

# **The social life of a strategy document**

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Degree of Doctorate in Business Administration  
(DBA)

2018

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# The social life of a strategy document

By

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Submitted in Fulfilment of the Doctorate in Business  
Administration

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Submitted to Waterford Institute of Technology  
June 2018

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my dearest friend, the inimitable Tariq Al-Ammadi.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the dedication and support of the WIT team for their consummate professionalism throughout the organisation and running of the DBA programme. I would especially like to acknowledge Dr Anthony Foley and Dr Seán Byrne for their support, guidance and kindness.

I offer my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr Ray Griffin for his incredible dedication to the fulfilment of this project's promise. For his constant availability to give feedback and discuss the work with me, considerably expanding my library, and introducing me to the world of conference publication, I am truly grateful. I would also like to acknowledge that working with Dr Griffin has improved my own professional practice by observing the standard of dedication he applies to his own work.

I would also like to thank the external and internal examiners of the paper series- Professor Joseph Coughlan, Mr. John Casey and Dr Malcolm Brady, for their helpful and constructive feedback on the betterment of this study.

I would like to thank my colleagues and the management of Bahrain Polytechnic who have supported this work. I would like to thank Sh. Hisham bin Abdulaziz Al Khalifa, Dr Mohamed Al-Aseeri, Dr Jeff Zabudsky, Sh. Ali bin Abdulrahman Al-Khalifa and Dr Hasan Al-Mulla who have trusted me to faithfully research the institution they have built and given their time and support to this project. I would also like to thank my colleague Clare Walsh for her support, encouragement, and review of my work.

To the combined O'Nolan, Al-Ammadi and MacLennan families I thank you for all the practical and emotional support which has enabled me to complete this study.

To my friends in Ireland, Bahrain and beyond, I thank you not only for your support and encouragement, but for your patient understanding of my frequent absenteeism in my dedication to this project.

## **Abstract**

Strategy documents are curious artefacts of the modern organisation. They represent formal strategic planning processes that have come under criticism, in part for not representing the emergent strategy path that organisations follow in practice. This criticism of formal planning's efficacy has coincided with a marked decline of research output in this field. This is at odds with the practice world of strategy, where formal strategic planning has become a hallmark of good governance. A Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) stream of research has emerged over the last fifteen years to counter this divide between theory and practice and has largely focused on the micro-practices of strategy making. This study is firmly rooted in this tradition of looking at the micro-practices of strategy work to offer novel explication on new ways of organising. This study follows the social life of a strategy document in an institute of higher education from its initial conception, writing, consultation and use, to understand the role these curious documents play in organisational life.

Philosophically, this work is inductive, phenomenological, and interpretive. As a process, it presents an ethnography of strategy making, an autoethnography of strategy consultations, a deconstruction of the strategy text produced as an output, and interviews with all those in and around the strategy document's life in the organisation. Themes of power and dramaturgy emerged in the exploration of strategy making that are further developed by reflecting on how the strategy interacts with organisational life. The tightly controlled and somewhat inauthentic strategy-making, reveals a surprising emancipatory aspiration that is reflected through the strategy in use. These findings question the the lack of focus on the concept of power in the strategy research agenda.

The work follows a single strategy document's life and therefore has a limited claim to generalisability, however, in presenting an all-encompassing view of strategy work through the strategy document, the work presents a totalising account of the role of this document in an organisation. This is a coherent account of the social life of a strategy document from in inception to its life in the organisation. The work adds to an emerging critical perspective on strategy practices and is of interest to managers and strategists alike in considering the process of writing, consulting and calling upon their strategy documents. The study adds a new perspective to the meaning of strategy work in the modern ideal of the university.

**Keywords: Strategy-as-Practice, Open Strategy, Higher Education Strategy, Ethnography**

## Table of Contents

Ethical declaration.....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Abstract .....	vi
List of tables .....	vii
List of figures .....	ix
List of abbreviations.....	x
<b>Section one .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction to the study .....	2
<b>Section two .....</b>	<b>27</b>
Preface to the paper series.....	28
Paper one .....	31
Paper two.....	60
Paper three.....	97
Paper four .....	140
<b>Section three.....</b>	<b>168</b>
Discussion and conclusions.....	169
<b>Section four .....</b>	<b>203</b>
Reflective log extracts.....	203
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>222</b>

## **List of Tables**

### **Section two – paper two**

1	Interviewees list	76
2	Committee list	78
3	Data sources	82
4	Types of records	85

### **Section two – paper three**

1	Binary opposites within goal definition	124
2	Showing the use of the word ‘student’	127
3	Exemplar essentialist statements	127

### **Section two – paper four**

1	Interviewees	146
2	Interviewee identifiers	147



## List of figures

### Section one – introduction

1	A map of Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf	10
2	Images of Bahrain Polytechnic’s campus	17

### Section two – paper one

1	Four approaches to defining strategy	38
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### Section two – paper two

1	The strategy document in context	72
2	Images from inside the strategy document	73
3	A staff photograph from a strategy event	80
4	Slides presented at an all staff meeting	81

### Section two – paper three

1	A presentation to the board of trustees	108
2	A facilitator commenting on the day	112
3	A table of participants	114
4	A flip chart from the consultation event	118
5	More flip charts from the event	120
6	Pages from the published strategy document	123
7	An excerpt from the strategy document	125
8	Colours of the strategy document	128
9	Pictures from the strategy document	129
10	Graphical elements of the strategy document	130
11	Strategic goal icons	130

### Section three – discussion and conclusions

1	Key conclusions by paper	173
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### Section three – Reflections

1	A screenshot of email conversations	217
2	Book buying	218
3	Book buying	219
4	Book buying	220
5	Book buying	220

## **List of Abbreviations**

This study discusses theory, practice, educational contexts, national and transnational bodies among others, and, as such contains a plethora of acronyms that to the best of the researcher's knowledge have been defined below:

ANT – Actor Network Theory

BHD – Bahraini Dinars

BNIM – Biographical Narrative Interview Method

BQA – Bahrain Quality Authority

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

CSB – Civil Service Bureau

DBA – Doctorate in Business Administration

DCEO – Deputy Chief Executive Officer

EDB – Economic Development Board

EGOS – European Group for Organisational Studies

EIASM – European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management

HEC – Higher Education Council

HEI – Higher Education Institute

LMRA – Labour Market Regulatory Authority

NQAI – National Qualifications Authority Ireland

NQF – National Quality Framework (Bahrain)

OOO – Object Orientated Ontology

PINZ – Polytechnics International New Zealand

SAP – Strategy as Practice

SCQFP – Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership

SQA – Scottish Qualifications Authority

SQF – Scottish Qualifications Framework

WIT – Waterford Institute of Technology

**Section 1:**  
**Research overview and context**

## **1.0 Introduction**

This thesis explores the social life of a strategy document in an organisation. Strategy documents have worked their way into being in almost all organisations. Their primacy represents a new prominent organising process. Presented publicly on websites and in print form, they purport to hold the organisation's strategy and vector of future development within their pages. As a construct, they are fundamentally paradoxical in that they intimate the presentation of a strategy, a formula for survival or success of the organisation, yet, this competitive advantage is not a secret. It advertises itself to the world, asks to be read and is then used to govern the organisation. This is perhaps the first sense that these documents have a hidden purpose. This study was conceived to excavate that hidden purpose and discover the role these documents play in organisational life.

This study follows the life of a strategy document created for a young university. This document, launched in September 2014, contains text, pictures, graphics and colour to describe and present the university to all those who may read it. As with most strategy documents in higher education it is available to all in soft copy online, with a select group of stakeholders and employees in possession of hard copies printed on high quality glossy paper. In the document's preface, it offers a story on how the document came into being, what is inside it and how it is intended to work. There are letters addressed to the reader from the CEO and Chairman of the Board of Trustees that speak to the environment and external context of the institution and how this new strategy document responds to that environment. Within this document there are five strategic goals that describe the core work of the institution and impose a number of key performance indicators around this work upon organisation. This study follows that document from its ideation, to creation and how it works in and around the organisation in the aftermath of its release. The purpose of this is to understand the role these carefully crafted documents fulfil in organisation life.

### **1.1 Introduction to the thesis structure**

This document both reports and represents the study. This section, which introduces the work and the final section report on the study, are written towards its completion and offer a survey of the study and its contribution. Between these two sections, produced towards the end of the study, there are four papers written over the course of this study that represent the central thesis of this study. These four papers were produced sequentially through the course of the study. Paper one was generated in April 2016 and reports on the conceptualisation of the research area. It sets the scene for the study, framing the work in the discourse on Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P). This discourse on S-a-P stayed with the study through the four papers presented and is one in which findings of concern are made about. Paper two, presented in April 2017, details the methodological approach, explaining its origins in calls for an ethnographic approach in S-a-P. Paper two detailed the use of multiple approaches to data collection (an assemblage of photos, videos, notes, documentation, emails, meeting minutes among others, alongside nine long-form interviews). As a research training programme, this, by necessity offers considerable detail. Paper three, presented in October 2017, presents the first phase of fieldwork and early analysis through an autoethnography of a consultation event, an ethnographic account of the strategy's making and writing, and a deconstruction of the strategy document produced by that process. That paper surfaced themes of dramaturgy and power in the making and conceptualisation of the strategy document. Paper four, presented in April 2018, details the second phase fieldwork and analysis through nine long-form interviews with those in around the strategy making and life in the organisation. The themes of dramaturgy emergent in the strategy document's making are reflected on in the interviews and extended to reflect on their meaning and presence in the strategy's overall life cycle. The analysis in paper four takes the themes of dramaturgy and power to reflect on the idea of the university, the context of this study.

Unorthodox as this might be, this is the nature of DBAs and perhaps all PhD documents that are both summative and formative, a mix of work in process and completed works. The work has stayed faithful to the original prospectus set out in paper one- to revisit the unthinkingly familiar quality of a strategy document, see it anew, trace its

production, explore it as an object in-and-of-itself, and how it has been used into something that has been consistently referred to in this study as “the social life” of a strategy document.

## **1.2 Introduction to the researcher**

The anthropological approach taken in this study makes it important to announce myself as the researcher, as it has implications for how the work was conducted. My academic formation started with a BSc in Computer Science, followed by an MA in International Security and Conflict studies looking at the emergence of terrorism and the internet (2006). My work life has been varied with roles held across multiple sectors, including cloud computing, consulting, teaching, quality management, strategic planning, academic management. Both my studies and career began in Ireland, from where I had the opportunity to work internationally from the Dublin headquarters of a major technology corporation. In 2009, during the national depression of post Celtic tiger Ireland and with a personal connection to Bahrain I took the opportunity to move there and took up consultancy work. In 2011 an opportunity came up to work in a new higher education institute, set up by the government of Bahrain to reform higher education in line with the nation’s 2030 vision. I started teaching management information systems and from there moved into various roles in academic management and strategic management in the institute over the last number of years. As a researcher, researching my own institute, this is insider research (Holian & Coghlan, 2013), but in a sense, despite a multitude of nationalities present in the institute, there is a cultural divide between the foreigner and the native. As such the work takes both an *emic* and *etic* perspective on the happenings presented in this study.

The study, like all anthropological work comes from a particular time and place. In this instance it is the Kingdom of Bahrain, from 2013-2018, a particular higher education institution, a particular set of people, events. Whilst context matters and must be surfaced early and often in reporting the work and its limitations, the contours of strategy making here bear a remarkable similarity to elsewhere and everywhere. Bahrain does come over as exotic to many, yet it is a remarkably globalised context

with multitude of nationalities in the university, indeed five nationalities are represented in the nine interviews conducted as part of this study. In presenting the work at various international conferences and throughout the DBA process the context falls away as individuals from various parishes of the world recognise the shared rituals and practices of strategy making.

In this section of the thesis, before presenting the four central papers to the study, a background to the research is first presented which puts into context the study of strategy documents. As the context in which this study takes place will be unfamiliar to many, a brief historical overview is covered alongside other critical contextual information such as economy, demography, and culture to place the study in context. The institute in which this study is set is further described to give the reader a feel for the people and place that form the main context of the study. This contextual background has two purposes, firstly to give a sense of place to the study's happenings, and secondly, to reveal the familiar in the context that could perhaps be an anywhere. As a background to the study the relationship between the study and professional practice are outlined beside the background to settling on this particular area of study. Finally, this section introduces the research aims of the study and its relevance to the literature.

## **2.0 Research background**

This work centres on the preparation and use of a strategy document in a university. As concepts, university and strategy, their entanglement is relatively new, yet both have long genealogies. As a background to this study of a strategy document in a university, the development of the concepts in use of strategy and the university are explored briefly below culminating in the meeting of the two.

### **2.1 Strategos to strategy documents**

From a genesis of secretive plans, the preserve of leaders of large armies, only made in times of war, for a survival of short foresight, strategic plans have morphed into



something quite different (Wittfogel, 1957). The beginning of paper one (in the next section of this document) traces this leap from war, to trade schools, to the burgeoning management classes, to an understanding that strategic plans are a fundamental part of corporate culture. In one of the most recent published polls on the level of strategic planning in the corporate world, strategic planning documents are now produced by over 80% of U.S. companies (Whittington and Cailluet, 2008). More than that there is growing trend of embedding and formalising strategic planning and implementation in a high level ‘Chief Strategy Officer’ role, suggesting that organisations are placing ever more resourcing behind these processes (Breene, Nunes and Shill, 2007). Reflecting on this transformation of strategy from the private domain to the public, strategy documents are no longer precious secrets of competitive advantage, but public statements of intent; a public presentation of the organisation. In a recent study of nascent organisations, the production of these sort of planning documents was found to have little impact on the profitability of the firm (Honig & Karlsson, 2004). Indeed, the ubiquity of strategic planning in non-profit and public- sector organisations suggests that profitability or competitive advantage is not the driving force behind the creation of these sorts of documents (Bryson, 2010). Like the larger effect of globalisation on national policy, strategic planning and the public documents produced by it can be seen to be subject to a mimetic impulse that seeks to reproduce the look and feel of an international standard (Massey, 2009).

## **2.2 The university**

The university at hand does not even hold itself out as a university, rather it fashions itself as the Bahrain Polytechnic. But writ large in that complexity is the idea of a Polytechnic as a second order of the idea of a university. The contemporary university takes its conceptual roots from medieval Europe where universities began to emerge in England, France, and Italy almost a thousand years ago. Many of the structures and processes that form part of the contemporary university are derived from these early institutions which evolved from Christian schools and monasteries (Byrd, 2001). These early universities evolved from the Church and kept the Church as sovereign. This system of patronage served the university well until the period of enlightenment and

reformation reduced the power of the Church and saw the development of many other types of seats of learning. In this shift the university's sovereign switched from Church to state. This change of sovereign increased the complexity of the relationship, as the state felt the Kantian obligation to protect academic freedoms but also an obligation to regulate the university (Kavanagh, 2011). With the state as sovereign the orientation of the university changed from its autotelic origins to active involvement in economy and society. The development of the American university system underwent a similar trajectory of development from the preserve of an elite few to a multi-disciplinary mass education system focused on the production of graduates for the economy (Lucas, 1994). Taking an active part in the economy brought further changes to the American university model, where corporations and their representatives took active interest in the activities and management of the university, often replacing members of the clergy on governing boards (Kavanagh, 2011). This line of development was followed in the main across Europe too. The greater presence of commercial interests in the university, combined with the growth of those attending, led in time to an increase in managerialism, consumerism and commodified higher education (Delanty, 2002). The massification of higher education throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought ever more stakeholders to the table to compete for the role of sovereign – state, industry, professions, students, and military. While the contemporary university is still funded largely by the state, it is an arm of the state with an ever-increasing need to account for its purpose to a wide stakeholder group.

### **2.3 Strategic planning in higher education**

The increased scrutiny placed on universities as they grew was responded to by universities taking elements of corporate culture into their self-management, namely financial and strategic management (Keller, 1983). The traditional university, elite in membership and only beholden to one sovereign had no need to communicate a strategy or account for itself in so many ways. The increase in the number of stakeholders to appease and the massification of higher education has coincided with the emergence of strategic planning as a coordinating process of the university. The first mention of strategic planning at a university wasn't until 1959 when a group of planners got

together at MIT to plan a rapid expansion of facilities (Dooris et al, 2004). Between then and now strategic planning has become a *de rigueur* part of communicating publicly about the university. Strategic planning has been a doctrinal element of new public management in higher education since the 1980s (Carter, 1988). By the 1980's new public management criticism of the university system as out of touch with both economy and society cast strategic planning as a revolutionary tool in helping universities change and adapt to market needs (Kotler and Murphy, 1981). While the origin and development of the university over nearly 1000 years had been separate and distinct from the economy, the university system was now linked to the market economy and judged on its performance on both driving economic growth and changing in line with labour market needs. In this sense it wasn't that the university was failing to change with the market economy so much as the market economy was an entirely new imposition on the university. Strategic planning was viewed as the tool to bring universities in line with their new mandate and offer transparency, value for money, and accountability to the public (Keller, 1983). In this way, strategic planning on the surface could be viewed as the primary tool for imposing new public management and managerialist agendas to the university system. Critics of strategic planning in higher education point to the erosion of academic freedom and the failure of universities to meet such a broad set of mandates, as proof that the corporatisation of higher education was a poorly conceived idea (Rhoads and Torres, 2006). The prevalence of this type of planning in developed countries has had a profound impact on developing countries who seek to recreate the education systems of more developed countries and who are, through aid conditions, mandated to produce national sectoral strategic plans. It is now quite difficult to find a university that has a website, but not a strategic document placed on it.

As the new public management agenda propagated in higher education and embedded strategic planning at its core, academia has resisted at every turn attempts to organise work in any way that could compromise academic freedom. Strategic planning by its very nature, could be viewed as counter to the ideals of higher education, forcing a market orientation as a priori condition of strategic development (Conway et al, 1994). This market orientation in strategic planning leads to a focus on customer, product,

service that inevitably then leads to efficiency drives often to the detriment of academic freedom, and truth (Birnbaum and Snowdon, 2003). There is a sense in that resistance that the ubiquity of strategic planning has led to conformity of strategy with lesser known institutions conforming to the strategies of top research universities without a care to context or mandate. Critics of this type of planning have suggested that the new mantra of the university could be imitate or perish (Dill, 2014).

These ancient concepts of university and strategy have collided, but both are not as they were conceived. Their meeting is often represented in document form, as a strategic plan published on the university website. As a document is the artefact of interest to this study, the next subsection outlines the interest in documents as a manifestation of strategic planning.

## **2.4 Documents**

In a way, it would be easy to dismiss these sorts of documents as bland window dressing and conforming to expected behaviours, however modern history has many powerful examples of the performative effects of humble documents. One such innocuous document, a train timetable, did by some accounts call the First World War into being. In A.J.P. Taylor's book (1969) on the origins of the first world war the author discusses the meaning in the mobilisation of troops, which for most countries meant that troops could be mobilised while diplomatic efforts continued, except in Germany's case where the Schlieffen plan conflated the mobilisation of troops and the start of war. To avoid having to fight a war on two fronts, the Germans had meticulously planned troop mobilisations by train, going through Belgium to strike a decisive blow against France before using the rail network to move troops to the second front against Russia. Any deviation from the set timetables would cause the plan to collapse and Germany would be defeated. The train timetable had set Europe on a path to war that could not be averted once Germany mobilised its troops. The planning of a future, formalised in a document, constrained the ability to act in the present lest it upset the future. While this interpretation does not give adequate credence to the complex events leading up to the war, it does give pause for thought on the performative nature of documents (Vaara et al, 2010).

The documents produced by strategic planning processes, devoid of strategies of competitive advantage and subject to the normative effects of globalisation, could be viewed as ineffectual outputs of modern global corporate culture. Yet, the potential performative effects of strategy documents combined with the curious effort that goes into their production gives pause for thought on their role in the modern organisation.

### 3.0 Context

As this study takes place in a newly established higher educational institute in a context that may be unfamiliar to many, this section outlines the historical context of Bahrain, the development of its economy, the push for national and educational reform and the context of the institute under study.

### 3.1 Placing the study in context



Fig.1 Map of Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf

This study takes place in the Kingdom of Bahrain, an archipelago of 33 islands in the Persian Gulf<sup>1</sup>. It is an island nation home to 1.3 million inhabitants, half of whom are non-nationals (CIO, 2012). At 765 square kilometres, it is one of the most densely populated countries on earth. Its history is one of a highly valued and thus deeply contested trading base (Mohammed, 2017). Bahrain (literally ‘two seas’) is the site of the ancient Dilmun civilisation, and was ruled in succession by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and later the Persian empire (Højlund, 1989). Bahrain was known as Tylos in the ancient Greek period and for a time had reinvented itself in the Hellenic tradition (Andersen, 2002). Bahrain was brought into the Islamic world in 628AD when ruled by the Al-Tamimi clan. From there, the islands passed from the Qarmatians, to the Uyunids, to the Usfurids, and then to the Jabrids (Kennet, 2005). In 1521 the Portuguese took control of the islands and built a number of defensive forts that still stand today as UNESCO World Heritage sites (Cole, 1987). From 1783 to 1820 the islands were controlled by a series of competing Arab tribes of the region, when in 1820 the British recognised the Al Khalifa as the rulers of Bahrain (Belgrave, 1952). A period of instability again ensued until 1868 when Bahrain became an official British protectorate with the Al Khalifa tribe recognised by Britain as its rulers (Onley, 2004) In 1926 the British put Bahrain under the *de facto* rule of Charles Belgrave who remained an advisor to the ruling Al Khalifa tribe until 1957 (Hay, 1955). In 1971, through a United Nations referendum, Bahrain declared independence and joined the United Nations and the Arab League later that year (Zahlan, 2016).

As a nation Bahrain has had a colourful history of layers of civilisations that have called the island home. Bahrain is at a crossroads of civilisations, not least through its history but also with the constant throughput of transient residents that make up more than half the population. In a way, the tumultuous political change and ever-changing population gives it the universal qualities of a *non-place* through the anonymity of transience and lack of shared meaning (Augé, 1995). This is of course subjective, an individual could derive meaning from a place that another does not, but as a context for this study, the lack of significance as a place to many suggests the idea of *non-place* and the confluence of cultures as substitutable for many developing cities.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here that the Government of the Kingdom of Bahrain refer to the Gulf as the Arabian Gulf.

### **3.2 Economy and government**

Prior to the discovery of oil in 1931 Bahrain was a major centre for pearl diving with its pearls considered the finest in the world (Belgrave, 1934). Post-oil discovery the economy has been largely dependent on oil and gas revenues extracted in Bahrain with the addition of a share of revenue from Saudi Arabia's Abu Saafa oilfield (O'Reilly, 1999). This revenue has funded a large, well paid, public sector where individuals are not subject to income tax. The limited oil reserves available to the country have encouraged a long-term diversification and modernisation strategy (Abdulla, 1999). Vision 2030, spearheaded by Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, has focused on developing the financial services sector, particularly around Islamic finance, and a renewed tourism sector among a number of key development areas for the economy (EDB, 2008). The country has had success developing a vibrant financial services sector, however Dubai has firmly become the regional financial hub. Tourism is also relatively successful; however, it is largely dependent on visitors from Saudi Arabia and other neighbouring countries who may well be attracted, in part, to Bahrain's considerably more liberal social environment. The ability of those in neighbouring countries to visit and spend in Bahrain is affected by the price of oil, and with regional economies in decline tourism has naturally been impacted (Bagaeen, 2017). Limited oil reserves have long prompted not only efforts at diversification, but also reform of the labour market, education and healthcare in bid to prepare for a post-oil world (Weber, 2011). Recent drops in the price of oil have pressured this further with relatively harsh austerity measures taken by the government in order to curb spending growth (Ulrichsen, 2017). Bahrain lives with a sense of the temporariness of the current source of its economic wealth and deeply feels the need to develop before the oil runs out. The constant state of developing to this end permeates the education landscape where higher education is still perceived as being in development. This development is seen as an essential bulwark against a changing global economy, one that will ease the transition from an oil export economy to a knowledge economy.

University strategy documents happen in a political context and are a political expression of the university. Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy headed by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa who holds a range of executive powers from the appointment of cabinet ministers and prime minister, as the commander of the armed forces, heading the judiciary, appointing the upper house (Shura Council) and the power to dissolve the lower house. Legislative powers are held both between the lower and upper house and can be issued by royal decree. The lower house, directly elected, reflects the religious, ethnic, and cultural divisions within the nation (prior to 2011) in a country that finds itself often affected by the regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Mabon, 2012). Post Arab Spring, the governmental status quo remained but among the many casualties of civil society was the withdrawal of the AlWefaq opposition bloc from parliament (Goldstone, 2011).

Much like this conception of government, organisations tend to split themselves into the operational technical function which often relies on international expertise and the executive management which connects to government. With exception of the reliance on international expertise, the same could be true for organisations the world over, where politics is the preserve of upper management. It is in this context that strategy documents are produced by management, often to communicate with government in some form of consultation with the rest of the organisation. These considerations imply a universal normative value to the creation of strategy documents in a political space. These universal qualities imply an element of *non-place* to the space in which strategy documents are created (Augé, 1995).

### **3.3 Culture and modernisation**

Bahrain is often considered the most culturally pluralistic society in the region, perhaps due in part to its ancient history as home to many civilisations (Zahlan, 2016). Islam is the dominant religion among Bahrainis, with most either following Sunni or Shia Islam, although there are minority Christian and Jewish citizenry. Shia Muslim Bahrainis are divided between the *Baharna* who are regarded as the original pre-Islamic inhabitants of Bahrain, and the *Ajam* who are ethnic Persians who immigrated to Bahrain in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sunni Muslim Bahrainis are divided between the *Arabs* who are



descended from the tribes of Arabia of which the ruling family belong, *Afro-Arabs* who are descendants of East Africans, and the *Huwala* (literally the returners) who are descendants of Sunni Muslims who migrated from Iran, in many cases generations after a migration to Iran from central Arabia. There are also Arab Christians and a small Jewish community along with naturalised Indians, Pakistanis, Balochis, Yemenis, and a small group of British and other naturalised European groups (Seikaly, 1994). To accommodate such a broad and diverse group of citizens living in such close quarters Bahrain has developed a more open, tolerant, and liberal culture when contrasted with other states in the region. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and recent past, tensions, spurred on by larger regional politics, have impacted development in the country. The common thread running through this history, is that Bahrain as a port-based city-state is a place of transience and muted public identities.

In 2008, Bahrain launched ‘Vision 2030’ as a master plan for national development as the country moved away from oil wealth to a modern knowledge economy (EDB, 2008). The plan itself acknowledges the imbalances created in the economy and society that has seen 4,000 graduates on average join the labour market each year with the private sector only creating 1,100 jobs annually that are suitable for graduates. Even within that demand, Bahrainis are not the preferred candidates for those roles due to a perceived mismatch between the skills required and the preparation given by the national education system and the perceived differences in work attitudes (Tamkeen, 2009). Since the discovery of oil, wealth distribution through the creation of public sector jobs has compensated for this. However, with the end of oil in sight, the government has heavily resourced a reform of the labour market and larger economy from a number of perspectives since 2008 (EDB, 2008). This has been hastened by the recent crash in oil prices which has demonstrated that while the national economy may be on the surface diversifying, it is buoyed by the downstream activity of regional economies which are dependent on oil and gas revenues (Vandyck et al, 2018).

Of the many reform initiatives set up during the 2000’s, the Economic Development Board (EDB) has focused on bringing foreign direct investment to the country, making the country more business friendly by lobbying for legislative and planning changes, and seeding reform in state bodies through a manager training and rotation programme.

Tamkeen was established in 2006 which was funded from a levy applied to businesses to employ non-nationals. The fund has given away 60-100m BHD every year on a range of activities funding Bahraini start-ups, funding professional training for individuals, and funding employment enhancement schemes. The Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) was also established in 2006 to regulate the employment of expatriates, work permits, visas, and manpower agencies. The institution in which this study is based is also a reform initiative from 2008 to produce 'work-ready' graduates to bridge the gap between labour market needs and graduate skills (Tamkeen, 2009). It is against this backdrop that the study was undertaken.

### **3.4 The education landscape**

Bahrain has a free, public education system from primary, secondary to third level. In the region it has the oldest established public-school system with the first boys primary school, AlHidaya Al Khalifia, established in 1919 (Bahgat, 1999). Prior to this schooling was primarily Quranic through the madrasa system (Misnad, 1985). Although a 20<sup>th</sup> century development, this journey from religious beginnings to structured secular education follows the contours of education development around the world.

Despite a fully funded education system, Bahrain is home to a heavily commodified education system made up of 63 different private fee-paying primary and secondary schools and 13 private universities (Costandi et al, 2018). The proliferation of private primary and secondary schools is due in part to the instruction being given through Arabic which places a barrier for expatriate children to attend and is less attractive to middle class Bahraini parents who want their children to achieve fluency in English. In addition to this, the establishment of the Bahrain Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA), who inspect all educational institutes in the Kingdom against international benchmarks and publish the results publicly, have highlighted the poor quality of instruction and the low level of educational attainment achieved across many public schools. In the first round of tertiary level inspections the BQA gave a finding of 'no confidence' to two programmes and 'limited confidence' to two further programmes (BQA, 2009). Like many other countries, Bahrain has chosen to

benchmark its education system against international standards and institutions, buying into the international knowledge economy.

These issues, combined with increasing moves for private institutions to ‘double badge’ their degrees with western university credentials led to the establishment of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) under the BQA whose role is to establish a consistency and equivalency on level and credit value across the Kingdom that provides international transferability (Albalooshi, 2013). As a system it was based on the Scottish Qualification Authority’s (SQA) level framework with assistance in its development and implementation been given by both the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQFP) and the National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI). It is fair to say that the Bahraini education system has followed a similar thrust of development to most countries in trying to establish a functioning public education system, attract international education providers, and mirror changes happening internationally (academic and professional embedded accreditations, qualification frameworks, inspection bodies, international testing benchmarks etc). In following these generic trends in education development, it is in a sense like many developing countries, simulating higher education. This simulation is driven by the need to build a reserve army of graduates, who it is hoped are the foundation for a future knowledge economy. It is against this background that the strategic plan is written – for the institution the future needs, but not necessarily the one that is there today. It could be argued though that that holds true for all conceptions of the future- an expression of our current hopes and fears projected to a time that has not yet occurred (Augé, 2015).

Bahrain has relatively recently come to higher education with its first university established in the mid-1980s. The development of higher education in the country has coincided with the economic imperative to pivot resource wealth into knowledge capital. The two state initiatives are the University (30,000 students) and the Polytechnic (3,000 students), replicating the traditional division found across the OECD of research led universities and practice-orientated polytechnics. These categories are of course porous with all UK polytechnics becoming universities a generation ago, the reorganisation of German applied universities, and the re-designation of many Chinese universities to Polytechnics. Beyond these two formal government initiatives, there is a

rich mix of international, private and charitable higher education providers who have taken an interest in Bahrain. Apart from the main two state initiatives, there are 14 other international private universities operating in the Kingdom (including Royal College of Surgeons Ireland), with some operating as non-profit and others operating as commercial businesses. Within these institutions there are a further seven international universities offering programmes or parts of programmes within these institutions. These include Bentley University, DePaul University, Hull University, Kent University, London School of Economics, University of Strathclyde, and University of Wales. While the two main state institutions do not replicate the offerings of the other and cooperate on contributing to the national higher education strategy, the private institutions are regulated by a separate authority (The Higher Education Council), where there is considerable overlap on the programmes offered. The final contextual backdrop to this study is the newest government higher education institute – Bahrain Polytechnic.

### **3.5 Bahrain Polytechnic**

This study is situated in one of the public education reform initiatives of the 2000's – Bahrain Polytechnic. The institute was established in 2008 by Royal Decree partly in response to a national work skills survey which showed industry frustration with the lack of practical work skills demonstrated by tertiary graduates and the high level of training and development that had to be invested in Bahraini graduates (AlDaylami et al, 2015). The institute was envisioned to produce professional and enterprising graduates that aspired to international ('world-class') standards, contextualised for Bahrain. To establish Bahrain Polytechnic, the government of Bahrain issued an international tender for a partner to develop the institute. The government short-listed candidates from New Zealand's PINZ group, Polytechnics Canada, and the Irish Institutes of Technology. Ultimately, PINZ won the tender and the institute was established under the Polytechnic model with a core management and teaching team from New Zealand. The Polytechnic was given an aging campus (the former home of the public University of Bahrain) in Isa Town and an annual budget starting in 2008.



Fig. 2 Images of Bahrain Polytechnic's campus

In its start-up, the opening date was moved forward by one year seeing the institute taking students from 2009 into the foundation (degree preparation) programme. This haste led to the institute purchasing a number of qualifications from a range of institutes in New Zealand, Australia, and the U.K. which were then contextualised to the local environment and broken up to include the embedding of English language and 'employability' skills (AlDaylami et al, 2015). Part of striving for 'world class' standards led to a major international hiring drive, primarily in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and the U.K., of industry professionals with higher qualifications to teach on the undergraduate programs after undergoing a tertiary teaching and learning qualification on site. It is now an institute of over 2000 full time undergraduate students taught by a teaching faculty of 162, 70% of whom are international. At the time of creation there was no national or regional qualification framework so one was created by the institute to govern course development, based on the Scottish Qualification Framework (SQF) and later transferred to the newly developed NQF.

There are nine programmes offering Bachelor degrees through English in Business, Marketing, Management, Banking and Finance, Accounting, Human Resources Management, International Logistics Management, Electronic Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, ICT Networking, ICT Programming, ICT Databases, Information Security, Web Media and Visual Design. All qualifications were based on the economic areas for development identified in Vision 2030 and national labour skills research. Each degree programme is guided by an industry advisory board and has professional

accreditations embedded within the degree cycle (e.g. ACCA). While there are plans to both expand the number of programme seats on offer and to offer higher level qualifications, currently the majority of the student body are school leavers. This has posed challenges to maintaining international standards in the degrees as there is a considerable gap in the English, Maths and ICT skills in school leavers and the entry requirements of the degree programmes. Currently 70% of students are enrolled in a year-long foundation programme to reach the entry level requirements of the degree programmes. In a region with high graduate unemployment (Forstenlechner, 2010), graduate employment rates are notably high. Yet, there are demands for further qualifications for those in industry without any formal education qualifications and professional qualifications in niche areas. The institute to date has not been able to tackle these demands due to the structure and regulation of higher education whereby there is no ability to offer recognition of prior learning and experiences or transferability of vocational credits to higher education.

The institute has brought together a multitude of nationalities to recreate an idea of modern higher education in knowledge economies to prepare for a future without oil. Over its first ten years of operation, the institute has created a broad set of undergraduate programmes, applied research and entrepreneurial supports. It is in this environment that documents of principles and vision take on particular importance, that perhaps are part of cultural memory in institutes that have been allowed to develop slowly over time with a more homogenic staffing profile. If Bahrain can be ascribed elements of *non-place* (Augé, 1995), the institution where this study is an extreme manifestation of this concept where a transient tribe of academics are banded together under generic banners of ‘world-class’ and ‘excellence’. Bahrain Polytechnic could be a young institute anywhere in the world, chasing international standards and recognition.

#### **4.0 Relationship to professional practice**

The study follows Bahrain Polytechnic’s 2014 strategy document that the researcher was party to the development and implementation of. As this study follows the researcher’s involvement in the process, the relationship of this study and its aftermath to professional practice is laid out below.

I started working in the institute in September 2011 as a member of teaching faculty, using my experience in technology and business to teach on the Bachelor of Business's Management Information Systems and Project Management courses. The following year I took a role with the Dean of Business as the Quality Manager, overseeing six undergraduate programmes. In that role I managed the first BQA programme audits of the institute achieving a milestone for the institute of all programmes receiving 'confidence' in the standards of curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning. I had the opportunity to bring in an international validation of the programmes by panels comprised of international academia and local industry figures to assure the programmes were both of an international standard and fit for purpose in the local market. In 2014 I got involved in the development of a new strategy for the institute which was just about to graduate its first cohort and had transitioned from the original New Zealand management team to a local management team operating under the Civil Service Bureau (CSB). From this initial involvement in the planning process of a new strategic plan for the institute, I transitioned to a role as the CEO's adviser for strategic planning and later for academic affairs. In my role I have been involved with the creation of strategy documents, their consultation and their use over the past four years. Through my experience of creating and managing strategy documents I have had the privilege to be asked to write and get involved with other governmental strategic planning processes and documents, particularly in the area of education access reform. The opportunity afforded through the DBA process to pause for thought on one's professional practice, question it, examine and analyse it have added hugely to my understanding on the creation, consultation and use of these types of documents.

As the writing of this thesis has explored how strategy documents are written, how consultations are conducted, and how strategy documents 'live' in an organisation post-creation, this has allowed reflections on the significance of each of these organisational practices and signposted some opportunities for improvements to my own practice in the future. As managers, we can often approach our professional practice in 'auto-pilot' conforming to the norms and expectations of our sector. If a strategy document is to be the blueprint of organisational efforts post-publication, it seems instinctively unnatural that the writing or management of that process be delegated to a combination of all

those consulted with in the development process and an organisational planning function. As I look into an immediate future of my own organisation that are winding down a five-year strategy and looking to start a new cycle of strategy development, consultation and implementation in a significantly altered environment, I will be looking anew at the significance of each stage in the process to the organisation and to the external stakeholders.

