conducts research into development and implementation of strategies in public schools of higher education in Poland as a part of a research project aimed at creating a development strategy design and implementation model for public schools of higher education in Poland (research project No. N N115 008337 financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education).

# 3. The area of research into the implementation of strategies in public schools of higher education in Poland

In order to introduce the mechanisms of strategic management to the school management system, it is necessary to modify the existing organization model, which is connected with taking actions in the following five areas:

- Re-modeling of the present school organizational structures so that the new organizational model supports implementation of the planned development objectives,
- Strategy cascading into departments and organizational units, increasing faculty involvement in the execution of strategic actions,
- Implementation of an incentive system, which would motivate the faculty to get involved in strategic projects,
- Re-building the communication system to provide the faculty with access to information and show new, desired patterns of organizational behavior,
- Implementation of a monitoring and oversight system to improve strategies through feedback,

Schools of higher education are considered to be complex systems, that is, they are highly inertial. Consequently, in order to take actions targeted at remodeling a schools management system, it is necessary to overcome certain obstacles, which impede, and, in extreme cases, enable proper strategy implementation. Obstacles, which impede implementation of a given strategic model, may be classified into three categories:

- Systemic obstacles, which are the results of strategic management systems, which were unsuccessfully built in schools;
- Human obstacles, which are connected with the faculty's wrong attitude, or with the fact that the school failed to shape competences, which would be desired for proper strategy implementation;
- Resource obstacles, which are connected with schools' limited resources.

In the light of the above considerations over the research into strategy implementation in public schools in Poland, it seems worthwhile to analyze the following:

- Strategy cascading,
- Introduction of organizational changes,
- Obstacles to strategy implementation,
- Strategy monitoring processes,
- Mistakes made during strategy implementation.

## 4. Research methods

Strategic management in public schools of higher education in Poland was a starting point for research, the results of which will be presented below. Under this project the research population was composed of public schools in Poland. During the implementation of the study, the studied schools consisted of 132 schools.

The main objective of the research was to interpret the investigated reality into numbers, thus quantitative research methods were selected. In accordance with the adopted research procedure, a CASI technique survey was conducted. In this survey a respondent filled in a survey on-line at a website.

The survey was conducted in the first six months of 2010. 20 public schools participated in the survey. The group was composed of 5 universities, 4 state vocational colleges, 3 technical universities, 2 economic and medical universities, an agricultural university, a military university, an academy of fine arts and an academy of physical education. At the time of research, 11 schools had strategies, 7 schools were preparing them and 2 schools were planning to develop them.

The respondents were selected by the schools' chancellors. The group was mostly made up of academics and Ph.D. faculty members. They were chairmen or members

of strategy development teams and representatives of school authorities responsible for strategies.

# 5. Results analysis

## 5.1. Analysis of strategy cascading

A strategy is effectively implemented in a public school only when it gradually travels to its lower levels, that is, to faculties, departments, and employees. It is thanks to cascading that a school's strategy becomes operational. Figure 2 shows how deep a strategy cascades in public schools in Poland.

Figure 2. "Depth" of strategy cascading in public schools in Poland
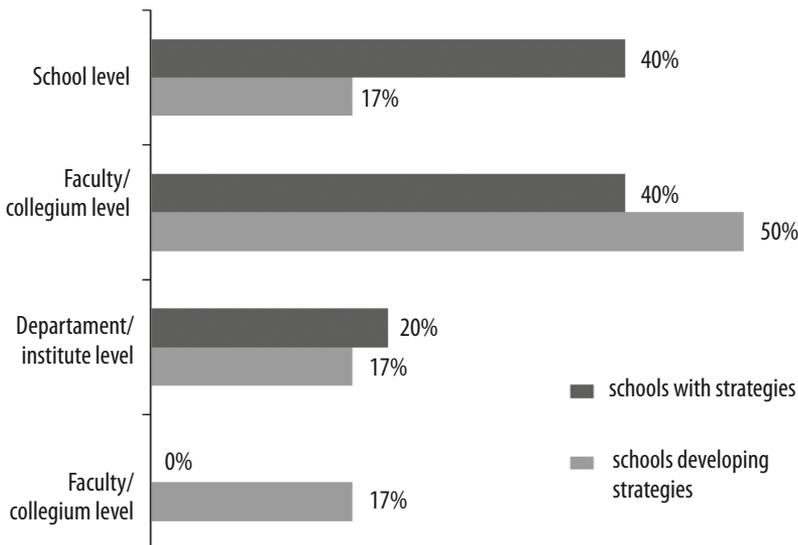


