Insights into Strategic Decision-making: Views of Filipino Education Deans

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Strategic decision-making is a complex process, especially in the context of higher education institutions. Understanding how education college deans approach strategic decisions is crucial for effective management and decision support. This qualitative single case study aimed to explore the strategic decision-making processes (SDMP) of college deans in state universities in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. The study sought to identify the characteristics of SDMPs, approaches to SDM and propose a new model that captures the spectrum of decision-making modes.

Methodology: A single case study that rests on the interpretive research paradigm was adopted to delve into the individual experiences of education college deans in making strategic decisions. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective essays from eight deans, selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria. The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring confidentiality and obtaining informed consent from participants. Data analysis followed Attride-Stirling's thematic network analysis method, allowing for in-depth exploration and interpretation of the decision-making processes.

Main Results: The analysis revealed several characteristics of SDMPs, including their highly unstructured, non-routinary, nonrepetitive, high-stakes, risky, complex, and irreversible nature, aligning with findings from prior research. College deans employed three main types of SDMPs: rational, intuitive, and improvisational. Rational SDMP involved systematic, logical, and fact-based decision-making, while intuitive SDMP relied on judgment and past experiences in time-sensitive and uncertain situations. Improvisational SDMP emerged as a novel approach, characterized by spontaneity, novelty, and action-orientation.

Discussions: The study contributes to the understanding that SDMPs are not fixed processes but rather dynamic and context dependent. It highlights the importance of considering the specific circumstances and timing of decision-making when determining the most suitable approach. The proposed model presents a spectrum of SDMPs, recognizing the interconnectedness of the decision-making modes. The study also brings attention to the improvisational decision-making approach, which has received limited focus in the literature but is increasingly relevant in today's rapidly changing management context.

Conclusions: Education college deans adopt diverse approaches to strategic decision-making, with rational, intuitive, and improvisational SDMPs being prevalent. The study underscores the need for flexibility and adaptation in decision-making to address the complexities and uncertainties faced by educational administrators. The new model of SDMPs captures the continuum of decision-making modes, allowing administrators to tailor decision support to the specific needs of deans based on the context and timing of decision-making. By recognizing the different decision-making approaches, administrators can foster more effective decision-making processes and improve the overall management of higher education institutions. Further research on the improvisational decision-making approach is warranted to explore its potential benefits and limitations in strategic decision-making contexts.

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Introduction

Globally, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) function within a constantly evolving environment where changes are frequent and widespread. Alongside these changes come a host of challenges. These challenges include dealing with competition and globalization, adapting to the diverse needs of students and the evolving demands of the job market. HEIs also face pressure from regulatory bodies and collaborating institutions, while simultaneously managing the growing trend of student migration and the escalating costs of education. Moreover, there is a struggle with limited resources, shifting demographics, advancing technology, and the need to uphold a consistently high standard of education. (Glass, 2014)

Despite efforts to implement initiatives, education in the Philippines continues to suffer from persistent issues, similar to those highlighted by Glass (2014). These long-standing problems include substandard quality of education, inadequate budget allocation, the presence of incompetent teachers, lack of proper facilities, insufficient teaching staff, and a lack of clear vision and direction. As a result, the Philippines finds itself among the low-performing countries, struggling to adapt effectively to the international education system. These challenges faced by the government in the education sector underscore the urgent need to improve and establish higher standards that can produce a competent and skilled workforce (Dimasindel & Salam, 2018).

In the face of an increasingly uncertain future and a rapidly changing environment, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are compelled to seek new approaches to thrive in both the short and long term. To address the challenges posed by this evolving landscape, HEI managers have adopted a strategic mindset (Hinton, 2012). Immordino et al. (2016) suggest that strategic planning and decision-making are direct responses to these challenges. Although previously perceived as exclusive to the business industry, strategic management, planning, and decision-making have now been acknowledged as crucial in the context of HEIs (Divjak, 2016).

