

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC  
LEADERSHIP IN STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION IN  
KENYAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES: A CASE STUDY OF  
MOUNT KENYA UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT**

Strategy implementation is an integral part of the strategic management process as it entails converting the formulated strategy into action. Managers who successfully implement their strategies enjoy competitive advantage over organizations with managers who are less competent in implementing strategy. Strategic planning can only be successful if there is effective implementation of the strategy. A review of literature indicated high failure rate in strategy implementation which shows that implementing strategy is not an easy task. One of the ways the management team is able to ensure that they successfully use the strategic management process is through effective strategic leadership. Successful implementation of strategies formulated will depend on effective leadership provided by the top managers in the organization. However, too many leaders delegate implementation responsibilities and do not follow through on the actions. In the light of this problem, the researcher investigated the role strategic leadership played in strategy implementation in Kenyan private universities with Mount Kenya University serving as a case study. In order to achieve this objective, data was collected using questionnaires administered to a representative sample from the total number of full time employees at Mount Kenya University. A correlation analysis and regression analysis was done to determine relationship between the variables under study. The study concludes that there are factors that affect the overall implementation of the strategic plans and others that only affect the implementation of certain items in the implementation of the plan.

**Key Words:** Strategy Implementation, Leadership, Kenyan Private Universities Mount Kenya University,

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## INTRODUCTION

Strategy implementation is a key component of the strategic management process. Given all the energy and resources that is invested in strategic planning, it is of concern that less effort is directed at strategy implementation. Strategic plans are of no use without implementation. A review of literature shows that 57 percent of firms were unsuccessful at executing strategic initiatives in a survey of 276 senior operating executives in 2004 in North America (Allio, 2005). The main concern for any strategic manager is to ensure organization's performance by creating and shaping effective strategy to outsmart competition (Tait and Nienaber, 2010). This is even more crucial now that competition among companies has increased given the technological advancements and consumer awareness. Organizations are under pressure to meet the demands of all their stakeholders: owners expect not only returns on their investment but also fair if not excellent returns. Customers on the other hand expect the best quality products or services at a fair price while employees expect the best working conditions and good compensation packages. The community in which the organization is situated expects a positive contribution from these companies and the government expects compliance with all the regulations in place (Pearce and Robinson, 2007). According to Oketch (2003), private universities in Kenya have not been left out either. Stakeholders in these universities expect quality education, new forms of accountability as well as technologically driven education programs.

To deal effectively with everything that affects the growth and success of a firm, the management team formulates the company's strategies. When these strategies are achieved, the various stakeholders' expectations are met. Strategy implementation is an integral part of the strategic management process as it entails converting the formulated strategy into action. Managers who successfully implement their strategies enjoy competitive advantage over organizations with managers who are less competent in implementing strategy (Fourie, 2007). Strategic planning can only be successful if there is effective implementation of the strategy. Without implementation, even the most glamorous of plans are useless (Aldehyyat and Anchor, 2010; Aaltonen and Ikalvako, 2002). Rowley and Sharman (2001) suggest that strategic planning in higher education sector is complex and that implementation is seldom successful. Kenya's private higher education sector and in particular, private universities have not been left out either. The various stakeholders in these universities expect fulfillment of the universities' vision and mission

despite the challenges that these universities face. These universities have no other option but also to ensure that implementation of its strategic plans is successful (Oketch, 2003).