## **5.0 Background to research topic**

This section covers the development of this study's line of inquiry through the DBA structure. In starting the DBA, the intention was that the thesis area would focus around strategic planning and its efficacy, related to my professional practice. Throughout my career I had observed plans being made and the strategy being pursued either diverging quite quickly or the environment changing so radically as to render the plan useless. In some cases, well-crafted strategies were left to sit on a shelf while life went on around them. In all cases, I observed this as some fault of either implementation approach or forecasting or management. I was determined that I would uncover what kept a plan 'alive' and useful in an organisation so I could implement this approach in my organisation. Initially, from this approach I envisaged an action-learning research project where I could trial and evaluate different approaches to strategy implementation to develop the most effective approach. It was during the broad literature review conducted as part of the development of paper one that I started to question this approach and started to consider the semiotic place of strategy work in the organisation. In a review of the classical strategic planning literature from Ansoff (1991), to Mintzberg's critique of planning, right up to the absence of modern academic writing on strategic planning, one theme overrode all else – strategic planning just wasn't very good (Mintzberg, 1994). It couldn't predict the future and therefore was not functional. In relation to this criticism, strategy research, as a discipline, could also be observed to be in a general decline with ever-decreasing publications in the field (Wolf and Floyd, 2017). However, strategic planning is an expensive, time-consuming activity within an organisation and if there were not some form of functionality to it then certainly profit-making organisations would seek to reduce their investment in strategic planning



processes. However, research on the prevalence of strategic planning in organisations suggest that this is an area of growth in practice, if not in academic interest. From this point I started to think about the greater significance of organisations producing these kinds of documents and going through these processes not from a purely functional efficacy perspective. In doing this I started to read intently on the emergent stream of literature in the Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) area which sought to explore the people, processes, and praxis of strategy in an effort to understand it from the inside out, feeding academic literature from practice knowledge and experience (Whittington, 2006). From this understanding the study was conceived – strategy was not necessarily broken, but perhaps its broader significance needed to be considered in assessing its role in the modern organisation. This study is to follow the ‘social life of a strategy document in an organisation’ to understand the role it plays in organisational life.

## **6.0 The research aims**

The conceptualisation reached in paper one is that this study is exploratory in nature and so, takes an inductive approach. The study follows a strategy document from the first idea on its existence, through to its writing, consultation, approval, and use in the organisation. The aim is to explore the life of a strategy document with the aspiration of offering a novel perspective on its continued use and significance in organisational life. As the study is explorative, there are no research questions and objectives to be tested, however, the study has a number of objectives whose function is to guide the exploration along the major points in the strategy document’s life cycle. These are:

- To deconstruct a strategy document and the process by which it was created.
  - o Perform a fine-grained analysis of the narrative within the strategy document.
  - o Explore the evolution of the document’s rhetoric through the process of creation.
  - o Analyse process of creation in relation to the narrative output.
- To explore the social life of a strategy document after its creation.
  - o Discover the network of actors interacting with the strategy document.

- Explore the relationships formed with the document's rhetoric

These guiding objectives are used in the study to explore, through multiple methods, the writing of a strategy document, the consultation of the strategy document, a deconstruction of the document produced, and an understanding of the document and its mode of action through the eyes of all those in and around its life in the organisation. This study is conceived as inductive, and as such the research objectives given at the outset are guides for exploration, rather than a set of hypotheses to be answered in its conclusion.

## **7.0 Relevance**

There are strong calls from the literature for further work in the Strategy-as-Practice field, particularly related to socio-material artefacts, agency, power, performativity and a broader understanding of strategy actors (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Some of these have branched out into their own areas of research such as Strategy-as-Discourse (Balogun et al, 2014) or Open Strategy (Hautz et al, 2017). Exploring the significance of a strategy document and its processes in an organisation answers that call within literature but also has direct relevance to my professional practice related to creating and using these documents.

Each of the papers in the series has been presented to internal and external examiners at each stage who have added their advice for improvement and development at each colloquium. The feedback overall from this process has been that the topic is a highly engaging one as most have been through a process of institutional planning if not from a management perspective then from a consulted audience perspective. Despite the differences in contexts, the happenings described and analysed in the paper series have been both familiar and relatable to all those who have been through a strategy planning process. Within the study there are areas of novelty in both methodology and findings that contribute to theory and practice.

The inductive nature of the study and its relationship to an emerging area of research have pushed me to present the work more broadly than the DBA colloquiums. I was

accepted to EGOS 2017 in Copenhagen, in a sub-theme chaired by Richard Whittington, Leonard Dobusch and Georg Von Krogh, with a paper that encompassed the initial findings and analysis presented in paper three. The panel's feedback, advice, and encouragement all helped shape that paper and the following paper four from the series. I have been accepted to EGOS 2018 in Tallinn, with a paper with the data set from paper four and exploring some of the discussion from section three of this document. I have also been accepted to University of Liverpool's Ethnography Symposium (2018) at Copenhagen Business school with a paper on the contribution of the study to ethnography. The overall feedback and interest in the work to date suggest that this area of research is not just relevant in my professional practice but has a larger relevance to the academic community and practice-based researchers.

## **8.0 Thesis outline and structure**

The overall thesis document is structured into four main sections. This section, section one, gives background and context to the study. Section two is comprised of four separate papers presented as part of the DBA examination processes. Paper one of the series presents the conceptualisation of the problem space to be researched, paper two covers the methodological choices made in the study and their philosophical underpinnings, paper three introduces the first phase of data in the study and some initial findings, while paper four concludes the second phase of data and analysis. Section three of the thesis presents a discussion and conclusion of the findings, including a reflection on the contribution of the work to both theory and practice. The final section, section four, presents the reflexive practitioner journey undertaken as part of the DBA process.

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## **Section 2:**

### **Cumulative paper series**

## **Preface to the paper series**

As part of the DBA process, each paper completed towards the final thesis is examined by an internal WIT examiner and an external examiner. At each paper presentation the examiners offer commentary and feedback on the work presented. The researcher is then given a period of time to address the examiner commentary before approval of the paper that is locked in place as part of the final thesis. As the examiner feedback or other factors may impact on the course of the work, the researcher is offered the opportunity to add a preface to each paper to add context to changes made to the study in the DBA process. This study has not undergone major conceptual changes between the papers presented in this section of the thesis and therefore no prefaces are put between the papers presented. However, to add context to the examination process that each of the four papers below have been through, a summary of examiner feedback and how it was addressed is included for each of the papers as a preface for the entire paper series.

## **Paper one**

After the presentation of the first conceptual paper, the examiners made two comments relating to the definition of what ‘strategy’ encompasses, firstly that the paper assumed that a strategy document was a fixed expression of an organisation’s priorities and perhaps this was not reflective of modern practice and secondly, there is often a written strategy and an unwritten strategy that combine to form the de-facto organisation strategy. In response, the paper was clarified to acknowledge that the strategy document does not necessarily encompass an organisation’s strategy, but that the study is concerned with the phenomenon of strategy documents and their role in the organisation.

The examiners commented that a significant amount of discussion was reserved for ‘defining strategy’ and classical strategy which has only limited relevance to the ultimate research objectives. The discussion of S-a-P needed to be expanded and an early introduction of research objectives needed to be worked into the paper. This was addressed in the rewrite of the paper for final submission. The examiners also



commented that the context of the study, in particular the country and organisation type needed to be further clarified which was addressed in the revised paper.

In expanding the S-a-P elements of the paper, further focus was put on increasing the references to empirical studies of the practices of strategy-making that form the core interest of this study. Other minor comments on defining the terminology used in the paper and the currency of the literature base were addressed in the re-submission of paper one.

### **Paper two**

The overarching feedback from paper two was:

*Good clear and generally well written paper. The argument and critique are at an appropriate level. There are some clarifications required of a minor nature to justify decisions made, and to discuss research ethics. A significant effort has gone into this paper and the author does display a considerable understanding of the 'methodological gymnastics' that will need to be performed in a study of this nature. The approach being proposed is novel: this provides opportunity to make a tangible contribution but is not without its risks. It was an interesting and stimulating read.*

*Relatively vague research objectives. Bring the objectives forward from the paper 1 more explicitly.*

To improve the paper, it was suggested that the limitations of the proposed methods were more clearly stated, greater clarity on the BNIM method used, and more in-depth focus on the ethical considerations of the study's methodological choices. These three areas were addressed in full in the final submission of paper two.

### **Paper three**

The examiners commented on a number of areas of paper three, firstly that in interpreting consultation, the paper had used improv comedy as a potential interpretation of the day's events. As part of preparing for paper three, a paper was

being prepared for EGOS on the open strategy track at the same time. When reviewing the data initially elements of an unstructured dramaturgy started to emerge. Using comedy improv as a lens to examine interactions during open consultation provided a useful development tool for this paper in that it revealed an unspoken power structure at play in what are pitched as open, liminal spaces. In response to the examiners, it was recognised that the interpretation required more development if it was to be included as part of the theory base. To that end the comedy improv lens was removed from the paper in favour of a broader dramaturgical metaphor which still captures the essence of that unspoken power structure.

The second area of feedback centred on the referencing of multiple theorists, rather than choosing one and then bring that singular theory base through the analysis of papers three and four. In response to the examiners comments, the use of theory was justified as appropriate to the methodological choices. Being faithful to the inductive approach means approaching theory in this way, and the challenge is always to be assured and commanding in using a wide range of theory to the explore the topic- without erring or being superficial. The exploratory interpretations through the lens of mimesis, liminality, performativity and dramaturgy have allowed a sense of unspoken power to emerge as a clear theme that is refined in paper four and explored in participant interviews. It should be noted the examiners did not pick up on any errors or misuse of theory in the paper, indicating that theory was used appropriately, even if quite liberally. Further genealogical information was added to the paper as the theories emerge, to demonstrate the genuine engagement with the theory bases cited as part of paper three's development.

#### **Paper four**

The examiners main area of feedback concerned the presentation of the interview data in the context of the overall study. The concern was that in isolation, it could appear as though the study rested on nine interviews alone. The paper was updated in response to this to indicate that the data from nine interviews presented in paper four, are only one of the method boxes in a much broader study. The nine interviewees selected

represented the sum of perspectives of all those in and around the strategy document's life cycle.



## Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA)

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Supervisors: Dr. Ray Griffin and Dr. Chris O’Riordan

Date: 23 / 07 / 2016

### **RESEARCH PAPER SERIES**

#### **Paper 1:**

#### **CONCEPTUAL PAPER**

### **“The social life of a strategy document”**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this project is to try to understand the continuing importance of strategic plans in organisations. This paper is a conceptual paper; it introduces the theory around strategy documents, tracing their introduction and propagation through modern organisations, the emergence of a critique of their efficacy, and the current state of the art literature on strategic documents in organisations. The paradigm of strategy as planning in organisations, heavily criticised by Henry Mintzberg, is countered by the burgeoning Strategy-as-Practice research stream. As an emerging field, Strategy-as-Practice is only beginning to explore the more performative and rhetorical aspects of strategy documents in organisational life. Despite the critique of their performance, strategy documents are still important artefacts in organisations. This paper sets the scene for an inductive, explorative study on the life of a strategy document in an organisation from construction to consumption. In doing so aspires to improve our understanding of the mode of action of these types of documents.

## **1.0 Introduction**

From the earliest human history work has required organisation and cooperation. Many of the greatest feats of the ancient world were accomplished through the organisation of mass labour such as the great pyramids of Egypt, the irrigation of Mesopotamia, and the Roman aqueducts (Wittfogel, 1957). The rise of powerful civilisations gave way to the rise of large armies to protect and expand their societies. The rise of large armies necessitated the development of formal strategies to seize and sustain advantage. We could draw a line between these ancient societies and our own and view our large corporations and strategic plans as the natural evolution of mass labour and military strategos. Except the sheer size and number of large organisations is without precedent and the involvement of society in their daily operations is absolute (Toffler, 2013). In historical terms, our organisations are new and knowing how to manage and organise modern workers around common objectives presents new challenges. (Perrow, 2009).

The advent of these large organisations has created a class of professional managers employing formal planning to manage the increasing complexity of running large organisations in post-industrial economies (Knights and Morgan, 1990). There is much criticism of the efficacy of formal planning to direct the work of organisations, particularly in relation to its ability to insure against the future in an increasingly unstable world (Mintzberg, 1994). However, despite doubts to its economic benefit, formal planning endures as a practice in the majority of organisations (Whittington and Cailluet, 2008). As a professional manager in an organisation one can find much literature nowadays on the construction of strategy documents and to a lesser extent advice on the best method of execution through use of formulaic tactics (Sull, Homkes and Sull, 2015). Using these prescribed tools and tactics presents a challenge to the modern manager as each are performed in a different organisational context, with its own unique complexities, which can mean what works in theory does not in practice and vice versa (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). Acknowledging the continued practice of formal strategic planning and the challenges this presents to the modern manager, the

emerging Strategy-as-Practice area has examined how strategies are constructed in practice, how strategic tools are put to use, and how strategies are consumed and executed in context in an effort to shed light on this enduring facet of organisational life (Whittington, 2011).

The emerging stream of Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) research is only starting to explore the more performative, rhetorical aspects of strategy documents in organisational life to better understand their mode of action (Laine et al., 2016). As a manager in an organisation, I am actively involved in constructing strategic documents and equally faced with the challenge of implementing their edicts, often in a context much changed from the original conception. I have worked as a manager in both the public and private sectors and across many countries, and in all contexts having a strategic plan has been an essential accessory of organisational life and been seen to follow the plan in rebellion to changing circumstances a necessary part of work life. I have also seen first-hand how strategy documents can confer power on those who use their language, can create common organisational perceptions, and can both hinder and help collaboration based on those shared perceptions. Through experiencing different processes of strategy creation and different effects of a strategy document on an organisation, I have developed a personal curiosity around how such documents are created and how they live within an organisation and if the approach to creation impacts the document's mode of action within an organisation. That is not to say that a strategy document encompasses the strategy of an organisation, as it is more often than not a fusion of the strategy document and emergent strategy that surfaces from changing circumstances (Mintzberg, 1994). However, I am interested in the creation of strategy documents and the relationships formed with them, particularly as circumstances shift over time.

This research intends to explore the continuing importance of strategic documents in organisations by examining the life of single strategy document within an organisation. This is the first paper of an inductive, explorative study of the creation of a strategy document and its life after creation in a single organisation. Key to this study will be an exploration of the strategy documents' language through fine grained analysis of its rhetoric which challenges and explores the underlying assumptions behind the language

used (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). As an inductive study, in place of a conceptual framework, two main research objectives are proposed to guide the exploration of the life of a strategy document (further sub-objectives are provided in section 4.4):

- To deconstruct a strategy document and the process by which it was created.
- To explore the social life of a strategy document after its creation.

As an introduction to this study, this paper intends to review the theory relating to strategy documents within organisations, the break between theory and practice, the rise of the Strategy-as-Practice area, and finally where and how this study fits into the Strategy-as-Practice research agenda. This document is organised into three main sections, in the next section there is an exploration of the major schools of thought within traditional strategy research. The following section covers the substantive critique of the strategy as planning paradigm using Mintzberg's planning fallacies (1994) as a frame for this critique to date. Subsequently, the emergence of the Strategy-as-Practice stream of research is explored including gaps for further work within the area. The document concludes with an overview of the gaps in this research area in relation to the proposed study and context.

## **2.0 Defining strategy**

This paper explores the theory around strategy documents in organisations. Before exploring further it is important to look at the concept of strategy in human history to understand where these documents originate. Many texts on the history of strategy trace the military strategos of ancient Greece, through to the strategies of the Napoleonic wars, and finally to the application of strategies in modern management, noting the common use of the word 'strategy' throughout (de Wit and Meyer, 2004). Strategy was not invented by a military on particular certain date, but constitutes a primal mode of action for humans – the forming of coalitions and the use of deception towards an end (Freedman, 2013).

Strategy has always existed, but its form differs quite considerably depending on the era and domain (Freedman, 2013). Post world war two, burgeoning industry across Europe

and North America required managers to manage the increasingly complex set of responsibilities and relationships that come with large organisations. In parallel a revolution in business school education was taking place to move them from lowly trade schools to places of academic rigour to educate the new class of manager required by the labour market (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005). The gentrification of business education, particularly in the aftermath of the Ford Foundation report, led to formal strategic management education and firmly embedded the strategic plan as a key accoutrement of the modern organisation (Datar, Garvin and Cullen, 2011). The approach of strategy as formal planning, centred on a strategy document, has gone through several evolutions of thought from post world war two to now. Nevertheless, these strategy documents still form the core of the modern approach to strategic management (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013). The next section will look at the dominant views in strategy literature and the role these documents have played in organisations over the last 60 years.

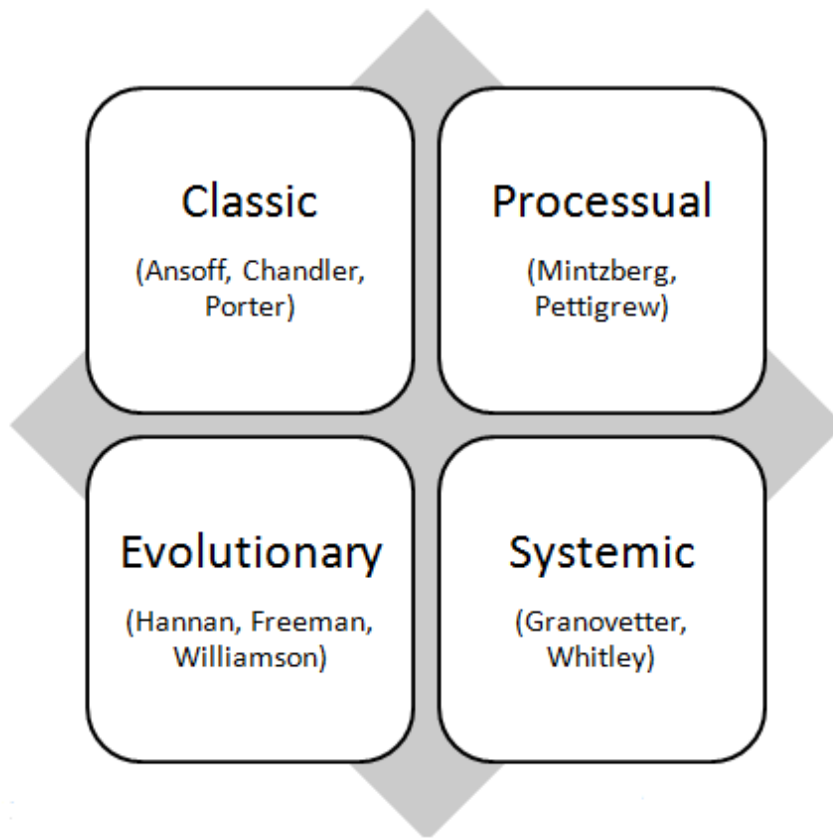
## **2.1 Schools of strategic thought**

Whittington (2001) identifies four generic approaches to strategy in the literature and links each to the time period in which they were first popularised - classic, processual, evolutionary, and systemic. The classic approach to strategy emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s in newly revamped business schools. The key proponents, Ansoff, Chandler, and Porter were heavily influenced by military strategy and economics. For them strategy was about gathering enough intelligence to develop rules to guide decision making (Ansoff, 1979). In the 1970s academics such as Mintzberg and Pettigrew championed the processual school where formulation and implementation were indistinguishable. Strategic planning documents were important but they had to be continuously refined as the organisation learned. In the 1980s a new stream of strategy research emerged, dubbed the 'evolutionary' school due to the influence of evolutionary



biology and economics on their research. Academics such as Williamson posited that strategies are nothing without a sound economic rationale informed by accurate intelligence (Williamson, 1991). The final school is known as the 'systemic' school due to the influence of sociology in their thinking. The systemic school proposed that there could be no universal approach to making and using strategy documents as each strategic challenge was embedded in its own social context (Whittington, 2001: 37). All four schools find commonality in their focus on the results or the performance of strategy with particular focus more often than not on the economic output of strategy.

The promise of strategy is to link our day to day actions to our vision of the future, providing a clear and simple path between the two. As Drucker defined it a "continuous process of making present entrepreneurial (risk-taking) decisions systematically and with the greatest knowledge of their futurity" (1974: 125). As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed and the nature of organisations changed building 'futurity' into strategic documents became a more elusive aim. The oil crises of 1973 and 1979 highlighted the difficult relationship with futurity in formal strategic planning and sparked a robust debate on the value of formal planning to organisations that is re-ignited each time there is a failure to predict disruptive change (Bradfield et al., 2005). Despite this, strategy documents still remain as an important part of organisational life.



**Figure 1 – Four approaches to defining strategy adopted from** (Whittington, 2001).

### **3.0 Critique of strategy**

Strategy predicts the future to plan for it, building a future based on past experiences and current fears (Augé, 2015). The approach to strategic planning in the 1970s (and indeed in part today) did not account for the increasingly unstable and complex world within which managers and corporations decide and act in. Classical strategy giants like Igor Ansoff were mocked by emergent strategists such as Mintzberg, for the supposed arrogance of the ‘plan it and it will happen’ approach to strategy (Pettigrew, Thomas and Whittington, 2001). In his seminal piece of work ‘*The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*’, Mintzberg took aim at what he saw as the three main fallacies of strategic planning which still provide a compelling frame to examine the pitfalls of planning. It is interesting to note that despite the veracity of the critique, it has not diminished the role of strategic documents in organisations (Freedman, 2013).

### **3.1 The fallacy of predetermination**

Formal planning processes depend on the ability to predict the future so as to plan around it. There are two types of futures available to planners, continuous and discontinuous. In the first planners confidently use forecasting and scheduling to plan out the future using past experience as the blueprint. This works well when planners catch the midpoint of a trend, of which they may or may not understand the context, but it allows them to predict based on the past (Makridakis, Hogarth and Gaba, 2009). As the proposed study will explore the creation of a predicted future in the strategy document and the aftermath in reality, it is hoped to gain a greater understanding of how the two coexist.

In a longitudinal study of planning jobs, it has been shown that the demand for ‘forecasting’ has an inverse correlation with the increase of environmental turbulence, that is to say it is recognised that forecasting has limited value in a world of increasing change (Whittington et al., 2016). The second type of future that troubles predictability is a discontinuous one, where an event brings about a significant change to the environment that could not be imagined or predicted from the past. Classical strategy scholars insist that strategy can be moved into a ‘quasi analytical’ science where systems are developed to listen for signals of major strategic change (Ansoff, 1984). A number of economists accurately predicted the housing bubble and subsequent crash of 2007, but few economists were able to predict the global scale and rapid escalation of this crisis or indeed were in a position to affect change (Colander et al., 2009). The reasons for this have their roots in the fallacy of detachment, where economists relying solely on mathematical models, assumed rationality of actors in a system (e.g. housing prices will track income levels).

### **3.2 Fallacy of detachment**

The detachment model of strategic planning posits that operations management and strategic management are diametrically opposed and if managers are going to make valid strategic choices they must be detached from the detail of everyday operations (Mintzberg, 1994). To use Gramsci’s assertion “society does not pose itself problems

for whose solutions the material preconditions do not already exist” (1971 [1929–35]). The elitist deciding of what is ‘strategic’ is often a way of filtering out those ideas that don’t have solutions readily available (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). The implicit knowledge that a manager has from everyday interaction cannot be aggregated, analysed, and detached for decision makers easily, so formal strategic analysis must be based on quantitative data. However, the usability of quantitative data relies on the tacit knowledge of practitioners to implement a chosen strategy (Langley, 1989). A good illustration of this point can be seen in the separation of those who made economic models and those who used them in practice in the lead up to the 2007 financial crash. Separating the thinkers and doers led to overconfidence in the omniscience of such models to accurately predict the future (Ferguson, 2008) (Colander et al., 2009). The detachment assumption that strategic management requires the separation of thinkers and doers is followed by the assumption that *thinking* and *doing* are also separate.

### **3.3 Fallacy of formalisation**

The fallacy of formalisation is that strategy making and doing can be corralled into a process to produce the same results as naturally occurring innovation (Mintzberg, 1994). Quinn (1980), in a study of several large organisations found that although most went through a number of high level steps from identifying the strategic issues that needed to be addressed, through exploring solutions and implementing change, the process took years to complete; it was continuous without any clear beginning or end. This kind of experimentation produced a gradual convergence on viable strategies rather than controlled, sequential strategy formulation followed by scheduled implementation. An interesting perspective on this a study of America’s leading venture capital firms, renowned for their strategy work with young firms, and their own relationship with strategic planning (King, 2008). The study showed that although formalized strategy making was an essential part of developing young firms, the venture capital firms themselves tended to pursue opportunistic or emergent strategies; as one participant noted ‘No matter how formal your process is, if you can absolutely determine what the market for something is, you’re probably too late’ (King, 2008: 353).

### 3.4 The Persistence of Strategic Planning

Despite the ongoing critique on the downfall of rationalistic strategy, it is still a pervasive practice in organisations (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994) (Kiechel, 2010). Academic journal articles on strategic planning have steadily declined in recent years yet strategic planning documents are still produced by over 80% of U.S. companies (Whittington and Cailluet, 2008). More than that there is growing trend of embedding and formalising strategic planning and implementation in a high level ‘Chief Strategy Officer’ role, suggesting that organisations still place a high value on formal strategy making and doing (Breene, Nunes and Shill, 2007). This appears to be at odds with the growing academic study of emergent subjectivism in strategy and decline of rationalist objectivism, however perhaps centring the debate between these two concepts misses a wider practice-based view (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011).

Perhaps the issue rests with the conception of strategic planning as way of exerting rationalistic control over the future. The critique of strategy’s failure has *assumed* that the purpose of a strategic planning document is to provide an action plan for the future and indeed from this viewpoint strategy documents provide quite a poor fortune telling service. Alternatively, positioning strategy as a discourse, for example, offers the opportunity to look more broadly at how strategy is talked into being and how it acts in the world (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008). Examining how strategy documents are constituted through discursive practices and how they act in practice may help to explain their persistence (Vaara, Kleymann and Seristö, 2004). In embarking on an explorative study of a strategic plan from its creation to its life in the organisation it is hoped to provide greater understanding as to the mode of action of strategy documents in organisations.

The next section will review the post-critique literature on strategy and the emergence of a practice based stream of research. This research engagement with strategy practice to understand the role of strategy within the organisation in order to improve practice is a definite shift towards a ‘critical performativity’ aimed at improving management practice (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009). Key themes covered in this emerging

research space will be explored followed by the gaps and opportunities for further work in the field in relation to our proposed explorative study.

## **4.0 Beyond Critique**

### **4.1 The emergence of Strategy-as-Practice**

The critique of strategy has been focused on the performance of strategy as planned action. Yet despite critique of its efficacy, the production of strategic planning documentation persists in practice (Whittington and Cailluet, 2008). In the last 10 years there has been an emergence of a Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) stream of research which endeavours to address this dichotomy and understand what those strategy practices constitute and why they pervade. It is an attempt look in the 'black box' of strategy making and doing (Mintzberg, 1973) (Pettigrew, 1973). Strategy-as-practice, like other practice analyses, looks at practices to understand how strategy is enabled and constrained by organisational and wider societal contexts to improve practice (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). The origins of this stream of research can be traced to a workshop in 2001 organised by the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM) to discuss developments in research strategy's micro-processes (Carter, Clegg and Kornberger, 2008). This meeting led to a special issue of the Journal of Management which called for a greater practice-based approach to the study of strategy-making, in response to what was viewed as an unbalanced focus on the macro organisational level and purely economic variables (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003).

The emerging understanding from this body of work is that 'strategising' is heavily intertwined with wider organisational practices which affect the process of strategy making and doing and the performance of strategy. In short, strategy is contextual (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). This emerging body of work is in line with the wider 'practice turn' in contemporary social sciences (Knorr-Cetina, Schatzki and von Savigny, 2005). The wider practice turn has a diverse set of contributors from sociologists, ethnomethodologists, anthropologists, to philosophers examining broad issues around the embedded and connected nature of agency, action, organisations,

social systems and culture (Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow, 2003). The practice view has drawn such diverse contributions due the opportunity to move from abstract analysis of social activity to specific analysis of social reality (Golsorkhi et al., 2011). This practice view is a rejection of a wholly ‘individualist’ or ‘societist’ view of social activity that attempts to balance focus between the micro activity of the individual to the larger social structures in which they are placed. Whittington identifies three core themes in practice literature which thread the individual to their context: organisations and wider social contexts, actual activity or praxis, and the actors themselves (2006). People, what they do, how they do it, where they do it form the central inquiry space for practice research.

There are a number of other points of departure in S-a-P research from traditional strategy research. S-a-P has rejected a purely economic view of strategy by drawing more on a sociological theory base as opposed to a primarily economic one. This has significantly broadened the scope of research by shifting focus from purely economic input-output value equation to a range of outcomes and an extended range of organisational settings. The change in focus from purely financial outcomes has also correlated with a methodological shift in strategy research from a primacy of quantitative studies to a proliferation of qualitative studies (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). The next section presents an aggregate view of the main S-a-P research themes to date, including relevant theory bases, methodological choices, and contexts with the intention to view how the strategy research agenda has been advanced by S-a-P and what potential for further work exists.

#### **4.2 Key themes of S-A-P research**

S-a-P has emerged as a distinctive stream of research from a number studies of ‘strategising’ in different organisational contexts. By simply expanding the range of contexts in which strategy was performed to non-profit, public sector, or non-western showed that much of the critique of strategy practices to date were based on an assumption of value to the organisation. As an explorative study, this project is seeking

to add to this knowledge by closely examining how a strategy document exists within an organisation.

A number of authors active in this stream of research have presented thematic views on S-a-P research to date and suggested ways of furthering the field (Whittington, 2006) (Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl, 2007) (Jarzabkowski and Paul Spee, 2009) (Seidl and Whittington, 2014). S-a-P research has been themed by organisational settings, intra or extra organisational studies, types of practices under observation, examinations of the material artefacts of strategy, discursive views of strategy, and the ontological and epistemological roots of S-a-P studies (Golsorkhi et al., 2011). Whittington's (2006) seminal piece 'Completing the practice turn in strategy research' provides broad lens with which to view the key contributions in S-a-P research that is still useful today: practices (strategy-making), praxis (strategy-doing), and practitioners (strategy actors). In terms of our research objectives, all three perspectives are required to holistically explore the life of a strategy document in an organisation from its creation to consumption. These delineations will provide the frame for examining the S-a-P research contributions to date.

#### **4.2.1 Practices**

In S-a-P research there is a strong tradition of looking at the usage of strategy practices to understand the disconnect between the functionally poor performance of strategy documents and their enduring importance. A longitudinal study of General Electric's strategic planning practices provided an alternative view on the 'fall' of formal strategic planning as an evolution whereby changes in labelling practices masked their continuing prevalence (Ocasio and Joseph, 2008). Close studies of strategy practices have shown other non-economic value derived from their employment. Jarzabkowski (2003) showed that the collaborative practices of strategic planning can help to overcome strategic challenges such as organisational cohesion that the 'plan' intended to address.



Socio-material practices such as workshops, meetings, strategy think-ins, or retreats can enable or eradicate strategic enterprise depending on how they are constituted (Hodgkinson et al., 2006). The constitution of practices has been explored through looking at the role of discourse in constituting and legitimating a strategy (Jarzabkowski, Spee and Smets, 2013). Discursive practices in airline alliance strategies were observed to produce an essentiality to the perception of a chosen strategy which in turn prompted action (Vaara, Kleymann and Seristö, 2004). Discursive practices have a key role in the creation of strategic planning documents. Kornberger and Clegg (2011) showed the performative influence of discursive practices in the construction of the Sydney 2030 strategic planning document. Discourse in the creation of strategic plans has the power to create strategists who adopt the language of the document (Dameron and Torset, 2014). As the Sydney 2030 case shows (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011), close examination of discursive practices in the construction of a planning document can help to illuminate its value and persistence in practice. Key to this project will be an exploration the discursive practices in the creation of the strategy document.

#### **4.2.2 Praxis**

A number of studies of practices acted out in their context, that are the roots of S-a-P research are essentially studies of praxis. The earliest stream of S-a-P research examined strategy practices in context is to understand how practices are performed and mutually constituted (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Examining micro instances of performed practices can provide useful views of high level concepts (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003). Sensemaking, by which we mean the process by which people give meaning to their experiences, has shown to be a variable for the role strategic documents have in organisations (Whittle et al., 2015). Studies of 'sensemaking' have shown the impact of sensemaking to enable strategic change (Balogun and Johnson, 2005) and unresolved sensemaking in constraining strategic change (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Such studies recognise that strategy practices live in a complex world and that such practices cannot be detached from their context and judged independently of it; in fact as many of these studies have shown it is the context or frame that often moderates outcomes. In this project exploring the consumption or invocation of the

strategy document requires a sensemaking perspective to fully understand the role the document has in the organisation and to its actors (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

An offshoot of the emerging S-a-P research agenda is looking to strategising as discursive praxis used in text and talk by management to perpetuate hegemony and by middle management to mask resistance (Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes, 2008). The move to studying individual rather than organisational performance in this way is not to keep the micro-macro divide intact but to join both views for a better holistic understanding of strategising (Samra- Fredericks, 2003). Exploring discursive praxis in the process of creating the strategic document and discursive praxis around the document's use offers the opportunity to shed light on the purpose and value of formal strategic planning in an organisation.

#### **4.2.3 Practitioners**

Traditional strategy research was concerned with two types of practitioner, planners and top management. Strategic planners in the modern organisation are intertwined with the daily operations working as bottom-up facilitators of strategic planning (Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2007). S-a-P research, by looking at strategising in different contexts, has expanded the traditional set of strategy actors to include middle managers (Mantere, 2008). This was a valuable expansion of the literature as studies of middle management strategising have shown the substantive influence middle managers bring to strategy discourse, strategy making, strategy doing and strategy outcomes (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011) (Lavarda, Canet-Giner and Peris-Bonet, 2010) (Hardy and Thomas, 2014). Middle management can now be seen as makers, mediators, executors and consumers of strategy (Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000). Studies have shown that the roles of these strategy actors are constructed through discursive practices that have performative effects on power relations (Laine and Vaara, 2007). Discursive practices can create and exclude actors as strategists and can imbue practitioners with power (Balogun et al., 2014).

While S-a-P research has made a large contribution to understanding the role of top and middle management in strategising, the wider understanding of how other

organisational actors contribute to strategising is limited (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008). Limiting the set of practitioners to top and middle management has also limited our understanding of how and why some strategies are engaged with and others are resisted (Laine and Vaara, 2007). A key direction for S-a-P research in the future is expanding studies of practice to include other organisational actors (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Understanding strategy making “should be considered as the combination of the production of texts and their creative consumption in daily activities” (De La Ville and Mounou, 2011: 195). In this project putting the strategy document at the centre of the study allows a wider exploration of who those strategists might be.

The emergence of a Strategy-as-Practice stream of research, studying the constitution of strategy practices and their value to the organisation has furthered our understanding of strategy making and doing. Linking micro practices to their macro context, S-a-P studies have provided new insights to strategy making, strategic agency, engagement, resistance, strategic actors and a wider range of contexts. Similarly, examining the construction and consumption of strategic texts gives understanding to the multiplicity of purposes that organisations pursue this practice apart from accurate conceptions of the future (Whittington and Cailluet, 2008).

### **4.3 Opportunity for further work in S-a-P**

To review the current gaps in this research stream and what opportunities exist for this project to address those gaps it will be helpful to keep in mind the research objectives of this project:

- To deconstruct a strategy document and the process by which it was created.
- To explore the social life of a strategy document after its creation.

In a comprehensive review of current S-a-P research, Vaara and Whittington (2012) outline a number of areas for further research to expand our understanding of strategy to improve its practice. Among these is a call to understand how a strategy lives in an organisation after its creation by looking at what relationships are formed with its

rhetoric throughout the organisation (Samra- Fredericks, 2003). A more narrative approach to Strategy-as-Practice by looking at the rhetoric of strategy in an organisation would allow us to better understand the ongoing role and influence of strategy documents after they are created (Brown and Thompson, 2013). The performative power of strategy discourse is being explored in greater depth, even spawning an offshoot research stream of Strategy-as-Discourse, however there is still much work to be done to understand strategy discourse and the relationships formed with (Vaara and Lamberg, 2015). Viewing the strategic plan as a rhetorical device in an organisation and examining the underlying critical assumptions that inform that discourse offers an opportunity to understand how strategy lives within an organisation (Balogun et al., 2014).

Agency, by which it is taken to mean the power of an ‘agent’ to act in a particular context, is gaining increasing prominence in the Strategy-as-Practice agenda (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015) (Herepath, 2014). Vaara and Whittington (2012) call for a more critical analytical approach to studying practices by placing ‘agency’ at the centre of the web of practices. In particular, how material artefacts are imbued with strategic agency and act within an organisation (Laine and Parkkari, 2015). Of particular interest to S-a-P scholars currently is agency in relation to the material artefacts of strategy. Strategic plans as actors in an organisation can develop a textual agency in that they exert power over other actors, influencing language and behaviour (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009) Texts must be read and used to have agency and how that occurs needs further research to understand their power (De La Ville and Mounou, 2011). An exploration of the creation and use of one such text in an organisation is intended to answer this call from the S-a-P research agenda. Overall, there are clear gaps in the S-a-P research agenda for explorative studies on life of a strategy text. Putting the strategy document at the centre of the study allows the set of strategy actors to be expanded to all those who interact with it. Additionally, exploring the rhetoric of the strategy document itself and the rhetoric of those who use it is to provide a more holistic vantage point of how strategy lives within an organisation.

