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**Strategic Planning in University Athletic Departments in the United Kingdom** ISSN: 1543-0518

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## Abstract

The study's purposes were to (a) determine the extent to which university athletic departments in the United Kingdom use strategic planning, (b) identify key factors discouraging strategic planning, and (c) examine relationships between use of strategic planning and the variables university size and athletic director's background. Of athletic departments studied, 59.5% were strategic planners that wrote long-range plans, assessed external and internal environments, and based strategies on department mission and objectives. The remaining 40.5% were nonstrategic planners using just some components of the strategic planning process, as either users of short-range written plans and budgets, for the current fiscal period; users of unwritten short-range plans maintained in an administrator's memory (intuitive planners); or users of no measurable planning procedures.

**Keywords:** *planning, strategic planning, strategy, university athletic departments*

Private and public organizations today use a structured planning process to select appropriate long-term objectives and develop means to achieve these objectives (Christensen, Berg, Salter, & Stevenson, 1985; Elkin, 2007; Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn, & Ghoshal, 2003; Wheelen & Hunger, 2008). The business sector of society has long recognized that continued profitability requires maintaining a strategic fit between organizational goals and capabilities and changing societal and economic conditions. As its environment changed, the business sector developed planning systems which made possible coordinated and effective responses to increasing unpredictability, novelty, and complexity (Ansoff, 1984). Strategic thought and practice generated in the private sector can also help public and nonprofit organizations anticipate and respond effectively to their dramatically changing environments (Bank, 1992; Bryson, 1988; David, 1980; Dwyer, 1990; Esry, 1988; Lovcock, 1990;

David, 1989; Duncan, 1990; Espy, 1988; Laycock, 1990; Medley, 1988; Nelson, 1990; Robinson, 1992; Wilson, 1990).

Today's colleges and universities have experienced rapid change. Educational administrators are confronted with changes associated with aging facilities, changing technology, changing demographics, increasing competition, rising costs, funding cuts, and so on. The educational sector has begun to recognize that strategic planning is necessary in order to maintain responsiveness to the rapidly changing environment (Agwu, 1992; Busler, 1992; Hall, 1994; Williams, 1992). Since athletic programs are so much a part of colleges and universities, athletic departments face the same problems as do the institutions to which they belong. If athletic departments are to respond well to change, they must anticipate it and adapt programs and resources to meet their mission and objectives in new situations (Bucher, 1987; Kriemadis, Emery, & Purohaho, 2001). Strategic planning may help athletic departments do this and may further point them to the strategies necessary to achieve their missions and objectives (Dyson, Manning, Sutton, & Migliore, 1989; Ensor, 1988; Gerson, 1989; Kriemadis, 1997; Smith, 1985; Sutton & Migliore, 1988).

Duncan (1990) stated that strategic planning is a method of decision making developed in the private sector that has been adopted by public sector organizations. Proponents of strategic planning argue that traditional long-range planning fails in the contemporary world, and strategic planning is now the powerful tool for organizations to cope with an uncertain future.

The service sector today includes a growing nonprofit segment, including social services, schools and universities, research organizations, sports organizations, religious orders, parks, museums, and charities. Strategic planning is earning its place in the management systems of service businesses (Kriemadis, 1997; Kriemadis et al., 2001; Sutton & Migliore, 1988; Wilson, 1990). Pearce and Robinson (1985) have argued that strategic planning consists of the following steps:

1. Determining the culture, policies, values, vision, mission, and long-term objectives of the organization.
2. Performing external environmental assessment to identify key opportunities and threats.
3. Performing internal environmental assessment to identify key strengths and weaknesses.
4. Developing long-range strategies to achieve the organization's mission and objectives.
5. Establishing short-range objectives and strategies to achieve the organization's long-range objectives and strategies, a process called *strategy implementation*.
6. Periodically measuring and evaluating performance, a review known as *strategy evaluation*.

Steps 1 and 2 together are referred to as *strategy*

Steps 1–4 together are referred to as *strategy formulation*.