Mount Kenya University was established in 2002 as a private university located in Thika. It was granted a charter in the year 2011 as an accredited private university after courses in Business, Telecommunication, Law, Computing and Information Technology. The first group of students reported in August 2002. Courses offered cut across all levels namely PhD, Masters, Bachelors, Diplomas and Certificate. Mount Kenya University spells out in its strategic document 2010-2014 its vision as scaling the heights of education to become a world class centre of academic excellence as a Social Sciences, Business, Science and Technology Institutions". The mission is to provide a holistic quality education to the youth, and other age groups, equipping them with knowledge, practical skills and moral values. It goes further to indicate that the varsity will "serve local communities, the nation and the world through the creation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge. In addition, there is a university philosophy which states that the university is an institution for teaching, training research. It aims at "providing quality and holistic university education which encourages a way of life characterized by fear of, humanity, honesty, pride in labour, quest for knowledge, high moral and academic standards and concern for the welfare of the others as well as the rest broad varsity and environment"

In the strategic plan 2010-2014, Mount Kenya University identified certain key result areas it intended to address in order to achieve its strategic goals of registering 2000 students by the year 2012, introducing a new range of academic programs upon accreditation, increasing its presence in several market niches, expanding infrastructure and improving teaching and learning environment (Mount Kenya University Strategic Plan, 2010-2014).

The key result areas are: (i) Learning environment and overall student's staff experience, (ii) Good governance in all sectors of university life, (iii) University mission and vision (iv) review (v) quality assurance (vi) Academic programmes (vii) research and consultancy and training (viii) External links.

One of the ways the management team is able to ensure that they successfully use the strategic management process is through effective strategic leadership. Strategic leadership is a person's

ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organization (Lussier and Achua, 2007). Effective strategic leadership leads to development of goals that guide everyone in the organization to improve performance and achieve these set goals. Competent strategic leaders also establish the context through which stakeholders such as employees and suppliers can perform at peak efficiency. It is the role of the top management to ensure that they come up with decisions and actions that result in the formulation and implementation of plans designed to achieve the company's objectives (Lussier and Achua, 2007). Kinyanjui (2007) stated that visionary and creative leadership is critical to the transformation of higher education. He noted that restructuring of the leadership, governance and management systems of each institution should be a priority.

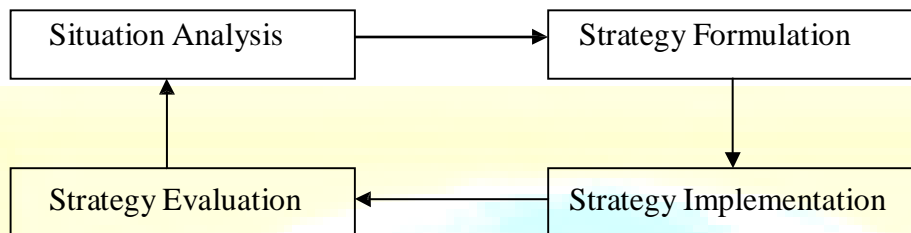
The ripple effects of failure in strategic leadership are felt both within and outside the organization. Employees may suffer from a crisis of low morale, lack of confidence lack of unity in direction and low productivity. Stockholders in the company may lack confidence in the company and may worry about the safety and future of their investments or pull out their funds all together. A firm's ability to achieve strategic competitiveness and earn above average returns is indeed compromised when strategic leaders fail to respond appropriately and quickly amidst the global dynamism businesses face today (Pearce and Robinson, 2007).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Thompson, Strickland and Gamble (2010), a company's strategy is management's action plan for running the business and conducting operations. The creation of a strategy or strategies represents the management's commitment to pursue particular actions in growing the business, attracting and pleasing customers, competing successfully, conducting operations and improving company's financial and market performance. Strategy implementation is putting the various strategies into action. The process of crafting and implementing a company's strategy consists of five integrated phases: developing a strategic vision, setting objectives, crafting a strategy to achieve the objectives, implementing the chosen strategy efficiently and effectively and evaluating performance and initiating corrective adjustments in the company's long term plans (Coulter, 2010, Pg.8; Ireland and Hitt, 2005).

