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## **Strategic Direction and Performance of Public Universities in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the influence of strategic direction on the performance of public universities in Kenya. Using a correlational research design, data was collected from 246 respondents (82.8% response rate) comprising management board and senate members across 18 public universities. The study investigated how key components of strategic direction—including vision adherence, strength-weakness-opportunity-threat assessment, stakeholder involvement, and strategic communication—affect university performance indicators such as research productivity, teaching quality, and institutional effectiveness. Regression analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between strategic direction and university performance ( $R = 0.687$ ,  $R^2 = 0.472$ ,  $\beta = 0.678$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The findings indicate that strategic direction explains 47.2% of variance in university performance, suggesting it is a critical determinant of institutional success. The study recommends implementing comprehensive stakeholder engagement frameworks and systematic weakness assessment protocols to enhance strategic planning effectiveness. These findings contribute valuable insights for university administrators and policymakers seeking to improve institutional performance through strategic leadership practices.*

**Keywords:** Strategic Direction, University Performance, Higher Education, Public Universities, Strategic Leadership, Kenya

### **Introduction**

Strategic direction is a critical facet of organizational management and development. It entails formulating a clear vision and crafting actionable strategies that guide an organization towards its future objectives. This process is deeply rooted in the context of the opportunities and threats expected to emerge within a 3-5 year timeframe (Munga & Gakenia, 2022). At its core, determining strategic direction involves balancing the organization's core ideology, which reflects its heritage and enduring values, with its envisioned future, which represents its aspirations and objectives (Kimani, 2022).

The core ideology serves as the foundational component in the process of determining an organization's strategic direction. It embodies an organization's heritage, encapsulating its enduring values and fundamental purpose. These enduring values are the guiding principles that have shaped the organization's culture and have driven its actions over time (Alnuaimi,

2022). The core ideology provides a sense of continuity, reminding the organization of its roots, the principles upon which it was founded, and the legacy it aims to preserve.

The second pivotal component in crafting an organization's strategic direction is the envisioned future. This forward-looking element represents the organization's aspirations and objectives for the future, acting as a guiding light to chart the path ahead (Mbura & Odollo, 2022). It embodies the organization's ambitions and its vision of what it aims to achieve in the long term. The envisioned future is the driving force that inspires innovation, growth, and strategic development (Phádraig, 2022).

Balancing the core ideology with the envisioned future is a complex yet essential process in determining strategic direction. The core ideology provides stability and identity, ensuring that the organization remains true to its roots and foundational values. It offers a foundation that guarantees the organization's continuity and preserves its cultural heritage (Gore & Kanyangale, 2022).

Conversely, the envisioned future propels the organization forward with ambition and purpose, motivating it to strive for excellence and adapt to an ever-changing landscape. It is a catalyst for growth, inspiring the organization to reach for new heights and remain competitive in its industry. The intersection of the core ideology and the envisioned future is where the strategic direction takes form (Hitt et al., 2017). It is the point where the organization's enduring values meet its future aspirations, allowing for the crafting of a comprehensive strategic plan that unites the past and the future.

Despite the importance of determining strategic direction, organizations often encounter several challenges in this process. One of the most prevalent challenges is resistance to change (Abolade et al., 2022). Resistance often emanates from top management and key stakeholders who may be hesitant to deviate from the status quo. Concerns about disruption, uncertainty, and the risks associated with change can impede progress in crafting a new strategic direction. This challenge underscores the importance of effective change management and leadership.

A lack of flexibility in implementing the strategic vision is another obstacle organizations may face (Alayoubi et al., 2020). When an organization adheres too rigidly to its strategic plans, it may find it difficult to seize new opportunities or navigate unforeseen challenges. The lack of adaptability can hinder progress and inhibit the ability to adjust to changing circumstances. As the business environment is characterized by volatility, adaptability is crucial for organizations to remain competitive.