A number of authors (Ansoff & McDonell, 1990; Barry, 1986; Bryson, Freeman, & Roering, 1986; Bryson, Van de Ven, & Roering, 1987; Elkin, 2007; Kotler, 1988; Mintzberg et al., 2003; Rowe, Mason, Dickel, & Snyder, 1989; Steiner, 1979; Wheelen & Hunger, 2008) argue that, in turbulent environments, strategic planning can help organizations to

- think strategically and develop effective strategies
- clarify future direction
- establish priorities
- develop a coherent and defensible basis for decision making
- improve organizational performance
- deal effectively with rapidly changing circumstances
- anticipate future problems and opportunities
- build teamwork and expertise
- provide employees with clear objectives and directions for the future of the organization and increase employee motivation and satisfaction

Wheelen and Hunger (2008) and Newman and Wallender (1987) stated that basic management concepts should be applied to both profit and nonprofit organizations. The present study is useful in extending the basic management concept of strategic planning to university athletics. It may help athletic administrators to further their understanding of the strategic planning process in their respective athletic departments.

## **Management of University Athletic Departments in the U.K.**

Both the nature and context of sports programs in the United Kingdom—and specifically of sports in higher education there—have changed in unprecedented ways in the last decade. For instance, public income per student has declined by 40% in real terms, and universities have responded by rapidly expanding student numbers and developing alternative income-generation activities involving nongovernmental sources (Lubacz, 1999).

Sports in the university sector in the U.K. has historically been managed by each university's athletic union, a largely student-run body attached to the student union. The role of the athletic union, the fact that students belonging to it are untrained, and the voluntary nature of athletic union offices (filled annually by election) have rendered management of university sports largely ineffective, strategic planning virtually nonexistent. But sports' profile has increased considerably, as has the value attached to sports. Many universities in the U.K. have already recognized that by managing their sports programs more effectively, fully endorsing a corporate-

type strategy within their athletic departments, they should be able to develop new opportunities at local, regional, national, and even international levels. To establish a rationally planned and coordinated approach to sports, many universities have introduced relatively formal sports management structures. These have often involved full-time paid positions emerging from either academic departments, central services, or, more directly, from a university's student union.

Because the scale and scope of such developments in university athletic departments over the last five years have varied widely, university sports in the U.K. now involves many diverse approaches to management. At one extreme, some universities still feature programs run entirely by students for students. At the opposite end of the continuum, some universities have recently created institutes of sports that are separate cost centers employing up to 20 staff members or more. Such institutes of sports aim to fully realize roles that may include (a) encouraging and supporting sports participation by students and staff, (b) establishing the university's place as a center of excellence in sports, (c) managing the university's sports facilities, programs, and events, and (d) organizing short courses, seminars, conferences, research, consultancy, and publications that reflect both university expertise and strong international, European, and regional links enjoyed by the university (Ilam, 1999).

Thus the functions of university sports and the nature of university sports programs are now considerable in some cases, much broader than campus athletic clubs and student competitions. Stakeholders can include internal and external clientele: participants, spectators, coaches, administrators, sponsors. Sports products and services can relate to anything from merchandising to organizing short courses; from national athlete awards to requirements of degree study in sports-related areas. University sports facilities can be used for a variety of leisure purposes over all 52 weeks of a year, and the meaning of *recreational sports* can extend to providing personalized health fitness programs. Consequently, within higher education, sports has a growing, diversifying audience, only one part of which is involved with competitive performance. Many universities have positioned themselves accordingly, establishing the balance and management practices to meet new needs.

Where universities and their students wish to compete against one another, either nationally or internationally, they must become institutional members of the British Universities Sports Association (BUSA). This voluntary association has its origins in the first intervarsity athletic meeting between nine institutions from England and Wales, held in 1919. Since that time, membership eligibility has been limited to U.K. institutions of higher

education, but in 1999 BUSA had 148 members and some 200,000 students participating in nationally organized championships in 43 different sports (BUSA, 1999).

