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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC PLANNING ON INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: THE EXPERIENCE OF AZERBAIJAN AND TÜRKİYE

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Abstract. Strategic planning has become an essential component of higher education governance in the context of globalization, technological transformation, and increasing international academic competition. Modern universities are expected not only to provide high-quality education but also to contribute to scientific research, innovation, socio-economic development, and international cooperation. In this regard, strategic management approaches play a significant role in improving institutional effectiveness, organizational sustainability, and governance efficiency. This study comparatively examines the impact of strategic planning on institutional effectiveness in higher education institutions within the experiences of Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The research analyzes strategic planning practices, governance structures, quality assurance systems, stakeholder participation, and institutional development processes in universities of both countries. The study employs a qualitative comparative approach based on academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reform analyses. The findings demonstrate that Turkish universities possess relatively more institutionalized strategic management systems due to long-term administrative reforms, accreditation mechanisms, and broader implementation of performance-based governance models. Azerbaijani universities, meanwhile, have accelerated modernization and internationalization reforms, particularly in areas such as digital governance, academic mobility, and quality assurance development.

The comparative analysis indicates that strategic planning positively influences institutional effectiveness by strengthening organizational coordination, improving decision-making processes, enhancing research productivity, and increasing international competitiveness. However, several challenges continue to affect the successful implementation of strategic management systems in both countries, including financial limitations, bureaucratic centralization, insufficient monitoring mechanisms, and limited stakeholder participation. The study concludes that effective strategic planning requires adaptive leadership, institutional flexibility, transparent governance, and continuous evaluation mechanisms.

Key words: strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, higher education governance, university management, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, quality assurance, strategic management.

Introduction. The contemporary higher education system is undergoing rapid transformation due to globalization, technological progress, international competition, and changing socio-economic conditions. “Universities today are expected to perform far beyond their traditional educational role. In addition to teaching, they are now actively involved in research, innovation, regional development, and international collaboration (Marginson, 2016).” As a result, strategic planning has become an important instrument for strengthening institutional performance and ensuring long-term sustainability in higher education. Universities are also increasingly required to respond to labor market expectations, encourage entrepreneurship, and contribute to knowledge-based economic development. These growing responsibilities make it necessary for higher education institutions to adopt more flexible, adaptive, and future-oriented management approaches.

Strategic planning can be understood as a structured process through which institutions determine their mission, vision, priorities, and long-term objectives while identifying the mechanisms needed to achieve them. Within universities, strategic planning plays an important role in improving coordination, supporting effective resource allocation, enhancing quality assurance systems, and

evaluating institutional performance. It also helps institutions respond more effectively to changing academic, technological, and social environments. At the same time, strategic planning encourages greater transparency in university governance and supports the establishment of clear and measurable development goals. Successful planning processes generally require cooperation among academic staff, university administrators, students, and external stakeholders.

Over the past two decades, both Azerbaijan and Türkiye have introduced significant reforms in their higher education systems. These reforms have mainly focused on improving educational quality, strengthening governance structures, increasing institutional autonomy, and aligning universities with international standards. Strategic planning has gradually become one of the central components of these modernization efforts. Although Azerbaijan and Türkiye share certain historical, cultural, and regional similarities, their experiences in strategic university management differ in several respects, including institutional development, administrative practices, and the implementation of educational policies. Turkish universities, in many cases, demonstrate more institutionalized strategic governance models, whereas universities in Azerbaijan continue to develop and modernize their management systems through ongoing reforms and international academic cooperation.

This study aims to provide a comparative analysis of the role of strategic planning in improving institutional effectiveness within the higher education systems of Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The research examines the extent to which strategic planning contributes to governance quality, academic productivity, organizational efficiency, and institutional sustainability. In addition, the study explores the common challenges faced by universities in both countries and discusses possible approaches for strengthening institutional competitiveness and supporting long-term development in the higher education sector.

Literature Review. Research on strategic planning in higher education has expanded considerably since the late twentieth century, particularly as universities began facing growing competition, financial pressures, and rapid social change. One of the early influential studies by Philip Kotler and Patrick Murphy (1981) emphasized that universities increasingly turned toward strategic management practices in order to adapt to environmental uncertainty and institutional competition. Later research further highlighted that strategic planning helps universities align their institutional missions with broader social, economic, and educational expectations.