Focusing on the strategic decision-making process (SDMP) is paramount for HEIs. This process empowers decision-makers to assess and compare various alternatives effectively, ultimately choosing the best course of action by evaluating the potential outcomes derived from the decision-making process (Nooraie, 2014). By embracing strategic thinking and SDMP, HEIs can better navigate the complexities of their environment and position themselves for success in the ever-changing educational landscape. Smethers (2020) and Keeney (2012) reported that higher education administrators have started to embrace the idea of strategic decision-making; however, it is unclear how these decisions are carried out and evaluated. The process by which academic leaders make strategic decisions remain unclear and requires more exploration (Smethers, 2020). While some SDMP schemes and models are discussed and implemented in the context of industry (Nooraie, 2014), no such effort appears to have been focused on HEIs, more so on TEIs (Magd & Bindah, 2016). Also, despite its importance to strategic planning and the fact that SDMP has been found helpful in the industrial sector, it has not attracted the attention of researchers in the context of HEIs (Elbanna & Fadol, 2016; Hinton, 2012).

Indeed, it can be argued that the concept SDMP in the context of HEIs has received relatively limited research attention. However, existing studies have indicated that SDMP holds significant potential in enabling HEIs to effectively address the challenges they face. Building upon these observations and arguments put forth by researchers, this study aims to investigate the concept of SDMP, specifically within the context of education colleges.

This primary aim of this qualitative study is to explore how strategic decisions are made within the context of participant education deans in HEIs. Education deans are considered the most knowledgeable individuals concerning strategic decision-making within the academic setting. As the highest-ranking administrators in their respective colleges, academic deans bear

the responsibility of making strategic decisions that encompass a wide range of areas, such as educational program and curriculum development, faculty selection, promotion, and development, student affairs, financial management, physical facilities development, and fostering relationships with alumni and the public (Melon-Galvez, 2018). By examining the decision-making processes of education deans, this study seeks to shed light on the strategic practices that can ultimately contribute to the success and growth of HEIs, particularly in the field of education.

Theoretical Framework

The literature points out two theoretical perspectives of decision-making: one being prescriptive and the other descriptive. Most studies on decision-making are based on the decision theory, an example of a prescriptive model, and information processing theory, a descriptive model.

Prescriptive models guide the decision-maker by prescribing how decisions should be made rather than how they are actually made. Prescriptive models provide decision-makers with a procedure that can be followed during the decision-making process. It is further concerned with helping people make informed and hopefully better decisions. Decision theory provides a structured and formal framework for making rational choices when faced with uncertainty. Within this framework, a set of alternatives, potential consequences, and the relationships between these elements are considered. It offers straightforward and conceptually clear procedures for the process of selection. By carefully evaluating the available alternatives and their potential outcomes, decision-makers can arrive at logical and well-informed choices that best align with their objectives and preferences. This systematic approach helps individuals and organizations navigate complex decision-making situations and improve the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes.

The second approach used to study decision-making is the descriptive approach. The core of the process involves investigating the reasons and mechanisms behind individuals' thoughts and behaviors. One of the well-known descriptive models is the information processing theory. This theory is also known as the hypothetico-deductive approach originally developed from Newell and Simon's work on artificial intelligence (1972). The theory has evolved as one of the most influential theories of decision-making.

The theoretical discussion of decision-making clarifies that there are two distinct ways of looking at decision-making. Both of the identified perspectives were found to be helpful in understanding how an individual arrives at decisions. The prescriptive approach places boundaries on how an individual decides as one faces complex decision situations. The descriptive approach, however, suggests that a systematic process should be adhered to in order to reach a decision.

Method

Research design

This study is a qualitative study using a single case study design. Strategic decision-making is generally highly unstructured and poorly understood (Shafie et al., 2017); hence, a qualitative study is needed to allow a nuanced and complicated story to unfold (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The research questions aim to answer the "how" of strategic decision-making at the higher education level, which suggests the value of a qualitative approach.

