Navigating Complex Decision-making: A Study of Filipino Education Deans' Perceptions on Strategic Decision-making

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores Filipino deans' perceptions of strategic decision-making (SDM), utilizing interviews, FGD, and reflective essays. Six dimensions of SDM are identified, including foresight, tacit knowledge, political activity, collegiality, assessment of alternatives, and long-term planning. Findings reveal that SDM is future-oriented and allows decision-makers to anticipate and prepare for events. SDM is considered a form of automated expertise when swift action is necessary to steer the college toward a long-term direction. The study highlights political and collegial nature of SDM, which results in conflicting interests and necessitates collaboration with colleagues. The study contributes to the growing research on strategic decision-making.

Keywords: strategic decision-making; Filipino college deans; perception,

1. Introduction

In today's fast-changing and competitive educational environment, strategic decision-making (SDM) is more important than ever to ensure educational institutions remain relevant and meet the needs of their students. The increasing complexity of the education landscape, combined with limited resources and competing priorities, has made it challenging for education leaders to come up with decisions on school operations. It is for those reasons that strategic decision-making is seen to help educational institutions to stay ahead of the curve by anticipating changes in the educational landscape and responding appropriately. Several studies show that school leaders who make strategic decisions based on data analysis, collaboration, and alignment with school goals are more likely to improve student outcomes, promote school improvement, and manage resources effectively (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Bush & Glover, 2014).

Of the many factors influencing SDM, perception is one of the significant determinants of the process. Research studies have shown that perception plays a vital role in strategic decision-making. According to Hitt et al. (2001), the perception of individuals involved in the decision-making process significantly affects their judgment and decision-making. The authors argue that the perception of decision-makers shapes their understanding of strategic issues and influences their willingness to take risks and make bold decisions. School leaders' perceptions of SDM also provide valuable insights into how decisions are made and what factors are taken into account. By understanding the decision-making process, researchers and policymakers can identify areas where improvements can be made and develop strategies to support more effective decision-making.

In higher education, deans play a critical role in making strategic decisions related to their professional and strategic responsibility. This role includes the development of goals and strategies for education, research, and communication, as well as the responsibility for quality control and development

(Arntzen, 2016). More specifically deans of teacher education colleges, are responsible for overseeing teacher education programs within their institutions, managing faculty, staff, and students, and developing and implementing policies and programs. It is therefore important to determine how these deans perceive the whole strategic decision-making process to see whether their decision-making process is indeed strategic. Understanding the perceptions and decision-making processes of deans can provide insights into how they prioritize different goals and initiatives, and how they navigate the various internal and external factors that may influence their decisions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guides this study is the Information Processing Theory (IPT), a valuable perspective for exploring the decision-making processes and perceptions of education leaders. Developed by Miller in 1956, IPT posits that the human mind processes information in a series of stages, which include attention, perception, and decision-making (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). IPT has been expanded upon by subsequent research on memory processes and automatic processing and attention control (Nelson, 1977; Schneider and Shiffrin, 1997).

Perception is a critical element of the IPT framework which involves organizing and interpreting sensory information received from the environment. The interaction between attention, interpretation, and memory is fundamental to decision-making, as it impacts how individuals respond to information (Simon, 1955). In education leadership, processing and interpreting complex and uncertain information are vital for effective strategic decision-making.

This study aims to build upon the IPT framework by exploring how education leaders perceive and make strategic decisions. By utilizing IPT as a lens to examine decision-making processes, the study seeks to understand how education leaders process and interpret information related to strategic decisions, how they organize this information, and how they ultimately arrive at a decision. Furthermore, this study will investigate the limitations of the IPT framework in capturing the intricacies of decision-making processes in education leadership, thus offering insights for future research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This is a descriptive qualitative study that aims to elucidate the perceptions of Filipino Education Deans concerning strategic decision-making. The utilization of a qualitative methodology was motivated by the need to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants. Such an approach enables a deeper exploration of the complex and multifaceted phenomena being investigated, which can be challenging to capture using quantitative methods. Additionally, qualitative research allows for flexibility in the data collection process, providing participants with the opportunity to share their experiences in a more nuanced and detailed manner (Creswell, & Guetterman, 2019).

3.2 Research paradigm

This study is based on constructivism, a perspective that asserts that knowledge is subjective and constructed through social interaction. The study posits that the perceptions and experiences of Filipino Education Deans are socially constructed and that their unique cultural and social contexts influence their understanding of strategic decision-making. Therefore, the study aims to uncover the meaning and interpretation of the deans' experiences through a qualitative research design. The study also adopts an interpretivist epistemological perspective, acknowledging that the researcher's interpretation is subjective and that the deans' experiences are shaped by their cultural and social backgrounds. As such, the study seeks to

understand the deans' experiences within their specific contexts and not to generalize their experiences. To achieve this aim, the study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, which is deemed appropriate for exploring the Filipino Education Deans' perceptions of strategic decision-making.