The present study addressed two research questions: (a) To what extent do university athletic departments in the United Kingdom use the basic management tool of strategic planning? and (b) What are the key factors discouraging athletic departments' use of strategic planning? In addition, the study tested the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The extent to which strategic planning is used by the athletic department of a U.K. university is independent of the university's size.

Hypothesis 2. The extent to which strategic planning is used by the athletic department of a U.K. university is independent of the background of the university's athletic director.

## Method

### *Population*

The population for the present study consisted of 101 of the 148 institutional members of the British Universities Sports Association (BUSA). The 101 BUSA members studied represented all U.K. universities that had participated in more than 10 sports competitions during 1999 and that furthermore employed a full-time coordinator of sports. These criteria were established in order to ensure participation by sports planning units large enough to pursue the kind of strategic planning under investigation. Surveys were sent to the athletic departments of the 101 BUSA members. Out of these, 37 responded (37% response rate). Nonrespondents' characteristics did not appear to follow a pattern of geographical location or institutional size. This fact, combined with the response rate, suggests that results of the study can be generalized to the target population.

### *Instrument*

Data describing the 37 participating athletic departments' strategic planning practices were collected using a questionnaire developed by the author and validated by a panel of experts in strategic planning, higher education, management, and sports management. The reliability of the survey instrument was determined via Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ); all alpha coefficients were within acceptable ranges for comparable instruments (Nunnally, 1967). Coefficients for each subdimension were as follows: general planning factors,  $\alpha = .67$ ; external factors,  $\alpha = .89$ ; internal factors,  $\alpha = .87$ ; constraint factors,  $\alpha = .82$ ; type of plan factors,  $\alpha = .74$ ; short- and long-range plans factors,  $\alpha = .68$ . A pilot study was also conducted, and recommended improvements were incorporated in the final research instrument.

## Results

Data from the survey instrument showed that 75.7% of the responding athletic departments have developed a vision statement, and more than 90% have developed a mission statement, conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of the internal and external environment, and developed long-range and short-range plans (Table 1). In addition, 73% of the surveyed athletic departments reported that they evaluate the performance of their planning process, while 78.4% reported that they evaluate the performance of the athletic department.

Table 1  
*Activities Included in Surveyed Athletic Departments' Current Planning Processes*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Vision statement		
Yes	28	75.7
No	9	24.3
Mission statement		
Yes	35	94.6
No	2	5.4
Evaluation of strengths and weaknesses		
Yes	34	91.9
No	3	8.1
Evaluations of opportunities and threats		
Yes	34	91.9
No	3	8.1
Formulation of goals and objectives		
Yes	35	94.6
No	2	5.4
Formulation of long-range plans		
Yes	35	94.6
No	2	5.4
Formulation of short-range plans		
Yes	35	94.6
No	2	5.4
Formulation of planning process		
Yes	27	73
No	10	27

Performance Evaluation		
Yes	29	78.4
No	8	21.6

However, the percentage fitting all three criteria specified to indicate authentic strategic planning was smaller, only 59.5% (Table 2). The three criteria are (a) the formalization of long-range written plans; (b) the assessment of the external and internal environments; and (c) the establishment of strategies based on a departmental mission and objectives. The remaining 40.5% of the surveyed athletic departments were identified as nonstrategic planners not meeting the three criteria, although they may have indicated that they did pursue some components of the strategic planning process. Athletic departments in the nonstrategic planner group were excluded from the present analysis, because their planning endeavors represented the use of only short-range written plans and budgets, for the current fiscal period; or the use of only unwritten short-range plans maintained in an administrator's memory (intuitive planners); or no use of measurable planning procedures at all.