Specifically, this study adopted a single case study design. Yin (2015) recommends a case study when a unique contemporary issue, such as decision-making, must be described in context. Also, Houghton et al. (2013) recommend case study research in the study of a phenomenon in its natural context. The primary aim of a case study is to acquire comprehensive and detailed information about an event, individual, or process that remains incompletely

comprehended or explored. The case in this study is defined as the strategic decision-making by college deans in state universities. According to Tumele (2015), it is advised to establish boundaries (binding) around the case to maintain a reasonable scope. Following this recommendation, the current study constrained the case by precisely defining the concept of strategic decision-making and its relevant context.

Research paradigm

The research employed an interpretive perspective to examine strategic decision-making. Myers (2009) highlighted that embracing the interpretivism paradigm would enhance the credibility of the data, given its emphasis on individual perspectives and consideration of various factors. Moreover, an interpretive paradigm enables the researcher to delve into the complete experience and explore the intricacies of individual experiences through discussions and interviews.

Locale, sampling, and participants

This study was conducted in five State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) with teacher education programs in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. In this study, purposive sampling was employed to select participants. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: must be or must have been a dean of a college of education, made strategic decisions in the last three years, and be willing to answer questions about SDMP. Only those who fit all three criteria were included as participants in the study. Following the recommendation of Malterud et al. (2016) and Merriam & Tisdell (2015), the study used the concept of saturation to determine the sample size. This study involved eight deans from the region who qualified based on the inclusion criteria set.

Research instrument

For this study, the researcher used a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide whose entries are in English. A reflective essay was also used to gather more information from the participants. Instruments were reviewed and validated by experts in qualitative research and educational management.

Ethical consideration

Strict ethical guidelines were followed in all study phases, and the necessary permissions were secured. Participants were asked to read the contents of the informed consent form and sign after that when they were amenable to the conditions stated. Moreover, the highest level of confidentiality in the treatment of research data was guaranteed. Also, the anonymity of the participants was ensured by using pseudonyms in the interview transcripts and the research report.

Data collection

After securing approval from the HEI's president, participant deans were contacted via email, and the study was explained to them along with the ICF. When qualified against the set inclusion criteria, participants were individually interviewed. Participants were then requested to make a reflective essay after the one-on-one interview. After the round of individual interviews, a focus group discussion was conducted.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this research adhered to Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic network analysis method. The analysis process was divided into three main stages: text reduction or breakdown, text exploration, and integration of the exploration. Data collected from the

individual interview of participants, FGD, and reflective essays were organized by establishing an identification system. Transcripts were read at least twice and were coded. Responses were in English, so translation was unnecessary.

Trustworthiness of the study

Birt et al. (2016) argue that the trustworthiness of results is the bedrock of high-quality qualitative research. Hence, triangulation and respondent validation were done to help establish credibility and contribute to the trustworthiness of the study. Data triangulation as well as theory triangulation were done.

Findings and Discussion

Characteristics of SDMP

Analysis of the participants' narration of how they make strategic decisions brought to the surface several characteristics of SDMP. Among the characteristics taken from the context of the participants' decision-making process are the following: SDMP per se is highly unstructured, non-routinary, nonrepetitive, high-stakes, risky, complex, and impossible to reverse. It is worth mentioning that the characteristics were similar to the characteristics enumerated by Shafie et al. (2017).

Strategic decision-making process

Based on the results of the study, the process by which deans make strategic decisions could be categorized as rational, intuitive, and improvisational. Common among the three types is the idea that none of them proposes a definite or exact generic step-by-step process description; hence, SDMP is viewed as highly unstructured. All participants expressed the idea that whatever the manner of strategic decision is, it should always be followed by an evaluation to assess the attainment of goals.