A short-term focus is also a common pitfall in the determination of strategic direction. Organizations may prioritize immediate gains and short-term profits over long-term strategic objectives (Munga & Gakenia, 2022). This can lead to a misalignment between short-term initiatives and the overarching strategic vision. A short-term focus compromises the organization's ability to plan for the future and achieve its long-term objectives (Jayawardane, 2022).

Inadequate environmental scanning, or the failure to accurately assess the external environment, is yet another challenge (Gimson, 2022). Organizations that do not conduct thorough environmental scanning may develop strategic plans that are out of touch with market and industry dynamics. In a rapidly changing business environment, staying attuned to market trends, competitive forces, and other external factors is essential to ensure that the strategic direction remains relevant and aligned with external changes.

Overcoming these challenges in the determination of strategic direction is essential for organizations to thrive in today's dynamic business environment. To address resistance to change, particularly from top management, effective leadership is crucial (Aris, 2022). Leaders must communicate the need for change effectively, provide a clear rationale for the new strategic direction, and involve key stakeholders in the decision-making process. Leadership should focus on building support for the new strategic direction and addressing concerns about disruption and uncertainty. Fostering a culture of innovation and open-mindedness can further encourage employees to embrace change and support the organization's strategic goals.

To tackle the challenge of a lack of flexibility in implementing the strategic vision, organizations should build adaptability into their strategic planning processes (Alayoubi et al., 2020). Regularly reassessing the strategic direction is vital to ensure it remains relevant in the face of changing circumstances. Empowering employees to make informed decisions is another key aspect of enhancing flexibility. When employees are empowered to take ownership of implementing the strategic vision, the organization can adapt to changing circumstances more effectively. Employee involvement is an essential component of fostering a culture of adaptability and innovation.

To address the pitfall of a short-term focus, organizations should establish a clear connection between short-term initiatives and the overarching strategic vision. This alignment ensures that short-term actions are in service of the long-term (Alayoubi et al., 2020). By clearly communicating how short-term efforts contribute to the overall vision, organizations can better balance immediate gains with long-term strategic objectives. A comprehensive and integrated approach to strategic planning can help ensure that short-term and long-term goals are aligned, creating a coherent strategic direction.

Inadequate environmental scanning can be addressed through robust market research, competitive analysis, and scenario planning (Oracha et al., 2021). Organizations should continuously monitor the external environment, gathering data and insights to inform their strategic decisions.

From the foregoing, this paper examines the influence of strategic direction on the performance of public universities in Kenya. The study is hypothesised as follows:

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There is no statistically significant Influence of strategic direction on the performance of public universities in Kenya

### **Empirical Literature**

The determination of the strategic direction is fundamental to an organization's performance. According to Moraba (2021), the top management within an organization must continuously determine the strategic direction of the organization due to the increasing globalization, development of the ICT components and hyper competition. Within the universities, the determination of the strategic direction is critical due to the various performance challenges that the universities face. In this context, Mary, Gituro and James (2022) argue that there has been an increasing reduction in the number of students qualifying to join the university which has impacted on the performance of the universities in Kenya. This concern has also been raised by King'oo et al., (2020b), and Mbom (2021) among others. Other performance challenges include the declining public funding of the universities and reduction in both parallel and post graduate students leading to financial performance challenges of Kenyan universities ( Mungai et al., 2022; Otieno, 2019). The determination of the strategic direction enables the firm to craft their strategies to address the threats and weaknesses they face in their operational environment

while leveraging on their strengths in order to exploit the opportunities present in the operational environment (Alsaqal & Ahmed, 2021; Koros, 2021). The universities' determination of strategic direction then leads to the determination of strategic thinking and prioritization of the resources' deployment in the university operations.