Source: Own work.

Based on the data from figure 2, it can be concluded that none of the schools implementing a strategy cascades it in order to reach its employees. On one hand, a time-factor can be blamed, as it is very time-consuming to reach employees with a school's strategy, and on the other hand, cascading the strategy down to the employees is not essential. If a school's cascading stops at the department/ institute level, it means that heads of the departments and institutes play particularly significant roles in the execution of the research and didactic tasks. In order to enforce a school's strategy they should motivate and engage the employees. In this context for

the implementation of a strategy it is especially crucial to develop a so-called competence profile of a department head.

## 5.2. Analysis of organizational changes

In most of the discussed public schools of higher education strategy implementation was not supported by any changes in the adopted structural solutions (figure 3). Only 20% of the schools included in the research, which implemented their strategies, created organizational units responsible for strategy implementation. A similar percentage of public schools re-organized existing organizational units to execute strategy-oriented tasks.

Figure 3. Organizational changes supporting an implementation
process in public schools in Poland
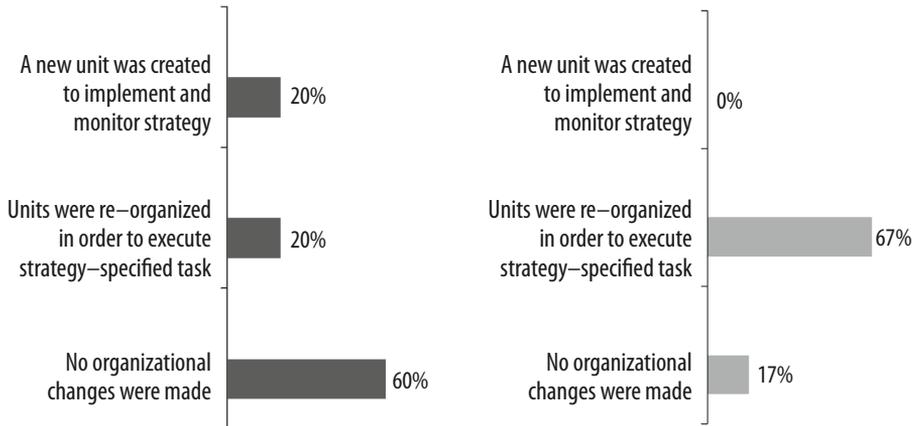


Source: Own work.

The low level of adjustment of structural solutions to the adopted strategic options is a consequence of an improper development of schools of higher education and a co-occurrence of two factors - limited financial resources at a public schools' disposal and a failure to educate about strategic competences. The lack of cohesion between strategy and structure may significantly lower the likelihood of a successful implementation of a strategy, as it will not allow strategic actions to be adequately coordinated and supported by actions on an operational level. A similar scenario can be observed in schools of higher education, where a strategy development is currently under way. They do not intend to establish organizational units, which would support strategic management, but plan to re-organize existing structural solutions to execute the strategy-specified tasks.

## 5.3. Analysis of obstacles to strategy implementation

Figure 4 illustrates the most significant obstacles to strategy implementation in the discussed public schools of higher education.