#### **4.4 Proposed study**

In the previous sections a historical view of strategy has been presented, alongside the main positions in strategy research from the literature. We have examined the substantive critique of formal strategic planning and the corresponding emergence of the Strategy-as-Practice stream of research. There are clear gaps in the S-a-P agenda for studies exploring the more rhetorical, performative aspects of strategy in an organisation. With that as a backdrop, this project inspires to put the strategy document at the centre of an inductive, explorative study examining the language and processes of its creation and its social life after creation. While recognising that it is difficult to propose a set of tightly bound research objectives and a conceptual framework when pitching an inductivist study, the following objectives and related sub-objectives are intended as a guide to the exploration:

- To deconstruct a strategy document and the process by which it was created.
  - o Perform a fine grained analysis of the narrative within the strategy document.
  - o Explore the evolution of the document's rhetoric through the process of creation.
  - o Analyse process of creation in relation to the narrative output.
- To explore the social life of a strategy document after its creation.
  - o Discover the network of actors interacting with the strategy document.
  - o Explore the relationships formed with the document's rhetoric

This study will examine the life of a strategy document starting with an exploration of its rhetoric and exploring what relationships are formed with it throughout the organisation. The research is embedded in a newly established, public sector, third level educational institute in the Kingdom of Bahrain. As the study is a fine grained narrative analysis over a number of years from the creation of the document through to its usage a single site approach is proposed (Vesa and Vaara, 2014). Bahrain Polytechnic itself the outcome of a national strategy document entitled 'Vision 2030' which promises to deliver large scale social and economic transformations to a liberal knowledge economy. The institute was established to offer 'world class' education opportunities to Bahrainis to fuel this future knowledge economy. In pursuit of 'world class' standards the institute, largely run by Bahraini administrators, has recruited a multi-national

faculty from industry and academia and uses English as its operational language. As a context for research this provides an opportunity to explore the life of a strategy document in a non-western context, in the public sector, and in a multi-national/multi-cultural environment

#### **4.5 Study Context**

The Kingdom of Bahrain currently has a zero tax burden for citizens, with revenue derived from external ‘rents’ and the state budget purely an exercise in expenditure; as such it would qualify for the term ‘rentier state’ as naturally occurring wealth from resources and position within the GCC precludes the need to extract revenue through a domestic taxation burden (Beblawi, 1987). The Kingdom of Bahrain has extensive social welfare and wealth distribution programmes through large scale public-sector job creation and subsidies (Common, 2008). It has been shown that relationships to work in organisation in such states are fundamentally transformed by the knowledge that payment is a form of wealth distribution in as much as it is an exchange for work (Yates, 1996). In that sense, while our context is public sector it is an alternative public sector to the public sector contexts explored by S-a-P researchers to date. There is also an argument that approaches to strategic management in public and private sectors are converging as the proliferation of large firms, poorly disciplined by competition, focus more on the ‘big strategy’ of ideas and culture with fewer and fewer firms concentrating their strategy documents on financial or competitive advantage (Whittington, 2012). An important consideration for this study could be the split between the Bahraini administration and the international, mostly Western, faculty and the relationships they form with the strategic text.

As a practitioner researcher, I work as a senior manager participating in the production of strategic documents and promote its action through the use of formal planning processes. I am involved in decision making that uses the strategic planning document as a basis for action and decision making that does not. The exploration of the relationship between how a strategy text is constructed to how it is related to within the organisation is of prime interest to my practice as a manager, as a producer and consumer of strategic documents.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This paper has reviewed the emergence of strategy as an academic discipline tracking the proliferation of large complex organisations. Key schools of thought on strategic planning have been explored and examined against the critique of formal planning, its efficacy, and relevance to practice. Despite critique of formal planning, and the decline in academic interest in strategic planning, formal strategic planning is ubiquitous in organisations today (Whittington and Cailluet, 2008). The Strategy-as-Practice stream of research has emerged to engage with a ‘critical performativity’ of strategy practice in context; for academia to positively intervene and engage with practitioners (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016). This body of literature has made visible many previously ‘unknown’ ways of strategising (Whittington, 2011). To further an understanding of strategy practice and explain the dichotomy between the critique of formal planning and its pervasive usage, a number of potential areas for research have been proposed. S-a-P studies have examined the construction of strategic planning documents from alternative viewpoints such as sensemaking (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011) or performativity (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011), however to further understand how strategy documents exist within organisations a fuller picture of their use, related to their construction, is also required as opposed to looking at creation and consumption in isolation of each other. This study intends to contribute new knowledge to the Strategy-as-Practice stream of research by exploring the strategy document as a rhetorical device through the process of construction and its use thereafter. It is hoped that documenting the ways in which strategy documents are related to in an organisation could provide valuable knowledge to practitioners in refining the approach to the creation of strategic documents.

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Date: 8 / 05/ 2017

**RESEARCH PAPER SERIES**

**Paper 2:**

**Methodology**

**“An interpretative approach to exploring the social life of a strategy document”**

**ABSTRACT**

Strategy documents play a powerful, central role in organisations, yet we know very little of the ways in which they work (Whittington, 2011). The previous conceptual paper explored the weak relationship between theory and practice in this regard and argued for a practice-centred approach to understanding the phenomenon of strategy documents. The purpose of this paper is to make explicit the philosophical underpinnings of this study’s methodological choices. This study rests on a phenomenological, inductive, interpretative approach to methodology which influences data collection and analysis. As an inductive, interpretative piece of work, quality is centred on the authenticity and transparency of the approaches to data collection and analysis. There is a vast repertoire of organisational data available to this study; therefore the choices for inclusion, limitation and exclusion have been clearly laid out.

## **1.0 Introduction**

My professional work over the last number of years has been consumed with the preparation, writing, and using of strategy documents, policy papers, and organisational documents of one form or another, as a way of getting things done in a large, bureaucratic organisation. Drawing on best-practice advice from academic sources, without much in the way of contextual reflection, autodidacticism or basic inquiry, like others (Balogun et al., 2014), I have often wondered about the formulaic nature of this life cycle and the deeper cultural code of strategy making has on organisational life. In starting the DBA it was a natural problem space to investigate. While at the start of this journey I talked in functional terms about the challenge of implementation, as I reflected on my own professional practice, I was drawn to consider the broader meaning and purpose of strategy documents in organisations. What do they do? How do they work?

These are powerful documents that are produced, used, and discarded by all organisations, yet we know so little about how they work (Whittington, 2011). In recent years there has been both declining academic interest in formal strategy research (Whittington and Cailluet, 2008) and, yet there is ever increased prevalence of strategy documents in organisations (Freedman, 2013). In essence, there is a divergence between theory and practice. The Strategy-as-Practice discipline has emerged to question an overly rationalistic view of strategy and calls for a practice-based understanding of strategy-making to further our understanding of such a prevalent organisational practice (Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003). The starting point of Strategy-as-Practice research is thus practice rather than theory; to understand practice and offer a stronger foundation for theory development. This study takes a practice-based view of a strategy document in an organisation and explores its meaning and modes of action. The aim is to further the work of strategy-as-practice scholars by exploring the more performative and rhetorical aspects of strategy documents in organisational life.

In the previous conceptual paper, it was acknowledged that in an explorative, inductive study of a strategy document it was somewhat difficult to bind the study to a stringent

list of research objectives without diverging into a deductive hypothesis testing mode. In recognising this and the time-bounded nature of the DBA process, a number of research objectives and sub-objectives were proposed to guide the study's exploration. These focus around three stages of a strategy document's life in an organisation: the writing of the document and the development of its narrative, the process of initiation into the organisation, and the document's social life in the organisation:

- To deconstruct a strategy document and the process by which it was created.
  - Perform a fine grained analysis of the narrative within the strategy document.
  - Explore the evolution of the document's rhetoric through the process of creation.
  - Analyse process of creation in relation to the narrative output.
- To explore the social life of a strategy document after its creation.
  - Discover the network of actors interacting with the strategy document.
  - Explore the relationships formed with the document's rhetoric

This entails a fine-grained analysis of the strategy document's rhetoric, a reflection on its method of creation and introduction, and an exploration of the relationships formed with the document's rhetoric and tenets throughout the organisation. It is intended to trace the holistic life-course of a single strategy document in a single organisation; the 2014 document *Strategic Plan 2015-2019*, Bahrain Polytechnic.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the approach taken to methodology, the philosophical implications of the methodological choices, the study materials, and an argument to the validity and reliability of the study. This paper is organised into three main sections; in the next section there is a discussion on the philosophical roots of the methodological approach taken, in the following section the method is described in greater detail including data collection, data sources and the approach to interviews. In the final section there is a discussion on deconstruction as a perspective on text analysis.

## **2.0 Methodology**

Strategy is an important field in organisation and management research, yet there is not a strong relationship between theory development and practice (Lobos and Partidario, 2014). We know from the work of Strategy-as-Practice scholars that there are vibrant and evolving practices in relation to strategy-making in organisations (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Therefore, to contribute to theory, and develop a coherency between theory and practice, it is useful to start with practice to build theory.

In organisations, practices played out in-context are the stuff of which meanings and significances are built from (Crotty, 1998). In search of the meaning and significance of strategy documents, this is a study of the practices of strategy making during the life of a strategy document, in which it is hoped to reveal those deeper, less obvious meanings (Van Manen, 2007). There are three philosophical paradigms that inform this sort of work: phenomenology, inductivism, and interpretivism. This section will cover the paradigmatic views that inform this study's methodological choices (Gummesson, 2000), before outlining the data collection and analysis approaches that flow from those methodological choices.

## **2.1 Phenomenological**

The criticism of the academic study of strategy stems from the perceived failure of rationalistic strategy to deliver on the promise of a mapped future (Kiechel, 2010). Strategy in practice is largely emergent, bottom up, and essentially a social practice (Mintzberg, 1994). Strategy documents are at the centre of the rituals and practices that we think of as strategy, but we do not yet fully understand their significance, why organisations persist in producing them, find value and meaning in them, and how they work. This is a sentiment more broadly perceived; in that we exist in a social, practice-based world, which we understand poorly (Crotty, 1998). It is really through reflexivity on our experiences that we can find meaning and understand the world. Phenomenology provides a theoretical perspective that describes experiences as they have meaning to the subject in context; its purpose to reveal hidden meaning in phenomena and provide rich interpretation of human experience (Van Manen, 2007). Phenomenology puts practice at the centre of our understanding of the world.

Phenomenology emerged as a distinct philosophical discipline with Husserl's development of the concept of *intentionality* as the internal experience of consciousness of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl developed phenomenological reduction, the objective of which was to suspend theoretical posturing and subjectivity to facilitate the emergence of the essence of the phenomena under study (Racher and Robinson, 2003). Central to this is what Husserl calls '*lifeworld*', the immediate experiences of individuals before they have reflected upon their experience (Husserl, 2012). In essence, this project is about exploring the '*lifeworld*' of the phenomenon of strategy documents within organisations through exploring the document itself, related documentation and the descriptions of participants themselves (Dowling, 2007). Heidegger, a student of Husserl, diverged from the work of his former teacher on the manner in which lived experience is explored and the primacy of participant description. Heidegger posited that lived experiences are an interpretative rather than descriptive process and proposed the use of hermeneutics as a method of understanding phenomena (Lavery, 2003). There is debate over whether a hermeneutical approach is a rejection of Husserl, but it could be viewed as a development of phenomenological reduction where *apriori* understanding is followed by an interpretative approach (Van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological approach was further developed by Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer, who offer more concrete methods to researchers, including expanding the hermeneutic circle to include study participants in the process of understanding (Lavery, 2003).

Phenomenology in practice has been much more interpretative and reflective than prescribed in the works of Husserl or Heidegger, perhaps reflecting the influence of the practice-based disciplines it is most closely associated with (Crotty, 1996). A reflective, thoughtful description of experience by research participants can offer more insight towards revealing the essence of a phenomenon under study than strict adherence to phenomenological protocol (Caelli, 2000). In this study there is the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of strategy documents in the words and visual expression of the strategy document itself. This explorative nature of phenomenology lends itself to an inductive approach, starting with phenomenon under study and letting the theory emerge from the data.

## 2.2 Inductive

In the previous paper, the apparent contradiction between the relative academic disinterest in formal strategic planning and the continuing reliance of organisations on these documents was examined. For strategy documents to have continued importance in organisational life they may have more to offer an organisation than the functional, executable action plans they have been reduced to. Perhaps one of the reasons that theory has not explained the continued importance of such a functionally flawed process is that practice in socially situated contexts is different from context-free theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). In this case what works in practice does not translate to theory, and to start to understand this divergence we must first try to understand the practice, the centrality of these documents.

The purpose of this project is to understand the nature of strategy documents in organisations from the inside out. As a senior manager, I have worked with strategy documents from their lengthy development process, their eventual implementation, reporting against the strategy document's tenets, and the process of retiring a strategy document at the end of its life cycle. I have observed strategy documents constructed in-house through lengthy consultation processes; I have seen the writing of an organisation's strategy document entirely outsourced, and a few variations in between. I have used numerous strategy implementation methodologies as fashions have come and gone and various levels of involvement from executive management in their evangelism. I have also seen the language of strategic documents become part of an organisation's vocabulary and equally strategy documents that remain as outsiders in organisational life. Through these observations I became curious about the central role these documents play in organisational life and how the manner of their construction impacted their usage in an organisation. Regardless of their functional success, the documents still very much *lived* in the organisation, impacted its rhetoric, and formed a backdrop for the narratives of organisational life.

Given the breadth of the unknown in terms of the less-functional relationship of these documents to their host organisations, this work is unsuited to deductive analysis whereby a set of hypotheses is constructed, and data is tested against them (Thomas, 2006). Rather, it is proposed to take an explorative approach to the area under investigation, delving into close readings of the raw data and allowing the themes and concepts to emerge (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In most studies theory leads to data, however given the problem presented it is necessary to work in reverse order, from data to theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

While much quantitative and qualitative work is dedicated to theory refinement and verification, there are times that speculative theory does not fit the real world in which it inhabits; either it is at odds with the data or data cannot be found to test the speculation. In this case it is better to take the data and develop an understanding (and potentially theory) that fits and works for the social world that the data is derived from (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is at odds with the hypothetico-deductive method of formal hypothesis setting and field verification of those narrow constructs. In starting with the data, the researcher is a *tabula rasa*, entering the field with no formal hypothesis with the sole objective of listening closely to the data and trying to comprehend meanings within the social reality of the subjects under study (Minichiello et al., 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this study there is the opportunity to listen to the reflective, thoughtful descriptions of participants connected with the strategy document and offer rich interpretation on the symbolic place of strategy documents in organisations.

### **2.3 Interpretative**

Organisations are made up of people and practices, and in trying to understand the practices around strategy documents we place the lived experiences of people as a central source in this study. This reflects an ontological position of relativism where reality is subjective and constructed on an individual basis (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Our realities are constructed based on our interactions with the world and the senses that mediate those interactions. Language for example is not just a conduit of expression, but is a means to mould reality with the use of words and imagery pregnant with

meaning (Frowe, 2001). Since knowledge is constructed from individual interactions with the world and transmitted socially, the social world should be understood from those participating in it (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013). Theory in interpretive studies is usually inductive as it is generated from the data rather than preceding the data (Scotland, 2012).

In the interpretive paradigm there is an acknowledgment that knowledge is neither value-free nor context-free. Individuals and their interactions with the world must be understood from the historical and cultural context which they inhabit (Creswell, 2012). This social world is complex and cannot be reduced to the individual components of its makeup but must be observed in its entirety (Shaw, 1999).

Strategy documents exist in a nexus of relations, context and historical social practice that have been built up over years within the organisation (Taylor, 1993). Whatever meaning can be derived from the strategy document's language and individuals' relationship to it, it is a meaning that is contextual, tied to the meaning of others in the organisation and can only really be understood interpretivistically, taking account of the social historical context. Semiotics, the study of meaning-making, signs, and meaningful communication, explores context to understand how shortcuts of meaning are imbued in signs and symbols (Vannini, 2007).

The purpose here is not to produce a principle or law for all strategy documents in all organisations, but to reveal the semiotic significance of these documents within an organisation. In an introduction to the seminal sociological work '*interpretation of cultures*' Geertz (1973: 5) states "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expression on their surface enigmatical". The explication that is being sought in this study is the role of strategy documents in the organisation. Organisations represent cultural systems where there is a hierarchy, narrative, linguistic traits, norms, shared practices, relationships and shared history. Recognising the organisation as a cultural unit, like societies, each has



its own interpretation (Geertz, 1973). The hope in this study is to gain access to the organisation's interpretation and in doing so reach a semiotic understanding of strategy documents and their symbolic place in the organisation.

## **2.4 Quality in methodology**

With all methodological choices there are limits to rigour and validity and what can be legitimately claimed. This study is explorative in nature, and natural to phenomenological, inductive, interpretative, theory building approach there is a limit to its normative generalisable, repeatable, predictive value. This work aspires to achieve rigour in inductive, interpretative, phenomenological terms where credibility, auditability, and fittingness are the judges of rigour (Chiovitti and Piran, 2003). Ontologically, this type of research does not make assumptions as to what is real, rather, phenomena is interpreted through human experience of them (Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010). Consequently, interpretivist research is not concerned with proving or disproving theory, but with building theory and understanding from the bottom up (Cope, 2005).

To explore the role of strategy documents in the organisations, it is proposed to do a fine-grained analysis of a strategy document, explore how the language of that document evolved through its creation, use organisation records (documents and photographs) to explore the process of creation and most importantly take the lived experience of participants to explore in detail their relationship to the document, its creation and its language. This study is aiming at theory building as opposed to theory testing, only achievable in the breadth of exploration offered by a single site case study. While there is a perspective that single site case studies cannot offer anything other than the particular (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994), there is recognition that deep, focused, single site case studies are extremely useful in inductive theory building and in the early stages of an emerging field of research (Teagarden et al., 1995). The strategy-as-practice stream of research is at that early stage of documenting phenomenon and building theory that is appropriate to case study research (Benbasat, Goldstein and Mead, 1987). The aim of this study is to offer something in the way of meaning making

for strategy documents and their role in the organisation. The next section outlines the approach to ethical issues in this study.

## **2.5 Ethics**

All research studies should be concerned with the application of moral standards to the planning, execution, and writing up of research (McNabb, 2002). These ethical issues generally concern honesty, plagiarism, informed consent, and permission to publish among others (Myers, 2013). It is the duty of the researcher to ensure that the study's purpose is honestly and clearly communicated, that appropriate participant and organisation consent is obtained in advance, that confidentiality agreements are observed in publishing, and perhaps most importantly that the rights of all organisational stakeholders are respected (AOM, 2006). Conducting research within your own organisation brings another layer of more complex ethical issues concerning role duality, anonymity, access to information, power issues, organisational consent and ensuring voluntary participation (Holian and Coghlan, 2013).

One of the most challenging ethical issues in conducting research within your own organisation is the issue of role duality whereby the role of the researcher and the role of the manager can be in conflict, or whereby the role of the manager bears undue influence on participation and access to information (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). In this study of my own organisation I have the role of researcher, senior manager, and faculty member which raises the issues of access to information and voluntary participation. In terms of access to information, through my role as a senior manager I have access to the necessary information to complete this study; however, I have been guided by the organisation's own research and ethics policy which requires smaller studies concerning some organisational data to go through research and ethical committee approval and larger pieces of work that look at the entire organisation or require significant organisational data to go to CEO level approval. As part of completing paper one, the conceptual framework, this proposed study went through this

approval process for the use of organisational data and employee participation in the study. In terms of voluntary participation, this study will use data from the interviews of at least eight individuals (see section 3.1.3 where further ethical issues in relation to interviews are discussed), six of whom hold more senior positions than I, one of whom holds a similar rank, and two of whom hold lower positions in the organisation. To ensure that rank does not bear undue influence on participation in these interviews, the study's purpose, confidentiality expectations, separation from work responsibilities, and voluntary nature will be clearly communicated in writing in advance. It has also been acknowledged through the approval process that there is no organisational anonymity offered in this study. By its nature, the study clearly identifies the organisation through the researcher and thus has been explicitly named. The next section outlines the approach to data collection, including the data sources and rationale for inclusion in the study.

### **3.0 Data Collection**

Strategy as a phenomenon captures a wide range of practices within an organisation. It is a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Exploring the semiotic nature of a strategy document in an organisation from the process of its creation through to its use within an organisation demands a broad, but forensic approach to data collection (Patton, 1990). The challenge when exploring such a broad area of organisation life is how to curate the vast repertoire of data that we could think of as strategy.

A wide-angle view of strategy documents in organisations naturally requires drawing from the documentary artefacts of its lifespan and from the people who interact with it. There are three main terrains of data collection stemming from the guiding research objectives: the strategy document itself, data from the process of writing the strategic document, and data concerning the strategic document's role in the organisation after creation. Each of these terrains has several different data sources. Data sources fall into two main categories: formal documentary artefacts and participant interviews. Both offer differing perspectives on the process of developing a strategy document and on how it lives in an organisation. Documentary sources provide a reliable temporal

sequence of events and actors; however, some aspects, such as meeting minutes, may be relatively conservative in the recording of events due to the nature of official record-keeping. Interviews on the other hand provide rich experiential accounts of participants involved in the development and implementation of the strategy document. These accounts are reflective in nature and offer potentially conflicting accounts to the formal records. It is in this variance between formal accounts and participant perception that provide opportunities to explore the relationships formed with the strategy document. Further discussion on the limitations of the use of both formal records and reflective interviews can be found in sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3.

In the next section, a list of all the data sources that will be drawn upon and a justification of their inclusion is given. Following that, each terrain of exploration (the document, the process, and the social life thereafter) is explored in relation to the data sources.



### **3.1 Types of data sources**

This section outlines the main types of data sources for inclusion in this study and a justification of their use. With such a broad assemblage of data needed to represent the manifestations of strategy, choices had to be made in regard to the inclusion and exclusion of data. Within the three terrains of exploration, data sources have been selected based on their representation of the manifestation of the phenomenon.

#### **3.1.1 The strategy document(s)**

The strategy document represents the first terrain of exploration and is central to this study. The document was written and published in the latter half of 2014 to cover the 2015 – 2019 period. The final document is 16 pages in length containing text, graphics,

portraits and other images. The organisation's branding and livery is used throughout the final published document. The document consists of five strategic goals which are colour coded and each have a corresponding logo. Each goal contains a two-page formula of text and graphics outlining the context of the strategic goal, the proposed initiatives, the objectives, and the KPIs measuring the goal. The document also contains letters from the CEO and Chairman of the Board of Trustees. Although short in length, the document is an impactful, visual perspective on the organisation's view of itself and the purpose of a strategic planning document through the intertwining of language and imagery.

There are seven prior text-only versions of the strategic planning document that show the development of the document through the writing process. Each of these versions contains notes and comments from the writers on changes to be made and notes on why certain changes have been made in the particular version. These unpublished versions provide insight into how the language was shaped and what constructs were progressively removed and included. These documents also provide a contrast to the image rich final strategy document. Given that these versions in development represent for the organisation a self-analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the strategy document they are included as a data source to contrast with the final published version of the document.



Fig 2. Images from inside the strategy document

### 3.1.2 Interviews

Interviews are a central data source in case-based research (Yin, 2013). Interpretive case research in particular interviews represent the most optimal way to access participant interpretations and views of the phenomenon under study (Darke, Shanks and Broadbent, 1998). The case in this research is an organisation of over 400 employees all of whom have had some interaction with the strategic document whether through being involved in its creation, its consultation, receiving strategic updates, using the language of the strategy document, or having their work directed and altered by the imperatives of the strategic document. In that sense, people and their experiences of the strategy document are central to this study. The interviews are reflective in nature, asking participants to look back at their past experiences, in an effort to capture their perceptions and narratives around the development and use of the strategy document. This interpretative dialog (Dinkins, 2005) provides a contrast to the formal official records such as meeting minutes which we can rely on as temporally accurate but lacking in depth and richness.

In acknowledging that individual experiences are central to understanding the phenomenon of strategy documents (Van Manen, 2007); those experiences must represent a broad contingent of individuals who interact with the document over its life cycle. While representing the strategy document life cycle is one selection criteria, any organisational view of strategy documents will have to capture the breadth of hierarchy in an organisation interacting with the strategy document. It should also be noted that I have been involved in some capacity in both the development and implementation of that strategic document through working with the CEO and senior management team as an advisor, working with the writing team, and having facilitated a consultation session. As a participant researcher I also represent various layers and areas of the organisation, working both with the senior management team on the administration side and also as a faculty member on the academic side.

There are challenges to objectivity and influence in researching your own organisation in general (Evered and Louis, 1981), but particularly in this case where the interviewer is so closely linked to the strategic practices to be explored in interview. Inductive, interpretative work demands honesty and authenticity in approach to method (Chiovitti

and Piran, 2003) which must be addressed when undertaking intra-organisational research. Internal researchers must include details such as their role in the story of the research, their potential influence on the process and what was undertaken to mitigate this. This approach is in contrast to much outsider research where there is often little information on the researcher and their role in the process, giving a sense of third party objectivity that may or may not be accurate (Holian and Coghlan, 2013). The most challenging ethical issue around conducting interviews within your own organisation is the role duality of researcher and employee, where role confusion for the interviewee can potentially lead to issues of power and authority influence on the discussions. Essential to mitigate those are clear consent and voluntary participation, honestly communicating the level of anonymity, confidentiality, and clear communication on the divide between work and research (Holian and Coghlan, 2013).

The following represents an initial list of interview participants covering both the breadth of hierarchy and life cycle:

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Their role in the strategy document</b>
Chairman of the Board of Trustees	Responsible for overseeing the approval of a new strategy and its implementation. The Chairman of the Board of Trustees is also represented in the strategy document itself by portrait and a letter to the reader.
The CEO (outgoing).	The CEO played a central role in managing the process of approving the new strategy, putting in place implementation and accountability mechanisms. The CEO is also represented in

	the document itself by portrait and a letter to the reader.
Deputy CEO who championed the process of writing and executing the strategy.	The Deputy CEO took a hands-on role in the consultation process, the writing, the designing and implementing of the strategy on a day-to-day basis. The deputy CEO spoke on the strategy at most significant events during the process of developing, consulting and implementing the strategy.
A writer of the strategy document	The final document was written and edited by a team of three managers (of which I was one) who took the raw feedback from the consultation process and developed the goals and narrative content of the strategy document.
Consultation session facilitator.	A draft strategy document prepared by the writers was brought to an all staff consultation session, managed by a facilitator who guided the discussion and feedback on the new proposed strategy document.
Consultation session participant.	A staff representative who participated in giving feedback on the new strategy during an all-staff consultation session.
Member of teaching staff.	Once the strategy was launched



	its tenets filtered down into operational objectives contributed to by members of faculty. These were also used to justify management decision on a range of issues affecting teaching staff.
The CEO (incoming).	A new CEO was appointed at the mid-point of the strategy's lifecycle. His role is to deconstruct many of the tenets of the strategy document, build a new narrative, and start the cycle again.

Table 1 – Interviewee list

Natural to an inductive piece of work it is difficult to confirm the final number of interview participants as more may be required to reach saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), however the above list of eight interviews represents an adequate spread of participants to answer the guiding research objectives (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

### 3.1.3 Meeting minutes

This study is conducted in a government run public institute and following governance regulations all meetings are formally minuted using a government template that covers the invitees, the attendees, opening remarks from the chair, the agenda items, discussion notes, voting outcomes, actions completed, actions set, tabled items, closing remarks, and a date for the upcoming meeting, if applicable. From an ethnographic perspective these are organisational artefacts that provide us with formal snapshots of who was officially involved with the construction and execution of the strategy document, how the strategy document is intertwined in some aspects of organisational life and perhaps

not in others, and where the strategy document was discussed and by whom (Phelps and Horman, 2009). In that sense they are authentic artefacts of organisational life that represent an official self-produced record (Bowen, 2009). There is an acknowledgement that these types of official records may not reflect a whole truth in that controversial discussions or comments may be left unrecorded, however when combined with multiple data sources do improve the overall validity and reliability of case study findings (Voss, Tsiriktsis and Frohlich, 2002).

While the volume of text contained in this data set is relatively high, much of this volume is perfunctory, process driven templates that provide a coherent temporal view of our three terrains of exploration. There are a number of committees related to the strategic planning document and organisational life whose minutes will be drawn upon for this study:

<b>Committee</b>	<b>Involvement with the strategy document</b>
Strategic planning committee	<p>This committee was charged with managing the initial consultation, environmental analysis, and to oversee the construction process.</p> <p>Volume: There are ten sets of minutes from this committee representing 45 pages of text.</p>
Writing group	<p>This group was tasked with writing the final strategy document using the consultation output from the strategic planning committee.</p> <p>Volume: There are four sets of minutes from this group representing 23 pages of text.</p>
Senior management	This group represents the senior

<p>team</p>	<p>management group from across the academic and corporate functions of the organisation. The group meets fortnightly to approve and discuss all operational matters.</p> <p>Volume: There are six sets of meeting minutes relevant to the development of the strategy document and 11 sets of meeting minutes pertaining to the first six months of the strategic document's life. This represents approximately 340 pages of text.</p>
<p>Academic board</p>	<p>This group represents the most senior academics in the organisation and focuses on matters of strategic interest for the academic function.</p> <p>Volume: There are 5 sets of meeting minutes pertaining to the strategy's first six months in operation representing 40 pages of text.</p>
<p>Strategy implementation committee</p>	<p>This committee was charged with overseeing the implementation of the strategic plan through the setting and monitoring of short-term objectives at all levels of the organisation.</p> <p>Volume: There are 5 sets of meeting minutes pertaining to the strategy's implementation representing 30 pages of text.</p>

Table 2 – Committee list

### 3.1.4 Photographs

Photographic images are said to provide an insight into the ruling ideology in any social system, and a way to observe societal or organisational change is through observing narrative shifts in the images broadcast (Sontag, 1977). The inclusion of photography as a data source in qualitative research can also be seen to give a more active voice to study participants (Warren, 2005). In this study, where we aspire for a semiotic understanding of strategy documents in organisations, visual representation of lived experience provides a complement to individual narrative interviews and the detached official record-keeping.

All stages of the life cycle of this strategic planning document have been photographically documented both formally through the staff photographer and informally through staff pictures, often shared over social media. The process of constructing the strategy document, taking a draft to staff meetings for consultation, staff awareness sessions, workshops, and giving milestone presentations have all been captured photographically, providing a visual timeline of the lifecycle of a strategic document in an organisation. There are 47 photographs within this data set representing this visual timeline. Similar to the minutes and the various document drafts, the photos included in the study were taken long before the study was conceived, and so are naive of the study and its purposes, which give them a naturalistic character as an ordinary part of contemporary practices around strategy making.



Fig. 3 All staff photo at the strategy consultation event

### 3.1.5 Other documentary evidence

There are a number of other ad-hoc sources of data that enriches the timeline of the strategy document in the organisation. Firstly, there are twelve PowerPoint presentations spanning the public consultation of the strategy document lifecycle from the analysis workshops, the draft consultations, the formal launch, and external and internal milestone updates for management, staff and public audiences. These presentations represent a communicative structure that mirrors and moulds organisation practices and thus adds to a fuller picture of the strategy document within the organisation (Yates and Orlikowski, 2007). Secondly, as a participant researcher in the organisation I have kept notes and emails regarding the strategy document's construction, consultation, approval, and implementation that will act as an aide-memoire.



Fig 4. Slides presented an all staff meeting

The above represents a comprehensive view of the types of data sources that will be drawn upon in this study. The following sections 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 will focus on how each terrain of exploration (the strategy document, the process by which it was constructed, and its life in the organisation thereafter) will use these data sources outlined above to offer an interpretative account of the role of a strategy document in an organisation.

### **3.2 The strategy document**

In our guiding research objectives, the first area of focus is to produce a fine-grained analysis of the narrative within the strategy document and to explore the evolution of the document's rhetoric throughout the process of its creation. While the final strategy document can be analysed and deconstructed in isolation as a stand-alone data source, insight into how it evolved can only be gleaned by looking at all of the versions of the document during the writing process. Further explication of the strategy document's narrative will be gleaned from interviews with the writers and those who interact with its language and tenets, to complement the analysis of the document's evolution. Tied to this is the next focus point of the study – the process by which the strategy document was created.

### **3.3 The process**

This terrain of exploration calls for analysis of the process by which the document was created and a reflection on how that influenced the final narrative output. The document was constructed over an 18-month period following a turbulent period within the organisation. The consultation sessions during this time brought together industry, board members, high level government representatives, regulators, representatives from other institutions, local community members, staff, and students to produce PEST and SWOT analyses of the organisation's internal and external contexts. While this was a fruitful exercise it didn't move the writing of the final document forward, so a small team of writers were tasked with taking the output of these sessions and writing it up into a draft strategy. That draft strategy was taken to a number of all staff and senior management consultation sessions, before being finalised and sent to the Board of Trustees for approval.

The data sources (outlined above) that will be drawn upon to explore the process of creating a strategic document are a broad mix of documentary sources and interviews with those most closely involved in the process. These sources include:

<b>Data sources relating the process</b>	<b>Rationale for inclusion</b>
Minutes of the strategic planning committee in the 2013-2014 period concerning the stakeholder consultation sessions.	These minutes provide an accurate timeline of the stakeholder consultation process, how it was lead and who was involved.
Minutes of the Senior Management Team discussing the outcome of the stakeholder consultation sessions.	These minutes provide insight into how the top management team viewed the stakeholder input to the strategy development process and how they wanted it incorporated into the plan.
Minutes of the writing group meetings.	These minutes show the process of writing the document from the stakeholder feedback. They show who was involved, how the writing developed, and the extent of the stakeholder feedback that was incorporated into the process.
Minutes of the Senior Management Team meeting approving the strategy.	These minutes show the discussion around the draft strategy presented, questions raised, and who was involved in this decision.
Facilitator notes on the stakeholder and staff consultation sessions.	These notes demonstrate the feedback given by these groups, questions raised during the process, and a

	reflection on each of the sessions.
Writing team notes on process of refining the strategy document.	This complements the versions of the strategy document available showing the rationale for inclusion and exclusion of ideas.
Presentations to the Senior Management Team on the draft strategy.	These presentations show the visual development of the strategy and the choices made in its presentation
Facilitator presentations to staff in consultation sessions.	These presentations contrast and complement the presentations given to the senior management team showing different approaches for different audiences in the process of developing the strategy.
Presentations on the outcome of the stakeholder consultation sessions.	These presentations show the careful filtering of stakeholder feedback in the development process.
Presentation to the Board of Trustees on the draft strategy.	This provides a contrast view of the draft strategy compared to the staff and the internal top management team.
Photographs of stakeholder consultation sessions, staff workshops and consultations, and the strategy document launch.	Visual records, much of them natural and unstaged, that add to the account of these sessions we have through



	documentary evidence and interviews.
Interviews with those involved with the writing process, the consultation and approval of the final strategy document.	Interviews provide personal interpretative accounts of the process from the participant perspective, complementing the interpretation gleaned the documentary evidence of the process.

Table 3. Data sources

The above assemblage of data sources provides a representation of the imperatives of the process by which the document was created. Using interviews that cover a range of organisational perspectives provides an opportunity to reflect on that process and its semiotic significance in organisational life in relation to the analysed narratives of the documents itself. Once created the document lives in the organisation, influencing language, decisions, being resisted by some and enabled by others. The third focus area of this study concerns this period of time after creation.

### **3.4 The social life of a strategy**

The final terrain of exploration in this study relates to the social life of the strategy document after creation. In particular, revealing the network of organisational actors who interact with the strategy document and exploring the relationships formed with the document's rhetoric within the organisation. As outlined in the previous sections on data sources, the organisation has extensive reservoirs of formal records of meetings, notes, emails, presentations, and photographs. Breadth, in terms of the volume of resources are an essential component of any wide-angle inductive study, however this also presents a challenge to in any time-bounded piece of research (Millen, 2000). Depth in studies of this nature is also essential to provide a judicious understanding of the phenomenon under study (Crowe et al., 2011). To provide a balance of both depth

and breadth in exploring the social life of a strategy document post-creation it is proposed to limit this exploration to the first six months post launch (January – June, 2015). There a number of reasons to choose this particular six month period over another, firstly, in looking at the lifecycle of a strategy document, from development to social life, it is important to understand the transition from an artefact to organisational actor. The first six month period allows not only an insight into the social life of a strategy document but also the process of initiation into the organisation. Secondly, in seeking a semiotic understanding of these documents place in organisational life it is necessary to first access the interpretations of those within the organisation. Interpretations by their nature are built slowly over time and by taking a reflective view of past events there is the opportunity to understand the deeper, more ingrained meanings of these documents to the organisation. Interviews may of course stray beyond this focus period as they offer a holistic reflection on the document, its rhetoric, and its meaning in the organisation. Other data sources will be limited to the six month period.

The following formal records will be drawn from January to June 2015 inclusive:

<b>Type of record</b>	<b>Rationale for inclusion</b>
Senior management team minutes	As the top management board for the organisation, meeting fortnightly, these minutes give an indication of the level of integration of the strategy document in organisational life.
Academic board minutes	As the top academic strategic decision making body these minutes reveal the extent to which the strategy influenced decision making.
Strategy implementation committee	These minutes reveal the

minutes	focus areas for implementation and which departments, functions, and individuals were central to enabling and resisting the strategic imperatives.
Strategy update presentations	These presentations, given to management groups and to wider staff gatherings, give an indication of the tone, rhetoric and the relationship formed with the strategy document in practice.
Strategy update reports	These reports include detailed and measured accounts of individual and group contributions to implementing the tenets of the strategy document. These reports indicate where deep relationships were formed with the ideals of the strategy document and where resentment or resistance to the strategy document can be observed. As a culmination of many self-reports on progress, meaning of the strategy document can be gleaned from the language of the reports.