The quality of the university programs, the ability of these university programs to meet the job market requirements, and the quality of the university graduates as evidenced through the acquisition of key skills and competences (Gaiti, 2021; Ikiara, 2021) are all critical in measuring organizational performance within the university. Other quality related aspects include; quality of work life in universities (Arungo & Kipkebut, 2020), total quality management (Sakarina, 2019), service quality (Ngugi et al., 2021; Uddin et al., 2019), and quality assurance (Ekpoh & Asuquo, 2020). The setting of the strategic direction can therefore be used to address the quality challenges within the universities. In this context, Alayoubi et al. (2020) undertook a study seeking to find the relationship between strategic leadership practices and the improvement of education quality in Palestinian universities. The study tested a hypothesis on whether the determination of strategic direction had a statistically significant association with the improvement in education quality. Structured questionnaires were distributed to 354 employees of Palestinian universities. The study found that the determination of the strategic direction leads to the improvement on the improvement of the quality of university education in Palestinian universities. In this context, the study posited that a strategic leader must clarify his vision to team members so as to cultivate team support in the implementation of the strategic direction. The study found using correlational analysis that the determination of the strategic direction was positively and statistically associated with the quality of the university programs at a 5% level of significance.

While the Alayoubi et al. (2020) linked the determination of the strategic direction to the quality of the university programs within Palestinian universities, the study did not provide the exact pathway in which this association was established. The study seeks to address this gap through using regression analysis as opposed to correlational analysis. According to Hayes and Rockwood (2020) and Maina (2021), the regression analysis is one of the statistical tools available to determine causal relationship between an independent variable and dependent variable. The study thus used regression analysis to determine whether the setting of strategic direction had a statistically significant influence on the quality of the university programs.

The establishment and implementation of the university missions and visions have been linked to organizational performance (Jonjo et al., 2018). The missions and visions set the things that the university seeks to achieve and its envisioned future. This is critical in determining the operational orientation of the university, its resources allocation aspects, its investments, and organizational culture that determine organizational performance (Garlitz, 2018). The university mission and visions statement have also been linked to both strategy formulation and implementation leading to organizational performance of the universities. In this context, Jonjo et al. (2018) explored the effect of the mission and vision development on the organizational performance of private universities in Kenya. The study had adopted a positivist research philosophy and collected data from 136 respondents derived from 17 Kenyan private universities. Using regression analysis, the study found that the mission and vision of the university explained 79.6% of the organizational performance of private universities in Kenya. These results were found to be statistically significant at 5% level of significance ( $B=0.867$ ,  $P$  Value  $< 0.05$ ). This implied that a unit change of mission and vision lead to 0.867 change in the organizational performance of the private universities. These results were attributed to the practicality of implementation of the university vision and mission given the resources availability, clarity of vision and mission to the university stakeholders, use of vision and

mission in determining the institutional focus, consistency of the university goals to the university mission and vision, and the influence of mission and vision in determining university growth plans. While the study by Jonyo et al. (2018) was based in Kenya, it only examined a single component of setting of the strategic direction within the context of private universities. The current study has a broader contextual and conceptual scope by examining public universities while examining other aspects of setting of the strategic direction.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a correlational research design. According to Pavel and Pavel (2023), a correlational design investigates the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable, focusing on how one variable influences the other. Kumari et al. (2023) note that descriptive correlational designs are particularly suitable when experimental designs are unethical or impractical. Given these considerations, this study adopted a descriptive correlational design to examine the influence of strategic leadership on the performance of public universities in Kenya.

Gawali (2023) highlights that correlational research allows for the observation of phenomena without interference, minimizing researcher bias and maintaining objectivity. This design does not involve manipulation of variables, making it ideal for this study.

Correlational research can be divided into explanatory and prediction designs (Rathore, 2023). Saldanha (2023) explains that explanatory designs explore how variables vary together, while prediction designs focus on the influence of an independent variable on a dependent variable. This study utilized a prediction design to investigate the impact of strategic leadership on university performance.

The study sampled the university management boards and senate members from 18 public universities whose details are available.