The strategic management process has four basic activities as illustrated by Coulter (2010, Pg. 6)

below:



**Figure 1: Strategic Management Process**

*Source: Coulter (2010)*

This process implies sequential and interrelated activities leading to some outcomes. The organization cannot therefore do with some of the processes and leave out others. It is not enough to formulate strategies, they have to be implemented. Strategy formulation has in the past been considered as an important component of strategic management, more important than strategy implementation. For this reason, researchers have directed more attention to planning rather than implementation. However, in the recent past, the ability to implement strategies in the organization has been viewed as more important as this is the key to superior business performance. The main weaknesses of strategic management are associated with the implementation stage and not the formulation stage. This can be noted where in most organizations, less than half of formulated strategies are implemented. An Economist survey found that 57 percent of firms were unsuccessful at executing strategic initiatives in a survey of 276 senior operating executives in 2004 (Allio, 2005). In a separate research of Chinese Corporations in 2006, 83 percent of the surveyed companies failed to implement their strategy and only 17 percent felt that they had a consistent strategy implementation process (Li *et al*, 2008).

Despite this alarming trend, research into strategy implementation has been largely neglected because the field of strategy implementation is considered to be less attractive than planning as a

subject area. There is the belief that anyone can implement strategies and researchers often underestimate the difficulties involved in investigating such an area (Atkinson 2006; Aaltonen and Ikalvako 2002, Raps, 2005). Allio (2005) wonders at the little effort that is directed at strategy implementation given all the energy and resources invested in the pursuit of the perfect strategy.

### **Barriers to Effective Strategy Implementation**

Managers must realize that strategy implementation is a difficult process and that they habitually underestimate its problems. Many leaders delegate implementation responsibilities and do not follow through on the actions. When leaders stop paying attention to the implementation, so do the staff members and it starts to fail (Speculand, 2011). The major reasons why organizations fail to implement their strategies according to Fourie (2007) are the vision barrier, where employees do not understand the strategy of the organization and key changes in responsibilities have not be identified; leadership barrier where leadership provided by the top management is inadequate; resource barrier where allocation of resources in the organization is not aligned to the strategies and people barrier where goals and incentives have not been well aligned with the strategy of the organization. A lack of strategic leadership by the top management of the organization has also been identified as one of the major barriers to effective strategy implementation (Beer and Eisenstat, 2000; Kaplan and Norton 2004, Hrebiniak, 2005).

### **Key Drivers to Strategy Implementation**

Raps (2005) suggests 10 critical success factors that can help leaders overcome and improve difficulties during the implementation process. According to Raps, commitment by the top management is the most important prerequisite for strategy implementation. Involvement of the middle manager's valuable knowledge is the second most important thing but unfortunately, managers and supervisors at lower hierarchy levels are not involved in strategy formulation yet they have important knowledge from their experience. Communication is what implementation is all about; it should be detailed, two-way and not delayed until changes have already crystallized. Implementation should also follow an integrative point of view as it is dangerous to emphasize the structural aspects and ignore other existing components. Clear assignment of responsibilities will go a long way to prevent power struggles between departments and within hierarchies. Preventive measures against change barriers should be identified and be dealt with effectively.

Teamwork activities should be emphasized and individuals' different characters should be

respected. The leaders should take advantage of supportive implementation instruments such as the balanced scorecard and supportive software solution to assist in gathering information and tracking actual performance. Finally, the leaders should calculate buffer time for unexpected incidents as extra time should be taken into account for unforeseen events. On the other hand, Fourie (2007) highlights two key drivers of strategy implementation; Structural drivers, which are organizational structures and resource allocation and human drivers, which are organizational culture, strategic leadership and reward systems.

### **Strategic Leadership**

One of the ways the management team is able to ensure that they successfully execute the strategic management process is through effective strategic leadership. Strategic leadership is a person's ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organization. Effective strategic leadership leads to development of goals that guide everyone in the organization to improve performance and achieve these set goals. Competent strategic leaders also establish the context through which stakeholders such as employees and suppliers can perform at peak efficiency. Strategic leadership is about how to most effectively manage a company's strategy making process to create competitive advantage (Lussier and Achua, 2007, Ireland and Hitt, 2005).