3.3 Locale, sampling, and participants

This study was conducted in Eastern Visayas, Philippines, within five State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) offering teacher education programs. To determine the sample size, the study applied the concept of saturation, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Malterud et al. (2016). The inclusion criteria for participants were strictly enforced, and only those who satisfied all three were allowed to take part in the research. The criteria required participants to have served or be serving as a dean in a college of education, have made strategic decisions in the past three years, and be willing to participate. Eight deans from the region met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study

3.4 Research instrument and data collection strategies

To gather data for this study, the researcher employed a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide, both of which were written in English. These instruments were designed to elicit detailed information about the Filipino Education Deans' perceptions of strategic decision-making. In addition, a reflective essay was utilized as an additional tool to obtain more in-depth information from the participants.

The interview guide was structured around the central themes of the study, such as the participants' understanding of strategic decision-making and their experiences in making such decisions. The FGD guide was also designed to explore these same themes but in a group setting, allowing for greater interaction and discussion among the participants. Before data collection, the instruments were reviewed and validated by experts in the fields of qualitative research and educational management. This ensured that the instruments were aligned with the research questions and were appropriate for the study's population.

3.5 Data collection strategies

The interviews for this study were conducted using both asynchronous and synchronous methods, depending on the preference of the participants. The researcher, following the guidance of Scott (2011), allowed participants to choose their preferred method to avoid potential frustration with software downloads. Synchronous online interviews were preferred by six participants, with Zoom, Google Meet, and Facebook Messenger Video Chat being the platforms of choice for one, three, and two participants, respectively. These interviews were conducted in real-time, most closely resembling traditional interviews, as noted by Salmons (2011). The average length of each interview was twenty minutes.

On the other hand, asynchronous interviews were also utilized, with two participants opting for this method. Asynchronous interviews involve sending questions to the participants, who then respond at their convenience. Short message service and electronic mail were the mediums used for these interviews. The average time for these interviews was seven days of back-and-forth communication between the participants and the researcher.

3.6 Ethical consideration

Throughout all phases of the study, the researcher adhered to strict ethical guidelines and obtained necessary permissions. Prior to their participation, participants were presented with an Informed Consent Form (ICF) which outlines the terms and conditions of participation. This includes a statement that

participation is voluntary and without compensation, and that participants will not be exposed to any harm or adverse effects. The researcher made every effort to minimize potential risks and to prevent harm to participants. The utmost confidentiality was maintained in the handling of research data, and participant anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms in all interview transcripts and the research report.

3.7 Data analysis

In this study, reflexive thematic analysis was utilized to examine the collected data. This approach, as elucidated by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a theoretically adaptable and uncomplicated interpretive technique that empowers researchers to detect and scrutinize themes or patterns in qualitative data sets. This method entails a meticulous and iterative examination of the data to ascertain recurring themes, patterns, and categories. It is adaptable and can be implemented on diverse types of data, including individual interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective essays, as demonstrated in this research. Through this method, the researcher was able to effectively analyze and interpret the collected data, consequently obtaining a profound comprehension of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

3.8 Trustworthiness of the study

Birt et al. (2016) contend that the cornerstone of high-quality qualitative research lies in the reliability of its findings. To this end, triangulation and respondent validation were employed to bolster the credibility and contribute to the trustworthiness of the study. Specifically, data triangulation and theory triangulation were both implemented to ensure that the results were robust and consistent, thereby increasing their credibility and enhancing the overall quality of the research.

4. Results and Discussion

Perception refers to a specific manner of considering, comprehending, or construing something. The present study revealed that participants' perception of SDM encompassed the following dimensions: a) foresight, b) tacit knowledge, c) a political undertaking, d) collegial, e) assessment of alternatives, and f) long-term planning.

4.1 SDM is foresight

The rapid changes in the university management context have been likened to those experienced in the business sector. As such, Maia (2013) has noted that middle managers are forced to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, relying on estimates of what may happen in the future. Buehring and Bishop (2020) have emphasized that leaders and administrators must take into account the future needs of their organizations and mobilize resources accordingly. Given the current realities of higher education, such as the need for budget constraints, it is understandable why participants in this study viewed SDMP as a form of foresight. This perception is exemplified by participants statement:

> At present, universities are already comparable to businesses. The landscape is changing very fast, so leaders need to set the direction by having an estimate of the future. Strategic decision-making for me is a way to see the future and safeguard the college's future. So, setting strategic decisions is like the college being prepared for events of the future. (Dean Athena, interview)

> "Strategic decision-making is an approach that aims at making sense of the future, understanding drivers of change that are outside of one's control, and preparing for what may lead to success." (Dean Eros, reflective essay)

Analysis of data from various sources revealed that participants in this current study regard SDMP as a future-oriented activity that allows decision-makers to forecast future events, and formulate strategies or decisions to prepare the organization for those events. The findings of this study are supported by literature that SDMP allows decision-makers to prepare for a range of possible futures, and influence and shape those futures.