At the same time, some scholars questioned rigid and highly bureaucratic planning models. Henry Mintzberg (1994), for example, argued that universities function in complex and dynamic environments where flexible and adaptive strategies are often more effective than strictly formalized planning systems. Despite these criticisms, many studies continue to show that well-designed strategic planning contributes positively to institutional coordination, accountability, and organizational effectiveness.

Research conducted by John M. Bryson (2018) demonstrated that strategic planning can strengthen institutional performance by clarifying priorities, improving stakeholder involvement, and encouraging evidence-based decision-making. Within higher education institutions, strategic management has also become closely connected with accreditation standards, quality assurance systems, and performance-oriented budgeting mechanisms.

In Türkiye, strategic planning in universities became more visible and institutionalized following reforms in public financial management and the introduction of quality assurance regulations. Over time, many Turkish universities incorporated strategic objectives related to internationalization, digital transformation, scientific productivity, and student-centered learning into their institutional development policies.

In Azerbaijan, strategic planning gained greater importance during the modernization of the national education system and the country's integration into the European Higher Education Area. Universities in Azerbaijan have increasingly focused on strengthening institutional governance, expanding research capacity, and developing international academic partnerships. Nevertheless,

researchers note that some universities still encounter challenges associated with implementation mechanisms, monitoring procedures, administrative capacity, and stakeholder participation.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that strategic planning can significantly improve institutional effectiveness in higher education. However, its success largely depends on factors such as leadership quality, organizational culture, financial resources, administrative experience, and the active involvement of institutional stakeholders.

Discussion.

Strategic Planning in Higher Education Institutions

Strategic planning in higher education institutions refers to the process of establishing a long-term institutional vision and developing systematic approaches for achieving sustainable growth, academic development, and organizational effectiveness. This process usually involves defining institutional missions and visions, conducting internal and external environmental analyses, setting strategic priorities, allocating resources, and establishing implementation and evaluation mechanisms. In modern universities, strategic planning extends far beyond administrative management. It directly influences teaching quality, scientific research, innovation capacity, digital transformation, and international cooperation activities. Recent studies suggest that universities with well-developed strategic planning systems demonstrate greater institutional adaptability and stronger organizational performance in rapidly changing educational environments (Albahari et al., 2023). Similarly, effective strategic governance helps universities define measurable objectives, strengthen internal coordination, and improve institutional competitiveness at both national and international levels (Elbanna et al., 2016).

Today, universities increasingly rely on strategic planning to strengthen academic competitiveness, improve research productivity, modernize digital infrastructure, and enhance their positions in international rankings. Strategic management also plays an important role in helping institutions respond to economic uncertainty, demographic changes, and technological transformation. In addition, strategic planning contributes to more efficient governance, academic quality enhancement, stakeholder coordination, financial sustainability, and organizational transparency. According to Janne Kettunen (2015), strategic planning improves institutional accountability and supports evidence-based decision-making processes within universities. Furthermore, participatory planning approaches encourage cooperation among academic staff, students, administrators, and external stakeholders, thereby strengthening institutional culture and organizational commitment. In recent years, the integration of digital governance systems and quality assurance mechanisms into strategic planning processes has also become increasingly important in university administration (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

Despite these advantages, strategic planning may lose its effectiveness when it is treated merely as a formal bureaucratic obligation rather than a practical management instrument. In some higher education institutions, strategic plans remain largely symbolic documents with limited implementation capacity and weak monitoring systems. Researchers emphasize that insufficient communication, limited stakeholder participation, and a lack of institutional flexibility can negatively influence strategic management outcomes (Taylor & de Lourdes Machado, 2013). For this reason, successful strategic planning in higher education requires continuous assessment, adaptive leadership, active stakeholder engagement, and strong alignment between institutional goals and implementation practices. Universities that successfully combine strategic flexibility with a clear long-term vision are generally better positioned to respond to contemporary educational, technological, and organizational challenges.