**Figure 4. Obstacles to strategy implementation in public schools in Poland**
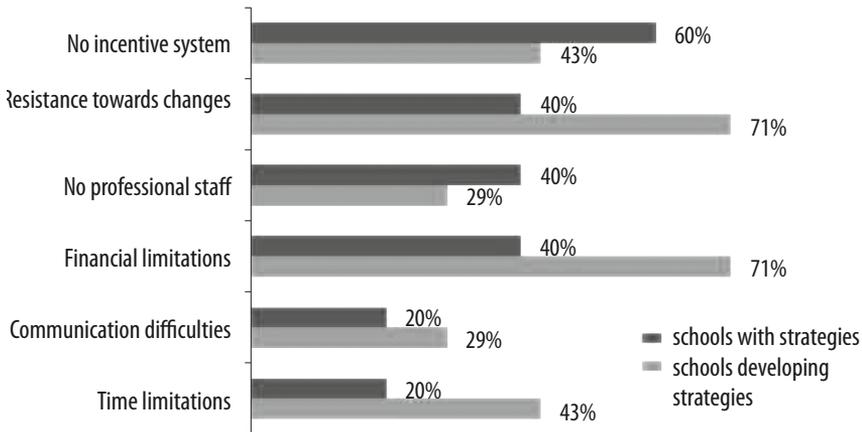


Source: Own work.

Figure 4 clearly shows that the largest obstacle for strategy implementation in the schools, which at the time of research had such documentations, is a lack of an incentive system (60% of responses). In order to introduce a strategy, the employees must cope with high requirements and, in the longer run, an effective incentive system is a pure prerequisite. Employees' resistance towards changes was the second most popular response (40%). It can be connected with an attachment to current practices, and also with fears concerning additional strategy-related responsibilities or implementation results-related employment reductions. A similar percentage of results pointed out a lack of professional staff to implement a strategy and control its execution and financial limitations.

The final aspect was most frequently addressed by schools developing their strategies at the time of research (71%). Apart from the most expected obstacles, they also indicated resistance towards change and time limitations (71% and 43% respectively), which is natural when taking into account the workload concerning the development of strategy documentation. Schools developing their strategies indicate problems and difficulties typical for an initial stage of works concerning strategy implementation, while the other schools observe the later ones.

## 5.4. Analysis of strategy monitoring

Figure 5 depicts how public schools monitor the execution of strategy-specified tasks.

**Figure 5. Ways of monitoring strategy execution in public schools in Poland**
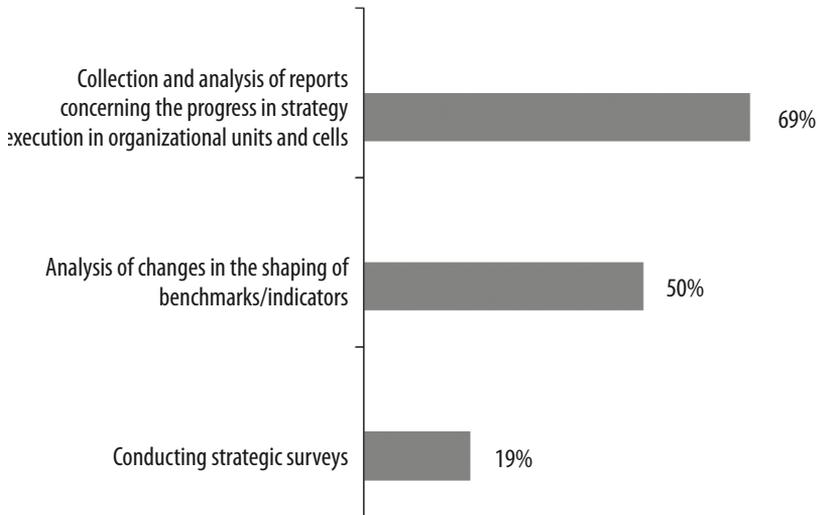


Source: Own work.