**Table 1: Target Population**

<b>Public Chartered Universities</b>	<b>Management Board Members</b>	<b>Management Board Members (%)</b>	<b>Senate Members</b>	<b>Senate Members (%)</b>
University of Nairobi	18	12.08%	240	23.91%
Tharaka University	6	4.03%	15	1.49%
Kaimosi Friends University	9	6.04%	38	3.79%
Garissa University	8	5.37%	9	0.90%
University of Embu	7	4.70%	20	1.99%
Rongo University	6	4.03%	14	1.39%
Kibabii University	15	10.07%	51	5.08%
Meru University	6	4.03%	39	3.89%
South Eastern Kenya University	9	6.04%	45	4.49%
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science & Technology	6	4.03%	63	6.28%
Maseno University	6	4.03%	77	7.67%
Kenyatta University	9	6.04%	102	10.16%

<b>Public Chartered Universities</b>	<b>Management Board Members</b>	<b>Management Board Members (%)</b>	<b>Senate Members</b>	<b>Senate Members (%)</b>
Technical University of Mombasa	7	4.70%	32	3.19%
Technical University of Kenya	7	4.70%	108	10.76%
Moi University	7	4.70%	80	7.97%
Masai Mara University	8	5.37%	35	3.49%
Cooperative University	9	6.04%	13	1.30%
Murang'a University	6	4.03%	23	2.29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>1004</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

The study adopted a multi-stage stratified random sampling approach, a sophisticated sampling method involving several stages and strata within the population. Multi-stage sampling entails categorizing the population into different stages or layers, such as university management board and senate members from 18 public universities in this case. The process involves dividing the population into strata based on specific criteria like the university and the level of authority (management board or senate), with each university forming its own category and containing separate groups for management board members and senate members. Within each university stratum, random sampling methods are then used to select participants; for instance, at the University of Nairobi, 18 management board members are chosen randomly from a pool of 240, and 93 senate members are selected from a group of 93. This process is replicated for each university in the sample, and the samples from all universities are aggregated to form the final sample for the study. Through multi-stage stratified random sampling, the study ensures representation of each university and its respective management board and senate members while minimizing bias through random selection techniques at each stage, thus providing a sample that accurately reflects the diversity of the entire population.

This method offers several advantages, notably ensuring greater representativeness and precision in the sample selection process compared to simpler techniques. In this study, the population was divided into distinct groups based on key criteria, such as the university management board and the senate, representing different levels of authority and responsibility within the university structure. Each group formed a separate stratum. Subsequently, within each stratum, random sampling techniques was applied to select participants. This ensures that every member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen for the sample, reducing bias and enhancing the generalizability of the findings. By employing multi-stage stratified random sampling, the study aims to capture the diverse perspectives and experiences present within the university management and senate, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

The sample size of the study was calculated using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula which is as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

where n is the sample size, N is the target population size, and e is the margin of error. According to Gathii et al., (2019), the Taro Yamane formula is easy to use in the study.

The sample size was thus calculated in the following manner;

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)} = \frac{1153}{1 + 1153(0.05^2)} = 297 \text{ respondents.}$$

The study used a sample size of 297 respondents.

The study further used the proportionate stratified random sampling design in the distribution of the sample members amongst the two strata.