Emails and notes concerning the strategy implementation	Notes on the challenges and experiences of implementing a strategy document that provide a useful aide-memoire in reflecting on the life of a strategy document.
Photographs from the strategy document launch	Photographs from both the launch and subsequent update meetings provide an insight into the social life of strategy document by providing a rich, visual impression of the organisation and its people interacting with the document.
Photographs from staff meetings	

Table 4. Types of records

### 3.5 Approach to interviews

This study endeavours to uncover the deeper, less obvious meanings of strategy documents and their place in organisational life through the lived experiences of those who interact with such documents. Interviews are an important data source in this study as they attempt to understand the world from the subjects' perspective and experience. Interviews in social science regard interviewees as subjects rather than objects of study; they are actively involved in meaning making and yet subject to the discourses of their context (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The interview is not simply a way of collecting these experiences, but a construction of meaning from these experiences through the interaction of interviewer and interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). This construction occurs with the inter-change of ideas and views on a particular topic; it is literally an 'inter-view' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

From a phenomenological approach, interviews aim to deliver the essence of lived experience (Talmy, 2010) . The purpose of this study however is not merely to showcase accounts of strategy documents in an organisation, but to listen, to question, and to interact with the data interpretatively to derive meaning. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) offer two epistemological conceptions of the interview, first the interviewer is the miner, unearthing nuggets of knowledge and in the second the interviewer is a traveller who wanders, interacting in conversation with those encountered and encouraging them to tell their stories. Bauman (1996) takes this conception further, offering two types of traveller: the pilgrim in search of truth and the tourist in search of snapshot experiences. A pure phenomenological approach to interviewing would pitch the interviewer as miner, collecting experiences without interviewer input. This study is rooted in the phenomenological, inductive, interpretative sphere where the interview is not just a collection of experiential reports, but an open *conversation*, a literal ‘wandering together with’ to explore the role of strategic documents in organisations and to interpret meaning from experience (Kvale, 1996).

Narrative interviews focus on meaning, context and the temporal sequence of events being explored (Mishler, 1990). The purpose of narrative interviews in this study is to record a communal oral history of a strategic document in an organisation (Leavy, 2011). Narrative analysis tries to uncover the underlying plot and structure of a narrative account to derive wider meaning of the subject under study (Murray, 2003). While story is an essential mode of communication in human life, not all life experiences and accounts will fit neatly into a coherent narrative. Narrative analysis should be balanced with a deconstructivist approach that explores both fragmentation and congruency in human experience (Frosh, 2007).

Interviews conducted in this study will follow the broad principles underpinning the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM) to elicit from interviews the essence of lived experience, its conception to the interviewee, and what that means for the phenomenon under study (Rosenthal, 2004). The epistemological basis for this method is the primacy of experience which flows on from the philosophical underpinnings of this study (Cardenal, 2016). This method complements our broader data set in that

while free-flowing narrative is sought in dialog it is contrasted with the biographical, the structural constraints of their experience (where, when, why, who) provided by the formal records.

This method has three foci: the history (biographical), how it is told (narrative), and its meaning (interpretative) (Sandelowski, 2002). BNIM is largely an open narrative technique whereby a single question or statement of context is given to induce a free-flowing narrative from the interviewee, the purpose of which is to uncover what the participants want to express of their experience, not what they believe the interviewer expects hear (Corbally and O'Neill, 2014). This is important in an inductive study where the theory should emerge from the data. Structured interviews would be inappropriate in this context given the potential to suppress interviewee narratives in favour of interviewer hypothesis (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). In strict BNIM protocol one single opening question or statement is used to start the interviewee on their narrative. This comes from its origin in eliciting the life-stories of Holocaust survivors free from interviewer bias on topic selection or meaning to the interviewee, however in studying particular phenomena BNIM is modified to suit a semi-structured interview approach where topics are decided in advance and sample open-ended questions are prepared for this topics (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). This study will follow this modified approach to BNIM, where broad adherence to the principles of BNIM will direct the interviews rather than strict observance of method. In this way the interviews aspire towards a naturalistic dialog, where engaged interlocutors talk at length and in detail about the specific happenings around the strategy document's life.

In this section the types of data sources have been identified and justified for inclusion in the study. Interviews with those involved with the strategy document directly and indirectly will form the most important data source for understanding the origin and context of the document's narrative and the social life of a strategy document within the organisation. As the central primary data-source, a clear approach to interviewing participants has been chosen. In the next section, the approach to analysis and deconstruction will be outlined.

#### **4.0 Approach to analysis**

What purpose does analysis serve in this study? The raw data, assembled together for this study taken at face value has its own power, and is naturally interesting to anyone concerned with strategy. But there are many good reasons to perform analysis on this raw data. First qualitative data sets are large and unwieldy, and that is certainly the case in this study with a wide repertoire of data types and sources drawn upon. Beyond this, there is an argument to be made that the data has already been interpreted and analysed in an unacknowledged way, in deciding what to data collect and curate, and present, and this calls for transparency and honesty in the approach to analysis. The DBA, like all doctorate studies calls for the creation of new knowledge, and so to capture the process of creating a new interpretation of strategy documents in organisations, a form of analysis is called for. The existing interpretation of strategy is somewhat moribund in the sense that it fails to explain its continued usage in practice. By systematically challenging this interpretation of strategy documents it is hoped to create the space to explore novel interpretations on the role of strategy documents in organisations.

As an inductive, interpretative study, there is an inherent promise to offer new meaning which challenges the truth of assumptions in meaning making and allows for new interpretations (Culler, 2007). Deconstruction, the challenging of dominant narrative and meaning, has been used to hold many aspects of organisational life to scrutiny (Jones, 2003). Interpretative studies, such as this one, challenge the assumptions through a deconstruction of meaning, to offer explication (Geertz, 1973). The truth and meaning of any text under study depends on the reader's willingness to accept the text's own claim to validity (Culler, 2002).

This deconstruction is informed by Derrida, who through detailed readings of western philosophers, believed that western philosophical tradition had allowed unacknowledged assumptions rule conception of meaning unchallenged (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004). A deconstructive reading of a text is to highlight what Derrida called

binary oppositions, whose presence and absence in a text affect the conception of meaning, to highlight the instability of such unacknowledged assumptions (Cooper, 1989). Deconstruction is not a method per se, but an event within a text itself that reveals a contradiction in the construction of meaning; in a sense the text deconstructs itself through contradiction (Culler, 2007). Binary opposition, a central concept of deconstruction, can be defined as the meaning given to something, defined against what it is not (De Saussure and Baskin, 2011). Concepts can therefore be associated with an 'opposite' positive or negative e.g. success/failure, inside/outside, speech/writing. Derrida argued that the conception of opposition was an unstable basis for meaning-making as this duality was often asymmetric, privileging one concept over another (Derrida, 1992). Reversing the hierarchy in oppositions allows deconstruction of conception within a text and opens up the possibilities of new interpretation.

To analyse the text within and beyond the strategy document itself, the task is to identify such contradictions and ambiguities and open the whole strategy narrative to new interpretation on the semiotic significance of strategy documents in organisations.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

In this study the main objective is to explore the role of the strategy document within organisational life by peeling back the layers of a strategy document, its symbolism, the process of its construction and the relationships formed with it. In paper one the problem space was conceptualised as one where organisational practice was functional and theory was not in relation to strategy documents and their role in organisations. In this paper the natural methodological choices which flow from this conceptualisation have been discussed. The philosophical underpinnings of this study's phenomenological, inductive and interpretative approach to the exploration of this problem space have been made explicit. It was also acknowledged that quality and rigour in an inductive study differs considerably from hypothetico-deductive methods.

Given the wide-angle view of strategy documents in organisations, our guiding research objectives have given three main foci for depth of analysis. Within these three foci there



are a myriad of data sources that are drawn from, including documentary sources and participant interviews. Clear justification was given for the inclusion of each data source and how that data source would be drawn upon for each of this study's focus points. Interviews will cover the entire phenomenon under study. The approach to interviews, in keeping with the principles of the biographical narrative interview method, was made explicit, in addition to the selection of interview candidates. Documentary evidence will be analysed using a deconstructive approach, questioning the stability of documentary assumptions to clear a path for new interpretations from the data. In keeping with the grounded, inductive approach to this study this paper represents the methodological intentions at this stage of the study, but also recognises that further interviews or data sources may have to be sought to reach saturation on the themes that emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

This interpretative account of strategy documents in organisations aspires to offer novel insights to the meaning and significance of strategy practices.

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Date: 04 / 12/ 2017

**RESEARCH PAPER SERIES**

**Paper 3:**

**Research Design**

**“Exploring the production of a strategy document”**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper is part of a broader phenomenological study of strategy documents in organizational life. The study takes a multi-method approach with data spread over this paper and the next, as it is examined inductively and refined. This paper focuses on the elements of strategy document production through an autoethnographic account of a strategy consultation and a deconstructionist reading of the strategy document produced. It is speculative and exploratory in looking at the theorisation of strategy making, which sets the scene for more refined analysis, conclusions and contribution in the next paper. Strategy production is examined against various theoretical lenses from the mimetic impulse to create strategy documents (Girard, 1965), the power in agenda setting (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962), liminality in open consultation (Szokolczai, 2009), performativity in saying and writing strategy (Austin, 1975), and broader dramaturgy surrounding the production of strategy document (Goffman, 1959). The multiple interpretations of strategy making laid out in the paper all converge on the

insight that there are hidden power structures at play in process of strategy development.

A special thanks to the convenors of the open strategy sub-theme at EGOS 2017 - Richard Whittington, Leonard Dobusch and Georg Krogh for their kind feedback and encouragement on the development of this paper.

Consistent with producing an authentic interpretative, autoethnographic account it is not possible at this stage, between papers three and four, to anonymise pictures and text artefacts relating to the case. On completion of paper four it is my intention to review aspects presented openly in the paper series for potential further anonymisation prior to thesis submission.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of a strategy document within organisational life by peeling back the layers of a strategy document, its language and symbolism, the method of its creation and the relationships formed with it. In paper one the problem space was conceptualised as one where organisational practice was functional, and theory was not, in relation to strategy documents and their role within the organisation. Paper two discussed the natural methodological choices which flow from this conceptualisation along with the philosophical underpinnings of this study's phenomenological, inductive and interpretative perspectives. This leads to a multiple methods approach underpinned by a shared approach to documentary analysis, an ethnographic account (including my own autoethnography of strategy consultation



processes that I ran), and interviews. This paper focuses on the production of a strategy document through an autoethnographic account of strategy consultation and deconstructionist reading of the final strategy document, while paper four focuses on the use of that document and reflections on the role strategy documents play in organisational life through interviews. This study has two overarching guiding research objectives:

- To deconstruct a strategy document and the process by which it was created.
  - Perform a fine-grained analysis of the narrative within the strategy document.
  - Explore the evolution of the document's rhetoric through the process of creation.
  - Analyse process of creation in relation to the narrative output.
- To explore the social life of a strategy document after its creation.
  - Discover the network of actors interacting with the strategy document.
  - Explore the relationships formed with the document's rhetoric.

These objectives position this study within current debates in and around Strategy-as-practice and strategy process research which is focused on revealing the inner-workings of strategy making and strategist modes of action.

While studies have employed traditional non-participant ethnographies of these modes of action (Jarzabkowski, 2008), there is a call to further this work through a “strategic ethnography” (Vesa & Vaara, 2014) which moves beyond traditional ethnography to more closely represent the lived experience of strategy work. This paper presents both an autoethnographic account of how a strategy document was produced as well as deconstructionist reading of the strategy document produced.

This paper explores the process of producing a strategy document through consultation, and how that process manifests itself in the final document. As a practitioner, I understand that consultations and workshops are an essential milestone in strategy development, are expected and are an important part of the ritual. But from a research perspective it is unclear why these consultations have become so enmeshed

with strategy practices. Are they a genuine endeavour to develop strategy from the employee to sustain competitive advantage, fulfilling the promise of open strategy (Chesbrough and Appleyard, 2007)? Or are they more about legitimating management discourse (Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes, 2008) and maintaining social order (Dobusch, 2014)? In exploring the production of a strategy document, this research answers calls (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2014) to develop strategic ethnography through an up-close account of the experience from the perspective of participant consultant-researcher. In doing so, this paper aspires to enrich understanding on how these documents come into being, and this holds the potential to better understand the deeper purposes of the rituals surrounding strategy making.

As the nature of the objectives is quite broad, elements of research design, initial findings and some discussion will be covered across both papers three and four as the analysis unfolds. In line with the inductive approach of this study, this paper (paper three) is more perhaps speculative and exploratory in looking at the theorisation of strategy making, which sets the scene for more refined analysis, conclusions and contribution in paper four. As an inductive study, it draws from a wide range of theory. Looking for theory in action, and the explanatory insights that can emerge from existing theory. As such, this paper is a user of theory which hopefully prepares for the next paper in which theory is parsed in more detail in hope of contributing to theory. This paper explores the production of a strategy including the writing and consultation that go into the assembling of the final document. From understanding the production of a strategy document, paper four will build on these initial findings to explore the relationships formed with the strategy document through participant interviews and documentary analysis. This paper begins with the method used to explore the production of a strategy document, which sets the scene for a discussion on the origins of the document under study. The stages of development gone through to produce the document are explored and contrasted with the final output – the strategy document. This allows for some initial reflection on the making of a strategy document. This paper is part of a series in an inductive study and at this stage seeks to

explore multiple interpretations and theorisations as part of a process of making sense of strategy in practice.

## **2.0 Method and purpose**

The previous paper in this series dealt with methodology in relation to a phenomenological, inductive, and interpretative approach. As a phenomenological study, it assembles multiple data sources at different points in the study. This paper is concerned with the production of strategic documents from their inception, their development in text, and their consultation and design. This section details the approach taken to studying this part of phenomenon from the use of vignettes in an autoethnography to a deconstructionist reading of the final strategy document. In doing so it positions the activities around producing strategy documents into the broader ethnographically inspired study on the social life of strategy documents in organisations.

### **2.1 Autoethnography of a strategy consultation event**

Traditional ethnographic work is the close observation of an ‘other’. Up-close, but distant through either the researcher-researched divide or vast cultural, linguistic, geopolitical divides. Calling for further work within our own organisations and of our own work is a move towards autoethnography more than ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), which offers the transparency of a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others (Jones, et al., 2016). While ethnography privileges being in the moment this study benefits from very rich and detailed contemporaneous field notes that were naively produced and a period of reflection before they were assembled into a totalising account. Autoethnography offers honesty to practitioner accounts and recognises that individuals are often best placed to describe their own experiences (Wall, 2006). In producing an autoethnography, there is an aspiration to offer a de nova account of our own experience in the world, taking on the Heideggerian injunction to see the world for ourselves, rather than taking other

people's words and interpretations and in this way attempting to offer a *tableau rasa* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) account of one's own, direct, personal experience.

Autoethnography has become ever more mainstream in organisations studies, with some auguring a turn to organisation ethnography (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012), a turn that offers an approach to understanding fluid phenomena (Pelly, 2016). Dominant research paradigms call for a sense of objectivity and distance that is at odds with a situated autoethnographic approach (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2016). After Geertz (1973), perhaps the secret of all ethnographies is that, to a greater or lesser extent, ethnographic work always yokes the researcher with the researched. Two papers in particular inspired this approach to studying consultation in the production of strategy documents - Hodgkinson et al's (2006) study of strategy workshops; and Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, and Bourque's (2010) more anthropologically inspired exploration of the ritual of workshops.

As a process autoethnography is retrospectively assembled (Ellis, et al., 2011). Assembled accounts, after consulting minutes of meetings, personal notes, presentations, pictures and consultation materials are reflected upon before being compiled into a totalising account. The account of a consultation event in this paper was written as cascaded happenings and thick description after Geertz (1994), that avoids analysis of essentialising events in favour of a rich account of what actually occurred.

Common with autoethnographic studies is the use of vignettes as an illustrative tool used to provide vivid examples of experience and situation (Barter and Renold, 1999). The use of vignettes as an approach to autoethnography allows for synergy between academic research and practitioners. As Jarzabkowski et al (2014: 280) comment "the evidentiary power of such vignettes lies in their plausible, vivid, and authentic insights

into the life-world of the participants, which enables readers to experience the field, at least partially”.

## **2.2 Analysis design**

In the previous paper the approach to analysis was set out as Derridean deconstructionism. From a philosophical stance, this is to probe at the underlying instability of dominant narratives (Culler, 2007). A central concept of this approach is *binary opposition*, which is to give meaning to something defined against what it is not (De Saussure & Baskin, 2011). Derrida argued that concepts are associated with their positive or negative opposite, which provides an unstable basis for meaning making as this duality is essentially asymmetric, privileging one concept over another (Derrida, 1992). The approach of deconstruction is therefore to determine what a text is constrained to mean at the root of its conception rather than what it is intended to mean (Norris, 1987). While this provides useful background on what a deconstructionist positioning of analysis is, it leaves little by the way of ‘how’ such a deconstruction may be undertaken. Derrida himself railed against deconstruction viewed as a ‘method’, an ‘act’, a ‘tool, or a ‘technique’ (Derrida, 1992). The reasoning behind this view is that a deconstructionist reading attends to something that already exists within the text not a critique from the analyst, but a revelation of what is within the text (Payne, 1993). Derrida had in his earlier writings tried to produce some instructive strategies on deconstructing a document, but stumbled on the potential for a never-ending cycle of deconstructions, that is a text that deconstructs a text which itself can be deconstructed (Derrida, 1983). This difficulty in tying deconstruction down to a method cuts to the heart of what it is trying to achieve; the opening of many possibilities of interpretation.

Fortunately, there are exemplar studies that employ deconstructionist readings to provide some guidance on the practicalities of doing so. Rolfe (2004), in a review of

using deconstruction as a method, offers three clear strategies to approach the deconstruction of a text, firstly to pay attention to the marginal text (overlooked text such as footnotes, casual metaphors), secondly to expose double coded words to make plain the antithesis present in every thesis, and thirdly to introduce binary opposites to the text to expose the invisible hierarchies present within each text. Boje (1995) presents a deconstructionist reading of Disney storytelling which provides a useful exemplar for deconstructing narrative and some guidelines as opposed to specific techniques for reading texts. Among these guidelines is a call to notice voice in text - whose voice is dominant? Marginalised? Excluded? Another is to observe both universalisms and essentialisms, where grand sweeping statements and appeals to the essential human nature are employed. Both indicate what the text is intending to marginalise and open it for alternative interpretation (Boje, 1995).

### **3.0 The origins of the case**

In the higher education landscape, one would be hard pressed to find a higher education institute anywhere in the world that does not both possess a strategic plan and publish it online. Some of this drive to create and share such documents reflects government requirements, funding, or accrediting stakeholder demands. While higher education has become more globally homogeneous, due in part to accreditation standards, curriculum vendors, dual badging and satellite campuses to name but a few, leadership in higher education has also experienced similar isomorphic pressure (Maassen & Potman, 1990) (cf. Powell & DiMaggio, 2012 for a detailed analysis of isomorphism in organisation studies). This global uniformity to best practise could be said to invite the writing of normative strategic plans through mimetic impulse (cf. Girard, 1965 as the originator of the term 'mimetic impulse').

The origin of the institute under study is itself an exemplar of this *global best practice* impulse. The institute was formed as part of a national strategic vision 2030 (the vision itself might be considered as an example of a commodified strategy) which called for the creation of a new modern higher education institute to meet the labour

market needs of an emerging knowledge economy. To create such an institute an international tender was put together with government representatives visiting places such as Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Finland and the United States to explore international best practice for the purpose of buying a model and transporting it wholesale to Bahrain. The government awarded the contract to Polytechnics New Zealand (PINZ), whose management team set up the institute in 2008. Naturally enough, amongst the many documents that both created and were created by the new institute during this set-up phase was the institute's first strategic plan 2008 – 2014. Following political unrest in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011 and concerns about the operation of the institute, the government intervened in the operation of the institute and the management team was replaced. From that point, the strategic plan was put on hiatus until a pending institutional quality review in 2013 prompted the start of preparations for the writing of a new strategic plan – stakeholder consultation workshops, environmental scans, surveys and focus groups. It was against this backdrop that I became involved in the creation of the institutions strategy plan *Towards Sustainability 2015 - 2019*.

Early in January 2014 I received a phone call from the Deputy CEO complaining that while they had so much input into the new strategic plan from stakeholders, there was still no written draft to bring to staff or to the governing board. The Deputy CEO had run environmental scan workshops with industry focus groups, government representatives, and the governing board over the previous 12 months. All of which culminated on a consensus around the current state of the education market, but little in the way of how the institution should plan for that. There was a team of four being put together, of which I was to be one, who would now sit and write the new strategy document. I was emailed all the stakeholder consultation notes to date and warned not to come to the meeting empty-handed. Our first meeting was held later that week, where I met the three other writers, the Deputy CEO and the writing group's secretary. Each of us, eager to show off, had prepared a mock document with what we thought the strategic goals should be. The Deputy CEO excused himself from the follow up

meetings that consumed the next month with the warning that the all-staff consultation meeting was in less than six weeks and we had to have something coherent to present to them. In the following eight months the writing, consultation, approval and launch of the strategic plan was to completely consume my working life.

On reflection and at this remove, in these early, perambulatory meetings it is obvious that a choreography around producing the broad and open process for others emerged, one that is somewhat at odds with the principle of open strategy. Strategy consultation does not happen naturally within organisation life, it most always has enabling works, stage management. It is therefore useful to explore the character of the enabling works and how they shape the open engagement and consultation. In this way, one can see if the spirit of open engagement is lived and enacted, or if the largely hidden power structures that coordinate, circumscribe and circumvent the principles of open strategy.

#### **4.0 Closed team development phase**

In the aftermath of that initial strategy writing meeting, without the Deputy CEO to present our alternative visions to, we quickly got down to the business of negotiating the general shape of the document and began the task of fitting that to our organisational mission, vision and stakeholder feedback. We were acutely aware that we had a very short time to bring something that was presentable to a long-planned meeting of all employees and shortly after to our Board of Trustees. Each of us represented a management function within the institute who found we could quickly agree on what needed to form part of the strategic document. As managers, we knew we would also deal with the implementation of any plan made, none of us wanted to be saddled with a large unwieldy document that required layers of annual business, operational, and financial plans and undue administrative tasks. We set about writing a concise list under each goal of what we thought need to be done and what was



probably feasible to do in our current environment. In a sense, this is the ‘restrictive face of power’ (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) (cf. Steven Lukes, 1974 for a discussion on the dimensions of power in particular, the power to set agendas), not the ability to directly wield power through decision making, but the power to ordain what makes it to the decision-making table and the normative framework for making those decisions once at the table. The sense of these meetings, felt by all the participants was that we were making the organisations for others, giving them the direction sorely lacking in the consultation phase to that point.



Figure 1. Presentation to the Board of Trustees by the researcher, March 2014

It was not long before we converged on the opinion that it just did not ‘look’ like a strategy. If we wanted to keep it simple and have a strategy of essentials approved it would have to take the form of what a governing board would expect of a strategy document. Each of us brought to the table exemplar strategies from international Polytechnics and Institutes of Technology and from those we built a template of strategic goal definition, goal context, goal metrics, and sample initiatives that would be undertaken to achieve each goal. A notable feature of this phase was that we alighted on certain phrases that we admired in other plans- rhetorical flourishes that survived through the consultation and rewrites. These templates and gobbets of text would go through seven different versions before final publication, with the fifth version being widely circulated as the basis for the all-staff meeting, six weeks from our first writing meeting. Reflecting on this now, I can see not only the mimetic

impulse (Girard, 1965) at play, but also the awareness of the importance of bending to an isomorphic pressure of what form a higher education strategy should take.

In parallel to these writing meetings, as part of my duties working for the CEO's office, I was charged with the organising the all-staff consultation and making sure that the day went off without a hitch, everything from room booking and set up, decoration, refreshments, audio visual support and sending invites to all staff. More formally, the strategic planning committee were charged with running the consultation and content of the meeting. Before the event we held two planning meetings in which I ran through my running order for the day and to-do list, taking advice and direction as I went.

The first meeting was held months before the event, which both indicated the symbolic importance of the day, and how anxious everyone (especially senior leadership) were to see it go well. Much of the meeting was given over to designing the group exercises and organising facilitator roles- everyone wanted something unformulaic, engaging and uplifting – but no one quite knew what that meant in practice. Particularly vocal staff members were to spread evenly out, - this meant designing an elaborate assigned seating plan. Considerable discussion was also devoted to agreeing a venue. A previous consultation in a fixed seating lecture hall had garnered little staff engagement and so we would have to use the main sports hall, carpeted and organised in large round table seating. Formal roles were assigned- an MC, a representative from the management team to give updates, a main facilitator for the group exercises, a team of facilitators charged with sitting at the staff tables to steer discussions, a photographer, a videographer, and a notetaker.

The second meeting exhausted quickly after going through the materials agreed in the first. There was considerable anxiety about the exercises- people felt they would be uninspiring. There were to be two exercises undertaken by each table, first was to review their assigned goal and brainstorm initiatives that could be developed to achieve the goal. Each table would be assigned two strategic goals picked from a basket that would travel around the hall giving a gift of strategic issues to each table.

Participants would then be requested to review and develop these strategic goals. The second exercise involved anticipating the challenges in achieving each goal and how they could be tackled. After each exercise, the nominated group spokesperson would review their table's feedback with the note taker and briefly report to the wider group. Each exercise was to be given 30 minutes with a similar amount of time taken in sharing feedback.

A final ad-hoc meeting with the CEO ran through everything in fine detail (down to the PowerPoint decks), talked over the choreography; this included a flurry of final adjustments including calls to speakers to refine their message, and check that the whole thing had the right look and feel- no detail was too small for parsing. Only at this stage was there a version of the strategy document available for review.

Two days before the day a rather panicked caucus formed to ensure full attendance. Managers rang managers- who emailed, phone, buttonholed their colleagues and reports into attending. The event was to be recorded through these notes, facilitator observations, secretarial documentation, video, and photographs; and all of this was put in place ready for the event.

### **5.0 The consultation of a strategy**

Below a post-hoc account has been assembled from memos, formal meeting minutes, diary entries, emails, the copious notes (now dignified with the title *field notes*), and consultation materials including the video of the day- all of which were produced in and around the consultation event that complement recollections. At the time of the event this study was not considered a remote possibility, and so the event was organised naïvely. But the sheer volume of debris and detritus from the day its origins and aftermath give plenty of source material for the theorisation and speculative interpretation on nature of strategy consultation work.

Here follows a series of vignettes, photographs, and flip charts from the event itself that represent the order, discussion, relationships and interactions of the day. As such they aspire to offer a useful glimpse into the micro-social practices (Knorr-Cetina,

1988) of open strategy. Vignettes hold out the possibility of capturing how strategies are consumed and executed in context.

*The first twenty minutes.*

Holding fresh coffee in their hands, in skirmishes of talk, 400 people swarmed in at nine am and promptly sat down wherever they saw fit, ignoring the assigned seating. Senior management were left marginalised at two tables against the wall at the back of the hall. After a brief impromptu meeting, the MC beseeched everyone to stick to the assigned seating, most grimly complied, schlepping over to the seating plan on the wall, before settling down. We were now twenty minutes behind our carefully orchestrated schedule.

The various travails of kicking the day off speak to the spirit of open strategy- the attempt to remake and reorder hierarchies, making a liminal space (Szokolczai, 2009) (cf. Van Gennep as the originator of the term ‘liminality’ in his 1906 book *Rites de passage*) that relaxes power relations and allows the whole organisation to speak to itself. Critical perspectives suggest that this can never happen, perhaps seeing how senior management can assert themselves to remedy the reordered hierarchy- and so power is always present. In this line of thinking the open strategy discourse is more about the maintenance of a certain organisational social order (Dobusch, 2014) and the dissemination of management discourse (Phillips, et al., 2008)- implicating everyone as a manager even if just for one day. The acute anxiety of management in sending out the right messages, broadcasting the inclusivity of the open strategy consultation suggests their belief in it being a powerful, performative (Austin, 1975) tool in the organisation’s arsenal (Whittington, et al., 2016).

When reviewing the data from the day, what struck initially was the structured – unstructured, both organised and disorganised (Cooper, 1989) nature of the interactions between participants which offers a pause for thought on the current dominant thinking on the democratisation or openness of strategy consultation. Presented below are a series of vignettes that represent the talk of the day.

### *Vignette 1*

In a darkened sports hall, the start of semester staff gathering had got underway with a video of a TED talk expounding the virtues of the vocational calling answered by those who choose to teach.



Figure 2 – A facilitator commenting on the day

As the video<sup>2</sup> finished a facilitator took to the floor to remind this audience of champions of the elemental reason they were there – to achieve the organisation’s vision and mission.

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<sup>2</sup> Every kid needs a champion, Rita Pierson, April 2013, New York. <https://youtu.be/SFnMTHhKdkw>

*“How do we achieve this vision and mission? Our strategy helps us to achieve this. Without a good strategy, a strategy driven by you, we can’t achieve this”* – Senior executive 1.

The facilitator then unveiled the five strategic goals that mapped the way to mission achievement.

*“Now we recognise that achieving these goals means changes to how we work, how we communicate, and how we collaborate, but most importantly this strategy is going to have to be driven by you. You need to define what these goals mean to us, how we will achieve them, and what we need to change to do so”* – Senior executive 1

The set is quickly changed. Flip charts and markers are produced at each table, a team of facilitators are dispersed among the audience, handouts are distributed, team groups are defined and the lighting goes up.....

Performativity, coined by Austin (1975) as an utterance which constitutes an act that transforms reality, has a role in shaping strategic discourse (Balogun, et al., 2014). Whittington et al’s (2016) study of new CEO strategy presentations has shown that positive strategy speech, described as ‘anticipatory impression management’, was shown to be highly performative in nature. Similarly, in Kornberger and Clegg’s study (2011) of the Sydney 2030 strategy consultation, declarative pronouncements on what was deemed ‘strategic’ had performative effects on stakeholder perceptions on boundary conditions. Laine and Vaara’s study (2007) on the construction of strategy actors demonstrated the performative power of strategy discourse on power relations. Strategy consulting could be said to have a performative effect on power relations whereby the power to write strategy is transferred from top management to the employees. In the vignette above, we can see performativity in action whereby the

opening declarative statement on the day ahead frames the day and becomes the day. In the following vignette we see the imposition of boundary conditions leave a performative imprint of what is strategic.

### *Vignette 2*

To a table tasked with exploring what the entrepreneurship and research strategic goals mean to the organisation and how it should be implemented. The participants question whether the goal is realistic.

*“Research? How are we to focus on research when we are teaching overtime every semester? If they want us to focus on research, they have to give us time and support to do it.” – Lecturer 1*

*“Yeah, it’s exactly like the entrepreneurship part. There’s no issue with the staff, students or facilities in doing that, but where’s the money? It’s a basic requirement, entrepreneurship programs require investment. It’s not complicated.” – Academic manager 1*

The group’s scribe, who was briefly distracted in taking notes from other group members, refocuses on the negativity at the table and interjects.

*“Guys, guys, stop please. You’re focusing on minor operational issues and getting dragged into detail when we were told to highlight the strategic issues. You need to think big picture. These are things we can fix and nothing to do with the direction of the organisation.” – Academic manager 2.*

Non-participatory open strategy discourse will have performative effects internally or externally; discourse must demonstrate narrative credibility to be performative (Barry & Elmes, 1997). Performativities are made possible through framing and the acceptance of roles in the onstage, the backstage and the audience to reach legitimacy (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). Building on Goffman’s (1959) earlier work, Hajer and Versteeg (2005) provide a dramaturgical view of performative discourse in governance through the use of organisational frames which takes into account the appropriate staging, scripting and setting of governance performances. Across open strategy consultation events, with exercises that shift the role of strategy protagonist back and forth between top management and the employee – there are evident roles and rules to this interaction which can be explored through the metaphor of dramaturgy.



*Vignette 3*

As the facilitator calls time on the first exercise and each table is asked to nominate one individual from their group to present their feedback to the wider group. A table tasked with reviewing the ‘graduate reputation’ goal nominates a member of the teaching faculty to deliver their group’s feedback to the facilitator.

*“I’d like to highlight that this isn’t really a goal we are striving for. We already achieve a 90% employment rate within six months. We compare very highly with some of the best institutions in the world in this regard. I’m not sure how we can improve on*



*that. We think it would be better to concentrate on some of the areas where we are not world class, in particular....” – Lecturer 2.*

Although no question in particular had been asked, a member of the management team stands to answer this feedback.

*“Great point! As you correctly noted we are world class in this regard and in no small thanks to the hard work and dedication of all the teaching staff in this hall, many of whom have brought years of industry experience to the classroom. It’s our duty to protect what you have created here as one of our institution’s core strengths. I think we should all be very proud of such an achievement in such a short time frame. Thank you.” – Senior executive 2.*

The vignette above demonstrates the deft shifting of roles back and forth between management and employee, during such open consultations. It is this blurring of normal structure that led Johnson et al (2010) to interpret such consultation spaces as liminal events. This interaction is not scripted nor openly regulated, yet there is a sense that there are tight behavioural codes at play. From a superficial exploration, it is striking how negativity is marginalised in open consultation events in favour of a chirpy, upbeat and optimistic vision of the organisation.

#### *Vignette 4*

After an arid hour of activities, the room liven up when the moderator moves on to discuss challenges. Two acerbic comments from the floor, which identified manager’s failings, were met with a general murmur of approval.

*“Our administrative model prevents this from happening, with high levels of red tape and bureaucracy.” – Lecturer 3.*

*“Book buying is very slow and problematic which sometimes impacts on teaching and courses.”- Learning support staff member.*

The master of ceremony moved deftly to validate and marginalise these unwelcome comments, described in a strategy meeting afterwards as grenades.

In addition to a sense of an imposed tone within strategy consultation it can be seen that participant interactions are negotiated and regulated. In large organisations participants will come from a broad range of professional and life backgrounds, bringing their past experiences and understanding of what strategy is and looks like married with their understanding of the current environment. These experiences and interpretations must be negotiated with other participant interpretations within these consultation settings.

#### *Vignette 5*

In discussing strategic goals relating to research and reputation, a table of participants from international backgrounds are debating the merits of aiming for international standards.

*“It’s all very well to say you want X number of peer reviewed journal articles per year, but what does that actually do to further our mission? How does that benefit the students?” – Lecturer 4.*

A colleague joins in...

*“If that’s what they want to do, then it’s easy, it just costs money. Buy in the talent you need to buy the publications you need. Plenty of institutions in the region do this and quite successfully. But we have to ask why this is important? We were set up for a very specific purpose far removed from the type of organisation it takes to mass produce journal articles” – Lecturer 5.*

A lone voice of dissent in the table recalls their past experience...

*“Of course it’s important! How can we be taken seriously as a ‘world-class’ institution, if we can’t compete against global standards? In my previous institution we could do so much more than we have been able to do here simply because we had a reputation built on our research and accreditations.” – Lecturer 6.*

This vignette represents a broader discussion held at several tables during the consultation on what had more merit as a strategy, the aspiration of international recognition versus the need to craft a strategy suited to the environment. During the consultation, the consensus seemed to lean towards a view that many of the things that are normally found in a higher education institute’s strategy neither were realistically achievable within the strategy’s timeframe nor really suited the environment and institution’s mission.