Regardless of the characteristics of the strategic leaders, providing strategic leadership is an important role for the top management team. They look forward in time to set directions for the organization and their power is increased when they scan and cope with the critical sectors of their environment. They communicate decisions for their organization's future, formulate the organization's goals and strategies, develop structures, processes, controls and core competencies for the organization, manage multiple constituencies, provide direction with respect to organizational strategies, maintain an effective organizational culture, sustain a system of ethical values, and serve as the representative of the organization to government and other organizations and constituencies as well as negotiate with them (Bass, 2000).

### **Strategic Leadership as a Driver of Strategy Implementation**

The implementation of strategic plans is often more difficult than coming up with the strategies in the first place, but if these ideas are not translated into action, they serve little purpose. In the strategic planning phase, it is often the top managers that debate choices, set priorities and the CEO

exhorts the team to go back and make things happen. This is where strategic leadership has to come in, failure to which managers will re-immense themselves into the day-to-day operational grind, where they typically lose their focus, their enthusiasm, and their way. Strategies that made eminent sense in the context of the strategic plan begin to lose relevance or become untranslatable. New deadlines and stakeholder demands intercede, old commitments and priorities reemerge, and longer-term initiatives simply lose momentum (Allio, 2005).

Previous research has illustrated how a crucial determinant of successfully implementing a new strategic initiative is whether lower level leaders support the change. For example, in 1990, Wooldridge and Floyd found that the more involved middle level leaders were in formulating their organization's strategy, the more the organization's performance improved as a result of a new strategy. Other studies have shown that consensus within the top leadership team about the strategy can also help or hinder its execution. This suggests that to realize performance gains from a strategic change requires that both senior and subordinate leaders effectively communicate the strategy and take actions to ensure its implementation; that is, if subordinate leaders are not committed to the strategy, implementation is at risk (O'Reilly, Caldwell, Chatman, Lapiz, Self, 2010).

### **Strategy Implementation at Mount Kenya University**

According to its strategic plan 2010-2014, Mount Kenya University was established in 2002 as a private university located in Thika. It was granted a charter in the year 2011 as an accredited private university offering courses in Business, Telecommunication, Law, Computing and Information Technology. The university's vision is "to become a world class centre of academic excellence as a Social Sciences, Business, Science and Technology Institutions". The mission is to scaling the heights of education. It goes further to indicate that the varsity will "serve local communities, the nation and the world through the creation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge. In the strategic plan 2010-2014, the university has identified certain key result areas it hopes to address in order to achieve its strategic goals of registering 2000 students by the year 2012, introducing a new range of academic programs upon accreditation, increasing its presence in several market niches, expanding infrastructure and improving teaching and learning environment. The key areas are: (i) learning environment and overall student's staff experience, (ii) good governance in all sectors of university life, (iii) University mission and vision (iv) revenue (v)