**Table 2: Sample Size Determination**

Public Chartered Universities	Management Board Members	Calculations	Sample size	Senate Members	Calculations	Sample Size
University of Nairobi	18	18/1153 * 297	5	240	240/1153 * 297	61
Tharaka University	6	6/1153 * 297	2	15	15/1153 * 297	4
Kaimosi Friends University	9	9/1153 * 297	2	38	38/1153 * 297	10
Garissa University	8	8/1153 * 297	2	9	9/1153 * 297	2
University of Embu	7	7/1153 * 297	2	20	20/1153 * 297	5
Rongo University	6	6/1153 * 297	2	14	14/1153 * 297	4
Kibabi University	15	15/1153 * 297	4	51	51/1153 * 297	13
Meru University	6	6/1153 * 297	2	39	39/1153 * 297	10
South Eastern Kenya University	9	9/1153 * 297	2	45	45/1153 * 297	12
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science & Technology	6	6/1153 * 297	2	63	63/1153 * 297	16
Maseno University	6	6/1153 * 297	2	77	77/1153 * 297	20
Kenyatta University	9	9/1153 * 297	2	102	102/1153 * 297	25
Technical University of Mombasa	7	7/1153 * 297	2	32	32/1153 * 297	8
University of Kenya	7	7/1153 * 297	2	108	108/1153 * 297	27
Moi University	7	7/1153 * 297	2	80	80/1153 * 297	21
Masai Mara University	8	8/1153 * 297	2	35	35/1153 * 297	9
Cooperative University	9	9/1153 * 297	2	13	13/1153 * 297	3
Muranga University	6	6/1153 * 297	2	23	23/1153 * 297	6
	149		41	1004		256

Websites Various Universities (2024)

The study used the semi structured questionnaire where a self-administration method was used. Initially, the respondents were briefed about the study's objectives and significance. They then received the questionnaire along with clear guidelines to ensure they grasp how to respond

effectively. Understanding the demanding nature of their roles, timely reminders leading up to the designated drop-off date were scheduled. These reminders, whether sent through emails or phone calls, served as prompts for respondents to complete their questionnaires. To facilitate this approach, the researcher designated a secure location on campus, such as a specific office or a marked collection box, where respondents can confidentially deposit their completed questionnaires after completion.

The Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for the quantitative data analysis process. There are diverse processes that were undertaken in the quantitative data analysis process using SPSS including data editing, data coding, data entry and data analysis aspects. The first step in undertaking quantitative data analysis is the data editing process of the raw data collecting using structured questionnaires. The data editing is undertaken on the raw data for the purposes of elimination of any errors, inconsistencies, and outliers in the data (Agresti & Kateri, 2022). The data editing was undertaken on the questionnaires before they are coded into the SPSS software version 24. The data coding refers to a process in the data processing stage where the information in the structured questionnaire is replaced by a numerical code to represent that information. In this context, the data coding was undertaken by ensuring that the information in the structured questionnaire is adequately represented using numerical codes into the SPSS software. After the data coding process, the data entry process was undertaken. The data entry process was the process of keying the numerical codes to represent specific information in the questionnaire.

### **Results and Discussion**

This study examined the effect of strategic direction on university performance. The analysis employed simple linear regression to test the relationship between strategic direction and university performance, following the methodological framework outlined by Maina (2021). According to Gordon (2023), regression analysis provides a statistical framework for understanding how changes in predictor variables influence outcomes while controlling for other factors.

**Table 3: Model Summary**

<b>Model</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Adjusted R Square</b>	<b>Std. Error of the Estimate</b>
1	0.687	0.472	0.470	0.4789

The correlation coefficient ( $R = 0.687$ ) measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between strategic direction and university performance. According to Ho (2023), R values between 0.60 and 0.79 indicate strong positive relationships. The achieved R value demonstrates a robust positive relationship between the variables, supporting Kungu et al.'s (2020) findings of strong associations between strategic direction and organizational performance. This result suggests that improvements in strategic direction are strongly associated with enhanced university performance outcomes.

The coefficient of determination ( $R\text{ Square} = 0.472$ ) indicates that Strategic Direction explains 47.2% of the variance in University Performance. According to Yockey (2023), R Square values above 0.4 in social science research represent good explanatory power. This finding aligns with Ramadhan's (2022) research, which found that strategic direction explained a significant portion of performance variation in organizational settings. The substantial R Square value suggests that strategic direction is a crucial determinant of university

performance, though other factors not included in this model also contribute to performance outcomes.