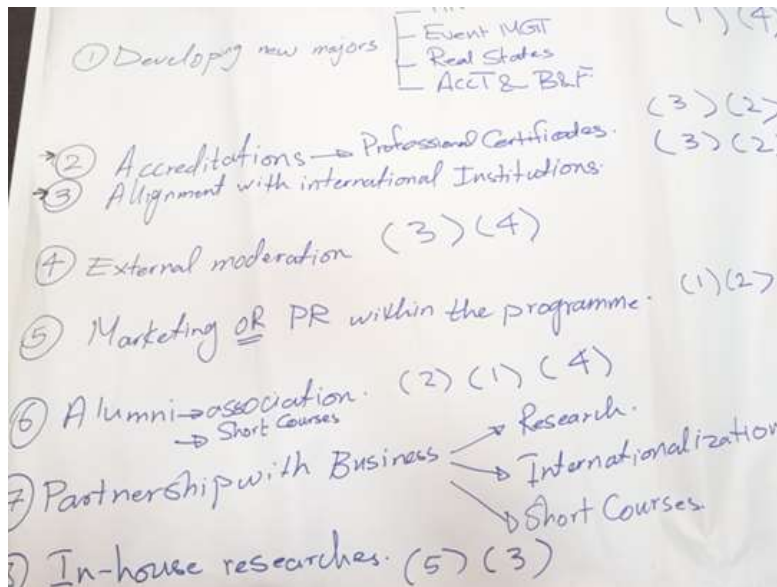
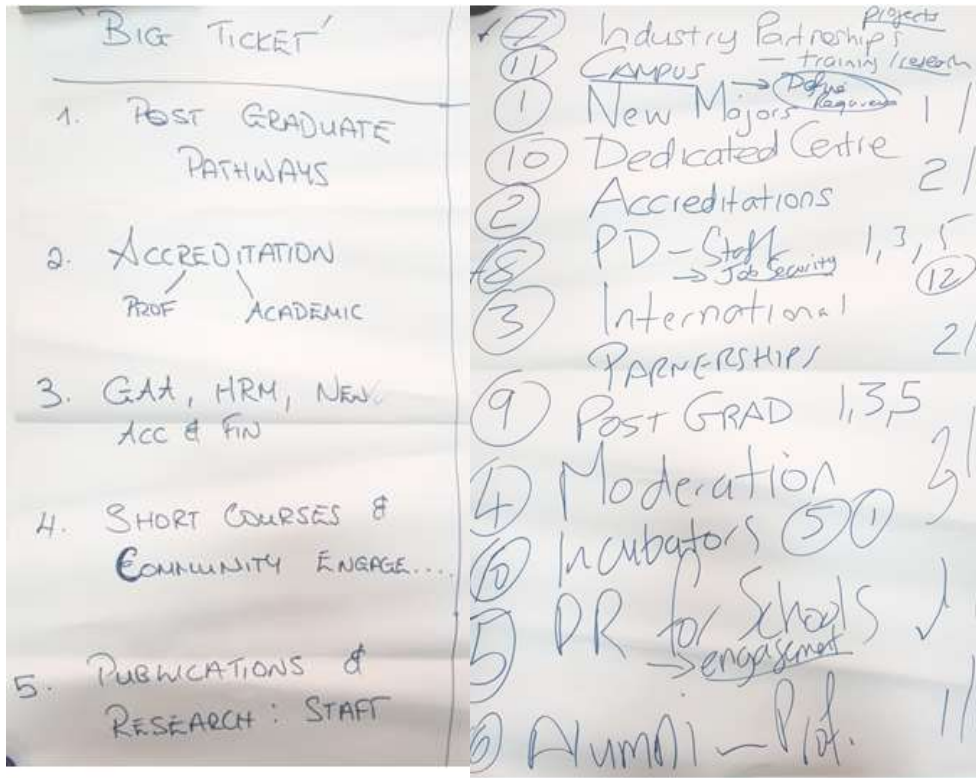
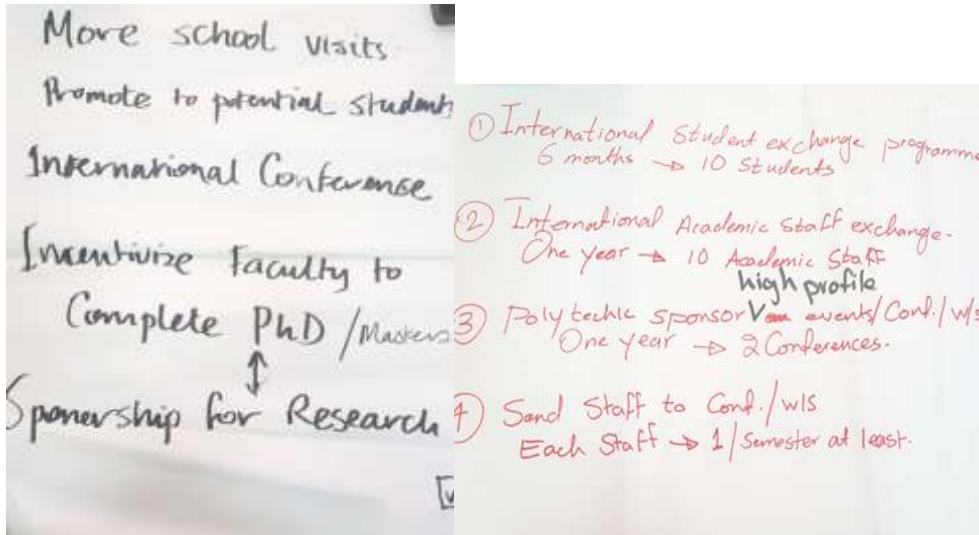


Figure 4 - Flip charts from the event

Interestingly, when it came to communicate the summaries of these discussions through the flip charts at the end of each exercise these views are entirely absent in

written form. In fact, looking at the charts, they could be taken from a group discussion in any institution anywhere in the world, with concerns for internationalisation, accreditation, publications, programme development, PR, staff qualification level, recruitment, and work loading. Despite judgment of their current environment pushing participants to explore different strategic choices, the output reflects more of a patchwork of generic strategic concerns.



- ① International Student exchange programme  
5 months → 10 Students
- ② International Academic staff exchange.  
One year → 10 Academic Staff  
high profile
- ③ Polytechnic sponsor Van events/Conf./w/s  
One year → 2 Conferences.
- ④ Send Staff to Conf./w/s  
Each Staff → 1/semester at least.

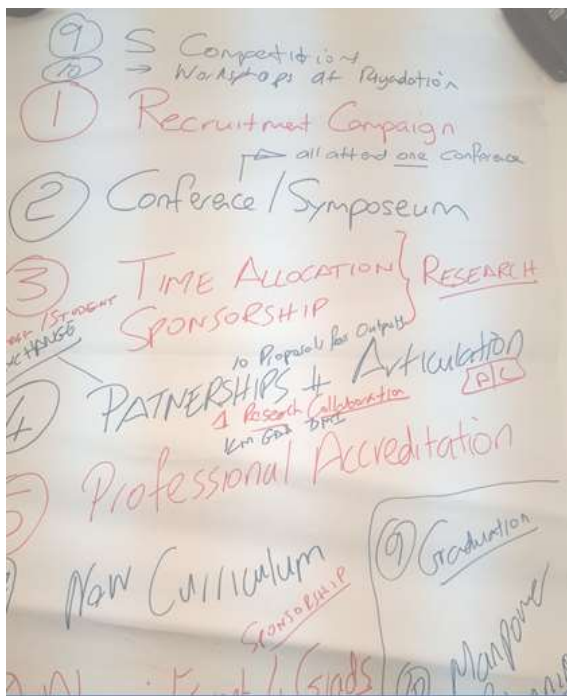


Figure 5 – More flip charts taken from the event

This perhaps reflects the expectations put on the day, in that the output is expected to look, feel, and sound like strategy. Participants in strategy consultations are burdened with the expectation of producing text and talk that mimics the form of strategy. To meet these expectations, they draw on their own previous experience of reading and participating in strategy text and talk in a range of organisations. When faced with the expectation of producing strategy text and talk, participants have all the tools with which to create simulacra of strategic rhetoric. In a sense, it is mimesis of strategy and strategy consultation.

The intertwining of strategy and the organisation is at play whereby strategy consultations shape the organisation through the legitimisation of views and conceptualisations of the organisation. As Whittington et al (2006) note, this type of ‘workshopping’ requires great amounts skill and craft to use effectively and much of the output will depend on what purpose of this kind of activity is intended to serve – acquiescence to a new vision or genuine ideation. A senior manager, consultant, or facilitator who has developed their craft can sway the output towards the intended purpose through careful use of restrictive power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962).

Genuine thought development or strategic ideation may be difficult to achieve in such a workshop/consultation session. On one hand, there is the pull of the familiar legitimate strategy of international norms and standards and on the other is a question as to whether something should be crafted to the environment. There is the phenomenological argument against the portability of knowledge and therefore the appropriateness of imposing international standards to all environments (Lavery, 2003). In our consultation case, the participants became critics of the space as though they were not part of it. They called for an explorative examination of appropriate strategic choices through interpreting their past experiences and that of their current environment. Yet, despite the consensus on the requirement for independent thought,

no participant actually committed to following this through. What emerges in the feedback is an unspoken consensus of sticking to familiar strategic form. In turn, the final strategic document bears little acknowledgement of local context and experience but focuses on the international best practices, norms, and standards sought after by the institute- speaking more of the mimetic impulse of Girard (1965) than a Heideggerian ethos of experiencing the world for yourself. The next section explores why this acknowledgement of the need to think independently did not result in independent thought nor attempted independent thought.

## **6.0 Post-consultation – final authorship**

Post-consultation the writing group secretary pulled together all the groups notes from the day into one document repository with pictures, scanned feedback sheets, presentation decks and video files from the consultation day. The writing team put together a brief report for the senior management team on the day and the overwhelmingly positive feedback received from staff on the strategy document. It was proposed that some amendments would be made to the document and it would be brought forward to a senior management workshop before being brought to the Board of Trustees for final approval. Over the following weeks the writing team regularly met at first to refine the document following the all staff meeting and prepare it for the upcoming senior management workshop. Version six of the document was churned out quickly before the team turned their attention to how the strategy document would be managed post-launch.

An implementation mechanism needed to be designed that was not too onerous on administrators but kept both the executive team and middle management committed to common goals. It was decided to pitch a short-cycle objective system used at a lot of technology companies to the senior management team. It wasn't going to be an easy sell as the system had three components that could make public sector management

quite uncomfortable – publicly stated goals, measurable targets, and public scoring against those targets.

The writing team switched to designing a workshop for the senior management team that would best present the revised strategy document and its proposed implementation mechanism. Presentation slides on each were prepared along with folders for each participant containing handouts on the strategy document, the development process, the broad consultation that had been completed, the proposed implementation mechanism and a timeline of next steps. A team from the humanities faculty was co-opted into the process to run team building exercises as part of the workshop as a preamble to the group reviews of the strategy document. Post-workshop the final version of the strategic document was put together to go forward for approval by the Board of Trustees. No substantive changes to the document took place between versions five (as presented at the all staff consultation) and version seven which was approved by the Board of Trustees.

## 7.0 The document – an output of strategy consultation?



Figure 6 – Pages from the final published strategy document

The final document published is a mix of the text developed for the strategy document overlaid to images, colours, and graphics running to 16 pages.



The analysis of the final document has two main elements, the text which evolved over a number of versions through the writing process and then the visual presentation of the document where the text is overlaid with colours, graphics, logos, and photographs. Both analyses search for the dualities, hierarchies (Rolfe, 2004), essentialisms and marginalisations (Boje, 1995) necessary to deconstruct the narrative presented. In the following subsections, the analysis of the document’s text and visual presentation is explored in line with the analysis design set out in section 2.2.

## 7.1 The written document

### Binary opposites/ dualisms

The introduction of binary opposites, antonyms and dualisms to text analysis is to understand the privileging of concepts within a narrative. These hierarchies present instabilities within the narrative that can reveal the text’s core concerns or roots. A line by line analysis of binary opposites was conducted for the entire document text which revealed a consistent privileging of certain concepts and unspoken hierarchies that speak to what the text is constrained to mean rather than intended to mean. Starting with an excerpt from the strategic goal titles, we can see the wording used in the goals juxtaposed with their binary opposite. In other words, the goals defined against what they are not:

Strategic goals	Binary opposite
From Start-Up to Sustainability	Start-up is linked with its binary opposite of <b>end</b> and sustainability with <b>unsustainable</b> .
Graduate Reputation	Reputation is opposed to either <b>disrepute</b> or <b>unknown</b> .
Assurance of Learning	Assurance is opposed to <b>uncertainty</b> or <b>self-doubt</b> and

	learning to <b>ignorance</b> .
Engagement for Impact	Engagement is opposed to <b>withdrawal</b> and impact to <b>ineffectual</b> .
Entrepreneurship and Research	Entrepreneurial is opposed to <b>cautious</b> and research to again to <b>ignorance</b> .

Table 1 – A table of binary opposites within the goal definitions.

On the surface, defined against what it is not, the strategic goals seem to be rallying against a crisis of legitimacy and uncertainty. From the first goal, it can be seen that the opposition starts to contradict and deconstruct itself through the progress continuum presented between start up to sustainability. Start defined against an end and the end sustainability defined against an unsustainable start. Sustainability cannot be an end or a stasis and a start is a point in time that cannot be unsustainable by itself.

Delving into the goal of sustainability, there is a dualism in the term itself between its precise meaning of maintenance and stability and the implied common usage of environmental and ethical business practices. The current ‘start-up’ environment in the document itself is described variously as ‘challenging’ ‘dependent’ ‘strong’ ‘tight fiscal environment’ and ‘outgrowing’. The imagined sustainable future should ‘reduce’ ‘re-examine’ ‘diversify’ and ‘grow’. The descriptions of each end of the progress continuum do not fit neatly to either side and contradict each other.

**Marginal text**

Connecting Generations ★ Inspiring Innovations

Bahrain Polytechnic has been established by His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa by Royal Decree No.65 for the year 2008, to address the need for a skilled Bahraini labour force, with the aim of supporting economic growth and diversification.

Bahrain Polytechnic delivers applied, professional and technical qualifications. Graduates will be work-ready; confident and competent, aware of what is expected of them in the professional world, and able to perform to their full potential.

Figure 7 – an excerpt from the final published strategy document

Marginal text refers to foot notes or casual metaphors used throughout the text that are not central to the document, but can reveal the deeper roots of the text (Rolfe, 2004). The inside of the documents cover page contains a small footnote on page that is otherwise reserved for images. The slogan ‘connecting generations \* inspiring innovations’ has references links to Bahraini and Arab identities of having strong familial structures and a past as Arab innovators and scholars. The first sentence of the strategy document makes reference to the organisation’s legitimacy, that it was created by the King through a royal decree. The task is an important one, to support the nation’s economic growth and diversification. As a footnote piece of text on the introductory section of the document it indicates a clear call to the organisation’s existential legitimacy. The voice in this opening footnote is legal, formal and official rather than speaking from the voice of the organisation itself. Interestingly, although the organisation was created as part of the grand national ‘2030 Vision’ strategy there is no particular reference to that legitimating force here despite it being the source of the law referenced. This is a noteworthy exclusion in the margins as the legitimacy of the organisation is used, but the weight of expectations contained within the national vision is excluded.

## **Exclusions**

The search for exclusions is to understand what a text is intending to marginalise. What is purposely excluded from a narrative is still part of that narrative and system of meaning making (Culler, 2007). Key to uncovering exclusions is to notice ‘voice’ in text (Boje, 1995) to understand the dominant perspective being presented. In our text, the document opens with the legal and governmental prerequisites that allow the organisation to exist. The document is introduced through a letter from the Chairman of the Board of Trustees and a letter from the CEO. After the management introductions,

five strategic goals are presented. The strategic goals are concerned with the structure of the organisation, the operations of the organisation, and the external perception of the organisation. Each of these strategic directions comes from the perspective and voice of senior management speaking to the concerns of government or funding stakeholders. What are overtly excluded in this narrative are the voices that make up a higher education institute, students and staff. The word student is mentioned a handful of times in the document and purely in the context of the function they provide as opposed to a perspective of student aspirations and needs from the organisation (see Table 2).

<b>Examples of the word student within the document</b>
“increase in student numbers”
“maintaining the student base”
“regional student recruitment”
“partnerships for student exchange”
“foster engaging behaviour in students”
“measured by the number of part-time students”

Table 2 – Table showing the use of the word ‘student’

As will be explored in the next section on the visual document, without reading the text it would be difficult to divine that the document was anything other than a government publication.

### **Essentialisms**

The call to look for essentialisms in the analysis of text is to understand both the dominant perspective presented and the marginalised voice excluded (Twine, 2001). Throughout the document there are essentialist statements concerning the current state of the world that give insight into the perspective of the dominant voice. A few examples of these statements are:

<b>Essentialist statements about the world</b>
In a world of turbulent change, where the past is no longer a good predictor of the future, the idea of a static 5 year strategic plan is no longer adequate to support innovation. (CEO letter, pg 5)
However, the era in which higher education is a solely matter of national policy and government funding and regulation is rapidly fading. (Strategic goal 1, pg 6)
As an institution of higher education we have a responsibility to provide thought leadership and encourage the exchange of ideas. (Strategic goal 4, pg 12)
Higher education is facing unprecedented challenges in the definition of its purpose, role, organisation and scope in society and the economy. (Strategic goal 5, 14)

Table 3 – Table of exemplar essentialist statements

These statements demonstrate the voice of management in the document, speaking to a stakeholder and describing a changing world. These are broad sweeping statements that essentialise the experiences of higher education organisations into a mono-simplistic viewpoint.

## 7.2 The visual document

### The document in colour



Figure 8 – Colours of the strategy document

Red is chosen to open and close the document as it forms part of the organisation's livery and represents the national colours. The red is tempered with grey, which while undergoing a renaissance of popularity in design, from a communications perspective represents neutrality and detachment (Madden, et al., 2000). The introductory management messages and table of contents are also presented against a background of neutral official grey. Each of the five strategic goals is colour coded with green, red, blue, orange, or purple. The sustainability goal is predictably linked with the colour green, further leaning on the duality between operational sustainability and the wider green agenda. The graduate reputation goal is presented in red, linking the reputation to both the organisational livery and the national identity. Assurance of learning is presented in bright blue, a colour of dependability and trust in corporate branding (Madden, et al., 2000). Orange and purple are chosen for the final two goals, predictably in line with branding norms for each of those goals.

## Pictures



Figure 9 – pictures from the published strategy document

There are few pictures contained within the document. There are no pictures of staff, students, facilities or the daily life of the organisation. The pictures used are formal posed portraits of government and management. The first three pictures are of the King, the Crown Prince, and the Prime Minister. The use of the three pictures adds a sense of officialdom and places the strategy document firmly in the governmental sphere. The chairman of the Board of Trustees is pictured in formal national dress with

the added formality of wearing the ‘*Bisht*’, a formal robe worn only for the most special occasions such as national events, marriage, or visiting important dignitaries. As the opening visual statement for the document it gives a sense of formality to the document and suggests the audience addressed therein. A formal posed portrait of the CEO in national dress was used instead of other possibilities such as the CEO at work, the CEO meeting students or the CEO at an event.

## Graphics



Figure 10 – Graphical elements from the published strategy document

There are a number of graphical branding elements overlaid throughout the document, in addition to specifically designed logos for each strategic goal. The organisational logo is a ‘*neurostar*’, a merging of two impressions, a brain neuron and a star. The neuron is animated by texture derived from traditional Arabic patterns. It lends a distinctive Bahraini dimension, a symbol of a Bahraini connecting to his heritage and history. The three layers of design patterns are from three periods of the country’s history: Dilmun, Islamic, and Medieval. There is a link from the neuron to Islam’s golden age of science and the organisation’s aspiration to be a seat of learning and science again in the Middle East. The patterns are a significant reference to the nation’s heritage, particularly important in a region of straight line borders and nation states still in their infancy.



Figure 11 – Strategic goal icons from the published strategy document

Each goal in the document is represented by a logo designed outside the strategy consultation process. The logo for sustainability is an upward arrow suggesting a strong movement from one context to another. Graduate reputation is represented by a graduate’s mortarboard, a natural symbol to use for a goal on graduate reputation. It is a particularly powerful symbol in the cultural context where graduation ceremonies are celebrated as a major life event, televised nationally, attended by high level dignitaries, and flowers and gifts are showered on the graduates. Assurance of learning is a simplistic seal of approval with a ‘check’ symbol in the middle of the seal. The logo for engagement is two hands entwined, evoking a sense of friendship, collaboration and partnership. The logo for research is a magnifying glass surrounded by dashes, symbolising illumination. The logo is a play on the now universally recognisable search symbol. A Google image search for the term ‘research’ or ‘research logo’ research returns a page of variations on the magnifying glass and light bulb combination. While not particularly innovative, it is a clear visual symbol.

### **7.3 Document analysis conclusion**

The textual analysis of the document reveals an organisation that views itself in a precarious position with respect to funding, sustainability and an uncertain relationship with the external environment. In text, the document is deconstructed as a communication to an official stakeholder audience to the exclusion of other voices such as parents, community and students. The visual deconstruction of the document



reinforces this message through staged official photographs, conservative colours and logos and the exclusion of other visual representation of the organisation.

The final document produced speaks to the state with which the organisation found itself in at the time of its production- a transitional period between management groups, lack of clarity on future funding arrangements and a raft of new administrative regulations imposed; all concerns of the management group. The final strategy document is an open letter from management to government on the future governance arrangements for the institute. It bears little imprint of the lengthy wider stakeholder consultation process the document went through from its inception, its writing, consultation and approval.

## **8.0 Reflections on the making of a strategy**

The previous sections have relayed what are familiar and relatable episodes from a strategy consultation and development where the underlying currents of structure that mirrors elements of dramaturgy are evident. One can see that social interaction in strategy consultations is regulated by unspoken rules, where each participant knew their parts and what was expected. There is a global uniformity to the form, structure, and even content to certain extent of strategy workshops and consultations. Each participant was expected to ad-lib within small regulated times, however their behaviour was ultimately governed by a structure whereby all participants sensed the appropriate output to present. Much of the work in open-strategy and indeed 'workshopping' in that context (Johnson, et al., 2010) suggest that this new egalitarian approach to strategy development has the power and potential to create a liminal state where normal power structures recede. This, it is suggested, allows a free exchange of ideas and space for new levels of employee led innovation. This case questions that thesis and finds that any malleability of power structures to be purely superficial.

The invisible structure observed overwhelmed and consumed any impetus towards differing thoughts and deeper dissection of what could form a strategy. The participants recognised the pull of international norms and standards may not have been fit for purpose but the structure did not allow for an exploration of that space. No sense of that critique of originality made it out of the consultation exercises and into the strategy formulation. The participants were striving for originality but what was produced was a mimesis of strategy and the consultation a performance of strategy; those vignettes so familiar to anyone who has been through strategy consultations in any capacity. Strategy consultations are pitched as being opportunities to refine the strategy or develop original content, yet as this case shows there is limited scope in these settings to explore the unknown or to question organisational liturgy. It is my interpretation that these are episodes of highly regulated performance akin to comedy improvisation, whereby there is no script but roles, rules, and expected behaviour. This form of theatricalisation in ritual organisational practices has much deeper roots in the genesis of organisations and global corporate culture, which leads us to an understanding of strategy consultations as a form of theatropoesis.

### **8.1 Theatropoesis**

Referring to dramaturgy or theatricalisation in relation to consultation is not a dismissal of the authenticity, but recognition that the roots of many organisational practices can be found at the nexus of the history of theatre and market commerce. The original impulse toward formal markets arises from a desire to bring the private into the public sphere (oaths could be witnessed, documents destroyed, executions carried out, or a proclamation read) and held on neutral ground alongside religious sites (Casson & Lee, 2011). These bounded markets provided a liminal space where the *theatrum mundi* played out, but were also enlivened with theatrical spectacles to entice buyers, such as comedic performances that satirised the powerful figures and issues of the day (Agnew, 1988). These markets grew and evolved, eventually developing into the global stock exchanges that we are familiar with today, where spectacle and ritual are still a prime mode of social action (Braudel, 1985).

One of the hidden foundations of the modern organisation is the market theatre and thus a dramaturgical metaphor offers an appropriate analytical frame to examine management practices. In the case of strategy consultations, the session facilitator must create credible narratives that convince both the audience and the patron of their value (Clark & Salaman, 1998). Understanding the rituals and practices of strategy development through a dramaturgical metaphor is not to question the authenticity of experience, but instead aspires to offer a novel perspective on the nature of these practices. By applying the dramaturgical metaphor to management practices, we can read strategy consultations as a form of *Theatropoiesis*; theatre making, to understand the lasting effects created by ephemeral transitional moments (Szakolczai, 2014). If we understand the rituals of open-strategy as dramaturgical space, open consultation is best understood as a space that gives the *appearance* of suspending everyday norms so that things can be said and done (Sturdy, et al., 2006). Instead of understanding consultations as plays where there is a learned script, an active stage and a passive audience, a strategy consultation can be interpreted as loose-tight improvisational theatre.

## **9.0 Conclusion**

This paper has drawn on several elements in a broader phenomenologically inspired study, including a freshly produced autoethnographic account of strategy consultation and a deconstruction of the final strategy document produced. Writing up the ethnography is consanguineal with analysis that positions consultation as a performance that aspires towards performativity, making the case for our formal organisation roots in the spectacle and rituals of carnival, theatre, fairgrounds and markets. Strategy consultations are set within a dramaturgical framework and are understood through the structure of improvisation, where audience and performer are both active participants creating the scene under broad script headings (Mangham & Overington, 1987)..

The reading of strategy consultations as a form of theatropoiesis, a dramaturgical performativity, has some interesting implications for practitioners and organisations engaged in strategy consultations. For those involved in the organisation, constitution, facilitation, and use of large scale strategy consultations, the two following insights may be of use. First, there is a sense that they are far from what functional accounts suggest they are- they are not spaces for unfettered input from employees and stakeholders, they do not connect with strategy making. Rather they are an important rite of passage on the way to a strategy document, where individuals from across the organisation allow themselves to be co-opted into managerial language and ways of thinking; one that, when done well, gives them a general sympathy for the conditions of leadership- and allows them through silence, acquiescence or mild-chastisement to let leaders lead. Thus, it is a ritual of followership (Collinson, 2006).

Second, and perhaps of more use, is that consultation rituals have tremendous goodwill associated with them, in which the rigidity of the performance and obstructs most forms of originality or exploration; and allows the organisation to just be. Participants are concerned with producing something that sounds, looks, and feels like strategy, based on their previous interactions with strategy texts, events and language. The result is often a mimesis of strategy that complies with expectations of the day. The structure of strategy events tends to either swing from the collection of eclectic feedback and ideas to document endorsement exercises. And so, if strategy development is anything, perhaps it speaks of the marginalisation of critical perspectives of organising, and a willingness to allow a vital ritual to succeed- a ritual that allows leaders the freedom to lead their organisation with the trust and benediction of all the followers who participate in organisational life.

These initial reflections of the strategy development process have explored a number of theoretical lenses, namely, mimetic impulse and isomorphism in strategy

development processes, liminality, performativity, and the dramaturgical metaphor. These lenses reveal hidden power structures, never far from the surface, influencing the life of a strategy document in an organisation. This provides an interesting perspective on the nature of these documents and their interaction with the organisation. As discussed earlier, one of the inspirations behind this paper was the Johnson et al study (2010) on the rituals of strategy consultation which presented consultations as a form of liminal space, where power structures receded in favour of egalitarian participation. The exploration in this paper suggests that if power structures do recede, it is perhaps at quite a superficial ‘front stage’ (Goffman, 1959) level. This insight will be explored in greater detail in the next paper through participant interviews.

This paper explored the production of a strategy from its first imaginings through to the development of the document itself and the organisational consultation process followed to bring it into being. Paper four will explore the next phase of this lifecycle- the consumption of a strategy document through the experiences of those who interacted with it and the raft of documentary evidence of its use.

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**RESEARCH PAPER SERIES**

**Paper 4: Findings and discussion**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper is the final in a four-part series, reporting on a two and a half year long ethnographic study of strategy making in a university. As a process, it assembles various field notes, photos, documentation, and paraphernalia, as explored in paper three with nine long-form storytelling interviews with those in and around the process reflected on in this paper. What emerges is the sense that the university is a public performance, in which individuals go through the motions for other participants. And so, it comes over as a form of tightly structured social interaction, a Goffmanesque scripted ritual of social being, with a tightly wrought dramaturgical framework in which power is never far from the surface. This is at variance with much of the vast body of work on the idea of the university; from Kant (Barnett, 2015), Von Humboldt (Barnett, 1993), Jaspers (1959), Newman (1992), Veblen (1943); and chimes with certain, more critical visions of higher education such as those of Lyotard (1984), Bourdieu (1984), Said (Gbazoul, 2007), Readings (1996) and Delanty (2002).

Critical contemporary scholars encounter this theatricalisation as a set of coercive and normative pressures that surround contemporary institutions (after Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). This paper asserts there is an emancipative aspiration of this performance. The rhetorical coherence of strategy making can be viewed as an example of unthinking bureaucracy, and that by extension that the university is now a place of unthinking (Arendt, 1963). Yet, the strategy makers interpret the tightly structured university strategy game as one that, if played successfully brings institutional legitimacy (as previously noted by Meyer and Rowan 1977;1978). So, far from being trite and unthinking the ritual, university strategy making, through its very vacuity brings the profound freedom of the academia to bear on the institution it attempts to manage.

## 1.0 Introduction

This paper is the final paper in the DBA series presenting an ethnography of strategy making in a university. Paper three explored strategy development and its outputs through an autoethnography of a strategy consultation event, an examination of the strategy writing processes and a deconstructive analysis of the strategy document produced. The emergent findings from this exploration were understood through the dramaturgical metaphor. Purportedly open spaces of consultation were interpreted as a form of tightly structured social interaction. The divergence of front stage and back stage in this process, allowed for the observation that power was never far from the surface in these happenings. The deconstruction of the strategy document produced in this process, hinted at a greater game at play in strategy work at the university, for whom strategy documents are written for. This paper supplements this analysis through nine storytelling interviews from those in and around the strategy document's life to further explore these issues and how the strategy document lived in the organisation once produced. The point of departure for this paper is Gilbert Ryle's celebrated observation:

*“A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks ‘But where is the University? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the Scientists experiment and the rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University.’ It has then to be explained to him that the University is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the Colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which all that he has already seen is organized. When they are seen and when their co-ordination is understood, the University has been seen” (Ryle, 1949, pp. 17-18).*

The changing nature of universities is well trod ground, albeit largely from a techno-functional perspective. In the absence of a rich and more complete picture, it is not surprising that this work fails to capture the importance for management and

organisation studies of the changing nature of these important institutions of late capitalism. This work responds to Bechky's (2006) unanswered call for more and better thick descriptions of knowledge work, and more recent calls for 'strategic ethnography' (Vesa & Vaara, 2014), going beyond conventional non-participant observation-based ethnography. Perhaps the university can be seen through an ethnographic engagement that dwells with its primary co-ordinating process and product- strategy making and strategy document. In this way, perhaps we can, in a commanding and authoritative way say that we have seen the university; that in some way we have gotten to grips with the essence of these curious institutions.

This paper will first present the background and approach to the second phase of data in the study and how that relates to the data and analysis presented in the previous paper. The approach to interviews and analysis is covered before an exploration of the phase two data under the themes explored in paper three. This analysis leads to further insight on the nature of the organisation managed through the strategy document.

## **2.0 An ethnographic understanding of strategy**

Anthropology is changing (Augé & Colleyn, 2006), moving away from comparative fine-grained studies of cultural diversity in globalised world societies. This is due in part to the changing nature of globalised cultures that are no longer discrete or even physically manifest. Ethnographic work is also changing, moving beyond the close observation, writing and reporting on 'others' through embedded, up-close, but distant fieldwork. The change is coming in many ways- a move beyond the humanistic ethos to consider posthumanism and new materialism, a movement beyond foraging and salvaging foreignness to look to distinctly at contemporary, modern and global spaces; a movement beyond the other to look towards ourselves, a move to address historical ethnographic privilege and bias by seeking new ethnographers. Even with all the talk of new concerns for ethnography (O'Doherty, et al., 2016), perhaps informed by Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Law, 2004), there is still a resolute focus on materials and performances. It is against this backdrop that this work explores the well-trod ground of university strategy making as a new social milieu for anthropology.

The previous paper assembled accounts, after consulting minutes of meetings, personal notes, presentations, pictures and consultation materials are reflected upon before being compiled into a totalising account. The account was written as cascaded happenings and thick description inspired by Geertz (1994), that avoids analysis of essentialising events in favour of a rich account of what occurred. These happenings, glimpsed through artefacts, are further reflected on through long-form narrative interviews allowing for nuanced explication.

Central to the ethnography are interviews which explore the discursive practices around strategy making, with storytelling episodes of the university leaders navigating the production of the final document. The work explores the micro-practices of strategy making (mainly from materials such as meeting minutes, drafts, fieldnotes at consultation events) to the macro-practices of tracing the university strategy. Quick to the surface is the complex politics, kinship, fealty, trust issues that dance around the production of the experience of strategy making. This part of the data was collected through narrative interviewing focused on particular events in the strategy life cycle (Czarniawska, 1997, Gabriel, 2000; and inspired also by Sims, 2003). These perspectives capture a rich, integrated and contextual understanding of the work of strategy making and perhaps Czarniawska (1999, p. 15) explains it best when she notes that ‘in all their different versions, [stories] capture organisational life in a way that no compilation of facts ever could’.

### **3.0 Phase two data**

The first phase of this study assembled field notes, photos, documentation, paraphernalia, video, minutes of preparatory meetings, table talk, as well as more formal post-consultation analysis meetings, and documentary accounts. These pieces, put together, allowed a view into strategy writing, strategy consultation events, and between the lines of strategy document. From these various and discordant fragments a meta-story emerged- a totalizing line that captures to a greater or lesser extent all the

data points and assembles a coherent and compelling story of strategy making in a university.

Strategy consultations are pitched as being opportunities to refine the strategy or develop original content, yet there was limited scope in these settings to explore the unknown or to question organisational liturgy. In paper three, consultation was interpreted as highly regulated performance with hidden power structures; a form of theatricalisation of ritual organisational practices which has much deeper roots in the genesis of organisations and global corporate culture. This led to an understanding of strategy consultations as a form of theatropoesis (Szakolczai, 2009). In the writing of the strategy, a back stage (Goffman, 1959), clearly separated from consultation's front stage, emerged. This raised issues around power, particularly the power of agenda setting (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). The strategy document once deconstructed, revealed within itself to be less of a vision of the future and more towards a negotiated conversation with powerful stakeholders. These reflections explored a number of theoretical lenses, namely, mimetic impulse and isomorphism in strategy development processes, liminality, performativity, and the dramaturgical metaphor. These lenses revealed hidden power structures, never far from the surface, influencing the life of a strategy document in an organisation. One of the inspirations behind the previous paper was the Johnson et al study (2010) on the rituals of strategy consultation which presented consultations as a form of liminal space, where power structures receded in favour of egalitarian participation. The exploration in the previous paper suggested that if power structures do recede, it is perhaps at quite a superficial 'front stage' (Goffman, 1959) level.

In phase two of the study the themes of dramaturgy and power established ethnographically in strategy making are explored by all those in and around the strategy from its making to its life within the organisation. Paper two identified eight individuals involved in the process of strategy making and doing in the organisation from the writers of the document, the managers who implemented it, the executive team responsible for it, consultation participants, a governing board representative and faculty, representing a totality of perspectives on the making and life of the document.

The extensive documentary review conducted as part of paper three’s analysis identified a further member of the executive team who played a significant role in the use of the strategy document, bring the final number of interviews to nine:

<b>Interviewee</b>
Representative of governing board
The CEO (outgoing)
Deputy CEO x 2
A writer of the strategy document
Consultation session facilitator
Consultation session participant
Member of teaching staff
The CEO (incoming)

Table 1. Interviewees.

Eight of the interviews were conducted at various locations in the Kingdom of Bahrain with the ninth conducted with a participant in Ireland who was involved in the strategy document’s life-cycle but no longer worked at the institution. The interviews averaged at over one hour in length. The interviews followed the modified biographical narrative interview method as proposed in paper two, further adapted with two learnings along the way related to interview structure and artefacts. At the outset, a generic interview guide was developed based on the biographical narrative interview method:

- The interviewer will provide a brief introduction and will thank the interviewee for their assistance and willingness to assist the interviewer in their research.
- The interviewer will then ask a single question aimed at inducing a narrative from the interviewee (during this period the interviewer will take notes but will not interrupt or intervene).



- Once the interviewee has confirmed, unprompted, that they have finished telling their story, the interviewer will take a brief pause / interlude to review their notes.
- The interviewer will then, sticking strictly to the sequence of topics discussed, ask for an additional narrative about some of topics raised.
- One the additional events are narrated by the interviewee; the interviewer will conclude the interview.

This was later modified for each interviewee based on the context in which they were being interviewed, e.g. managers had different points of contact with strategy document than writers, or faculty members. The purpose of this was to bring each participant through a timeline of the strategy document’s life from their perspective. Some of the artefacts (photographs and the strategy document) presented as part of paper three were brought to the interviews to encourage more naturalistic dialogue on actual experiences. This was introduced as an approach after the first interview where it was observed that the topic of strategy had the effect of producing learned, abstract talk, especially as all managers had some educational reference for strategy planning. In effort to get interviewees discussing their actual lived experiences and draw them through their timeline of involvement, the interviews were grounded around the events and experiences of each interviewee in relation to the strategy document. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full and transcripts were sent back to the participants to offer opportunity to correct, amend or delete. Only two interviewees chose to do this with one correcting their grammar in the transcript and one requesting that a potentially sensitive sentence, not directly relevant to the study, was redacted.

As many of the interviewee positions are identifiable, no direct identifiers are provided for each participant where they are quoted. Instead the following categories are used with the addition of numbers where there are more in one:

<b>Category</b>	<b>Identifier</b>
Governing board	GB

Executive management	EX
Senior manager	SM
Manager	M
Writer	W
Faculty member	F

Table 2. Interviewee identifiers

It should be noted, that as in many organisations, individuals are not always easy to assign into a single category as a writer might also be a faculty member, or a senior manager. Where this is the case, interviewees have been categorised by the function that was of interest at the initiation of the study. However, at times interviewees spoke from different perspectives and where that is the case, identifiers have not been changed.