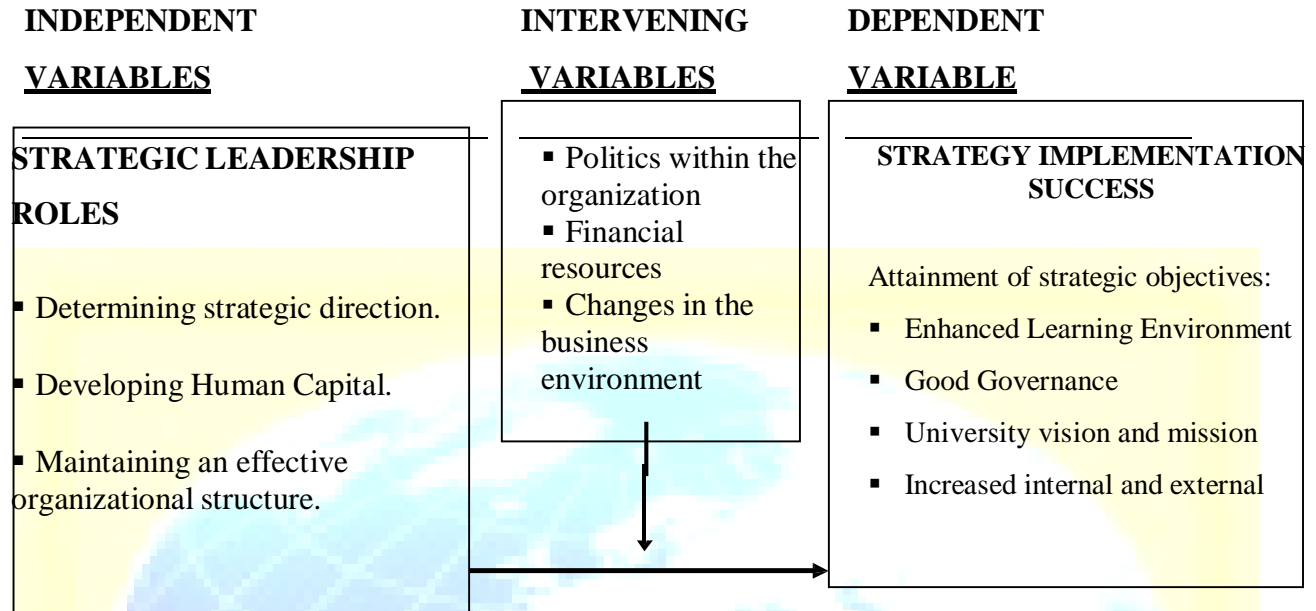


quality assurance (vi) academic programmes (vii) research and consultancy and training and (viii) internal and external links (Mount Kenya University Strategic Plan, 2010-2014). An assessment of what has been achieved so far in this strategic plan shows that a number of objectives have not been achieved. These include a radio station and printing press that have not been launched, e-learning/distance learning materials that have not been developed and an academic journal that have not been launched among others.

### **Strategic Leadership Roles Required for Effective Strategy Implementation**

Various authors have highlighted the strategic leadership roles required for effective strategy implementation. The roles highlighted include determining the strategic direction for the organization. This includes coming up with the vision, mission and objectives of the organization. These should be communicated clearly and directly to the organization members. The task of determining the direction of the firm rests squarely on the CEO and the TMT. The vision should be kept simple in such a way that all organization's members understand where the company needs to go. By having a clear attractive picture of the future, organization members are able to convert intention into action (Lussier and Achua, 2007; Pearce and Robinson, 2007; Ireland and Hitt, 2005). The other role highlighted is to ensure an effective organization structure. Strategic leaders should spend considerable time shaping and refining their organizational structure and making it function effectively to accomplish strategic intent. This encompasses strategies, policies and structures that translate vision, mission and core values into business decisions (Lussier and Achua, 2007; Pearce and Robinson, 2007).

Conceptual Framework



**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework**

*Source: Researcher (2015)*

The framework above shows the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Strategy implementation, which is basically the attainment of strategic objectives set by Mount Kenya University, is the dependent variable. The various roles played by the strategic leaders are the independent variables and affect the attainment of strategic objectives within organizations. The strategic leadership roles under study are determining the organization's strategic direction, developing human capital and maintaining an effective organizational structure. Determining the strategic direction for the organization includes coming up with the vision, mission and objectives of the organization. These should be communicated clearly and directly to the organization members by the CEO and the TMT. By having a clear attractive picture of the future, organization members are able to convert intention into action.

Developing human capital involves giving employees the opportunity to learn continuously thus expanding their knowledge base. Ongoing investments in organizational employees result in a creative, well-educated workforce, the type of workforce capable of forming highly effective great groups. An effective organization structure encompasses strategies, policies and structures that translate vision, mission and core values into business decisions. Strategic leaders should spend considerable time shaping and refining their organizational structure and making it function effectively to accomplish strategic intent..