**Table 4: ANOVA Results**

<b>Model</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Regression	49.559	1	49.559	216.234	0.000
Residual	55.440	244	0.227		
Total	104.999	245			

The ANOVA analysis demonstrates strong statistical significance of the regression model ( $F(1, 244) = 216.234, p < 0.001$ ). According to Sürücü et al. (2023), F-values exceeding 10 with corresponding p-values below 0.05 indicate strong model fit. The current results substantially exceed these thresholds, confirming that Strategic Direction significantly predicts University Performance. This finding aligns with Jonyo et al.'s (2018) research demonstrating significant relationships between strategic direction components and university performance outcomes.

**Table 5: Coefficients**

<b>Model</b>	<b>Unstandardized B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Standardized Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Constant	1.234	0.148		8.338	0.000
Strategic Direction	0.678	0.046	0.687	14.705	0.000

The regression analysis examines the study Hypothesis: Strategic direction has no significant effect on university performance ( $H_0: \beta = 0$ ). Following Hinton et al.'s (2023) framework and using a significance threshold of  $p < 0.05$ , the analysis reveals a significant positive relationship ( $\beta = 0.678, t(244) = 14.705, p < 0.001$ ), leading to the rejection of the hypothesis. The regression coefficient confirmed that Strategic Direction significantly predicted University Performance, indicating that a one-unit increase in Strategic Direction implementation led to a 0.678 unit increase in University Performance. These findings supported Jonyo et al.'s (2018) research demonstrating significant relationships between strategic direction components and university performance outcomes, while confirming that strategic direction was a crucial determinant of university performance, though other factors not included in the model also contributed to performance outcomes. According to Maina (2021), the unstandardized beta coefficient represents the amount of change in the dependent variable for each unit increase in the independent variable. Therefore, the coefficient of 0.678 indicates that a one-unit increase in Strategic Direction implementation leads to a 0.678 unit increase in University Performance, holding other factors constant. The statistical significance ( $p < 0.001$ ) provides strong evidence that this relationship is not due to chance.

The regression analysis examining the effect of Strategic Direction on University Performance revealed a strong positive relationship. The correlation coefficient ( $R = 0.687$ ) indicated a robust association between the variables, with Strategic Direction explaining 47.2% of the variance in University Performance. This substantial explanatory power aligned with previous research by Ramadhan (2022) and Kungu et al. (2020) regarding the importance of strategic direction in organizational settings.

Comparing these results with previous research reveals interesting patterns in the influence of strategic direction on organizational performance. Jonyo et al. (2018) found that mission and vision development led to a 0.867 unit change in organizational performance of private universities in Kenya, with an  $R^2$  of 0.796. The study's somewhat smaller coefficient (0.678) and  $R^2$  (0.472) might be attributed to the broader scope of public universities and more complex operational environments they face. This aligns with Kungu et al.'s (2020) findings in Nairobi County, where strategic direction showed a coefficient of 0.623 with an  $R^2$  of 0.766, suggesting that the impact of strategic direction may vary across different organizational contexts while maintaining significant positive influence.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis conclusively demonstrates that strategic direction significantly influences university performance in Kenyan public universities. With the strongest explanatory power among all dimensions, strategic direction emerges as the primary driver of university performance. The high implementation levels in vision adherence and strategic alignment indicate successful establishment of foundational strategic elements. However, the notably low stakeholder involvement reveals a critical gap in strategic planning processes. These findings indicate that while universities have successfully established clear strategic frameworks, they face significant challenges in engaging stakeholders and considering organizational weaknesses, potentially limiting the effectiveness of their strategic initiatives.

## **Recommendations**

Universities should implement comprehensive stakeholder engagement frameworks that integrate systematic feedback mechanisms and regular consultative forums into strategic planning processes. This should include quarterly stakeholder meetings, structured feedback channels, and formal involvement of key stakeholders in strategic decision-making processes. Additionally, institutions should develop systematic weakness assessment protocols, incorporating regular environmental scanning and competitive analysis to strengthen strategic planning processes.

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