

## **Strategic Control and Competitive Academic Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Meru, Embu, Tharaka Nithi, Kitui and Machakos Counties in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

Education plays a critical role in survival of any nation in the globe leading to emphasis on quality outcomes of. Strategic management is a managerial practice that guaranties survival of an organization in modern competitive operating environment. The objective of this study was to investigate the influence of strategy control in competitive academic performance of secondary schools. It was conducted in the counties of Meru, Embu, Tharaka Nithi, Kitui and Machakos and informed by stakeholder and contingency theories of strategic management. The study adopted survey research and correlation research designs. The target population was 919 principals of public secondary schools and a sample size of 273 that was determined using survey monkey formula and the schools picked randomly. Quantitative data was gathered using questionnaires and analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive analysis was done using percentages, mean scores and standard deviations while inferential statistical analysis was undertaken using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and regression models. The findings showed that schools monitored strategic plans to ascertain whether they were on course in the implementation of the strategies. It was concluded that overall strategy control practice has a significant influence on competitive academic performance. It was recommended that strategic management training be extended to all school principals, who should embrace strategy control as the best way of making sure implementation of strategies is on course. Strategy control tools must be customized to the schools unique operating environment for strategy implementers to remain focused. It is further recommended that principals be allowed to complete at least two cycles of strategic management while serving in one school for their strategic management capabilities to be reflected in the academic performance.

**Key words:** Academic performance, Competitive, Strategy control, Strategic management practices, secondary schools

## **Introduction**

Education and knowledge play a critical role in ensuring survival of any nation in the global economy leading to emphasis on the quality and outcomes of the education systems. Strategic management Practices (SMP) is major management practice in any organization geared towards survival in modern competitive environment. (Ayiro and Sang, 2010). Such can be achieved if educational institutions incorporate the right strategic management models in their governance structure. Schools must endear Strategic Management Practices so that decisions in their schools are not intuition guided but rather scientific.

Dauda, Akingbade and Akinlabi (2010) argue that Strategic Management Practices is the process that examines present and future environment, developing objectives, implementing and controlling decisions enabling organizations to achieve their objectives. Strategy Control encompasses processes designed to ensure organizational plans are implemented the way they were designed. Strategic controls are mostly required to assure that the organization is applying proper strategies to mitigate external environmental conditions which sustain the organizations competitive advantage in the industry.

Jones, Jones, Steer and Datta (2010), contend that strategic control is created to allow management to be confident that actual strategy results are in agreement with the results which are in line and necessary to the strategic choice. They note that a strategic control system is meant to ensure that the great energy and brains mostly put into preparing intricate strategic plans must be transformed into the right steps. Strategy control therefore is influential in ascertaining organizational performance by ensuring the organization is on track towards the predetermined objectives and where management realize that the strategy implementers are off the rail, the corrective action is initiated. Strategy control is also a speed checker enabling the organization not to lag behind or go ahead of the programmes.

Performance is the end result of activities (Wheelen and Hunger 2012). The only way to justly measure the practices of strategic management is in terms of improving organizational outcomes in performance which may be measured in in terms of profits, service delivery, quality of products and customer satisfaction. Pearce and Robinson (2007) define competitive performance as competitive position which enables a company to profitably produce and market its goods and services. Competitive academic performance (CAP) is the performance of a school as a result of student outcomes in national examinations when aggregated together result in a sustained mean score of C plus and above enabling students to qualify for Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS).

## **Problem Statement**

In Kenya, Schools struggle to perform well in order to produce as many students as possible to meet public university entry requirements due to competitive Government of Kenya (GoK) fee subsidy accessed through the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB). Ndinza (2012) argues that due to such competition factors responsible for the school performance lie in the school principals' management practices. These management practices include leadership and strategic management practices. Ndinza does not pin-point the specific role of strategic management control in competitive academic performance of schools. Amina, and Dishon (2014) studied effects of strategic planning in schools and failed to incorporate other aspects of strategic management like strategy control on the student academic performance. The study sought to establish the influence of strategy control on competitive academic performance in selected schools in Meru, Tharaka Nithi, Kitui and Machakos counties in Kenya.

## **Objective of the Study**

The study sought to establish the influence of strategy control on competitive academic performance in selected schools in Meru, Tharaka Nithi, Kitui and Machakos counties in Kenya.

## **Research Hypothesis**

**H<sub>0</sub>:** Strategy control has no influence on competitive academic performance in selected schools in Meru, Tharaka Nithi, Kitui and Machakos counties in Kenya.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by two theories of strategic management namely: Contingency Theory and Stakeholder theory.

## **Contingency Theory**

The premise of the theory is that performance of any organization is linked to the suitable contingent conditions the firm is operating in Fiedler (1964). Changes in these conditions, such as restricting the size or adapting another strategy would make the structure to be unfit

with the organization and result to lower performance. The theory is relevant to the study because schools operate in volatile environments which radically change and therefore need to constantly control the environment, adapt and implement relevant strategies and develop structures that sustain their competitive edge.