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was a case study survey of Mount Kenya University. The survey design provides a quantitative description of trends, attitudes or opinions of a population by studying a sample of the population (Creswell, 2009). The study collected quantitative data from Management, faculty and non-teaching staff of the University over a period of three months. The target population for this study was full time employees of Mount Kenya University. There are 6 management team members, 61 faculty members and 162 non-teaching staff at the university. This gives a total of 229 members. The management team together with the faculty and other staff members are responsible for implementation of the strategic plan with an aim to achieve set objectives. The target population

for this study was to be all employees as they all feel the ripple effects of strategic leadership and all have a role to play in strategy implementation. The main tool for collecting data in this study was a pre-designed and pre-tested questionnaire. The questionnaires comprised questions developed to measure attitude/opinion of members on performance outcomes of the strategic plan. Each factor and variable was tested on a five point scale from strongly agree on one end, to strongly disagree on the other end. The researcher collected data from the selected respondents, using the drop and pick system, after obtaining permission from the University. Mount Kenya University strategic plan was used to supplement the primary data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 130 questionnaires were returned. However, some had several missing values and had to be removed. A total of 122 questionnaires were analyzed, 116 of which were obtained from the general staff and 6 from management.

### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

#### Effect of Strategic Leadership Factors

Respondents were asked the extent to which they agree that given strategic leadership factors affect implementation of plans in the university. A summary of the descriptive statistics are shown in table 1 below:

**Table 1: Strategic Leadership Factors**

	Valid	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Provision of strategic direction by the University management	116	3.56	4.0	4	.944	-.650	.225

Development of human

capital/employees	116	3.29	3.0	4	.969	-.505	.225
Maintenance of an effective organization structure	116	3.50	4.0	4	1.026	-.590	.225

Source: Researcher (2015)

The mean and median values on provision of strategic direction to the university and organization structure are more than or equal to 3.50. The respondents almost agreed that provision of strategic direction and organization structure play significant roles than development of human capital in meeting strategic objectives at Mount Kenya University.

### Learning Environment and Student/Staff Experience

Most of the respondents here agreed that the University campus learning environment being enhanced in the last four years. A mean of 4 is recorded with a symmetrical distribution showing a skew of 0. It is though uncertain on whether the university has not formed a working alumni association or on the establishment and functionality of the career office. This is shown by means of 2.5 and 3 respectively. There is an agreement though on the University not operating a modularized learning system and a staff development programme being in operation. The means are close to 4. There is uncertainty on non-clarification of staff responsibilities with expected incomes. There is an almost strong agreement on the improvement of the university's information management and communication system. Generally, there is inconsistency in views from the respondents concerning the item on learning environment and student/staff experience. A summary is given in table 2.

**Table 2: Learning Environment and Student/Staff Experience**

	Valid	Mean	Median	Mode	Skewness
The campus learning environment has been enhanced in the last four years	6	4.00	4.00	4	0

The university has not formed a working alumni association	6.	2.50	2.00	1	.811
A careers office has been established and is functional	6	3.00	3.00	3	0
The University does not operate a modularized learning system	6.	3.50	4.00	4	-1.537
A staff development programme is in operation	6	3.67	3.50	3	-.075
Staff responsibility has not been clarified with expected outcomes	6	2.50	2.00	2	1.375
The University campus has improved its information management and communication systems					

Source: *Researcher (2015)*

### Good Governance in all Sectors of University Life

From table 3 it can be seen that a majority of respondents strongly disagree about the audit process for procurement and catering not being developed. On the contrary, a majority strongly agree about the development of an appropriate software and management system and also on the development of a service charter to improve customer relations. It can also be seen that there is a strong disagreement about the non-existence of an annual appraisal review and reward system. A majority are also not sure about the launch of an annual universal report. Table 3 therefore gives a general report showing that the respondents are generally in agreement with the item on good governance in all sectors of the University life.