### 3.1 Data analysis

The philosophical positioning of this study as inductive and phenomenological calls for a grounded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Heideggerian approach to data analysis; to see the world for ourselves. The purpose of interview data in this sense is to complement and enrich the ethnographic account given on the ‘spirit and ethic’ (after Weber, 1930 and more recently Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) of contemporary strategy making. Interview data is analysed to explore whether the ethnographic account of strategy making, presented in paper three, was present and meaningful in individual accounts of the process and the life of the strategy document thereafter. As a process, this involved focused listening to the recordings and deep immersive readings of the transcript. Each interview recording was listened to four times and each transcript was read in completeness transcript read at a minimum of ten times, each revisited again in parts as the analysis unfolded. In the previous paper a deconstructive approach was used to analyse the minutiae of carefully crafted statements within the strategy document. This served as a useful tool in text analysis as it cuts to the tension between conceived meaning and intended meaning (Norris, 1987) to reveal something which already exists within the text (Payne, 1993). A deconstructive approach is not a prescriptive method or technique, but a spirit of opening anything up to a multitude of interpretations (Derrida, 1992). While text, purposefully crafted with meaning, lends itself to analysis at the level

of word and phrase, events told through interview are more meaningfully deconstructed at a higher level. Similar guidelines to text deconstruction inform a focused, deconstructive listening to interview recordings. Namely, the call to listen to voice, dominance, marginalisation, universalisms, and essentialisms (Boje, 1995). In line with the modified biographical narrative interview method (BNIM) proposed in paper two, the interview itself is taken as the unit of analysis, with two views on that analysis- the choices the interviewee made within their experiences and the choices they made in the telling of these experiences (Wengraf, 2001). The use of software such as NVivo for this analysis of transcripts was not considered appropriate for this task as I endeavoured to capture the ethos of each interview in its wholeness, the participant's story, rather than break each narrative into blocks and pieces. The analysis required insight and reflexivity of the researcher (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) on the overarching narrative produced in each interview.

From this, four areas of learning emerged, the first two relating to the dramaturgical metaphor; a clear front stage and back stage to strategy development, consultation and use. These related to an understanding of power relations in all interactions with the strategy document. Finally, the perspectives told in the interviews speak to the very nature of the university as a public institution.

## **5.0 Strategy as theatropoesis**

The previous paper explored strategy consultation and writing through its artefacts and found elements of dramaturgy and power, evident throughout. What emerges is a familiar and relatable story from a strategy consultation and development where the underlying currents of structure that mirrors elements of dramaturgy are evident. One can see that social interaction in strategy consultations is regulated by unspoken rules, where each participant knew their parts and what was expected. There is a coherent uniformity to the form, structure, and even content to certain extent of strategy workshops, consultations, and rounds of drafting. So, in the consultation each

participant was expected to ad-lib within small regulated times, however their behaviour was ultimately governed by a structure whereby all participants sensed the appropriate output to present. Much of the work in open-strategy and indeed ‘workshopping’ in that context (Johnson, et al., 2010) suggest that this new egalitarian approach to strategy development has the power and potential to create a liminal state where normal power structures recede. This, it is suggested, allows a free exchange of ideas and space for new levels of employee-led innovation. This instance of strategy making questions that thesis, finding that the malleability of power structures to be superficial and perceived as inauthentic by all. This section explores through the interview data the elements of dramaturgy, through its front stage and back stage perspectives and the emergence of power as the central theme in strategy making and doing.

### **5.1 Front stage**

In the previous paper the performance of consultation as a front stage perspective came through clearly from the consultation artefacts of the case. The term ‘front stage’ here refers to the Goffman’s (1959) idea of behaviour that conforms to the norms and conventions of society, roles and situations. It is behaviour acted out for an audience, where an actor is aware they are being observed and acts accordingly. The In the interviews, this sense of a dramaturgical front stage was referenced in all nine interviews in relation to the consultation of the strategy document. The same sense of front stage performance in relation to the communication and use of the strategy document in organisational life was referenced extensively in eight out of nine interviews. On consultation, the interviewees were unanimous in their view that the content of consultation feedback was secondary to the ritual of consultation for the organisation and a wider stakeholder group. As one teaching faculty member notes:

*“the CEO has to be able to turn around and say, "we talked to everybody." Did they talk to everybody? Yes, they talked to everybody. Did they listen to everybody? Possibly not. But that doesn't matter”* (F).

Completing the ritual performance of consultation was seen as an important milestone for the document. One of the writers of the strategy document noted the importance of capturing and recording the act of consultation:

*“It would have been very easy for us to have finished the document to be honest. I mean the value that we got in terms of content was very, very small, but I think the value is in terms of being seen to consult and the photographs were evidence of the consultation” (W).*

In assessing the spirit of consultation a facilitator retold an anecdote on the importance maintaining a perception of egalitarian input:

*“There’s a famous story about a guy in London who used to lease out horses for estate carriages. He used to tell them all that they could have any horse they want, but in reality, he used to rotate the horses so they didn't get tired out and I know it's a silly analogy but it became a sort of a metaphor for the fact that sometimes it's still very important to give the perception that people have that freethinking choice within an organization even if they don't.” (M1).*

While these interpretations of strategy consultations could be viewed as cynical in spirit, there was also a strong recognition that there is something more important and lasting occurring through the performance of consultation. Both managers and employees interviewed were dismissive of the idea that consultation was a truly open and transparent process of strategy development, but all expressed a sense that there are few spaces in organisational life where the contentious present can be dismissed and relationships re-imagined through the expression of common ideals for the future –

*“instead of people looking at problems and blaming each other, this way they can release some positive energy towards each other by relaxing and working on some exercises that might lead to an outcome where everyone can share, an understanding that the actual plan itself, they're together in it” (SM2).*

In seven of the interviews there were multiple references to the creation of “feelings” towards the organisation and its strategy document, that are sewn through consultation. Going through the ritual of strategy consultation was seen as an important step in the future ability for managers to direct the work of the strategy document –

*“The main point is to make sure that they feel involved. It's a cycle. If you don't get them involved at the beginning, they don't buy into it and therefore, when things have to be done because of the strategy plan, they don't really want to do it because they don't see the big picture. If you involve them at the beginning, they feel that it's just the follow up of the same cycle. I think from that point of view it's very important to gather that feedback. More than for the quality of the feedback you get” (M2).*

Those in senior management, ultimately responsible for using the strategy document stressed the importance of creating feelings of togetherness through consultation as a precondition of strategy work:

*“it just makes them feel that they're part of that decision and organization. That creates loyalty and the rest can be easily done by when people believe in the plan, they can at least relate to the plan, that they felt that they took part in the decision of it.” (SM2).*

Creating the memory of strategy making for participants was seen, by each of the senior managers consulted, as inextricably linked to strategy work, for example:

*“when the document was approved, someone from lower management or even an employee could say, “Well yeah I sat down in an exercise with the CEO or the deputy and we came up with that.” And you can bet on anything that when the plan gets issued and people are working on it, he will be an advocate for it. And say, “No, I was involved in it. I know what they're talking about.” (SM2).*

Going further, some felt that consultation was the way in which all members of the organisation and governing board are reminded they share a common future:

*“when we shake their hands coming into the family, or by shaking their hands leaving the family of the institute, I think, I believe, that we are sending a message to them. That you are responsible for whatever is going on to this institute. This is your house. This is the reputation of your house. When we use the word family, you are talking not to their mind but you are talking to the non-conscious mind. That, with time, has a profound effect on the person.” (EX1).*

The concept of a front stage also emerged in the use of the strategy document for both internal and external actors. The regular communication internally and externally on the possession of a strategy document and the visibility of strategy work was emphasised in seven of the interviews, representing staff, management, and governing boards as an important statement of existence. A manager noted:

*“In some respects, it almost doesn't matter what that strategy is. Things might end up different from the outcomes of that strategy but unless you kind of have an understanding of what your purpose in life and how you see it panning out in the future, then, you know, you'd have to see the question why would you have the organisation in the first place?” (M1).*

Superficial communications around strategy work in the organisation were seen to have a deeper importance for individuals to understand their purpose and to have improved relationships across the organisation:

*“(strategy updates) did bring people a little bit together. It did allow us to have discussions about each other’s work, which is always good, but not always possible. If you understand better what the other department does, and the problems they’re having, it’s a little bit easier to understand why things don’t go well and maybe that we can help each other” (M2).*

Externally, the idea that communication of strategy work provides a sense of trust and legitimacy for the organisation was explored in all nine of the interviews. All had stories of communicating mundane work externally, linking it to the strategy document, creating a long-term sense of trust in stakeholders that had at times a profound impact on the life course of the organisation. As one faculty member put it:

*“it’s to give us credibility within the community. We can say “we’re a valid educational provider in the community” We’ll continue to have that support of government, we’ll continue to have that funding from x y and z. A strategy-less organization, whether it’s education or anything else, makes you feel like it’s a weak organization. It doesn’t have a plan, it doesn’t know its way forward, it’s floating around doing its own little thing.” (F).*

## **5.2 Back stage**

The documentary analysis of strategy consultation and writing explored in the last paper suggested a clear delineation between the front stage activities of strategy making and the back stage or actual production of the document. In particular, it was observed what little impact consultation appeared to have on the outcome of the document itself. The back stage is always separate to the front and there is no audience to conform for. Goffman (1959) described the back stage as the place where the performer can relax and step out of character. Of the nine interviews conducted, eight interviewees made numerous references to the idea that there is an active back stage that complements the front stage. This was more frankly expressed by those who had the perspectives of both – the writers and senior managers of the organisation. The previous paper concluded that strategy consultations were not the egalitarian spaces they are purported to be, open to unfettered input from all.

The interviews suggested that there are other spaces and channels in an organisation where this exists. Faculty members intimated that while consultations are not open spaces for input, the power to influence is open through agenda setting (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962):

*“I think if you want to have a bigger influence and navigate yourself around those communities of people who have power and you step in there, if you really have something that's burning and pressing and you're passionate about, and you kind of connect to those communities to have your say. You never have it heard in a wide consultation process, unless you're in the network of power itself to influence. You won't hear it on the floor of a consultation” (F).*

Senior managers used paternalistic language to describe the necessary separation of the two spaces; a sense that employees and the day to day work of the organisation had to be protected from the responsibility of shaping strategy work:

*“People in the organisation are not hired to think broadly about the direction of the organization. In fact, sometimes you distract them from what they're supposed to be doing when you sort of engage them in that, and they have a very specific task to do” (EX2).*

From both writers of the document interviewed there was a sense that consultations were not the full picture of strategy development, but part of setting the tone and nature of future work in the organisation. As one expressed:

*“it would have been very difficult to say they hadn't been involved in a process, or hadn't been asked or consulted from a development point of view” (W).*

They were honest in their reflection of strategy writing as distinct from the input of the organisation. They acknowledged that in coming together for what we refer to as consultation, or indeed for the ongoing communication of strategy work there was a sense that this was playing at something deeper; setting a common way to understand mundane day-to day work.

*“They were really only about talking about what it was rather than consulting about what it should be. I think the ‘should be’ was really clear when we started to articulate how we would put it together. It was just about agreeing on some of the language around it and then really it was about broader institutional sharing of that language and a way of describing the institution” (W).*

The writers of the document had a similar understanding of these sort of negotiated understandings with external stakeholders. They were aware that in writing the strategy



document they were setting the tone of external stakeholder relationships through an understanding of the consequences of agreeing to certain tenets. Interestingly they were cognisant that these consequences would not be apparent in the consulting or communication for strategy work:

*“I think writing was partly rebellious. It’s like the sustainability part, in order to be sustainable in reality you have to address a whole lot of other things that we were not currently addressing as an organisation. There was this other layer of development thought going on in the development team. We included a lot of stuff very subtly that would become important to organisation and we kind of slid in things knowing that it wasn’t necessarily overtly understood at the time” (W).*

The writers themselves viewed this back-stage power as something that they were also subject to; part of a wider governmental front stage, back stage division where their locus of control existed within the margins of strategy work:

*“A lot of the rules of the game are written either by a small number of people who are engaged with senior management or executive or board level or indeed a lot of the strategic stuff comes from external influences like central government. Strategy documents that are being written are essentially mandating that national policy and again, you have to ask yourself who’s writing national policy? It’s probably three or four individuals with privilege... no one knows who they are, so there’s that invisible aspect” (M1).*

Perspectives of the governing board emphasised the importance of being aware of that broader back stage of government, in the hope of providing emancipatory opportunities through strategy work:

*“Well, I take my readings from the government, which was beginning to understand it was not sustainable. We are highly dependent on oil, in an economy where oil is not as prominent as it used to be, and it will continue to decrease. So, we needed to be free, we needed to look at alternative ways of sustaining ourselves. I will tell you a secret. That was a dream that I did not expect to happen” (GB).*

This was reflected on by the executive team interviewed, who felt that by aligning with the language and concerns of the broader external back stage can deliver great freedoms to organisations subject to their power:

*“I think as I reflect on the strategic plan, it was probably broad enough, and had enough breadth within it, that it would work for me. In other words, it’s pretty high level, in terms of the kinds of things that you would generally see in any academic strategic plan. So that anything that I wanted to do, at a more tactical, operational level, wouldn’t be constrained by that particular strategic plan” (EX2).*

## **6.0 Power**

The previous paper concluded on power as an emerging theme from this study being played out through the dramaturgical metaphor. This was observed in the stories and experiences of those in and around strategy work at the institution. All nine interviews focussed on power in strategy work from differing perspectives. These perspectives complemented the analysis from the previous paper on power in consultation, in writing, and in the document. A further insight of this paper is how that power is manifest in the strategy document in organisational life. These experiences and views on power can be observed in four main threads – the strategy document as a powerful invisible hand, the arbiter of disputes, power to resist management, and finally the power to deliver autonomy to the very institution it seeks to manage.

### **6.1 The invisible hand**

The conceptual model for this study as one where an inanimate object, namely the strategy document, is central to the inquiry. The philosophical positioning of the study as phenomenological, puts it within the sphere of social constructivism where knowledge is considered to be socially situated and constructed in relation to others. These combined lend interpretation to an ANT perspective, where an inanimate object such as a strategy document exists in a similar network of relations to a human actor within the organisation (Latour, 2007). Latour (under Johnson, 1988) gives the example of doors and door closers to illustrate the significant power transferred to mundane objects in the mixing of human and non-human actors in a network of relations. An evolution in this line of thinking is the Heideggerian inspired Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) which rejects the privileging of human existence over non-human existence. Instead of actors in a network of relations, a strategy document would be an object of equal importance to the CEO, a building on campus, or a teacher. The view of a document as an object as opposed to an actor, rejects the primacy of the network of relations, as objects are not ontologically exhausted by their relations to other objects, both human and non-human (Harman, 2009).

All the interviewees spoke to the performativity (Austin, 1975) of the strategy document in one sense or another, or to the belief in the performativity of the document.

I have referred to this notion as one of the ‘invisible hand’ where power is attributed to the strategy document and therefore experienced by those who use it. As a document, it is a collection of phrases, notionally agreed upon by the organisation through the performance of consultation. Yet, to those that exist in a network of relations around it, it can act as more than the sum of its parts. The invocation of the strategy document in conversations was experienced by participants as a power to weight one side of an argument:

*“There’s a connotation associated with strategy document that it almost becomes the bible of what can and cannot be done. People might not actually know what’s in it, but they still refer to it as something of importance in discussions and negotiations.” (M1)*

The invisible hand of the document was experienced by those in and around the strategy implementation to hold a greater measure of power to direct work than any one human actor:

*“you might say, ‘Well, it’s the CEO’s strategy’, but the CEO is only one person who contributes into the strategy document. It’s a good way of making conversations easier by not actually attributing ownership to an individual, you’re attributing it to an invisible individual.” (M2)*

This non-human actor had power vested in it by those in the organisation who believed in its performativity as more powerful than the individuals vesting power in it. Different actors within the organisation related to each other through the strategy document as another actor. In this way, the document was also a powerful actor in the direction of work and the resolution of disputes.

## **6.2 Power to manage and resolve arguments**

Participants experienced the strategy document as an arbiter of disputes and director of work, whereby individuals or functions that would ordinarily find themselves in conflict with each other had to acquiesce to the higher power of the plan:

*“It’s a way to externalize what could be interpersonal conflict. It’s not me telling you to do something because I want you to do something that you don’t want to do. Rather we together have to do this because it’s built into the strategic plan that’s approved by senior management and, ultimately the board of governors. It’s saying we’re all in this*

*together now. I'm taking my orders from the plan, as opposed to I'm ordering you around. With the plan, all of that kind of goes away.” (EX2)*

The experiences of those interviewed reflected on the siloed nature of organisations. Interactions around the strategy document provided rare opportunities to cut across these fractious boundaries and resolve conflicts arising from the nature of this type of organising. To those leading individual silos, the strategy document offered a platform to resolve disputes:

*“An organisation is a coming together of people to achieve common goals, but by their nature are dysfunctional. Politics, there's imbalances, tensions and things that don't work. What the strategy document did, irrespective of how directly useful or relevant it was, provided some sort of overarching framework for people to resolve dysfunction within the organization.”(M2)*

Line managers spoke to the pressures they faced in directing strategy work, between implementing management directives and resistance from employees (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Attributing directives to the organisation's strategy, rather than management, eased the management of work:

*“For example, you ask a member of your team to do a certain activity that they don't particularly want to do but then you say to them, "Well, the strategy says this and this is why we're doing it." It probably makes the conversation a little bit more palatable.” (M1)*

These middle managers spoke to the reverence given to the strategy as akin to a law or policy that cannot be breached:

*“The strategy document holds a lot of weight in the discussion, like policies and laws, "You're not allowed to do this because the law says so." The law doesn't say that just like the strategy doesn't, but it's a nice way to win an argument. Or to force people in one direction.” (M2)*

This experience was also expressed by those who were managed, suggesting to an extent the power of the strategy document was not uni-directional, but could be co-opted by others within the organisation.

### **6.3 Power to resist management**

The same power of the document was also experienced as a mode of resistance to management. The observed power of the document to direct work was used dialectically to resist work and direction reminiscent of Habermas' Ideal Speech situation (Habermas, 1970):

*If you want to take it down a few levels to policy, people use excuses for everything, so often you hear "I don't have to do this because it's not in the policy." (F)*

The language game of strategy, conceived in the back-stage, was no longer the preserve of those who wrote it or were seen to own it. All those in leadership positions keenly felt the co-option of the strategy by employees who used it to protect their day to day work from managerial interests:

*"People were trying to match their day to day work to the words of the strategic plan instead of actually adjusting what they do according to the goals they want to reach. They were trying to negate our efforts at change and by making it look like they were meeting the goals." (SM1)*

#### **6.4 Power - autonomy**

In the same way employees found a measure of autonomy through the plan, those at the most senior levels of the organisation saw the same prize available to the organisation, the power of organisational autonomy. Those in executive management, charged with managing the institution and its relationships, viewed communication through the strategy document as a means to manage and minimise the intrusion of external governance:

*"You can share the plan progress with the board, as a means of demonstrating, self-management, but it's clear you're just sharing and you're not asking for permission or anything in that respect. So, yeah, the strat plan, properly crafted, can actually keep the board where they're supposed to be." (EX2)*

Others in senior management found in the strategy document a way to direct and impose boundaries on the narrative of the organisation in relation to its stakeholders:

*"When you go externally, the strategy document is essential to say, "This is what the institution does and this is what we need extra funding for, because we want to achieve*

*this. Do you think that's a useful objective?" Most of the time it's yes. Therefore, you need to help us. Otherwise, that's not going to happen." (SM2)*

The power of the strategy document to act was not limited to the confines of the organisation, but was used by those who had need to do so, to act externally in the interest of the organisation.

Through the view that strategy making is a form of theatropoeisis, power and its manifestations in and around the strategy document has been observed ethnographically and explored further through the stories of all those who took part in its life. Their stories reveal a strategy document that is not powerful, but has power vested in it; a power that can be co-opted by those who need to do so.

### **7.0 Surprise in the unthinking of university strategy making**

Revisiting Ryle's (1949) assertion that we can never see the university, perhaps we are glimpsing the essence of these curious institutions through embedded fieldwork around the universities primary co-ordinating process and product- strategy making and strategy document. And what we see here is at variance with much of the vast body of work on the classical ideal of the university. Animating the contemporary university is its medieval progenitor. Kavanagh's (2009) genealogy of the university suggests that medieval universities offers much more than just the name (from *universum* the Latin for whole or corporation), but that the spirit of the medieval seat of learning generates its structure/faculties, processes of teaching, examination and lecturers with a degree of autonomy.

Certainly the vision of the university that animates so much contemporary thinking on the university from Kant (Barnett, 2015), Von Humboldt (Barnett, 1993), Jaspers (1959), to Newman (1992), and Veblen (1943) as classical producers of teaching and research. In this ideal the university is inextricably linked to the nation state that created them, yet is autonomous in the pursuit of knowledge. The view that strategy making processes are an inauthentic layer within the modern university chimes with certain, more critical visions of higher education such as those of Lyotard (1984), Bourdieu (1984), Said (Gbazoul, 2007), Readings (1996) and Delanty (2002).

Although far from the subject of exploration, it is easy to understand how a critical reading of the context could emerge; one that takes the encounter with theatricalisation as the starting point for unpicking the coercive and normative pressures that surround contemporary institutions (after Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). In this line of argumentation, one could by extension decry the rhetorical coherence of strategy making in the university as an example of unthinking bureaucracy, and that by extension the university as a place that prevents real and authentic thought (Arendt, 1963).

The intimate entanglement of the interviews surfaces something altogether more surprising and more contradictory; that the dramaturgy present in strategy work is an emancipatory performance. Within their tightly structured language-strategy game, the university burghers play out an aspiration to be legitimate within the classic vision of an authentic university, and to maximise the autonomy of those within the university to act within the confines of a document that is supposed to govern the institution. This striving to be legitimate or “in the club” was reflected through each of the participant’s stories:

*“We’re here, we have a strategy, and external partners may not always know the ins and outs of the details of it but because there is a strategy there and it’s reported against. We are trustworthy.” (F)*

Both managers and employees reflected on the strategy as both a protection, but also providing the necessary boundaries that can protect a certain amount of autonomy. One executive reflected on the strategy providing a legitimate protection to take often politically sensitive but academically sound decisions:

*“I suffered from the consequences of taking tough decisions for a while, but they didn’t change anything with the university because we have clear rule and strategy to protect this institute. We are able to justify our decisions, from these media attacks, to the cabinet, or to the Crown Prince.” (EX1)*

Faculty and line managers reflected on the importance of these boundaries to protect autonomous space. Of many apocalyptic visions of the future expressed, possibly the

most illustrative was the staff member who felt the autonomy created was under greatest threat by those who enjoy its freedoms. The strategy document in this vision is protecting people from themselves:

*“In this environment, an institute without a strategy?! Christ, we'd have like 20,000 students here sitting out on the grass giving a lecture to 1,000 at a time. Right? We wouldn't be an applied university, we'd probably have nobody teaching because we're all doing research. I like doing research so I'm going to do research. I'm not teaching anymore, right?” (F)*

In doing this, the strategy makers are very consciously attempting to produce a negative liberty (after Berlin 1958) within the institution- using distinctly woolly language and empty signifiers to maximise the freedom and autonomy of those within the organisation through the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. The institution under study is currently undergoing major structural change, yet the executive team had no need or desire to rewrite the strategy to reflect these major changes:

*“I didn't see it as constraining, even with the new law coming in and the new mandate. I don't think that there's anything in that strat plan that would stand in the way. We might sort of interpret things a little bit differently, but I think, generally, it provides a vehicle that would allow me to advance this organisation” (EX2)*

They tell stories that demonstrate their anxiety at how the various university publics will use the strategy document, as it becomes the most significant non-human actor in the public sphere (Habermas, 1962) of the university.

*“(the document) is a good piece of advertising to use with senior policymakers in government, industry players, and to be able to articulate a clear direction that the organization is moving in and how it will support those external organisations' priorities, as well, and where you can make those connections. You build great advocates for the organization.” (EX2)*

Replacing Habermas's imagined and idealized bourgeois are the sediment of dry, technical non-human processes such as laws, policies, principles, regulations and strategy documents. From this there appears to be two possible further theoretical excavations of the ethnography as ways of bringing this work forward- taking an actor-network approach (Latour, 2007) to reading the ethnography one can see the various



actors, irreductions, translations and alliances in the process of strategy making. While ANT might be revelatory about how the strategy document is produced, object-orientated ontology (Harman, 2009) might allow an exploration of strategy documents as being their own authors. These real and sensual objects have an absolute right of action much greater than any of the university leaders, and the ethos of the stories told by those who wrote the strategy is that of people being wrestled into submission by external expectations and forces that they cannot meet or better.

The stridently assertive language game of strategy gives way to empty jargonistic language of ‘*world-class*’ and ‘*excellence*’. Far from being trite and unthinking the ritual of university strategy making, through its very vacuity the game aspires to auger a profound freedom of the academia.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

In paper one of this series, the following guiding objectives for this study were set:

- To deconstruct a strategy document and the process by which it was created.
  - Perform a fine-grained analysis of the narrative within the strategy document.
  - Explore the evolution of the document’s rhetoric through the process of creation.
  - Analyse process of creation in relation to the narrative output.
- To explore the social life of a strategy document after its creation.
  - Discover the network of actors interacting with the strategy document.
  - Explore the relationships formed with the document’s rhetoric

As an inductive study, these objectives were set as a guidance to the exploration of a strategy document’s life in an organisation. As is the nature of this study, these objectives do not form the basis of a thesis to be examined, but a guidance to building

up an understanding of the role these documents play in organisational life from the bottom up.

In paper three, I deconstructed the document and the process by which it was created, presenting an autoethnography of consultation ritual, a documentary analysis that pieced together the writing of the strategy document, and a deconstruction of the document, reflecting on its meaning against the process of its making. These analyses were understood through a dramaturgical metaphor that put power at the centre of strategy making and doing. In preparation for the writing of this paper, interviews were conducted with all those in and around the strategy document's life each exploring the issues raised in paper three through the timeline of the strategy's creation, consultation and use. Their stories revealed the front-stage, back-stage divide seen in the consultation and writing of the document, but also spoke to a wider front-stage, back-stage divide of organisations in relation to their external stakeholders. The issue of power seen through this front-stage, back-stage perspective revealed a strategy document that had power vested in it by all those who wrote it, owned it, pledged allegiance to it through consultation, and worked through it in organisational life. This power spoke to the agency of a document that could be co-opted to resolve disputes, direct work, and provide autonomy for those at the frontline of the day to day work of the organisation. At times, these understandings have led to a cynical view of strategy work as an inauthentic game played at all levels of the organisation and its broader external environment. Further excavated, the power to deliver autonomy for the day-to-day work of the organisation, is mirrored in the power to provide the necessary freedom to the university as whole to deliver on its prime mandate. In this understanding, the cynical view of the strategy game fades to reveal the emancipative aspiration in these strategy processes. The strategy document lives in an organisation to provide the necessary boundaries for a profound freedom to flourish within.

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### **Section 3:**

Further discussion and conclusion



## **1.0 Towards a conclusion**

This work has been concerned with the social life of a strategy document in an organisation. As objects in our organisations, they have tremendous agency (Cooren, 2004), yet their purpose and place within organisations is not well understood. While traditional strategic management research has been in decline (Wolf and Floyd, 2017), the emergent field of Strategy-as-Practice has concerned itself with describing and analysing the praxis of strategy work. As the Strategy-as-Practice agenda advanced there have been calls for more work on the materiality of strategy work, the tools and artefacts of strategy work, and more work within the researchers own organisations to look at broader phenomena (Seidl and Whittington, 2014; Dameron et al, 2015; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). This study sought in its design to answer the call for more up-close exploration of strategy work and artefacts. As the work evolved over the process of presenting each of the four papers, it became ever more committed to an ethnographic mode of inquiry.

The work and the discipline of the DBA programme forced a literature engagement earlier than would have appropriate for the ontological and epistemological approach taken. This mode of inquiry sited the study in the Strategy-as-Practice realm, but as the data emerged the analysis engaged with a wide range of theoretical bases to offer explication on the happenings presented. The DBA process demanded that the first of the four papers present a conceptual framework and research questions for the study. Paper one in this case presented not a conceptual framework, but a conceptualisation of the problem space. In place of clearly defined research questions, guiding research objectives were proposed to guide the study's inductive exploration. In paper two these guiding objectives were brought forward as the study's methodological choices were laid out as phenomenological, inductive, and interpretive. The methods described followed the contours of these guiding objectives by exploring the writing of the document, the consultation of the document, the document itself, and how it is called upon in the organisation through reflections from all those in and around the strategy document's life. The data for this emerged in paper three where an autoethnography of a consultation event was presented alongside an ethnographic account of the writing of

the document and a deconstruction of the strategy text produced. The themes surfaced in this exploration were reflected upon further in paper four through interviews with those around the strategy document's life. Throughout this process the study has tried to stay true to the inductivist path in its exploration, over trying to answer a research objective. As a result, this work does not discuss matters of fact, but in a Latour sense, generates matters of concern to explore (Latour, 2015).

This section of the study is intended to pull together the interpretations, analysis and discussion of the data presented in the paper series. As both papers three and four included considerable discussion of the data as the findings emerged this section brings the discussion of these two papers together with recap of the research aims the study started with, the key conclusions of the work, and a discussion on the findings in relation to open-strategy, power in strategy work, and the idea of the university seen from the organising perspective of strategy work. This discussion culminates in the contributions to both theory and practice made by this study. Finally, limitations and proposed areas for further research that builds upon the work's contributions are laid out.

## **2.0 The purpose of the work**

From the first paper of the series, the overarching research aim of this study was to understand the nature of strategy documents in organisations, how they are produced, what they do and their social lives in the organisation once created. Despite robust critique on their efficacy and relevance, strategy documents remain central to organisational life (Whittington & Cailluet, 2008). The study was conceptualised as inductive and explorative around the life of a strategy document to shed light on the prime mode of action of these types of documents. In doing so, it was hoped that knowledge could be offered to practitioners in refining the approach to the creation of strategic documents. Equally the study aspired to contribute to the Strategy-as-Practice stream of research by exploring the strategy document as a rhetorical device through its life-cycle. The second paper in this series refined these ideas to exploring the process of creation, the document produced and a limited view into the life of the document thereafter. As the work progressed over papers three and four the anthropological thread through this study was

strengthened through an increasing interest in these documents and how they work. Towards the closing of the study the ambition of the work was refined as elements of dramaturgy and power surfaced. These themes drew a commentary on both the audience for these documents and the nature of the institutions they serve.

To understand the workings of strategy documents, this study followed the life of a strategy document in an organisation from its first inception, early writings, consultation, and approvals, right through to its life in the organisation thereafter. The paper reports on a two and a half year long ethnographic study of strategy making in a university. As a process, it assembles various field notes, photos, documentation, paraphernalia, video, minutes of preparatory meeting, table talk, gossip, as well as more formal post-consultation analysis meetings, flâneries and documentary accounts, supplemented by nine long-form storytelling interviews with those in and around the process. From these various and discordant fragments, microstoria, anti-story; a meta-story emerges- a totalizing line that captures to a greater or lesser extent all the data points and assembles a coherent and compelling story of strategy making in a university.

This work contributes to the emerging body of work in the Strategy-as-Practice stream which seeks to understand strategy work from practitioner perspectives and to contribute to the practitioners. Strategy-as-Practice is both academic and practitioner oriented in equal measure. This study has answered recent calls for “strategic ethnography” (Vesa & Vaara, 2014), going beyond conventional non-participant observation-based ethnography, through an autoethnography, a deconstructive analysis, an ethnography of a strategy writing process, and a series of long-form interviews.

More speculatively, towards the end of the process, the inductiveness of the work started speaking to the idea of a university from an understanding of the profound responsibilities that are conferred upon these documents in strategy work. This is an interesting insight in an ongoing conversation central to the political economy of higher education, especially in the context of austerity, larger gaps in state funding and universities having to increasingly account for themselves.

### 3.0 Key conclusions

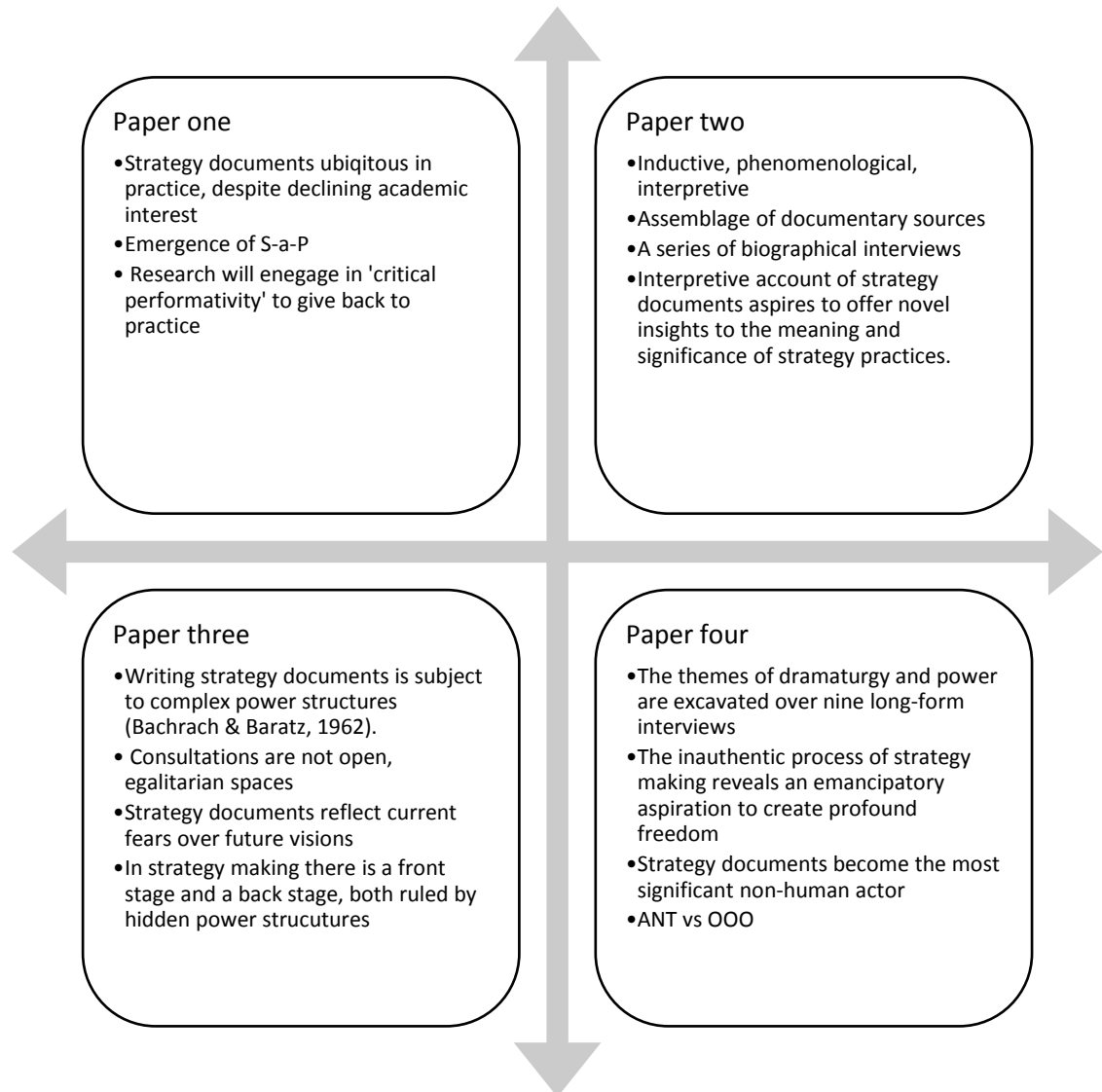


Figure 1. Key conclusions by paper

The Strategy-as-Practice stream of research has emerged to engage with a 'critical performativity' of strategy practice in context; for academia to positively intervene and engage with practitioners (Spicer, et al., 2016). This body of literature has made visible many previously 'unknown' ways of strategising (Whittington, 2011). This study set out to contribute new knowledge to the Strategy-as-Practice stream of research by

following a strategy document through its life cycle. Using an inductive approach, the data from the study was explored over paper three and paper four of the paper series, stopping at key points in the strategy document's life – its creation and process of creation, the consultation of the document, and a reflection of its use in the organisation.

Consultation was understood through the dramaturgical metaphor, where the front stage (Goffman, 1959) of consultation as an open space is contrasted with the agenda setting (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) of the back-stage writing group. The key conclusion from this insight is that consultation spaces are not the open spaces they are purported to be (Johnson, et al., 2010) but are carefully crafted ritual productions in organisational life. These rituals co-opt all those taking part into managerial language and ways of thinking, in sympathy with the conditions of leadership. The deconstruction of the document produced by the 'back stage' writing group bore little imprint of the process of consultation it went through, rather it represented a future compiled from the current fears (Augé, 2015) of those with agenda setting power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). These themes of hidden power and inauthenticity or dramaturgy were explored in interviews with all those in around the strategy document's life. These conversations brought a fuller understanding of the significance of these conclusions; not as cynical power plays, but emancipatory performances willingly participated in by all in the organisation. The strategy document became the most significant non-human actor in the organisation with the power conferred on it by all that used it to manage relations internally and externally for the organisation. The boundaries placed on the organisation by the document was seen to protect the institution from external management and uphold the conditions under which true academic freedom could flourish internally.

#### **4.0 Discussion of the work**

Typically, this is the point of the document where research objectives, stated in paper one, would be restated for the purposes of demonstrating full coverage of the area under study. As an inductive study, the end objectives were not known at the beginning of this journey, and while there were a number of guiding research statements to focus the exploration, they were not the boundary conditions for the final contribution of the study. This work doesn't account back to where it started, offering a line by line answer

to each of the objectives. As an inductive study, it set off on its own inquiry, but it has a responsibility to detail, clarify and bring together the central findings. Without forcing a neat conclusion, from the inquiry three main observations of strategy work were formed in relation to open strategy, power in strategy work and the idea of the university. As this work comments on the idea of the university, an understanding of the demarcations between university and polytechnic are first explored.