Strategic Planning Practices in Türkiye and Azerbaijan

Strategic planning practices in higher education institutions have gained increasing importance in both Azerbaijan and Türkiye as universities attempt to respond to globalization, digital transformation, and growing international academic competition. In Türkiye, the role of strategic plan-

ning expanded considerably following public administration reforms introduced in the early 2000s. Universities were required to prepare institutional strategic plans aligned with national development goals, quality assurance standards, and performance-oriented governance systems. This process encouraged many Turkish universities to establish more structured and institutionalized planning mechanisms that include accreditation procedures, regular quality evaluations, stakeholder participation, and measurable performance indicators. Strategic plans prepared by Turkish universities often focus on internationalization, scientific productivity, digital transformation, sustainability, innovation ecosystems, and cooperation between universities and industry. Similar conclusions were highlighted in recent regional studies, which noted that strategic planning contributes to the modernization of higher education governance and supports the development of innovation-oriented educational systems (Hamidova & Ismayilova, 2026).

According to Gül and Salman (2018), strategic management practices in Turkish universities have positively influenced institutional accountability and organizational coordination. Likewise, recent studies suggest that quality assurance reforms and strategic governance models have strengthened competitiveness within the Turkish higher education system (Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2021). Turkish universities also increasingly prioritize interdisciplinary research, entrepreneurial university models, international research projects, and external funding opportunities within their long-term institutional strategies. These developments have improved the global visibility of several Turkish universities and expanded their participation in international academic networks.

The establishment of national accreditation agencies and quality assurance institutions has further strengthened evaluation mechanisms and administrative transparency in Turkish universities. Many institutions now integrate strategic performance indicators into budgeting systems, annual institutional reports, and managerial decision-making processes. Nevertheless, certain challenges continue to affect the system. Some universities still face problems related to bureaucratic centralization, financial limitations, and unequal institutional capacities between large metropolitan universities and regional institutions. Additionally, growing student populations and rapidly changing labor market expectations place additional pressure on higher education governance structures.

In Azerbaijan, reforms in higher education accelerated particularly after the country's integration into the Bologna Process and broader educational modernization initiatives. Universities increasingly view strategic planning as an important mechanism for improving institutional competitiveness, educational quality, and international academic visibility. Strategic priorities in Azerbaijani universities often include curriculum modernization, expansion of international cooperation, development of digital education infrastructure, enhancement of research capacity, academic staff development, and student-centered educational approaches. Several universities have established quality assurance departments and strategic development centers responsible for coordinating institutional reforms and monitoring implementation processes. Government policies supporting digitalization and internationalization have also encouraged universities to adopt more organized governance and planning systems (Mammadov, 2020).

However, compared with Türkiye, strategic planning mechanisms in Azerbaijan are still in the process of institutional development. Common challenges include limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, insufficient participation of academic staff and students in decision-making processes, resource limitations, and continued dependence on centralized administrative structures. Despite these difficulties, Azerbaijani universities have shown noticeable progress in recent years, particularly in the areas of international academic partnerships, student mobility programs, digital governance initiatives, and participation in global educational projects. The increasing emphasis on strategic management reflects Azerbaijan's broader objective of integrating its higher education system more closely into international academic and scientific networks.

Comparative Analysis of Institutional Effectiveness

Institutional effectiveness can be defined as the ability of universities to successfully achieve their educational, scientific, administrative, and social goals while adapting to changing academic, technological, and socio-economic conditions. In contemporary higher education systems, institutional effectiveness is strongly connected with academic quality, research productivity, governance efficiency, financial sustainability, stakeholder satisfaction, and international recognition. Strategic planning plays an important role in improving institutional effectiveness by supporting organizational coordination, efficient resource allocation, performance evaluation, and long-term institutional development. Research in the field of educational management indicates that results-oriented strategic management approaches positively influence both organizational performance and institutional effectiveness within higher education institutions (Hamidova, 2025). Universities with more structured strategic management systems are generally better equipped to respond to external challenges, improve academic outcomes, and strengthen institutional competitiveness (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

A comparative analysis of Azerbaijan and Türkiye reveals several common trends in higher education governance and strategic modernization processes. Both countries increasingly prioritize quality assurance mechanisms, internationalization policies, digital transformation initiatives, and institutional development strategies. Universities in both systems actively seek to improve their positions in international rankings, enhance research capacity, and expand international academic cooperation. In recent years, technological innovation and digital governance have become especially important components of university strategic planning, particularly following the rapid development of online education and digital learning platforms.