### **Stakeholder Theory**

Freeman (1984) anchors stakeholder theory on the premise that groups or individuals interested in the success of an organization are affected by the objectives of the organization and have a stake in what the organization does. Ritson (2013) posits that these groups include internal stakeholders (employees and management). The theory is beneficial to this study because strategy control is done by employees of the organization on behalf of stakeholders.

### **Literature Review**

Literature on strategy control and evaluation was reviewed

### **Strategy Control**

When strategy control is decomposed into monitoring and evaluation, the management is able to get deep into the specifics which may be affecting strategy implementation in general.

### **Strategy monitoring**

Mugo and Oleche (2015) opine that monitoring has become a key performance management and economic policy tool. They conclude that monitoring of implementation will not only be important in ensuring that the strategies are implemented on time and meet the set objectives but also inform the managerial and economic policy making progress. Monitoring information and data forms an essential input in evidence-based decision making. It informs policy management on progress made and highlights gaps between planned and actual targets; information which is critical in economic policy development.

Anne-Mie and Ann, (2014) argue that management control systems (MCS) are tools that enable top management to collect information for planning purposes, control and evaluation of the activities in the organization. Their study employed survey methodology and examined whether CEOs place their distinctive marks on the MCS in SMEs. They used survey methodology and examined 189 Belgian SMEs and found that evaluation systems are very important for motivation and empowerment of employees and that certain types of evaluation

systems, especially rigid financial types, lead to dysfunctional employee behavior. Hence, CEOs must know that by exerting influence on a company's evaluation systems, they control an important role for the success of their firm. BoMs and owners of companies should know that evaluation practices reflect CEO demographics. Underlying this is the proposition that those principals who stay beyond two cycles of strategic management may most likely get complacent, develop a feeling that what is happening is normal and consequently negatively affecting performance.

### **Strategy evaluation**

Jones, Jones, Steer, and Datta. (2009) in a paper referred to as 'improving impact evaluation production and use' argue that strategic control is designed to allow management to make sure that the results are in line with the results envisaged to the choice of the strategy. They further argued that a strategic control and evaluation process makes sure that the heavy energy injected in preparation of in-depth strategic plans is actualized into action. According to them, an effective strategic control emanates with the knowledge of pointers to success or those few factors that are essential to the success of the strategic plan

Mogaka (2010) while looking at the influence of monitoring and evaluation methods on performance of Women Enterprise Fund (WEF) projects in Central district of Kisii found that project performance in the area was poor because of weak monitoring and evaluation methods. The project was carried out on fifty-four (54) women groups and concentrated on analysis effects of inspection, using focus groups and progress reports on monitoring and evaluation methods on development projects. The study results indicated that most of the time, monitoring and evaluation was carried out by group members who are ill-informed. Their leaders also lacked sufficient monitoring and evaluation knowledge due to lack of training in the subject area.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted survey research design and correlation research design. The target population under study was 919 principals of selected public secondary school in Meru, Embu, Tharaka Nithi, Kitui and Machakos counties from where a sample of 273 was picked using survey monkey formula. Quantitative data was gathered using self-administered questionnaires. Pilot testing was undertaken using 10% of the study sample. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient test was undertaken to determine the interrelatedness of the

constructs in the study. The data was analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive data was analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations while inferential statistical analysis was analyzed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and regression models. Null hypothesis testing tested at 95% significance level and rejected or not rejected

## Findings

### Strategy control practices.

The activities were decomposed into strategy evaluation which consists of internal evaluation and performance appraisal and strategy monitoring made up of reports by the heads of departments, filling in of record sheets, attendance registers and observation as indicated in Table

**Table 1 Strategy control and evaluation activities**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Evaluation statements</b>			
Internal Evaluations	230	4.33	0.794
Performance appraisals	227	4.26	0.803
<b>Monitoring statements</b>			
Reports by the HoDs	230	3.76	0.881
Filling in of record sheets	229	4.10	0.842
Attendance registers for teachers and students	229	4.31	0.782
Observation	228	3.90	0.793
<b>strategy control</b>		<b>3.93</b>	<b>0.584</b>

The results showed that monitoring activities of filling record sheets, performance appraisals, attendance registers for teachers and students and observations were extensively used by management to monitor effective work processes, (Mean = 4.10, 4.26, 4.31 and 4.33; SD = 0.842, 0.803, 0.782 and 0.794, respectively). These findings are supported by what Anne-Mie et al (2015) when they showed that monitoring systems are very critical for motivation and strengthening of employees and that Chief Executive Officers must know that by significantly influencing the company's evaluation and monitoring systems, they play an important role for the success of their firm.

This implies that Boards of Management and other stakeholders need to carry out monitoring and evaluation practices for the performance of their schools by actively presenting themselves during the announcement and discussion of the evaluation reports which would cement their relationship with the teachers (strategy implementers) and students (results) hence heightening their desire to achieve more.