#### **4.1 Polytechnic vs University**

In making a commentary on the idea of the university, it should be noted that the institute in this study styles itself as a 'Polytechnic'. While the origin of the university system and of this institute were discussed in the introductory chapter, as an introduction to the context of the study, in discussing the university as an idea it is important to recognise the oft blurred distinction between a polytechnic and a university. Institutes of technology and polytechnics started to emerge in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however it was the economic growth and labour market needs that pushed their expansion and popularity post World War Two (Taylor et al, 2008). Growing in response to student and industry demand the definition and placement of these types of institutes in the higher education landscape differs greatly from country to country. A broad definition would place a polytechnic apart from both a university and a community college, offering degree programmes, often in niche areas, work-integrated learning, and a focus on teaching over research. However, this definition belies the vast differences between these institutes and their changing nature. In some countries (e.g. Germany), polytechnics and institutes of technology are higher education institutes whose differentiation is based on specialisations in engineering or applied sciences. In others (e.g. France) this specialisation has led to an elite characterisation of the education offered, whereas Australia's move to offer Technical Applied and Further Education (TAFE) institutes has positioned these institutes as vocational. The UK had operated a binary system of higher education where universities were research focused and polytechnics focused on engineering, applied sciences and professional practice, however, the renaming of those polytechnics as universities has again blurred the distinction between the two. In Canada Polytechnics can be institutes that offer a range

of low level post-secondary qualifications, to higher degrees and increasingly seen as centres of excellence for niche areas. There are moves to have these centres of excellence re-badged (e.g. Sheridan College) as universities in response to this confused nomenclature. In short, the definition of a Polytechnic is largely dependent on the local higher education landscape and its historical development.

In this case a Polytechnic was established in 2008 as a state funded HEI in a small education sector with a single state university (University of Bahrain). The state university is mandated by law to admit all students who meet certain grade requirements in the secondary school examinations into the university. To avoid the appearance of competing directly with the established university and to control the new institution's admission criteria it could not be named a university. The institute was established to be smaller, highly selective on student admissions, and responsive to industry needs. Preferences in the local labour market for non-Bahraini employees has had an historical negative impact on graduate employment and as such the institute was envisioned to work closely with industry to produce graduates that met the labour market needs and to provide a platform for Bahraini entrepreneurship. This historical development has led to yet another imagining of a polytechnic institute appropriate to the local education landscape.

The polytechnic in this study does not enrol students in sub-degree qualifications, but provides generalist bachelor programmes with the addition of some niche programmes in response to labour market gaps (e.g. the Bachelors in International Logistics Management). Like many young institutions seeking legitimacy, it has concerned itself with international standards associated with professional and academic accreditations. However, there are points of difference between the institute and its research focussed peers, notably the focus on teaching and applied research with industry over traditional research. Although it can offer post-graduate qualifications, in its first ten years it has chosen to focus on establishing core degree programmes. The desired close links to industry have also led to the recruitment of staff that have academic qualifications but significant industry experience in senior roles with a smaller proportion of PhD qualified career academics.

If the mantra of the new entrepreneurial universities is “teaching – research – and entrepreneurship” (Cunningham, 2017: 4), the mantra of this incarnation of a polytechnic is teaching – *applied* research – and entrepreneurship. While the differences in the mandates of the polytechnic and the entrepreneurial university are narrow, the perceptions of the difference in performance of these universities is greater. In a recent analysis of the performance of technical universities in the 2017 Times Higher Education rankings show high performance of these types of institutes in industry income yet low performance in research (Carmen and Enrique, 2018). This analysis showed that if these types of institutes could account for their industrial income in the rankings their final scores would significantly improve. Student choice criteria for higher education however appears to be less concerned with nomenclature and more by performance in relation to job opportunities and institutional reputation (Henriques et al, 2018). This cuts to the heart of the matter that the linking of higher education systems to economic growth has put similar pressures on all types of HEIs across different education landscapes to answer to multiple mandates from a multitude of stakeholders (Scott, 2018). The new public management approach to managing HEIs has led common experiences across the global higher education landscape of retrenchment, increased competition, and commercialisation too often to the detriment of public value (Broucker, De Wit and Verhoeven, 2018). It is in this political space that higher education strategies are crafted, be it under the name university, institute of technology or polytechnic. Within this space it is the isomorphic pressure of context that produces the institution. A higher education institution can be mandated by a primary stakeholder to have a circumscribed mission, but ultimately it is the rich contextual interactions of all the stakeholders that produce the ethos, spirit and function of a HEI. In thinking this, naturally the relationship between the students and the faculty are primary in this, but broader impersonal forces such as the economy have significant agency in producing the experience of the institution. So, call it what you will, the strategy of any and every higher education institution is a terrain of thinking that has, to a significant extent, a generic quality.

## **4.2 Open strategy**



The work as it emerged speaks to the current discourse on open strategy. The open strategy discourse argues that transparency and inclusion are core to new approaches to strategy making (Hautz et al, 2017). Consultation in the strategy process is part of a broader transformation towards more open, inclusive, and transparent strategy making (Chesbrough and Appleyard, 2007; Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Whittington et al., 2011). Open strategy constitutes a range of strategy practices that aspires to broaden the range of actors involved in strategy making (Chesbrough & Appleyard, 2007). As this idea is interpreted in practice, it has reinvigorated large scale employee and stakeholder consultation as part of the strategy development process (Bjelland & Wood, 2008), and a range of novel emerging consultation forms such as open-strategy jams (Palmisano, 2004), knowledge shares, employee feedback sessions (Whittington, 2015), strategy crowdsourcing (Stieger, et al., 2012).

The view of more open and inclusive strategy work has largely emerged from scholars who take S-a-P as a managerial and organisational activity (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007). In this line, interesting work that explores ritual (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008; Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, and Bourque 2010), socio-materiality (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008,) and discursive-narrative (Laine & Vaara, 2007; De la Ville & Mounoud, 2010) strategy is emerging and is perhaps best understood through the sociological and anthropological imagination. Despite calls for social anthropological studies (Seidl and Whittington, 2014), strategy research is still largely functionalist and has not fully engaged in a practice turn. Engaging in a practice turn involves a relentless approach to examining agency and structure in practice to bridge the micro-macro divide of practice-based research (Chia and MacKay, 2007).

In presenting an autoethnography of a strategy consultation event in paper three, two papers in particular inspired a close look at this type of strategy work- a Hodgkinson et al (2006) study of strategy workshops; and Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, and Bourque's (2010) more anthropologically inspired exploration of the ritual of workshops. These in principle support the intent of consultation in open-strategy and present these events as liminal, capable of disrupting power relations, at least

temporarily. The data encountered in this study suggests that this is not the case. This is far from the lived experience presented in this study, where this transformation does take place albeit at a very superficial level. The stated intent of managers and participants was to gather feedback and contribute to the strategy respectively, both in line with the principles of open strategy. Yet, both knew instinctively to behave in a manner that deviated from the intent:

*if you really have something that's burning and pressing you never say it in a wide consultation process, unless you're in the network of power itself to influence. You won't hear it on the floor of a consultation. Never, it doesn't matter (F).*

*[Taking photographs] are about evidencing that it happened. I mean the value that we got in terms of content whether it was the senior management or the staff level, the feedback value was very, very small, but I think the value is in terms of being seen to consult and the photographs were evidence of the consultation (W).*

While this is one event, one consultation, in one organisation, it does still raise questions around the authenticity of such approaches to strategy making. In the ethnography presented, the promise of open strategy to throw open the halls of power to anyone with an idea, was extant in the intent of the consultation but not manifest in the lived experience of the event. If transparency and inclusion are key to the future open strategy and S-a-P research agendas (Hautz et al, 2017), then agency and structure should form a critical analytical frame to evolve beyond functionalist descriptions of practice (Chia and MacKay, 2007). In this study the discourse of open strategy making is in play around the main consultation event. The language practice was observed more as a façade, not a cynical façade, but one that all those involved recognised their role in what was happening. In the autoethnography of the event itself and the later conversations with those who participated, there was no resentful approach to participation even the closed controlled undercurrent of the process was recognised. There was a sense that all understood this was a Goffman-esque presentation of the front stage (Goffman, 1957). In that view, open strategy is a front stage rhetorical device, and if this case and other accounts of open strategy work are to be considered, the participants are willing to be co-opted into the process.

### **4.3 Power in strategy work**

The discussion of the front-stage and back-stage elements of strategy making quickly gives rise to a discussion on power and its role in strategy work. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in writing on the reticence of all to speak of power let alone examine it, declared that “power is America’s last dirty word” (Kanter, 1979: 65). On the S-a-P agenda there is very little said on power and its effects on strategy work. It might be the case that the functionalist and idealistic approach to open strategy is rooted in the failure to explore the power issues at play in consultation and other platforms of open strategy.

In the previous papers, power in strategy work starts at the inception of the document’s key concerns with the writers given the power to influence and set agendas (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Power weaves its way through the development of the strategy document from the divergence of the front stage consultation and back stage writing to the actual document which reveals and external front and back stage. As the document lives in the organisation, power is conferred upon it which at times is used as an invisible hand to direct work, an arbiter of disputes, a mechanism to resist management and ultimately a mechanism by which external management is resisted. Ultimately, the controlled process by which strategy is conceived creates a freedom that belies its contrived beginnings. The strategy document assumes the role of institutional patron with powers that can be co-opted by its members. The work really points to the value of exploring the power issues around strategy work. On encountering this manifestation of power in the data it was related back to the power to set agendas and thereby apply boundary conditions on the possibilities of the strategy document. Perhaps a broader view of power in this sense is the Foucauldian vision of *governmentality* where individuals render themselves governable by ascribing to a system of power and governing authorities seek to produce individuals that have the characteristics to support this system of power (Morissey, 2013). In higher education there are the international systems of power that speak to benchmarks, rankings, and productivity and nationally (in this case) there is a government concerned with graduate employment and a future

without oil. It is within this political economy that strategy documents are produced, consulted on, and referred to in the new managerially-minded universities (Morissey, 2013). While management have power and power is at play at universities, perhaps universities and most knowledge-based organisations have what could be described as a theatre of power. Moving beyond a traditional hierarchical way of thinking about power it might be useful to explore dialogical power dynamics. That ebb and flow between faculty admin, management, students, and even society, economic interests, and the political economy. In this more Foucauldian way of thinking, the power exercised by the government on the university, the university on the staff, and the staff on the students is a pastoral power (Howley and Harnett, 1992).

Both anthropologists and management gurus have found value in distinguishing between loose and tight cultures (Pelto, 1968). In higher education much has been made of the shift away from the loose coupling of schools, colleges and individuals to the tight management required by ever-increasing accountability measures (Meyer, 2002). This view sees a continuum of organising categories from loose to tight that organisations fall into, but alternatively these types of organising could be viewed as modal. Loose models, oft called ‘organised anarchy’ in higher education provide the level of flexibility required for academic freedom (Lutz, 1982), while tight models of organisation provide the necessary accountability measures to answer the demands of stakeholder groups. Here the organisation operated under a tight model to create the strategy document, which serves as a control mechanism within and without the organisation, allowing it to switch back to ‘loose’ mode to engage in the daily work of the organisation.

*“I think as I reflect on the strategic plan, it was probably broad enough, and had enough breadth within it, that it would work for me. In other words, it's pretty high level, in terms of the kinds of things that you would generally see in any academic strategic plan. So that anything that I wanted to do, at a more tactical, operational level, wouldn't be constrained by that particular strategic plan” (EX2).*

At a superficial level, strategy documents are part of regulation, control and ever greater managerialism. This element of new public management is often seen as a dangerous intrusion into academic life, a theft of academic freedom to increasing external

authority (Fitzsimons, 2017). Academics and managers alike see the double edge of strategic plans linked to generic ideas of ‘excellence’ whereby their flaws are evident enough to warrant eschewing them in the interests of the university, but yet eschewing this engagement could lead to isolation and reputational damage against the university, certainly in respect to international ranking (Morrissey, 2013). The pastoral power exercised by government and university managers creates a space through these innocuous documents to recreate the traditional spirit and ethos of the university in the Humboldt, Newman, and Kant tradition (Delanty, 1998).

#### **4.4 The idea of the university**

Circling back to Ryle’s provoking question on where is the university, in which he suggests that the university cannot be seen in its parts (colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices), or people (the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the Scientists experiment and the rest), nor in its administrative bodies (another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the Colleges, laboratories and offices), but it can only be seen in how all of these things are coordinated (Ryle, 1949, pp. 17-18). In exploring ethnographically how the university attempts to coordinate itself in its strategy documents we can perhaps see the university. Kavanagh’s (2009) history on the genesis of the university suggests that universities offer much more than just the name, but that the spirit of learning within generates its structure/faculties, processes of teaching, and lecturers with a measure of autonomy. The university can be seen in the ideals of the entrepreneurial against the autotelic, but these are idealistic visions of what a university should be, described in poetic distance, abstracted from experience or practice ways (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). So, this DBA research process, commenced inductively has possibly glimpsed the university in a new way- an empirical way, an experiential way, from the inside-out, by looking at the production of the core coordinating document that drives the animus of the university.

The vision that emerges from the analysis and reflection on fieldwork suggests that the administrators and polity of the contemporary university are deeply aware of the discourse around the idea of a university- the passing of patronage, governance, and the

traditional driving ambitions. These have been from the church to the King, the State, then to the economy and increasingly to the student or ‘consumer’, and the strategy document, if it is anything, is a play for university independence, self-governing of academic work and the spirit of autotelic inquiry. A hierarchical administrative line from Church/Pope, to Cardinal, to Bishop, to University administrator, to professoriate, to student in the medieval age, to demos, Minister for Education, Executive University President to academic staff to student and is now replaced by a tangled complexity of stakeholders. All these suspended in their reified positions in this strategy document, set in tension with each other, and held back to give space for the university to be. In the ritual of strategy work, university management are subject to a governmentality (after Foucault, 1982) by the need to produce these documents. The self-work of the university management is to produce these documents in order to make themselves governable. Through the imperative to write a strategy document and meet the expectations of their governmentality, management deprive themselves of the agency that most people believe management have. In this way, the contemporary university, having absorbed the performative quality of the long debate on the ‘idea of a university’ has found the power of a document to create a vision of something that was perhaps never there, a simulacrum. So perhaps we are now living in the golden age of the university as an independent, curious seat of learning.

The strategy document forces university managers to attempt to produce the ideal university in written form, yet the *telos* of the strategy document is the Newman, Humboldt vision of the university (Delanty, 1998). In this ideal our self-work is to accept the boundary conditions of this freedom as something that protects the university from itself:

*“In this environment, an institute without a strategy?! Christ, we’d have like 20,000 students here sitting out on the grass giving a lecture to 1,000 at a time. Right? We wouldn’t be an applied university, we’d probably have nobody teaching because we’re all doing research. I like doing research so I’m going to do research. I’m not teaching anymore, right?” (F)*

Once those boundaries are accepted a true freedom is granted upon the institution and its members:

*“I didn't see it as constraining, even with the new law coming in and the new mandate. I don't think that there's anything in that strat plan that would stand in the way. We might sort of interpret things a little bit differently, but I think, generally, it provides a vehicle that would allow me to advance this organisation” (EX2)*

## **5.0 Key contributions to theory**

While the primary purpose of a DBA is to make a contribution to practice, the inductive path this work took a definitive step towards generating contributions to theory. Taking Wittgenstein's injunction that theory is a thing of this world and is best understood as a tool that is useful or not, a contribution to business theory around strategy documents is not an obtuse or abstract activity- but is probably best understood as a more generalisable contribution to practice (Diamond, 1995). In tracing the social life of a strategy document, this DBA has generated three main contributions to theory relating to strategy documents, power in strategy work, and the philosophical base of S-a-P literature that has served as a base for much of this work.

### **5.1 Strategy documents as a mode of action**

In paper one of this study the gap within the broader strategy landscape and within the strategy-as-practice literature was outlined to expose how little we know or understand about how strategy documents work once they are made. In saying this, it is important to highlight how new they are as a practice of organising- many universities have only recently started to generate these documents, and so, in some way they must have replaced some prior way of organising how things are done. It is beyond the scope of this project to look back to how things were done, but it is safe to say that these documents replace people in a curious way. A university president, its governing body or academic council, so individuals or collections of individuals would programme the university's path and it is now envisaged that this is exactly what a strategy document should do. In this vision, the document replaces the person and becomes the decision

maker. Behind each person-office in the organisation hierarchy was a largely invisible line of patronage- either a church, a king, a state, a consumer or student with their vision of the university projected through decision making. What a strategy document appears to do is to level out all these stakeholders as equals and force an equivalency to each. In this way of thinking the document holds back the stakeholders from the university, circumscribing their absolute power to manage through fiat, reduced to being just one of many to be consulted with. In interviews with those responsible for managing the institute there is a fear expressed of stakeholder interference as an existential threat. These organising documents drew boundaries between management and stakeholder, that allowed management, from their perspective, act in the best interests of the future of the institution:

*One of the institutes decided to reduce the number of students by having a new policy and expelling low scoring students. After a few days with pressure from the public, media, and parents, they changed their mind. That means they don't have a document approved by their board. They are just taking decisions on the go. This is very high risk for the students, for the institute, and maybe to the future of this country.*

*In our case, we had our documents approved by our stakeholders. I had very bad time in standing against some interference from outsiders into accepting students or not expel other students or to violate some of our internal procedures. I suffered from the consequences for a while, especially when those people with good media relationships start to attack the organisation and attack me personally. In the end they didn't change anything with our institute because we have clear rules to protect this institute and we believe in what we are doing, so nothing affected us. [EX1]*

What is hidden in plain view is that the university writes the document and holds back its stakeholders from more meaningful, powerful action into the life of the organisation. In doing this, the university is perhaps creating a university from the vision, ideal, or simulacra of a university in a place where one perhaps never existed before. As such these documents call into being the very essence of a university.

## **5.2 Power in strategy work**

Such a line of inquiry surfaces the second contribution to the S-a-P field, where this work demonstrates the significant power issues that are surround and assemble strategy making practices but are largely overlooked in the *Panglossian* field of open strategy making. The origin of open strategy in S-a-P comes from the new product development



idea of the wisdom of crowds (Chesbrough & Appleyard, 2007), crowdsourcing and of those outside the organisation. It has become an ideology of participation and brought a confused extension of democratic principles to corporate governance. What is left for organisation leaders, individuals who are ultimately held accountable for the growth and survival of the organisation is to set the scene and stage manage strategy making:

*“it would have been very difficult to say they hadn’t been involved in a process, or hadn’t been asked or consulted from a development point of view” (W).*

The account of consultation in this work shows the critical skills of a contemporary manager is to navigate this world of consultative processes, inclusiveness and generate a singular, compelling document that has legitimacy and can act. This highlights the importance of agenda setting in power relations, and finds practical value in other, Foucauldian (after Foucault, 1982) visions of power (Bacharach & Baratz, 1962). In this vision, a sense governmentality serves as an imperative for management to create and consult a strategy document, where staff are complicit in their self-work of consultation and open-strategy participation, yet both use this opportunity to take a freedom, from what appears on the surface to be a mode of compliance and external regulation. As outlined in the discussion, organisations, particularly places of higher learning, are subject to complex power plays and it is within the political economy that strategic plans are conceived and referenced. For S-a-P to truly take a practice turn, the power dynamics at play in strategy work require thoughtful consideration to bridge the micro-macro divide and bring useful explication to strategy research (Chia and MacKay, 2007).

### **5.3 Towards a philosophical basis for S-a-P**

This project speaks directly to the discourse on strategy-as-practice. Although the work is inductive, once the theorisation of fieldwork began, and thus encounter literature, gaps in the S-a-P discourse became evident. S-a-P is an attempt to introduce a process ontology to strategy (Langley et al, 2013; Whitehead, 1929). Encoded in this ontological approach is a refusal to accept objects and things and to only explore

relations. Against strategy, which has tended to focus on a functionalist objectivist orientation, a process or relational ontology has attractions as a corrective. In a practical sense, instead of seeing the strategy document as an object, an S-a-P process ontology allows us to see the complex dynamic interactions that go into assembling it. On its own, a process ontology is not sufficient to account for the complex interactions around strategy making.

As the work evolved it exposed how the two ontologies of strategy making can be present and meaningful at the same time. Not unlike the way light can be simultaneously both particles and waves- strategy is both an object, a definitive document that does things; it is also a process, a set of relational activities that are only significant in their happening and is highly social. So perhaps strategy work can be viewed from both perspectives. The work contributes to the S-a-P research agenda in highlighting this important distinction for further theory generation. Given the purchase that strategy has on how we organise, and the resources and effort deployed into strategy making activities, S-a-P needs to consider the philosophical aspects of strategy- countering the two dominant philosophical approaches of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century- the relational, process ontology of social constructivism with the emerging reconsideration of things in the object-orientated-ontology and materialism that becomes ever more important in late modernity (Harman, 2009).

Finally, this work, in responding to calls for more anthropological work on S-a-P (Clegg & Kornberger, 2015; Gylfe et al, 2016; Whittington, 2017) demonstrates how to go about it as a process and showcases the value of this approach by bringing considerations to both theory and practice.

## **6.0 Key contributions to practice**

The purpose of undertaking a DBA is to explore issues faced in practice, master the academic tools of inquiry, with a view to contributing back to practice new understandings of those issues (Sarros, et al., 2005). In following the social life of a strategy document this DBA has three key contributions to practice relating to engaging in consultation, producing or writing strategy documents and understanding power in practice.

## 6.1 Unthinking in consultation

In setting out to explore strategy consultation anthropologically, this study went beyond musing what it is that consultations do, toward exploring what they mean for the community that engage in them. In a rational-functionalist interpretation, consultations greatly strengthen the quality and insight of any strategy making process by bringing many eyes to the organisations problems, hearing all perspectives and bringing them together and, gaining buy-in for the final plan.

Although a genealogy of these important organisational rituals is beyond the scope of this section, it is worth considering their cultural antecedents. The root of the word consultation itself comes from the Latin ‘consultare/ consulere’ meaning to ‘take council’, which was ordinarily a private affair between a monarch and his advisor. Leaders have always felt the need in various ways to keep their ears to the ground, to feel the pulse of the organisation and to find ways for good ideas to find their way to them. Speaking truth to power has always been a perilous activity, and many still wonder can the powerless ever speak (Spivak, 1988), but in contemporary business and management studies it is considered a straightforward affair. Strategy consultations can be understood as the transformation of this traditional feature of most power-systems into the public sphere (Habermas, 1991), a transformation that creates the new organisational ritual of the formal strategy consultation event.

Few organisations, even fewer public organisations would countenance producing a formal strategy without holding some form of public, stakeholder or staff consultation. The transformation of the private counsel to a ritual of the public sphere has changed the perceived nature of consultation for leaders. Consultation was an input that could be discerningly selected to the present day where it is a consultation of forced egalitarianism where all inputs are to be considered equal and valid.

The *panglossian* view of strategy consultations as open processes fails to take account the output of strategy work, a strategy document which must be produced in the appropriate register of strategy documents and within that there are limitations on what management will ultimately permit form part of the document. In this era of post-truth, the lie presented as open consultation does not grate on participants who know what not

to say. As Harry Frankfurt asserts “one of the most salient features of our cultures is that there is so much bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2009, p. 1). The acquiescence of the organisation at large to participate in the lie is perhaps more than anything else a missed opportunity. To managers contemplating the making of such events, it is worth considering the tightly constrained space where participants are expected to openly share their ideas, without any deep thought or reflection, each with an equal share in the making of the document. In a context that surfaces as inauthentic, the surprising learning is that all participants hope for this ritual to succeed, at least at the symbolic level. For senior managers it was important to show respect through the ritual of consultation:

*“it just makes them feel that they're part of that decision and organization. That creates loyalty and the rest can be easily done by when people believe in the plan, they can at least relate to the plan, that they felt that they took part in the decision of it.” (SM2).*

While for frontline managers the ritual was important in giving an origin to the day to day work instructions:

*“If you involve them at the beginning, they feel that it's just the follow up of the same cycle. I think from that point of view it's very important to gather that feedback. More than for the quality of the feedback you get” (M2).*

While faculty members consulted accepted the importance of a ritual that was in content, empty:

*“the CEO has to be able to turn around and say, "we talked to everybody." Did they talk to everybody? Yes, they talked to everybody. Did they listen to everybody? Possibly not. But that doesn't matter” (F).*

Managers could consider the nature of the language used in relation to these events and seek to narrow that free space down to a more honest representation of what is expected from participants. Central to that is providing more information and insight to those being consulted with to facilitate a more honest dialogue. Ultimately though, these nuanced changes to consultation do not cut to the heart of the matter (Healy, 2017), which is that managers need to think about the symbolic impact of consultation for the

organisation to step back from the edge of being an unthinking bureaucracy (Arendt, 1963). Without this consultation could be interpreted as a hollow fruitless exercise not to be engaged in. or that it is an important ritual that can be modified to provide usefulness to the participant and the manager. In either view managers should understand the semiotic nature of consultation approaches to avoid the hollow promises of brainstorming where deep thought is required or all ideas being valid where leadership needs to be shown. Managers should consider the *intentionality* of consultation in considering the process they want to bring their organisations through, heeding the Heideggerian injunction to experience the world for themselves (Tsoukas, 2011). Is consultation a ritual of strategy development, a tool of open strategy, or is there space to think about traditional closed hierarchical strategy making in modern organisations? For managers to transcend the affective practices of strategy making and their governmentalising action, they need to genuinely think for themselves, on how they should address their organisation through a strategy process. It is beyond the scope of this study and certainly I have no data to support this, but I do wonder how many university managers unthinkingly go through the motion of strategy consultation and making without reflection on their semiotic nature.

## **6.2 Writing strategy documents**

A considerable amount of academic training is given over to what we call critical thinking; using it, anything can be disassembled, rent asunder, with these tools. Applying critical thinking to the role strategy documents play in organisational life surfaces thought on the nature of leadership within modern organisations. In looking at modern leadership, its frequent failure over the last 150 years, with iconic moments of dark leadership throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cannot be ignored (Mazower, 2009). This has prejudiced our view of leadership styles with a form of moral judgement on the desire to lead (Kets de Vries, 1994). Our vision of leadership has adjusted to a form of leadership as a conspiracy (Plater, 2011), where the collective participation, either wittingly or unwittingly, acts in place of a singular decision-making voice. This is particularly true of higher education (Abowitz, 2016). The experience of a long-term absence of overt leadership results in organisations that are more amenable to being led by a vacuous document than a sentient individual. This is a document that can become

the most powerful non-human actor in the organisation, becoming an arbiter of disputes, supporting workers to resist the interference of management in day-to-day work, and assisting management resist the interference of external stakeholders. It has been seen to have a tremendous agency over organisational life, in that it reaches into the future, into decision-making forums, where the authors are no longer present and seeks to bear influence on the outcomes. Leaders need to be more aware and astute when writing organising documents of this nature, given their potentiality to act in the organisation after the fact. While documents, sanctioned in mass consultations, give management the appearance of authority to act on their tenets, those very tenets and the ability to act them out in the organisation is available to all. In this way, the document and its tenets can legitimately supersede the will of management.

*“If you want to take it down a few levels to policy, people use excuses for everything, so often you hear “I don't have to do this because it's not in the policy.” (F)*

*“People were trying to match their day to day work to the words of the strategic plan instead of actually adjusting what they do according to the goals they want to reach. They were trying to negate our efforts at change and by making it look like they were meeting the goals.” (SM1)*

Added to this is the complex stakeholder groups now linked to universities who can be both managed and manage through a strategy document.

*“You can share the plan progress with the board, as a means of demonstrating, self-management, but it's clear you're just sharing and you're not asking for permission or anything in that respect. So, yeah, the strat plan, properly crafted, can actually keep the board where they're supposed to be.” (EX2)*

Managers and strategy writers should consider the multiple perspectives that will be brought to bear on the usage of the strategy document, giving adequate space for all those addressed by the document and adequate thought to the boundary conditions being placed on the organisation.

### **6.3 Understanding power in practice**

In this study's contribution to theory, power was shown to be a somewhat overlooked aspect of strategy work in the organisation. The de-emphasis of power in S-a-P and other strategy disciplines could be said to hinder a critical view of strategy work in organisational life. This understanding has practical applications for managers involved in strategy development, consultations, and strategy work in the organisation. In this study the development of strategy was in effect the first step in drawing boundaries on the organisation in practice of what was to be governed and by whom. This power in practice was understood as both a Foucauldian sense of governmentality (after Foucault, 1982) and the restrictive face of power in setting agendas (Bacharach & Baratz, 1962). The writing of a strategy document is the organisation's self-work in making itself governable and ascribing to a broader system of power, yet what is on the surface an act of compliance is also an opportunity to indirectly ringfence, at least symbolically, the strategic remit of external agencies on the organisation. Managers tasked with writing strategy documents should be conscious of what is offered up for governance and what may need to be held back for greater flexibility within the organisation. In considering what ideas make the final cut to the strategy document, managers should be conscious of this study's lesson in agenda setting power. Where do ideas and goals that form the strategy document originate? This study shows the ability of individuals or small groups, not necessarily with managerial responsibility, capable of setting the agenda for the decision-making table. Those responsible for strategic plans should understand the different agenda setting pressures that are brought to bear in the making of a strategy. There are aspects that may come necessarily from government, or standard setting bodies, or in the case of higher education from global education practices and trends. These aspects should be clear for the strategic manager from their origin to the purpose they serve in the document. A cold eye can be cast then on which of these externally driven factors are necessary to include and which are optional. There are other ideas that make up a strategy document, some coming from staff or stakeholders, or perhaps particular interests of other managers – these should be made explicit with an awareness of who and what sets the boundaries of the strategy and thus what is formally governable.

This study revealed the hidden power present in strategy staff consultations, that imbued the process with an air of inauthenticity. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this is the willingness of staff to be co-opted into this process. While it is up to the strategy manager or organisation's leaders to think on the symbolic nature of the consultation in re-imagining these events, it is worth considering the power of the organisation to set its own boundaries in relation to consultations. If writing the strategy document draws formal boundaries on governing the organisation with external stakeholder groups, the consulting of a strategy document starts to draw boundaries within the organisation on what will and will not be actively managed in the minds of those consulted. Taking this view, the strategy manager could look on consultations as opportunities for greater information sharing with employees on how and why tenets of the strategy document have been included or perhaps excluded. Leadership-employee relationships are positively impacted with greater top-down information sharing (Chan, 2014). This is especially important given the nature of how the strategy document is called upon by both managers and employees in their day-to-day work. In this study the strategy document was shown to have a power vested in it by the organisation that was open to use by all those in the organisation. Of interest to managers is the power to resolve conflict between managers and employees, and different departments. The strategy document became a common rhetorical device that dispersed potential inter-personal conflict to a non-human object. Managers can consider from this the potential for groups and individuals to better understand their relationship to each through systematic strategy and work planning processes (Bryson, 2018).

## **7.0 Recommendations to management**

As this study's main concerns originated with the researcher's professional practice and experience within the organisation under study, there are several recommendations for the management of the organisation from the findings of this work. As these are particular to the organisation under study, they are necessarily more direct and specific than the general contributions to practice.

The strategic framework – In previous strategic planning cycles the development phase, prior to writing the document, involved a series of workshops with industry, board



members, staff, students, government officials, higher education sectoral leaders, and managers. These workshops aimed to put these collective perspectives into SWOT and PESTEL analyses from which the strategy would be devised. A collation of this data was then passed to a writing team who proposed a written strategy document from this input. This process levelled out the concerns of all stakeholders as equal, valid and complete. This study has demonstrated the difficulty that individual contributors face in forums such as planning workshops or consultations to go against the grain of the group, contribute anything other than the expected output, and to stray from the generic and familiar. It must be recognised that not all inputs to these formal analyses will be equal as not all stakeholders will have either the knowledge and perspective to contribute to all these aspects of the organisation's strategic position. In eliciting useful feedback from each of these groups it is recommended to conduct focus groups for each individual stakeholder group whereby their perspectives of various aspects of the organisation can be collected through discussion that centres on their experience and interaction with organisation. This could be facilitated by an external body or staff members that are appropriate to each group. Care should be taken when conducting these focus groups that the facilitator does not have a direct relationship with the focus group by virtue of position (e.g. a Head of School conducting a student group or CEO conducting a board group). This particularly important considering the pressure participants were observed to feel in this study to conform to the expected output and 'say the right thing'. The SWOT and/or PEST analysis, or any or strategy tool used should be owned by the CEO and senior management first and foremost as they will be held responsible for implementing a strategy that responds to it and due to the broad view required to develop it. This should be developed in parallel to the focus groups. The analysis can be revisited when the focus groups are concluded. This serves two purposes, firstly the siloed input allows for a broader range of strategic alternatives and concerns to be considered, and secondly, as aspects are added to the analysis they can be labelled with their origin. This allows for a conscious choice to be made on the mix of stakeholder concerns that frame the organisation's decision-making. The sharing of an initial SWOT/PESTEL analysis and the output of the focus groups would provide useful input to a management strategy development event. This study's finding on

power in agenda setting should caution management into understanding better how their decision-making framework is composed.

The writing of a strategy – Documents by their nature provide a more compelling narrative when they read in a singular tone and style, which preferences the writing of the strategy document by an individual or small group of individuals over a patchwork of contributions. This however is a point of risk for agenda setting within the document, which was seen in this study to lead to unintended consequences. From the output of the analysis, the CEO and senior management, if delegating the writing of a draft strategy, should provide clear guidance to the writers on its intended contents and the rationale for this decision. This is helpful for the writers, but it provides an opportunity for management to clarify for themselves the basis of their intended strategic directions. These instructions can be used in reviewing drafts of the strategy document. The findings in this study on the ability of the strategy document to draw boundaries around the organisation should be considered in the review of the strategy document. Consider what boundaries the draft strategy is imposing on the governance of the organisation. Management should consider the perspective of each stakeholder group on the strategy and give thought to how they will be held to account on its tenets.

The look and feel of a strategy – This study demonstrated how the concerns of management and the writers of the strategy document can impact the look and feel of the strategy document, mirroring their concerns in visuals. While strategy documents, crafted by the management of an organisation, will always reflect a primacy of management concerns, once released it is a document that addresses internal and external stakeholder groups. The visual aspects of the document should reflect the image of the stakeholder groups that form the concerns of the document.

Employee consultation – While this study revealed a hollowness in the promise of open consultation, that should not lead to a disregard for consultation and its important symbolic place in the organisation. Interviewees at all levels of the organisation indicated the importance of consultation as an organisational ritual, speaking to the need to show respect through consultation, share ideas through the organisation, and discuss issues across departments away from potentially contentious day to day

communications. What was also clear from the study of a large-scale employee consultation was that as a mechanism to either share information on future strategic directions or to elicit open feedback on a strategy, it is simply not effective. The decisions reached in the draft strategy were not explained, justified or defended by the management team proposing them. Neither did it prove an appropriate dynamic in which to gather the organisation's thoughts on the proposed strategy. Furthermore, as there was little impact of this feedback on the strategy, there was no formal process of informing the organisation of the output of the consultation.

There are two main purposes employee consultation on strategy development serves in the organisation, first is to share information and second, is to gather employee input. It would be prudent to design two separate styles of consultation to meet these very different needs. Employee feedback could be better elicited in smaller groups or perhaps through an online feedback tool. The large-scale consultation in this study showed the missed opportunity of employee goodwill to participate. Large-scale consultations are opportunities to speak to the organisation, to share the perspective of management, to share information on topics of interest to the organisation and feedback the ideas and perspectives shared in smaller forums. A third purpose of consultation is the symbolic approval of the strategy and management to act on it. This does not have to take the form of gathering input from all regardless of whether participants feel they have anything to add. A draft strategy should be presented at a large-scale consultation and explained and justified by management along with sharing the process that created it. At this final stage of strategy development feedback should be optional. Most importantly the impact and consideration of feedback given throughout the process should be communicated to the organisation.

Strategy communication – This study, in considering the strategy document as an object in the organisation, revealed the power vested in it by the organisation available to be co-opted by all. The strategy document served as broker in discussions between managers and employees, senior and middle management, between departments, and between the organisation and its governing board. It played a key role in diffusing potential conflict in the organisation from the perspectives of those who used it. The

current implementation methodology is formally conducted in writing whereas the work to implement the strategy is largely conducted informally face to face. There is an opportunity to use this insight to develop a more systematic method of implementation using face-to-face dialogue. Opportunities to communicate on an inter and intra department level on strategy progress may prove more effective than the current written siloed updates.

## **8.0 Limitations**

There are natural and obvious limitations to this study that mostly arise from the methodological choices and it is important to explore these. This study followed an inductive, explorative path that sought to bring critical explication to management practices. The objective of the study was to look anew at the making and using of strategy documents to find the strange in the familiar and offer from that a novel perspective on strategy work. The very nature of this work leads to limited generalisability claim. In studies like this, whereby the researcher follows a single phenomenon, in this case a strategy document, it is often at the expense of being able to look at the phenomenon over multiples contexts. This exploratory nature and singular context places the study findings as non-generalisable but as a pre-cursor to generalisability (Tsang, 2014).