Rational SDMP

Rational decision-making involves a systematic approach to making choices, relying on facts, reason, and logic, rather than emotions, personal biases, or intuition. It follows a step-by-step model that begins with problem identification, proceeds to evaluate multiple alternatives, and ultimately leads to finding the most appropriate solution (Hinton, 2012).

In this study, some participants described that the way they carry out SDMP is logical, systematic, and rational – all of which are descriptive of rational SDMP. The general process was described as starting with the problem or diagnosing the problem and logically figuring out steps unique to the problem. It was emphasized that SDs are not all the same and that the only common ground is it being complex and risky. Once steps were already identified, a departure from them is not acceptable. From the participants' experiences, it is a gamble that may lead to failure in the end. SDMP being rational is evident in the following participant remarks:

> "There is no place for uncertainty. The decision to be made is big and risky so you can't afford to miss a thing. It will be a major blunder and you will put the whole college at stake." (Dean Icarus, interview)

> "I proceed logically starting from the issue, scrutinizing it, being familiar with it in all aspects. Then collaboratively, we, in the college, brainstorm, choose the best option, and make the decision." (Dean Leda, interview)

> Personally, the decision-making I am doing is one which really involves others and is scientific. By scientific I mean like the scientific method steps are present so you

have a guide as you try solving the problem and come up with a decision. Strategic or not, that is how I proceed. (Dean Iris, interview)

"Like I mentioned in the interview, it is important to be systematic and logical …." (Dean Apollo, FGD)

The participants' description of the process finds support in the literature, more specifically in the existence of the rational decision-making model. It is the most common description of the decision-making process. It is normative-prescriptive in the sense that it describes how decisions should ideally be made. Calabretta et al. (2017) contend that the rational decision-making process is a cognitive, multi-step approach utilized to make choices among various alternatives.

Further, the theoretical framework of this study pointed out two theoretical perspectives of decision-making making: prescriptive and descriptive. It could be recalled that the prescriptive perspective provides decision-makers with a procedure that can be followed during the decision-making process. Rational SDMP falls under prescriptive, as previously mentioned, as it describes how decisions should ideally be made. The prescriptive perspective offers a systematic and logical sequence of steps, requiring managers to adhere to a methodical approach when considering how to address a task. Within this perspective, managers are perceived as rational individuals seeking to maximize utility or achieve optimal outcomes.

Intuitive SDMP

Aside from rational SDMP, participants also narrated an SDMP method that is intuitive in nature, thus, intuitive SDMP. Participants elaborated on their tendency to switch to an intuitive SDMP, especially when confronted with time-sensitive decisions, insufficient information, and unfamiliar scenarios that lack prior examples. In such situations, relying on judgment becomes essential. Intuitive SDMP is apparent in the following participants' remarks:

"There are times when administrators should decide fast that you cannot think of logical steps anymore. The decision will now lie on your ability to relate it to past experience. I don't want to call it deciding based on "gut-feel, but it is what it is. Yes it's risky but sometimes or even most of the time it happens ….. but take note also that this kind of decision is like wisdom that you get from being in the position for a long time." (Dean Eros, interview)

"In rare instances, you forget about the steps and the formality. When you are expected to give your decision right away you will be left with deciding abruptly based on, I can't think of a better word right now, but it's like hunch. It's the informed and educated hunch." (Dean Athena, interview)

In the study of Adam and Dempsey (2020), intuition is among the major key players in the decision-making of leaders in various contexts including higher education. In intuitive decision-making, decision-makers use their subconscious mind to process information and identify patterns. Moreover, during intuitive decision-making, individuals non-consciously activate all the cognitive schemas linked to the problem at hand. They also non-consciously form holistic connections across these cognitive schemas and subsequently, consciously generate a solution. Gopalakrishnan (2016) stresses that intuition, not analysis, is the key to becoming an effective leader.