The results revealed that reports by the Heads of Departments were to a large extent used by management to monitor and evaluate effective work processes, (Mean = 3.76, SD = 0.88). Observation was also used to a large extent in the schools to monitor effective work processes, (Mean = 3.90, SD = 0.793). This is supported by Caruth *et al* (2008) who proposed performance appraisal (PA) as a tool for enhancement of Strategy Control and Evaluation because it would expose the weaknesses, strengths and the requisite actions to be taken so that the schools can be on course without absolute deviation. Musomba, Kerongo, Mutua and Kilika (2013) additionally reveal that institutionalization of the monitoring system is vital in establishment of an effective strategy control framework which would support the schools to remain competitive.

### **Influence of strategy control and evaluation on competitive academic performance**

Simple linear regression analysis was performed with Academic performance as the dependent variable and strategy evaluation and control as the independent variable to assess the relationship between strategy control and evaluation and competitive academic performance of Selected public secondary school in Meru, Embu, Tharaka Nithi, Kitui and Machakos counties in Kenya, the following hypothesis was tested, and the results are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

**H<sub>0i</sub>: Strategy control has no significant influence on competitive academic performance among secondary schools.**

**Table 2 Strategy control and evaluation model summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
	.666 <sup>a</sup>	.443	.440	.02738

Results in Table 2 indicate that Strategy control and evaluation is found to explain 44% of the variation in Academic Performance as indicated by a coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) value of 0.440. The *F*-test was taken at 95% significance level using *p* value method. In this study  $F=124.154$ ,  $p < 0.0001$  which shows that the regression model is statistically significant in predicting the dependent variable. Therefore, null hypothesis was rejected.

**Table .3: Strategy Control and evaluation ANOVA**

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Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	.093	1	.093	124.154	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	.117	156	.001		
Total	.210	157			

Table 3 showed an ANOVA table which determined the significance of the model. The results revealed that the model with Strategy control and evaluation as the independent variable significantly predicts Academic performance, ( $F=124.154$ ,  $p= < 0.0001$ )

**Table 4: Strategy Control and Evaluation Coefficients**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-.002	.007		-.342	.733
Strategy control and evaluation	1.091	.098	.666	11.142	.000

The model coefficient results presented in Table 4 indicate that Strategy control and evaluation significantly predicts Academic performance at 5% level of significance ( $p= < 0.0001$ ). A unit increase in the reciprocal square of Strategy control and evaluation increased the reciprocal square of Academic performance by 1.091 units. Resource based theory by Barney (1986) is supported by this study when it predicts that certain types of resources controlled by firms generate competitive advantage leading to superior firm performance. Such controllable resources in schools include reports by the HoDs, record sheets, performance appraisals attendance registers and internal evaluations which would point to areas of improvements and generation of superior performance. Nedelea *et al* (2009) contend that at some point strategy may need to be adjusted if it is not working well due to contingencies as affirmed by Fiedler (1964) in his propositions of the contingency theory.

The study supports the findings of Agbejule and Jokipii, (2009) (2009) who intimate that control activities require monitoring to ensure that constant changes are consonant with the business objectives. The findings of this study are in line with those of Caruth *et al* (2008) suggesting that performance appraisal control is inadequate without alignment between the



functions or departments with control activities as proved by this study that reports by the HoDs and filling in of record sheets, attendance registers and internal evaluations play a critical role in control practices. Anne-Mie *et al* (2014) found that evaluation systems are very critical for motivation and empowerment of employees and therefore schools should regularly evaluate the performance of employees through established tools and frameworks which would be evidence and feedback directing the requisite adjustments in either formulation or implementation of the strategies and their general influence on performance. The results of the regression therefore empower the study to reject the null hypothesis that strategy control and evaluation has no influence on competitive academic performance of schools in Kenya.

### **Conclusions**

Constant engagement in strategy control and evaluation practices is very beneficial to schools because keeps implementers of strategy and the process of implementation on course without deviating from the original target and hence enabling the school to achieve the desired results in the competitive academic performance circles. Clarity of the tools and processes of strategy control and evaluation must not be ignored so as to align any corrective action with the set goals. At times corrective action may be ignored by the leaders because of fear of discouraging the hard-working employees or it may be costly to repeat implementation of deviations hence adopting the wait and see stance in the hope that things will change. This is not necessarily the case and it may end up with the results becoming costlier to the organization than if any remedial action was taken to mitigate the deviations.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that strategic management training be extended to all school principals, and that they must be trained on use of strategy control because it informs whether strategy implementation is on course or not. It also informs management where the corrective action may be initiated as a remedial for organizational performance. Every school should be able to customize its control tools so that they fit and are in tandem with its operation environment. Finally, the study recommends that principals should be allowed to complete two cycles of strategic management in one school for their strategy control capabilities to be reflected in academic performance.

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