**Table 3: Good Governance in all Sectors of University Life**

	Valid	Mean	Median	Mode	Skewness
An audit process for procurement and catering has <u>not</u> been developed	6	1.83	2	2	.313
An appropriate software and management system has been <u>developed</u>	6	4.33	4	4	.968
There is no annual appraisal review and reward system	6	2	2	2	0
A service charter has been developed to improve customer <u>relations</u>	6	4.33	4	4	.968
An annual University report has not been <u>launched</u>	6	3.17	3.5	4	-0.418

Source: *Researcher (2015)*

**Revenue Generation**

There is a general feeling of uncertainty about the development and generation of revenue at the university with most of the respondents being unsure about it. Indeed this implies that most projects within the university are not treated as business ventures with an aim of generating revenues. A summary is given in table 4.

**Table 4: Revenue Generation**

	Valid	Mean	Median	Mode	Skewness
A business plan for conferences has been developed and implemented	6	3.00	3.00	2.00	.000

A business plan for the Guest House  
has not been developed and  
implemented

6	2.67	2.50	2.00	-.075
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A business plan for the University  
Farm has been developed and  
implemented

6	3.33	3.50	3.00	-.889
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School based action plans have been  
developed and implemented

6	2.67	2.50	2.00	-.075
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Source: *Researcher* (2015)

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was found that on average most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the strategic leaders at Mount Kenya University provided strategic direction to the university members. This shows that staff have a clear understanding of vision, which was supported by high values of mean, mode and median. Further analysis using multiple regression analysis shows that strategic direction plays a significant role in the implementation of only one of the strategic plans, which is internal and external links (IEL) to be implemented out of the several items Strategic Plan of Mount Kenya University.

The descriptive statistics gave mixed results as some items had median and mode of three and others had a median of four. For a value of three, its shows the respondents are not sure on the issue stated. This shows that the respondents were not sure whether training programme results have not been useful as well as whether training and development needs were reflected in the organization budget. They however agreed that personnel learning and development with respect to strategy implementation was encouraged at the university and that resource needs for strategic implementation had been met. Multiple regression results were more revealing. It shows that developing human capital (DHC) has significant effect only on the implementation of learning environment and students/staff experience (LESE). This is an expected result since learning environment requires highly trained staff, especially in the academics which is the core business of the university. Indeed 5.6% of variation in the implementation of the LESE is



explained by variation in the DHC.

Descriptive summary of the influence of specific items in organization structure showed that on average the respondents agreed that there are structures in place to support the implementation of the strategic plans. Regression analysis revealed that organization structure is the significant factor that must be considered in the implementation of strategic plans. Further, 8.7% of variation in implementation of the selected plans is explained by variation in organization structure. It is important to note that Mount Kenya University has changed its structure for both management and the running of programmes in the university. This is reflected in the results obtained. A clear assignment of responsibilities will go a long way to prevent power struggles between departments and within hierarchies.

From the findings, it is evident that strategic leadership is a key driver of strategy implementation in organizations and in particular universities. It is only through effective strategic leadership that organizations are able to achieve planned objectives. Organizations need competent leaders and should build the capabilities to develop leaders with the appropriate competencies required to achieve planned objectives.

The coefficient of variations obtained was low. This is because implementation is affected by several factors but the researcher studied only one (strategic leadership), which was further subdivided to determine the effect of the elements such as strategic direction. There are factors that affect the overall implementation of the strategic plans and others that only affect the implementation of certain items in the implementation of the plan. This needs to be identified in all institutions for implementation to be successful.

There are factors that affect the overall implementation of the strategic plans and others that only affect the implementation of certain items in the implementation of the plan. These factors need to be identified for all institutions for implementation to be successful. Strategic leaders in organizations should also ensure that the planned objectives are effectively and simplistically communicated to employees in order to gain their support and ensure that they have internalized the organization's strategies.

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