From among the participants, those who had been in the administrative position for a long time were those who had the tendency to do intuitive SDMP. Moreover, as argued in the theoretical standpoint of this study, intuitive SDMP falls under the descriptive decision perspective.

Improvisational SDMP

Participants also opened up about the process that is neither purely intuitive nor rational. It is a form of SDMP characterized by spontaneity, novelty, and a focus on taking action. This perspective aligns with the concept of improvisation. Spontaneity captures the impromptu nature of improvisation, while novelty pertains to the generation of actions beyond existing plans and routines (Tabesh & Vera, 2020). Improvisational SDMP is clear in the participant comment below:

> It is when you started with a plan and then you figured out steps but along the way you think of something, like out of the blue, which would exactly address the problem and is more doable than the initial plan. In my case this is applicable when the one we are deciding on is on programs for extension of the college. (Dean Athena, interview)

Adomako et al. (2018), in their study on improvisational behavior, discovered that frequently decision-makers decide on matters in a way that abandons the systematic nature of conventional decision-making models. Decisions made that are improvisational are characteristically those which could be described in terms of action taken.

An improvisational decision-maker carries out a decision spontaneously as it arises in the decision-making process. The decision carried out is novel and is not similar to any known alternatives under consideration. Being action-oriented also comes with spontaneity and novelty as characteristics of the improvisational decision-maker.

Improvisational SDMP is neither purely rational nor intuitive, so the theoretical standpoint of the study fails to embrace this context. Improvisational SDMP does not fall into prescriptive or descriptive decision perspectives. It is one of the new knowledge areas gained from this study. Although improvisational decision-making is already getting attention, not many have paid attention to conducting studies about it.

A new model of SDM

Analysis of data was able to uncover patterns in the way strategic decisions are made considering contexts and timing. These patterns could be put into a model which could help look at SDM in general and get a view of conditions leading to the employment of specific SDMP. Rather than static boxes that classify types of strategic decisions, this study proposes a spectrum of SDMP. The spectrum explains the characteristics of three SDMPs and when they will be more suitably applied. Figure 1 shows the model.
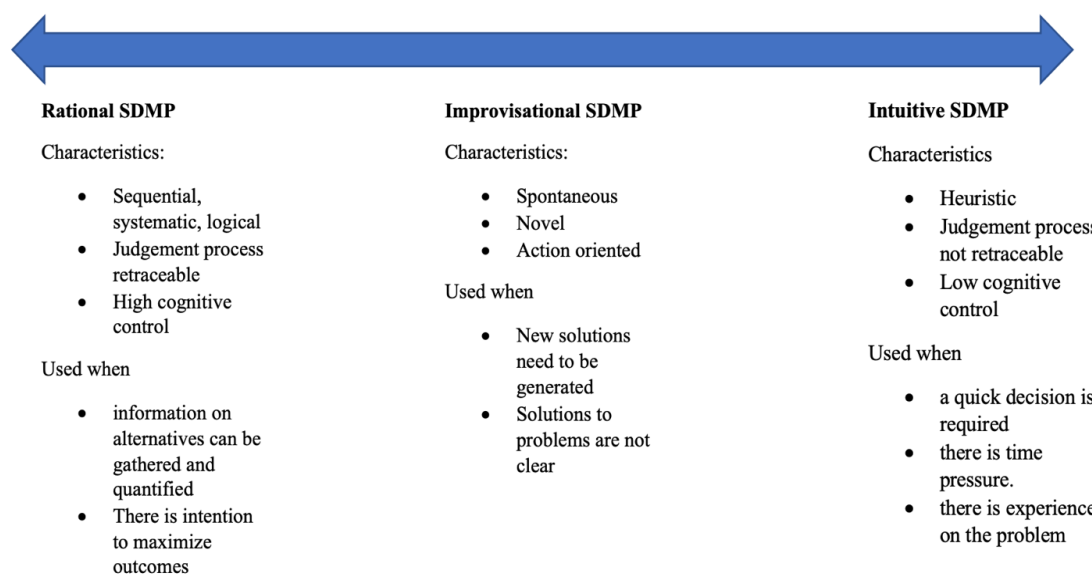
Rational SDMP