Siting the study in the Kingdom of Bahrain in a particular HEI may give the study an air of trivia mongering, a report from a curious parish with no generalisable or normative value. In answer to this it is up to the reader to see the familiar in happenings presented and the validity in the interpretation. This is not argument to be made, but certainly the response from presenting the work in various fora over the course of the DBA gives some sense that the work presented here has some universal value. There could be an argument made on the comparability of the context with other educational landscapes, however in presenting the research and findings internationally there was a sense of familiarity from those present of seeing their own organisations and experiences of strategy making in the work (Welch et al, 2011).

This study set out to offer novel interpretation on strategy documents and their role in the organisation. Interpretative approaches to research are limited through the choices

made in the interpretations, with quality and academic rigor maintained through honesty and authenticity (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). Choices in data presentation were made through papers three and four as the data set was quite large and varied and the editing and presentation of the data into an appropriate size for presentation within the DBA paper series is subjective. Countering this subjectivity is the honesty around method, inclusion and exclusion made explicit throughout the paper series.

The final limitation of this study is the clash of the DBA structure with the imperative of the ethnographer. The programme structure has framed the work, seeking at specified times the production of findings and conclusions. An ethnographer seeks to observe the world and describe it which sits in tension with the DBA call for a contribution to practice. Contributions to practice are to an extent a call for intervention at odds with the aloof observation of the ethnographer. In S-a-P there have been calls for greater study of our own organisations and within organisation studies there has been calls for greater use of autoethnography. The separation of the practitioner researcher and the outsider ethnographer in future organisation studies is likely to resolve this current perceived clash.

## **9.0 Potential for further research**

There are three lines of future inquiry envisioned for this work, quantitative theory testing, further ethnographic studies, and inquiry around the power of strategy documents over the university. The first potential to build upon this work is for it to move to another type of researcher in the positivist quantitative sphere. The findings from the study of a strategy document could form the basis of theory generation for theory testing. This work would address the limitations around validity and generalisability of the findings.

The second area for potential further research is to look to build on the study with new types of ethnographies and new type of phenomena. This study focused on the making and use of a strategy document in a particular context, time and place. Furthering the work, how strategy documents are made, consulted and used in other contexts would bring other perspectives to the life cycle of strategy documents in organisational life. Secondly, this study highlighted the curious organising power of documents in

organisations. There are perhaps other types of organising documents whose lifecycle could be explored from a similar holistic perspective such as mission statements, annual reports, policy documents, or perhaps even pieces of legislation.

The third area for potential further research centres on the role strategy documents play in organising the university. This study has considered the tumultuous change in the nature of university independence and management and the role that strategy documents play in managing both the internal work life of these institutions and how they manage complex stakeholder groups. This study did not set out to comment on the nature of our modern universities, but the explication offered on the role of the strategy document in the organisation claims that strategy documents have the power to manage the conflicting demands of the university's multiple stakeholder groups. Further work in this area could explore the life cycle of strategy documents in other higher education institutes, particularly on how the document is called on in the internal work life of the university and in its management of external stakeholder groups. Scholars at the centre of the S-a-P stream of research are well placed to explore the rich data of their own organisations to explore these themes further.

## **10. Conclusion**

This final section of the thesis recaps the research aims of the study, the key conclusions of the work, a discussion on the findings in relation to open-strategy, power in strategy work, and the idea of the university seen from the organising perspective of strategy work. The main contributions to both theory and practice made by this study were laid out in relation to the literature and professional practice. This final section also discussed the limitations of the findings presented in the study and proposed areas for further research that builds upon the work's contributions.

This concludes a transformative journey of discovery that I have undergone as both a practitioner and as a researcher. As a practitioner, both the workshop series of the DBA and the research journey documented through the paper series not only broadened my knowledge of strategy making and philosophical perspectives on organising, but piece

by piece deconstructed all assumptions that governed my daily practice. This deconstruction allowed me to consider a multitude of perspectives on the nature of organising and strategy work that were previously unseen and introduced an awareness of the bias I brought to my work. As practitioner, the process of the DBA journey has brought about a more considered, thoughtful approach to my professional practice that has impacted not only the quality of my work, but a new enjoyment in problem solving. The ability to critically reflect more broadly and abstractly on issues in practice has brought enormous satisfaction in applying more rigorous approaches to management. As a researcher, this process has sparked an interest in academic inquiry that I intend to continue through further development of the research agenda outlined in this section and the publishing of parts of this study.

This thesis's injunction to managers to think further upon their practice is in the first instance a self-entreaty to more thoughtful practice, in full appreciation as to the difficulty of that task- "unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory tower independence of thinkers, no other human capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think" (Arendt, 1958: 324).

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## **Section 4:**

### **Reflective log extracts**

## **Introduction**

The DBA, as a professional doctorate programme is a marriage of practice-based knowledge and academic knowledge. The meaningful impact of one upon another relies on the development of critical reflection skills and the emergence of the reflexive practitioner. Of the 11 learning outcomes listed in the handbook for the DBA programme, reflection is core to the final five learning outcomes:

7. Reflect on mastery of the skills of research manuscript preparation and delivery by actively engaging in a cycle of research manuscript publication.

8. Develop personal competencies through a process of self-reflection and the engagement of personal creative practice, individual leader proficiency, and ethical reasoning

9. Lead and initiate critical evaluations of the study, and independently and competently reflect, analyse, challenge, and theorise on new and existing business knowledge.

10. Critically reflect on the role of manager and change agent by challenging and evaluating new and existing theories and practices and bringing original and relevant scholarship to bear on business and/or management contexts.

11. Engage in reflective observation and the stimulation and leadership of workplace change and learning across different business and organisational contexts.

Through the three stages of the DBA I have had the opportunity to develop reflexivity in each of these five areas through engagement with research practices and skill development, literature review, presentations of the research, reflecting upon the feedback and refining the work through the paper series, and perhaps most importantly reflecting back what I was learning to my professional practice.

In the first DBA introductory seminar it was strongly suggested that a reflective journal was kept throughout the DBA journey to reflect upon learning, decisions, departure points, obstacles and achievements along the way. This was completed diligently in the first phase of the DBA through the workshop module series. Diary

entries after that point became more sporadic after I was assigned a research supervisor. As my supervisor was in Ireland and I in Bahrain, we started communicating first over email to plan out and discuss the preparations for paper one and then onto regular meetings over Skype video calls (video conferencing). This process of drafting ideas and sharing them with my supervisor became the reflective process, as I sent drafts along with my thoughts, we discussed, I took notes and re-drafted after reflecting on the discussions. As this process was such an integral part of my reflective journey I have represented the reflective journey honestly below through the journal entries of the first phase and the skype, email, multiple filled notebooks, and amazon book ordering spree prompted by our discussions.

### **Starting the workshop series**

After workshop one, day one:

*Felicity and Denis both made the point today that the DBA was about adding value to your professional working life, not chasing a qualification. To sustain an interest in your research area over 4 to 5 years the motivation has to come from something other than the end-goal of the qualification. I think this rings true for work also; to truly add value you have to find what you are doing (in the process) valuable. When I reflect on my own career so far, I enjoy above all else solving problems and being in spaces of uncertainty. The only role that I have taken on to date and not enjoyed has been one where everything was already figured out and all I had to do was complete pre-determined tasks.*

In preparing for the first assignment, I was struggling to find literature in the area that I had hoped my thesis to focus on, until I found the Strategy-as-Practice stream of research:

*21/10/14*

*Struggling to find papers that are well cited on strategy implementation. Every other view on strategy is well researched and cited, but when you look for strategy implementation there is a dearth of high quality papers and it appears none on regional challenges to implementation specifically.*

26/10/14

*I have found a larger body of work on 'strategy-as-practice' and strategic planning and implementation in the public sector that is well cited and regarded. However, once outside of the pleasant articles given for the first workshop and HBR, the language in these papers is difficult to get through, at least in one sitting. I have a dictionary open all day and I found myself drawing a diagram of one paper today to try to understand what the author was trying to say. One author, Paula Jarzabkowski, writes extensively on the topic of 'strategy as practice' but the papers are so densely packed with information with references to other theoretical frameworks that I also then have to research in order to understand her writings. On a positive note, she has done a number of articles on strategy implementation in HEIs and there is a lot of good work by other authors on the challenges of implementing strategy in the public sector. What I have found difficult to locate is any material on strategy implementation in the middle east, well at least material that isn't focused on military strategy. There is work on strategy implementation in emerging economies (and the authors include the middle east), but I would not count Bahrain nor the Arabian Gulf as an emerging economy. The economy is heavily controlled and almost static so the environment for strategy implementation is entirely different than those explored in the literature.*

### **Exploring the literature**

I struggled at the start of the DBA process with the level of the language used in papers, the references back to other bodies of work that I was not yet familiar with, and trying to find where the literature was limited with respect to context, that is did the conclusions reached on strategy practice and processes only apply to certain cultural context? Over the next few months the research journal primarily focuses on trying to reflect on the literature and trying to understand the broad landscape of strategy literature. Throughout this phase I was also at the start of a strategy writing



and implementation project that would later form the basis of the study. As both were happening in parallel I tried to use the literature to reflect on my practice:

*1/12/14*

*In the strategy project we now have a final draft of the 5-year strategy and the first cycle OKRs for the senior management team in place and awaiting Board of Trustees final sign-off before it goes for printing. I have started holding workshops with the 14 different directorates and faculties to get them to set their OKRs as a team in advance of starting in January. I will be doing this all month and it has been extremely interesting so far in terms looking at the Strategy as Practice literature and reading other experiences of going through this process.*

*4/2/15*

*First reports sent to the senior management team with scores at management and department level. Our senior management team meeting earlier this week was very tense despite it being an early stage report. I get the sense Directors did not appreciate having to justify what their teams were working on. Reading a paper on strategy and culture today it has been shown that in societal cultures with either a high power distance and or individualism, employees will not value participation in decision making and will prefer goals set by their manager. In societal cultures that demonstrate low power distance and or collectivism, employees appreciate participation in decision making and there is a positive correlation with participation and goal commitment. Arab societies are paradoxical in this sense in that they display a high degree of power distance, yet they are extremely collectivist in nature. By way of an example, it is common in our institute to see entire extended families accompany an applicant during the enrolment and admissions period simply to submit a form. While the individual applicant or their parents may have made the decision to apply, a consensus would have been reached across the entire extended family group. Observed meetings are characterised by a high power distance with the manager or leader issuing edicts about what is to be done and little in the way of discussion or debate. Closer examination of this however often reveals that a consensus has been reached in advance of the meeting, with few willing to risk a*

*potential loss of face by not knowing the outcome in advance. Expatriates working in this environment are often left perplexed at extraordinary decisions that are reached during meetings with little or no debate, not understanding perhaps the intense and private 'horse trading' that has likely gone on in advance of such decisions.*

After a number of months trialling processes at work learnt from the literature, I reflect on the success and failures to date and determine to take some of the DBA ethos of learning and reflection to the task at hand:

*14/5/15*

*Further conflict arising from our new strategy implementation system. Instead of unified dislike of the new system, some managers, directors, and deans have made huge progress on their OKRs and have used the system as a way to shine a light on the work of their department. For this they have drawn praise from their managers and derision from their poorer performing peers. Worse still some departments have gotten to a certain point with their objectives and can go no further as it is reliant on an input from another department. An accreditation key result is now unlikely to be achieved not due to it being unrealistic or not executed correctly, but because there is a finance issue yet to be resolved. The OKR system is being used by one department to highlight a deficiency in another. I am not sure this is good evolution. I had envisaged a system that facilitated us working together, achieving together, failing and learning together, but instead apart from some areas of light, there has been competition and resentment. Rather than giving up I am going to spend the next month doing informal interviews with each manager, director, and dean to explore how they feel the system is being implemented and what they would like to change for the next cycle.*

Adding this reflective process to my work prompted further exploration on the literature of work motivation:

*9/6/15*

*The three lessons from the motivation literature I've read of late that I think I would be well to take note of in my current predicament:*

- 1. Set proximal goals to build confidence*
- 2. Use a behaviour model*
- 3. Regular coaching and communication*

*The goals we set in the first cycle seemed unattainable to some and I have seen that there has been a certain amount of self-sabotaging. Perhaps to get failure over and done with or to fail on their own terms. While I agree that using a behaviour model for employees is very useful when you are dealing with heads of departments it is very difficult to do that without competition. My experience with embedding competition into processes in this context thus far is that while you reap the rewards of high productivity you concede all semblance of organisational cohesion and collaboration.*

*2/7/15*

*Completed interviews with all senior management and down two levels on their experience using OKRs for the first 6-month pilot. I used a pre-prepared list of questions shared with the interviewee in advance. I have been quite surprised at the positive feedback. Every single interviewee mentioned in some form or another that using OKRs had created a common language to communicate across the organisation for the first time. There is much work in the S-a-P area at the moment, particularly by Jarzabkowski, on the construction of strategist identities that rings true with the interview data collected. Many are dubbing this way of looking at strategy within organisational life as 'strategy-as-narrative' as we co-create the rhetoric around strategy which in turn recreates the base of power relations.*

### **Reflection to deconstruction**

After a full year of the DBA process and of starting the strategy project I reflect on how the process has deconstructed the assumptions I held around my work. The process of reading and reflecting in relation to my practice and the literature had destabilised my view of work to allow new ways of thinking (Samuels & Betts, 2007):

*16/9/15*

*Trying to prepare for the next DBA workshop and keep up with work while on maternity leave (which is 3 months here). Thankfully I feel that every piece of literature I explore as part of the DBA enhances my professional practice as my work and my proposed thesis area are closely aligned. It's funny though, even looking back now on my views at the start of the process, I knew less but I was so self-assured in what I did know. I now have more experience, have expanded my knowledge in the area considerably and in many ways I feel I know less and am less assured that my way is best. I wonder does this come full circle again?*

*5/10/15*

*Engaging with as much of the philosophy literature as I can manage at the moment. Coming from a sciences background I didn't have much cause to read Karl Marx and life after has left little time to do so either. It is almost pleasant to be forced to read such dense texts. Painful because I find there is a depth of meaning that I don't glean on the first or even second pass and enjoyable because it is rare to take time out of life to sit, read, and learn new/old things. I find much that resonates in the philosophy of praxis.*

The deconstruction of assumptions through reflection allowed me to explore a wide range of potential literature bases for the work, that I would not have considered previously:

*29/10/15*

*Reading around pragmatism I find the concept of a Community of Inquiry (later community of practice- Etienne Wenger) which posited that no meaningful*

*knowledge could come from self-reflection alone, shared meaning or 'participatory democracy' is a key aspect of a Community of Inquiry that uses a democratic approach to develop a shared meaning, specifically for problem definition. I am reading a lot of philosophy in this area as I feel many of the challenges I face have the potential to be addressed by building a community along this idea.*

### **Separating the practitioner and the researcher**

Over a year into the process and I came to the conclusion, with helpful feedback through the workshop series, that I needed to separate the work project from the research project, in order to be reflexive:

*17/11/15*

*Putting together my assignment for the most recent workshop and reflecting on trying and failing to marry the research and the job:*

*I started this process looking at this problem I faced as a practitioner and the issues explored as a researcher as one in the same. As a practitioner I saw the problem of implementation as one of process and participation; once I had developed an appropriate model of implementation with the right amount of employee participation I would have solved the challenge. Looking at it from the research perspective, I didn't separate out the issues I was facing and attempt to abstract these questions further, rather I wished to study the entire organisational development challenge, and the multitude of contexts surrounding that, solve the problem, and come back to my concluding chapter with a complete framework of implementation. As I have gone through the previous two workshop cycles I have slowly seen the many issues with this approach. In looking at such a large 'project' I was attempting to answer a surface-level question of 'what solved the problem you faced?' as opposed to a more abstract and generalizable question of 'how problems are solved'.*

*30/11/15*

*I am writing around communities of practice for the upcoming assignment, but I still don't feel I have the approach right for what I want to achieve professional and learn from the DBA. It still feels like a 'project' and the success of the work project impacts on the success of the research project. This feels disingenuous to engage in this case as the research is being heavily lead. At this stage I am exploring it for the sake of the assignment, but I am not sure it is the direction I want to move in.*

### **Research supervisor**

A pivotal point of the DBA is moving towards the research paper series and the assignment of a research supervisor. This was a turning point for me that allowed me to turn the inward reflection on literature and practice and engage in meaningful dialogue with someone who could bring a different perspective. Research supervisors provide a driving force in developing critical reflection skills that are required for doctoral research (Bates et al, 2009):

*11/01/16*

*I received notification today of the supervisor allocation for the DBA. The race is on now to have the first paper of the thesis submitted by the end of March. In many ways the DBA is a lot like work at the moment, limping from one crisis deadline to another. The only difference between the two is on the DBA I occasionally achieve total clarity on where I am headed only to read a new journal article and feel lost at sea again. Hopefully the supervisor will provide some much-needed structure to my erratic reading.*

*2/2/16*

*Had the first meeting with my supervisor, which was very helpful in clarifying my thoughts. We looked at possible approaches to what I wanted to achieve. Terrifying as there are only eight weeks before paper one is due. It's up to me to scope out the options now and come back with a decision and initial thoughts on the paper structure. A lot of work ahead, but nice to have someone other than myself to kick about ideas with.*

9/2/16

*Another supervisor meeting and so, so, so much reading being done and to be done. I also have a Board of Trustees update presentation coming up and I have to approach that in another mode. Although I feel lost in terms of my knowledge in the DBA, I have gained so much over the past 18 months and I have put it to good use on my major project. It is a case of now knowing what you don't know, but in the world of work such humility is not a desirable trait. We have agreed to press on with the strategy as practice theme.*

### **Writing paper one**

The writing of paper one, the process of presenting my work and re-drafting based on the feedback received, culminated in clarity around the objectives and direction of the study:

9/3/16

*Almost a full paper together and I'm not sure quite how I have done it in the timeframe. I am not totally happy with it and suspect that I won't be either at submission, however I now for the first time have something approaching clarity on what I want to achieve. Also, for the first time I have fully utilised and appreciated the wide reading that I have done since starting the DBA, which at the time seemed like aimless wandering in the desert.*

25/4/16

*Presented at the colloquium and survived. It was quite an intimidating atmosphere to present in and most participants seemed to suffer from presentation nerves in one way or another perhaps reflecting the importance of the milestone to all of us. I didn't survive unscathed and have a major revision of the paper to complete for the summer. I'm quite happy with that as the paper was ultimately written over three weeks and my thoughts need to be refined. Overall, I got great feedback and I still*

*have held onto that sense of clarity of direction attained during the write-up of this paper.*

7/7/16

*On academic leave now until the end of August and have failed to properly balance the DBA and work commitments. I have to submit my rewrite of paper one shortly and while I have done much of the necessary reading this has not translated itself into anything written. I wonder will I get better at this as time goes on? Will it get easier as the thesis gets closer and closer to daily work?*

3/8/16

*One of the major criticisms of the original paper submitted is that the research questions were not fully embedded throughout the paper and appeared at the end as if they were an afterthought. I wanted to pursue an inductive approach, but I did a rather ham-fisted job of making a case for that or putting appropriate boundaries in place. To remedy that I proposed to guiding questions at the start of the paper which has added much-needed clarity for me as well as the examiners.*

### **Post-paper one reflections**

After the final submission of paper one, my journal entries start to peter out as began regular meetings and written communication with my supervisor. Looking back over our conversations over the past two years showed an in-depth process of reflection over email, video conferencing, drafting and re-drafting, and widely expanding my literature base. A brief review of my email shows 139 conversations between my supervisor and I starting on Monday January 11<sup>th</sup> with the assignment of supervisors to DBA candidates.





Fig. 1. Screenshot of email conversations

These exchanges of ideas over email and video conferencing meetings often highlighted major gaps in my knowledge from philosophy, research methods, through to management and organisation studies. At each juncture, I tried to counter this gap with broad reading beyond the scope of the research study to bridge this gap. This has added to my competence as a researcher and has been an enjoyable process of discovery. Below are screenshots of my Amazon account over that period, showing some of my book-buying sprees prompted by an exchange of ideas with my supervisor:

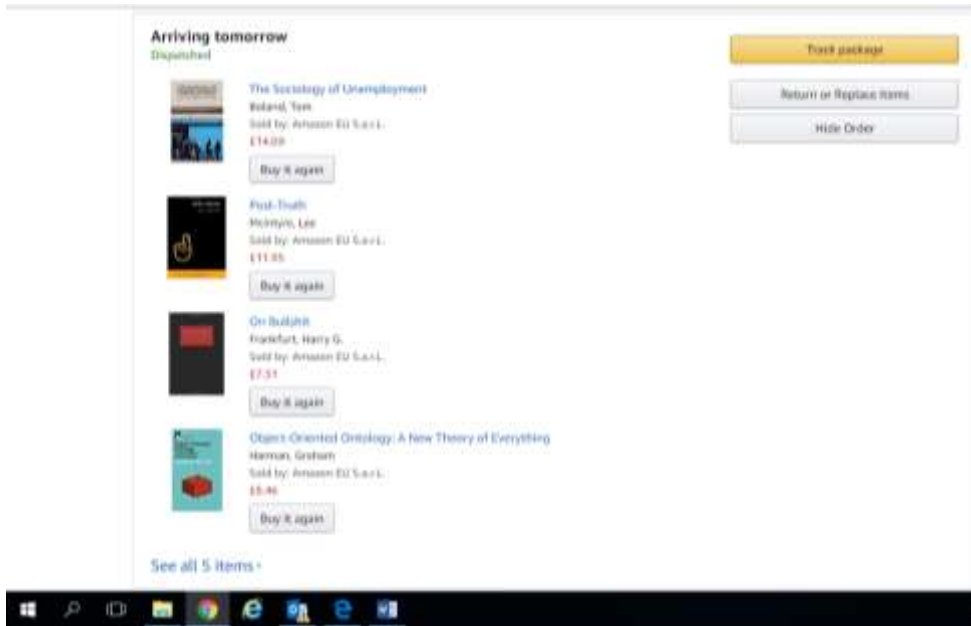


Fig. 2. Book buying.

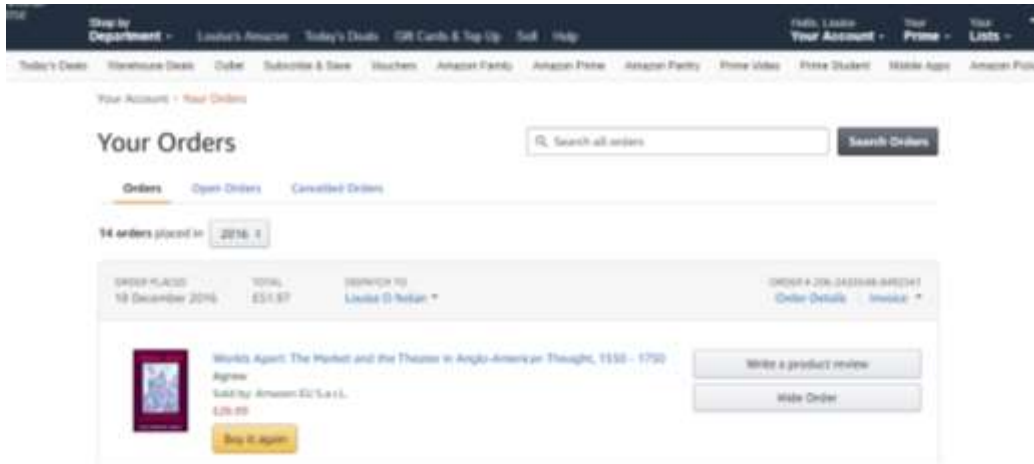


Fig. 3. Book buying.

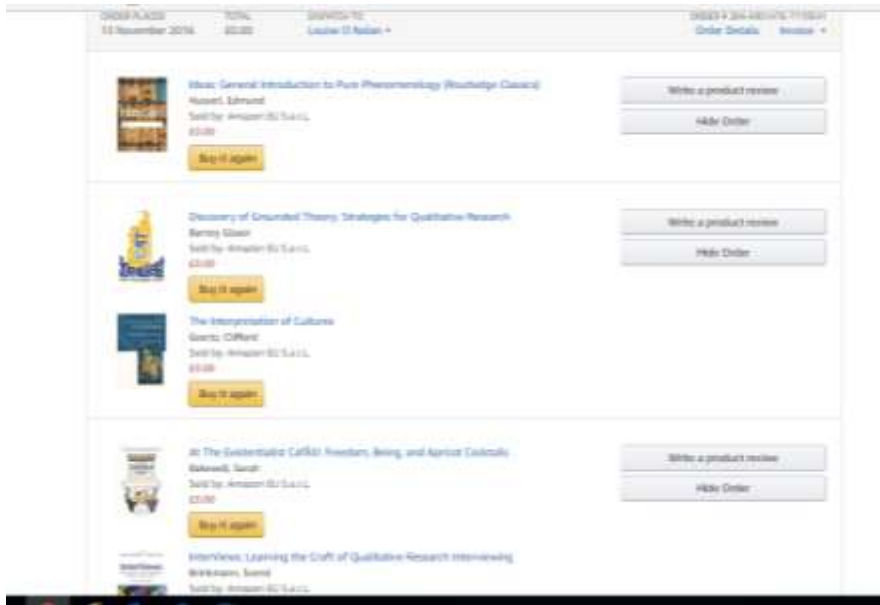


Fig. 4. Book buying.

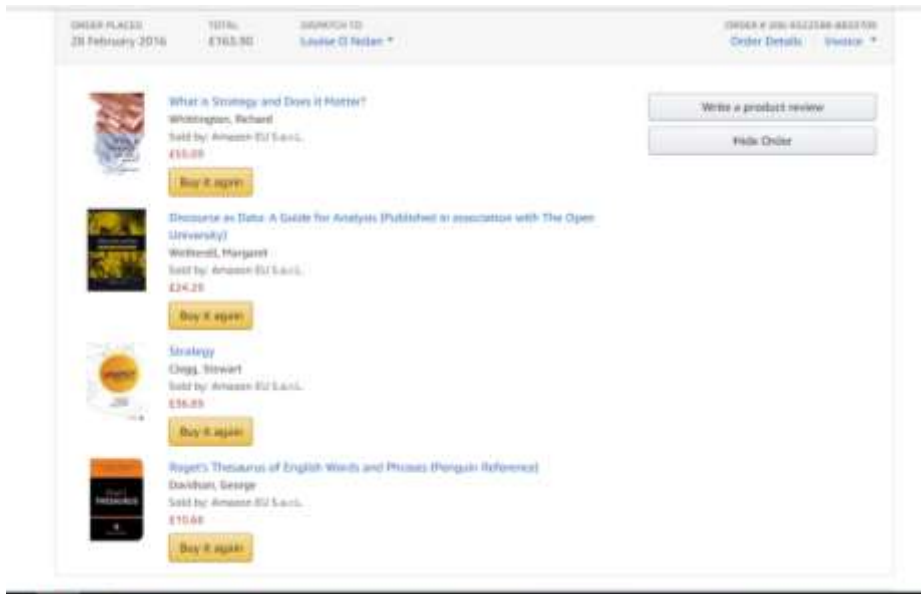
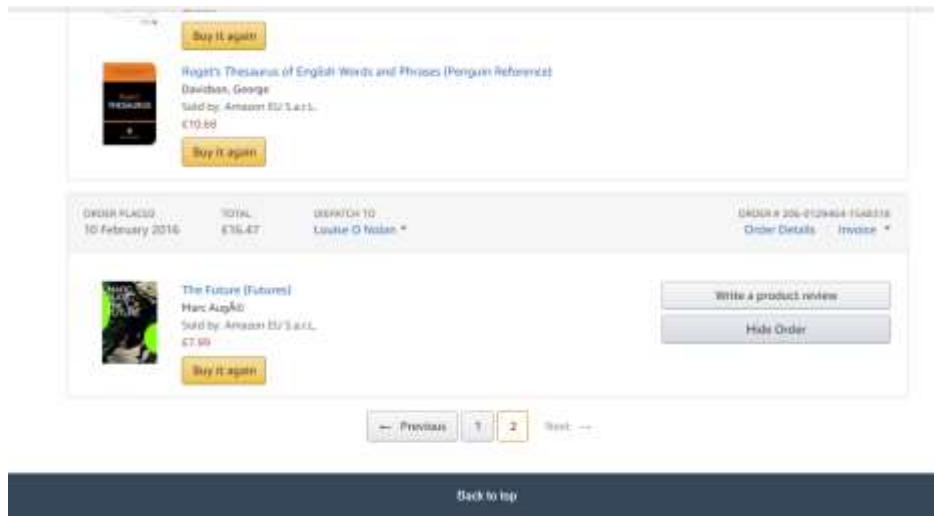


Fig. 5. Book buying.



## Concluding remarks

In signing up to the DBA programme my objectives centred around improving my knowledge base and research skills and gaining a qualification that would be of benefit to me in my future career. The process has been both humbling and privileged. My assumptions about practice were gradually deconstructed over the workshop series and paper series, but this allowed me to consider new perspectives that perhaps I would have dismissed previously. As a result, I am more reflective, open-minded, and structured in problem solving in my professional practice. It has been a great privilege to get the chance to broaden my knowledge through the programme and take time out and reflect on learning and doing throughout the process.

## References

Bates, A.J., Ramirez, L. and Drita, D., 2009. Connecting university supervision and critical reflection: Mentoring and modeling. *The Teacher Educator*, 44(2), pp.90-112.

Samuels, M. and Betts, J., 2007. Crossing the threshold from description to deconstruction and reconstruction: Using self- assessment to deepen reflection. *Reflective Practice*, 8(2), pp.269-283.

## **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1: Voluntary consent form**

### **Confidentiality and Identification:**

When informed consent is received you will be given the opportunity to tell your story to the researcher and have your data included in the study. In this way, your privacy may be compromised because your particular story may be identified by future readers of the thesis. Therefore, to maintain your privacy and avoid recognition through the data the researcher will endeavour to anonymise you by using anonyms and removing reference to specific locations and identifiable events. However, this will offer only limited anonymity because the researcher and organisation will be identified in the study. Therefore, to maintain your limited privacy and limited anonymity, the researcher will adopt a protocol of confidentiality by guaranteeing not to provide your data, or any part of it, to any third party by any means whatsoever. Consequently, the researcher offers limited privacy, limited anonymity, but complete confidentiality to all participants.

### **Recording:**

It is our preference that our interviews be recorded. The recordings will help the researcher to collect and analyse the data and will be retained for at least 5 years after the date of the final interview of the study. The researcher (Louise O’Nolan) is pleased to confirm that the interview recordings and the data extracted from them will only be available to the researcher.

### **Right of Correction:**

You will receive a confidential transcript of your interview and you are encouraged to make, additions, deletions, corrections, clarifications, or any amendments you deem necessary. You will also receive a copy of any amended transcripts where applicable and any final transcripts used in the study. You may withdraw your submitted data at any time.

### **Right to withdraw:**

Please note that participation in this project is purely voluntary and you have the right to decline participation without prejudice. You have the right to withdraw from the project at any point up to publication of the thesis without prejudice. You may do so in writing to any of the contacts listed at the end of this form.

Please confirm your consent to participate in the study by ticking the appropriate boxes and returning a signed copy to Louise O’Nolan at the address set out underneath:

I agree to participate in the research study	
I agree to have the interview recorded	
I agree to have the interview transcribed by the researcher	
I agree to have the interview transcription stored on a secure data base	
Name of interviewee (Block capitals):	

.....

Signed: ..... Date: .....

.....

<p>Louise O’Nolan,          DBA candidate,          CEO Office,          Bahrain Polytechnic,          Isa Town,          Bahrain          T. 39 515155          E.  <u><a href="mailto:louise.onolan@polytechnic.bh">louise.onolan@polytechnic.bh</a></u></p>	<p>Dr. Ray Griffin          Lecturer in          Strategic          Management,          WIT AT          building,          WIT,          Waterford          T. 051-302465          E. <u><a href="mailto:rgriffin@wit.ie">rgriffin@wit.ie</a></u></p>	<p>Dr. Chris          O’Riordan,          Lecturer in          Accounting,          Business Building,          Main campus          WIT,          Waterford          T: 051-845610          E: <u><a href="mailto:coriordan@wit.ie">coriordan@wit.ie</a></u></p>
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## **Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet**

### **Background**

The purpose of this project is to try to understand the continuing importance of strategic plans in organisations. Strategy documents play a powerful, central role in organisations, yet we know very little of the ways in which they work (Whittington, 2011). As an emerging field, Strategy-as-Practice is only beginning to explore the more performative and rhetorical aspects of strategy documents in organisational life. Despite the critique of their performance, strategy documents are still important artefacts in organisations. The emerging research stream in strategy-as-practice explores the weak relationship between theory and practice in this regard and argues for a practice-centred approach to understanding the phenomenon of strategy documents. This project explores the production and consumption of a strategy document at a higher education institute. This interpretative account of strategy documents in organisations aspires to offer novel insights to the meaning and significance of strategy practices.

### **Invitation**

You are invited to take part in a study that seeks to explore the role of strategy documents in organisational life through interviews with participants involved in the writing of strategy documents, strategy consultations, approvals and strategy document usage at Bahrain Polytechnic. The aim of this is to offer insights into the role strategy documents play in organisational life that will be of use to all those involved in the production and use of such documents.

### **What will happen**

If you consent to take part in this study, you will be contacted by the researcher (Louise O'Nolan) to schedule a time to conduct a one to one interview. Post interview you will be sent the transcript and any notes for your review and correction.

### **Time commitment**

Each interview will take 30 - 45 minutes.



### Participant's rights

You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation. You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you. You have the right to have your questions about the procedures answered. If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should contact the researcher or research supervisors listed below.

### Benefits and risks

This study only offers limited anonymity as the researcher will be identified and the organisation can be identified from this. While you will not be named your story as told in interview may allow future readers of the thesis to identify you. Taking part in this study will allow you an opportunity to reflect on the nature and use of strategy documents in organisational life and allow you the opportunity to reflect on your own professional practice around strategic planning. Your participation will contribute to furthering an understanding of the role strategy documents play in organisation.

### Cost, reimbursement and compensation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no payment or compensation. There is no cost to you for participation.

### Confidentiality and anonymity

When informed consent is received you will be given the opportunity to tell your story to the researcher and have your data included in the study. In this way your privacy may be compromised because your particular story may be identified by future readers of the thesis. Therefore, to maintain your privacy and avoid recognition through the data the researcher will endeavour to anonymise you by usingonyms and removing reference to specific locations and identifiable events. However, this will offer only limited anonymity because the researcher and organisation will be identified in the study. Therefore, in order to maintain your limited privacy and limited anonymity, the researcher will adopt a protocol of confidentiality by guaranteeing not to provide your data, or any part of it, to any third party by any means whatsoever. Consequently, the

researcher offers limited privacy, limited anonymity, but complete confidentiality to all participants. It is my preference that interviews be recorded. The recordings will help the researcher to collect and analyse the data and will be retained for at least 5 years after the date of the final interview of the study. The researcher (Louise O’Nolan) is pleased to confirm that the interview recordings and the data extracted from them will only be available to the researcher.

If you require any further information or have questions regarding your participation in this study, you may contact the researcher or research supervisors listed below:

<p>Louise O’Nolan, DBA candidate, CEO Office, Bahrain Polytechnic, Isa Town, Bahrain T. 39 515155 E. <a href="mailto:louise.onolan@polytechnic.bh">louise.onolan@polytechnic.bh</a></p>	<p>Dr. Ray Griffin Lecturer in Strategic Management, WIT AT building, WIT, Waterford T. 051-302465 E. <a href="mailto:rgriffin@wit.ie">rgriffin@wit.ie</a></p>	<p>Dr. Chris O’Riordan, Lecturer in Accounting, Business Building, Main campus WIT, Waterford T: 051-845610 E: <a href="mailto:coriordan@wit.ie">coriordan@wit.ie</a></p>
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### Appendix 3: Interview request letter

#### Interview request letter

Dear...

I am currently carrying out research for a DBA thesis exploring the role strategy documents have in organisations. It is my intention to discover the purpose and function these documents serve in organisations in the hope of offering advice and insight to practitioners involved in the use of strategy documents.

Participation can take place at a venue of your choice and should take no more than one hour. I will telephone your office shortly to inquire if it would be possible to meet with you. You will receive a confidential transcript of your interview and you are encouraged to make, additions, deletions, corrections, clarifications, or any amendments you deem necessary. You will also receive a copy of any amended transcripts where applicable and any final transcripts used in the study. You may withdraw your submitted data at any time. In addition, your signed release of the data will be required before it is included in the final submission (please see data protection protocol in the attached consent form).

Please note that participation in this project is purely voluntary and you have the right to decline participation without prejudice. You have the right to withdraw from the project at any point up to publication of the thesis without prejudice. You may do so in writing to any of the contacts listed below.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Yours sincerely,

Louise O’Nolan,	Dr. Ray Griffin	Dr. Chris
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<p>DBA candidate, CEO Office, Bahrain Polytechnic, Isa Town, Bahrain</p> <p>T. 39 515155</p> <p>E. <a href="mailto:louise.onolan@polytechnic.bh">louise.onolan@polytechnic.bh</a></p>	<p>Lecturer in Strategic Management, WIT AT building, WIT, Waterford</p> <p>T. 051-302465</p> <p>E. <a href="mailto:rgriffin@wit.ie">rgriffin@wit.ie</a></p>	<p>O’Riordan, Lecturer in Accounting, Business Building, Main campus WIT, Waterford</p> <p>T: 051-845610</p> <p>E: <a href="mailto:coriordan@wit.ie">coriordan@wit.ie</a></p>
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