4.2 SDM is tacit knowledge

Participants have conceptualized SDMP as a form of automated expertise, stemming from the recognition of familiar situations and the application of past learning. They have further characterized SDM as a skill that is challenging to articulate, which arises when swift action is required to steer the college toward a long-term direction. Given its experiential nature, participants have expounded that the capacity to make strategic decisions is a key attribute of an effective manager. This is because SDM is an implicit skill that is challenging to deconstruct systematically. Consequently, SDMP is perceived as a tacit form of knowledge that necessitates intuition, particularly when critical decisions must be made under circumstances that preclude intensive scrutiny. The responses below provide compelling evidence of participants' perceptions of SDMP as a form of tacit knowledge.

> I have been a dean for a long time already and sometimes when I am about to make an important decision like that which will be included in the strategic plan, I just get it from past experiences. It is what experience will give you. (Dean Iris, FGD)

> Yes, sometimes there are really times when you do not have enough time but the decision has to be made so you just bank on your experience and the knowledge that you gained over time. When you are dean for a long time you already have that ability to judge quickly from the mind. Automatic. That's it. (Dean Athena, interview)

The analysis revealed that participants with prior experience as deans in various colleges perceive SDMP as an intuitive and tacit skill, especially in making quick decisions that solely rest on their discretion. According to decision-making literature (Brock, 2015; Young, 2018), intuition tends to play a major role in decision-making, particularly when decision-makers are not compelled to involve others. Although there is scant empirical research on intuition in strategic decision-making, this study adds to the growing body of research on this topic.

4.3 SDMP is a political activity

This study also found that SDMP is treated as a political activity. One participant explained:

> An organization, like that of a university, have, comprises distinct groups of people with different motivations for getting involved in decisions. Strategic decisions in particular involve the allocation of such resources. The interplay of interests, conflict, and power between individuals and groups means that the strategic decision-making process can be seen as political in nature. (Dean Icarus, reflective essay)

Universities are recognized as particularly political organizations due to their diverse populations and limited resources, leading to conflicting interests and expectations among members (Marginson, 2013; Anderes, 2019). Horner et al. (2019) argued that the formation of a dominant coalition is crucial for making strategic decisions within universities, as power-holders decide on courses of action. Along the same line, a participant expressed:

> Since this is the first college I was assigned as dean, I need to begin from where the previous deans left off. I have observed that decisions need to be in conjunction with directions set up by higher-ups and sometimes things that have been decided upon may be changed altogether in favor of the

preference of those in the upper. I'm sure it happens not only in my college. (Dean Leda, interview)

The assertion that the SDMP is a political activity is corroborated by existing literature. Strategic decisions are critical to an organization's long-term performance, and thus individuals, groups, and organizations exert power or gain influence to shape these decisions. As a result, managers in organizations often form coalitions and use political tactics such as manipulation, secret communication, and biased information disclosure to influence decision outcomes and protect their interests (Petrou et al., 2020).

4.4 SDMP as collegial

In this study, the SDMP was conceptualized as a collegial activity, reflecting the principles of shared governance that underlie higher education institutions. The deans acknowledged that the effective functioning of the college is contingent on the collective efforts of faculty and staff. Consequently, the decision-making process was characterized by a collaborative approach that actively solicited feedback and input from relevant stakeholders. This inclusive approach enabled decision-makers to obtain crucial information and perspectives that could contribute to favorable outcomes. The findings further suggested that promoting transparency and participation throughout the decision-making process could enhance the quality of decisions made. The following statements demonstrate the foregoing assertions:

"People need to know. They must be informed. That way they will trust and support the decision." (Dean Apollo, interview)

"Recently, we decided on research agenda for the college and I made sure everyone's involved; may they be permanent, temporary, or part-time. That is what I mean when I said strategic decision-making is collaborative." (Dean Eros, interview)

"… it is something that concerns everyone so should have a say." (Dean Hermes, interview)

"As someone who has already made a lot of decisions in the past, and even at present, you really need to make it a point to ask and solicit opinions and suggestions." (Dean Athena, interview)

The statements presented provide evidence that the participants in the study perceive SDMP as a collegial process. They used language consistent with the characteristics of collegiality, including participatory, consultative, open, democratic, collaborative, and consensus-building. The deans described numerous meetings, forums, and discussions with faculty and other stakeholders to set up strategic decisions and gain support. Effective communication plans were described as repetitive, consistent, and constant, with transparency and trust being critical factors for successful strategic decision-making.