Characteristics:

- Sequential, systematic, logical
- Judgement process retraceable
- High cognitive control

Used when

- information on alternatives can be gathered and quantified
- There is intention to maximize outcomes

Improvisational SDMP

Characteristics:

- Spontaneous
- Novel
- Action oriented

Used when

- New solutions need to be generated
- Solutions to problems are not clear

Intuitive SDMP

Characteristics

- Heuristic
- Judgement process not retraceable
- Low cognitive control

Used when

- a quick decision is required
- there is time pressure.
- there is experience on the problem

Figure 1 A New Model of College of Education Deans' SDMP

The model treats the decision-making modes as part of a spectrum rather than three distinct and unrelated decision-making processes. On the extreme ends of the spectrum are rational SDMP and intuitive SDMP. They occupy positions in the spectrum as they are considered to be highly polarized, and their characteristics and contexts have sharp distinctions and are opposite to one another. Improvisational SDMP occupies the middle position of the spectrum as it does not share common characteristics with rational and intuitive SDMP. Improvisational SDMP is neither purely intuitive nor rational, as previously argued.

The whole spectrum explains the characteristics of three SDMPs and the context in which they could possibly be applied. Moreover, the model explains that any given SD made by a dean of the College of Education is explained by the context that required such a decision.

In addition to providing a descriptive framework for understanding SDMPs, this model opens avenues for practical applications within higher education institutions. Based on the insights gained from this spectrum, institutions can consider tailoring their decision-making processes to the specific contexts they face. For instance, when confronted with highly structured and routine decisions, the rational SDMP may be most appropriate, while in situations requiring rapid adaptation and creativity, the improvisational SDMP might offer a more effective approach. This model encourages institutions to assess their decision-making practices and adapt them in alignment with the situational demands. By doing so, institutions can better prepare their deans and administrators to navigate the complexities of strategic decision-making in higher education.

Conclusion

This study intended to shed light on the SDMP done by education college deans. The process by which deans make a strategic decision could be categorized as rational, intuitive, and improvisational.

The ways deans make SDs were based on their concepts that SDs are highly unstructured, non-routinary, nonrepetitive, high-stakes, risky, complex, and impossible to reverse. The SDMP as rational and intuitive are explainable in terms of theoretical perspectives where this study was based – rational being prescriptive while intuitive is descriptive. Improvisational SDMP, however, is not much discussed in the literature and clearly does not fall within any of the decision perspectives this study presented. This could be attributed to the fact that today's management context is more turbulent than expected. New and novel ways to manage issues are seen to emerge in situations where conventional ways of doing things fall short of practical results.

Research on SDM processes has revealed that decision-makers often employ multiple approaches to address various issues and concerns they encounter. Additionally, they can combine different approaches when making strategic decisions (Elbanna et al., 2020). Importantly, it has been found that exclusively relying on a single SDM approach may not always result in the most favorable decision outcomes, as the effectiveness of an approach can vary depending on the specific circumstances and context.

By determining the dean's inclination towards a specific type of SDMP, administrators will be able to think of ways to support deans in their decisions given the context and timing of the decision-making process. This study would also make administrators rethink how they delegate decision-making tasks to deans. Also, deans and administrators can use the insights gained from this study as a basis for fostering more effective collaboration and communication. It is encouraged to view the whole decision-making process as a collaborative and supportive approach where administrators and deans can engage in constructive dialogues about decision-making processes. This approach acknowledges the autonomy and expertise of deans while recognizing that institutions can benefit from aligning their strategies with the diverse approaches that deans may employ. By fostering such collaboration, institutions can adapt to

the ever-changing dynamics of higher education more effectively and ensure that strategic decisions lead to positive outcomes.

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