Despite these similarities, differences remain in the level of institutionalization and implementation capacity within the higher education systems of the two countries. Turkish universities generally demonstrate more established strategic governance structures, broader experience with accreditation systems, and more systematic performance evaluation practices. Azerbaijani universities, meanwhile, continue to strengthen their institutional capacities through educational reforms, international partnerships, and modernization initiatives. Nevertheless, universities in both countries increasingly recognize that strategic planning is essential for achieving sustainable institutional development and improving long-term organizational performance.

To provide a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences between Azerbaijan and Türkiye in terms of strategic planning and institutional effectiveness, the following table presents a comparative overview of key governance and management indicators. The table highlights major institutional characteristics, ongoing development trends, and common strategic challenges observed within the higher education systems of both countries.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Strategic Planning and Institutional Effectiveness in Higher Education Institutions of Azerbaijan and Türkiye

Indicators	Azerbaijan	Türkiye
Institutionalization of Strategic Planning	Developing and expanding	More established and systematic
Quality Assurance Systems	Expanding through reforms	Institutionalized through accreditation mechanisms
Stakeholder Participation	Moderate participation of academic staff and students	Relatively broader stakeholder involvement
Performance Evaluation Systems	Limited in some universities	More systematic and measurable
Digital Transformation	Rapidly developing	More integrated into governance systems

Table 1 (continuance)

Internationalization Capacity	Growing international partnerships	Extensive international cooperation and mobility
Research Productivity	Increasing gradually	Relatively higher institutional research output
Administrative Autonomy	Partially centralized governance	Broader institutional autonomy
Strategic Governance Experience	Emerging institutional experience	Long-term strategic management experience
Main Challenges	Resource limitations and monitoring gaps	Bureaucratic centralization and institutional inequality

Source: Prepared by the author based on comparative analysis of higher education governance systems in Azerbaijan and Türkiye

Despite these similarities, significant structural and institutional differences continue to exist between the higher education systems of Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Turkish universities generally demonstrate more established strategic governance structures and broader institutional experience in performance management practices. The institutionalization of strategic planning in Türkiye has evolved through long-term public administration reforms, accreditation systems, and national quality assurance frameworks. According to Yılmaz and Temizkan (2021), Turkish universities increasingly incorporate performance indicators, quality evaluation mechanisms, and stakeholder participation into their administrative decision-making processes. Moreover, universities in Türkiye often benefit from relatively broader administrative autonomy, allowing them to implement institutional strategies with greater flexibility and efficiency.

In contrast, universities in Azerbaijan are currently experiencing an intensive modernization process aimed at aligning higher education governance with international academic standards. Quality assurance systems, digital learning infrastructure, and international cooperation initiatives continue to expand across Azerbaijani higher education institutions. However, in some areas, strategic planning systems are still developing institutionally, particularly regarding implementation monitoring, performance evaluation procedures, and stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes. Several universities also continue to face challenges related to centralized governance structures and limited institutional resources. Despite these difficulties, Azerbaijani universities have demonstrated noticeable progress during the last decade in areas such as academic mobility, international partnerships, digital governance, and participation in global educational initiatives (Mammadov, 2020).

The findings of the study further indicate that institutional effectiveness increases considerably when strategic objectives are realistic, leadership approaches are participatory, monitoring systems function efficiently, and stakeholders actively contribute to institutional decision-making processes. Universities that successfully integrate digital governance technologies, data-driven management systems, and transparent quality assurance mechanisms tend to achieve stronger organizational performance and greater academic competitiveness. In this context, effective leadership and institutional flexibility play a particularly important role in supporting sustainable development and long-term strategic success within higher education institutions.

Therefore, strategic planning should not be perceived merely as a formal administrative requirement. Rather, it should be understood as a dynamic management instrument that promotes innovation, institutional sustainability, organizational adaptability, and continuous improvement in higher education systems.