The results of figure 5 show that schools most frequently monitor the way their strategies are executed by collecting and analyzing reports (69% of responses). The majority of the discussed schools, both those that monitor a strategy and prepare to do so, admit they adopt the most typical solutions to collect basic information about achievements of a given unit. Additionally, a half of the schools pointed out that they analyze changes in the shaping of benchmarks/ indicators. The responses are in contrast with the scale of the strategic surveys (only 19% of replies), which selectively ask about strategy-specified priorities. Based on a regularly conducted survey, it could be concluded if and to what extent particular organizational units improve their results in terms of strategy execution.

## 5.5. Analysis of mistakes in strategy implementation

Figure 6 illustrates mistakes made at the stage of implementation of a strategy in a public school.

Figure 6. Mistakes made at the stage of implementation
of a strategy in a public school



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|---|---|
| Failure to nominate persons responsible for execution of strategic goals and actions | 60% |
| Ineffective strategy–supporting incentive system | 50% |
| Ineffective strategy communication system | 40% |
| Failure to identify benchmarks/indicators for strategic goals and actions | 30% |
| Failure to adjust benchmarks/indicators for strategic goals and actions | 20% |
| Insufficient level of involvement of school authorities | 20% |
| Insufficient strategic control | 20% |
| Failure to define for execution of strategic goals and actions | 10% |

Source: Own work.

Public schools of higher education, which went through the entire cycle of strategic management, pointed out four critical mistakes made during strategy implementation, which decreased the process effectiveness. The most frequent mistake was the failure to nominate persons responsible for the execution of strategic goals and actions (60% of replies), which translated into a dispersion of responsibilities and a low level of the faculty's association with the strategy and an impossibility to coordinate inter-connected actions. Another critical dysfunction, which was frequently pointed out, was a failure to provide an effective incentive system to support strategy execution. The lack of a connection between the faculty's involvement in the execution of strategic actions and the incentive system makes the faculty concentrate on operational activities rather than on trying to execute strategic projects. The schools included in the research also pointed out that a lack of an effective strategy communication system was a serious mistake (40% of replies). A proper strategy communication policy, on one hand, allows to precisely define the faculty's expectations, while on the other hand, to get feedback about strategy execution. A lack of precisely defined premises of a strategy-related information policy, on one hand, leads to a lack of feedback, which means strategy improvement becomes a challenge, and on the other hand, increasing doubts and fears concerning the scope and depth of an implemented strategy. The final dysfunction, which is significant for strategy implementation, was the failure to define benchmarks/indicators for strategic goals and actions (30% of replies). The strategy measurement system makes no references to specific benchmarks related to strategic goals and actions, which in turn leads to two negative consequences: firstly, certain areas, crucial from the point of view of value

creation, will be left out, secondly, the lack of defined benchmarks will de-motivate the faculty as they will realize that they will not be held accountable for execution of given actions or for their default.

## References

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## Abstract

This article aimed to show a broad picture of strategy implementation in public schools of higher education in Poland. The analysis of strategy cascading showed that the process of transferring school strategies into lower organizational levels stops at the department/institute level. It was also concluded that strategy implementation is rarely connected with organizational changes, and often encounters characteristic obstacles of an internal nature, which must be challenged. The analysis of strategy monitoring processes revealed that schools adopt the most typical solutions, while the analysis of mistakes made in the strategy implementation process showed critical problems (human and methodological factors) which decrease the effectiveness of strategic management.

It is the author's opinion that the above conclusions should be further discussed in order to find answers to many fundamental questions: why do schools fail to transfer their strategies to lower organizational levels? Can schools, without far-reaching organizational changes, effectively implement and monitor strategies? What mechanisms should be introduced to the management system so that the implementation of strategy management does not burden employees with additional responsibilities? This would certainly allow for the increase of the effectiveness of strategy implementation and schools' likelihood of enjoying a competitive edge.

**Key words: strategy management, strategy implementation, public schools of higher education**