This finding is in line with Keeney's (2012) study on American deans of academic health centers, where more than half of the participants emphasized the importance of decision-making by consensus and the role of collegiality in higher education organizations, particularly in governing structures and decision-making processes.

4.5 SDMP as evaluating alternatives

The process of evaluating alternatives to facilitate implementation is a crucial aspect of strategic decision-making, as described in the literature on organizational decision-making. Shrestha et al. (2019) identified three approaches used by decision-makers to select alternatives: judgment, bargaining, and analysis. The judgment approach involves decision-makers using their intuition to choose among courses of action without providing a rationale for their decision. Bargaining, on the other hand, involves parties to the decision to come to a consensus. Finally, decision-makers who use the analysis approach conduct factual evaluations of alternatives.

In the context of this study, it was found that SDMP involves selecting the best solution among a set

of identified solutions. This finding was emphasized by a participant in the study through the remarks:

"At some point, it is like choosing the best strategy on the table." (Dean Iris, interview)

"Strategic decision making also is a process where the manager or the leader attempts to consider choices made from a democratic discussion, the immediate and external environment, as well as higher authorities ….. " (Dean Leda, reflective essay)

Drawing upon the accounts of the participants and the existing literature, it is apparent that strategic decision-making involves a process of identifying and evaluating various options to choose the most appropriate course of action. Deans in this study recognized that their leadership role required them to actively seek out and analyze potential alternatives, as well as to identify opportunities that could advance the objectives of the SDMP. The identification of alternatives and the selection of the optimal solution are key components of the strategic decision-making process. This finding is consistent with the prevailing understanding in the literature, which regards strategic decision-making as an iterative and deliberate process of weighing options to arrive at the most advantageous outcome.

4.6 SDMP as long-term planning

While tactical decision-making focuses on efficient day-to-day operations, strategic decision-making is crucial for ensuring an organization's long-term success. Strategic decisions involve determining the fundamental long-term goals and objectives of an organization, selecting courses of action, and allocating resources to achieve those goals. This process includes all aspects of long-range planning, and strategic decisions often require significant resources and have major long-term consequences that are difficult to reverse (Divjak, 2016).

Based on the evidence gathered from participants, SDMP is viewed as a process that emphasizes long-term planning for their respective colleges. This aligns with the notion that strategic decision-making is essential for organizations to achieve sustainable success.

"It is a way of seeing the future of the college because they are long-term plans." (Dean Eros, interview)

"It is long-term planning." (Dean Hera, interview)

"I consider it as how deans or any administrator take a look at the present situation and plan for the long-term even beyond the current dean's term." (Dean Iris, interview)

"It is different from the usual decisions people make every day for the reason that it is not short-term but is long-term." (Dean Eros, FGD)

The participants reached a consensus that the SDMP is a process focused on long-term planning for their colleges. This process is distinguished by its forward-looking perspective on where the college is heading and how it will achieve its goals. Unlike tactical or routine decisions made by administrators, strategic decisions involve significant resource allocation. According to the literature, SDMP is an endeavor aimed at establishing the direction of an organization for the long term, rather than for short-term benefits (Hauser et al., 2020).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to scrutinize the perceptions of college deans regarding strategic decision-making. Through an analysis of data garnered from focus group discussions, individual interviews, and reflective essays, the study identified six dimensions of SDMP, namely foresight, tacit

knowledge, political implications, collegiality, assessment of alternatives, and long-term planning. The research findings indicated that SDMP is regarded as an activity that is oriented towards the future and empowers decision-makers to prognosticate forthcoming events, as well as devise strategies or decisions that will equip the organization for such occurrences. Additionally, the study revealed that SDMP is a type of tacit knowledge that requires intuition, especially when crucial decisions must be made under circumstances that do not permit extensive scrutiny. Furthermore, the research demonstrated that SDMP is a political process wherein the interplay of interests, conflict, and power between individuals and groups makes it an intrinsically political decision-making process. This inquiry contributes to the expanding body of research on strategic decision-making in higher education, particularly concerning college deans' perceptions of SDMP. The research findings emphasize the significance of acknowledging the multifaceted nature of SDMP, which necessitates incorporating diverse dimensions to gain a comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process. Future research could explore how the perception of SDMP varies among other stakeholders in the higher education sector and how this may impact the overall decision-making process.

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