Challenges and Recommendations for Improving Strategic Planning in Higher Education Institutions

Despite the increasing importance of strategic planning in higher education institutions, a number of challenges continue to affect the effective implementation of strategic management processes

in both Azerbaijan and Türkiye. One of the major difficulties is financial limitation. Insufficient funding often restricts universities from carrying out long-term strategic projects, modernizing infrastructure, expanding research capacity, and investing in advanced digital technologies. Limited financial resources may also negatively influence academic mobility programs, innovation initiatives, and the development of international academic partnerships. As a result, many universities are sometimes forced to focus primarily on short-term operational needs rather than long-term institutional development priorities.

Another significant challenge involves bureaucratic and centralized governance structures. Excessive administrative centralization can reduce institutional flexibility, slow decision-making processes, and limit the ability of universities to respond quickly to changing educational and technological conditions. In some institutions, administrative procedures remain highly formalized, which may weaken innovation capacity and organizational adaptability. At the same time, insufficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms create additional difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of strategic plans. Some universities still lack clear performance indicators, data-driven evaluation systems, and continuous implementation monitoring processes. Consequently, strategic plans may remain largely formal documents without producing substantial institutional impact.

Limited stakeholder participation also represents an important problem. Insufficient involvement of academic staff, students, researchers, industry representatives, and external stakeholders can reduce institutional commitment to strategic goals and weaken organizational cooperation. Effective strategic planning requires transparent communication and active participation from all institutional actors. Furthermore, rapid technological transformation places additional pressure on universities. Higher education institutions are expected to adapt continuously to artificial intelligence technologies, digital learning environments, online education systems, cybersecurity requirements, and changing labor market expectations. Universities that fail to respond effectively to technological developments may gradually lose competitiveness within the global academic environment.

To strengthen institutional effectiveness through strategic planning, universities should further develop participatory governance models and encourage broader stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes. The expansion of digital governance systems and data-based administrative practices can contribute to greater organizational efficiency, transparency, and institutional accountability. Increasing institutional autonomy together with effective accountability mechanisms may also support more flexible and innovative governance structures. In addition, universities should continue improving quality assurance systems, accreditation procedures, and professional training programs related to strategic management for academic leaders and university administrators.

Sustainable funding mechanisms for research, innovation, and technological modernization are equally important for the successful implementation of strategic plans. Governments and higher education institutions should also encourage international academic cooperation, interdisciplinary research partnerships, and academic mobility programs in order to strengthen global competitiveness. In this context, both Azerbaijan and Türkiye may benefit considerably from exchanging institutional experiences, developing joint educational initiatives, and supporting collaborative policy approaches in higher education governance and strategic management.

Conclusion. Strategic planning has become one of the essential components of contemporary higher education governance. The comparative analysis of Azerbaijan and Türkiye demonstrates that strategic planning contributes positively to institutional effectiveness by improving organizational coordination, governance efficiency, quality assurance practices, and academic competitiveness. In today's rapidly evolving educational environment, universities are expected not only to provide high-quality education but also to contribute actively to scientific innovation, digital transformation, and socio-economic development. For this reason, strategic management approaches increasingly function as important instruments for achieving institutional sustainability and supporting long-term development objectives.

Universities in Türkiye generally demonstrate more institutionalized strategic management systems due to their longer experience with administrative reforms and more established quality assurance mechanisms. Their broader experience in accreditation procedures, performance evaluation systems, and participatory governance models contributes to more systematic implementation of institutional strategies. Azerbaijani universities, although still developing institutionally in certain areas, have made considerable progress through modernization and internationalization reforms. In recent years, universities in Azerbaijan have strengthened digital governance systems, expanded international academic cooperation, and increased their participation in global educational and research initiatives.

The findings of the study indicate that successful strategic planning depends not only on the preparation of formal policy documents but also on effective implementation mechanisms, active stakeholder participation, institutional flexibility, and continuous monitoring and evaluation processes. Universities capable of integrating adaptive strategic management approaches are generally better prepared to respond to future educational, technological, and socio-economic challenges. Furthermore, institutional success largely depends on the ability of universities to combine strategic vision with innovation, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making practices.

Strengthening academic and institutional cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye may also contribute significantly to the exchange of best practices and the development of more sustainable, competitive, and innovation-oriented university governance models in the future. In this context, strategic planning should be viewed not as a formal administrative procedure, but as a dynamic and continuous process that supports institutional development, organizational resilience, and long-term academic success.

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