Table 2  
*Surveyed Athletic Departments' Level of Planning*

Type of Plan Used	Frequency	Percentage
Structured long-range plan	22	59.5
Operational plan	11	29.7
Intuitive plan	3	8.1
Unstructured plan	1	2.7

The study found that at least 50% of the responding athletic departments reported that they weighed three external factors—competition, community opinion, and government legislation—to a “very great or great” extent when formulating their plans (Table 3). In addition, at least 78.3% of the responding athletic departments reported that they weighed three internal factors—financial performance, adequacy of facilities, and department staff performance—to a “very great or great” extent when formulating plans (Table 4). The study also found that at least 75.7% of the responding departments considered financial plans and human resource plans to a “very great or great” extent during their planning

activities (Table 5).

Table 3

*Frequency and (Percentage) of External Factors Considered to Three Different Extents by Athletic Departments During Plan Formulation, in Descending Order of Consideration*

<b>External Factor</b>	<b>Very Little or Little</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Very Great or Great</b>
Competition	4(10.8)	10 (27.0)	23(62.1)
Community opinion	7(19.0)	12 (32.4)	18(48.6)
Government legislation	10 (27.0)	9(24.3)	18(48.6)
Economic/tax	10 (27.0)	12 (32.4)	15(40.5)
BUSA trends	10 (27.0)	13 (35.1)	14(37.8)
Demographic trends	4(10.8)	20 (54.1)	13(35.1)
Political trends	17 (47.9)	14 (37.8)	6(16.2)
Spectators	22 (59.4)	14 (37.8)	1(2.8)

*aCorresponding Likert-type scale self-measures: 1 (very little), 2 (little), 3 (some), 4 (great), 5 (very great).*

Table 4

*Frequency and (Percentage) of Internal Factors Considered to Three Different Extents by Athletic Departments During Planning Process, in Descending Order of Consideration*

<b>Internal Factor</b>	<b>Very Little or Little</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Very Great or Great</b>
Financial performance	-	2(5.4)	35(94.6)
Adequacy of facilities	1(2.7)	3(8.1)	33(89.2)
Staff performance	3(8.1)	5(13.5)	29(78.3)
Athletic		12	



Athletic performance	4(10.8)	12 (32.4)	21(56.7)
Coaches' opinion	6(16.2)	16 (43.2)	15(40.5)

*aCorresponding Likert-type scale self-measures: 1 (very little), 2 (little), 3 (some), 4 (great), 5 (very great).*

Table 5  
*Frequency and (Percentage) for Management Factors Incorporated to Three Different Extents by Athletic Departments During Planning Activities, in Descending Order of Consideration*

<b>Management Factor</b>	<b>Very Little or Little</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Very Great or Great</b>
Financial plan	2(5.4)	3(8.1)	32 (86.5)
Human resource plan	3(8.1)	6(16.2)	28 (75.7)
Facilities master plan	2(5.4)	10 (27.0)	25 (67.5)
Marketing plan	9 (24.3)	11 (29.7)	17 (45.9)
Contingency plan	17 (45.9)	13 (35.1)	7(18.9)

*aCorresponding Likert-type scale self-measures: 1 (very little), 2 (little), 3 (some), 4 (great), 5 (very great).*

What are the key factors that discourage UK university athletic departments from engaging in strategic planning activities? Insufficient financial resources and time were identified by this study as factors that, to a “very great or great” extent, discourage 35% or more of the athletic departments from engaging in strategic planning activities.

Table 6  
*Frequency and (Percentage) for Factors Discouraging Athletic Departments from Strategic Planning, to Three Different Extents (in Descending Order of Influence)*

<b>Discouraging Factor</b>	<b>Very Little or Little</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Very Great or Great</b>
Insufficient financial	8 (21.6)	12 (32.4)	17 (45.9)

resources		21.0	32.4	43.9
Insufficient time		15 (40.5)	9 (24.3)	13 (35.1)
Insufficient training in planning	in	20 (54.0)	12 (32.4)	5(13.5)
Inadequate communication		23 (62.1)	9 (24.3)	5(13.5)
Staff's resistance		27 (72.9)	5(13.5)	5(13.5)
Lack of a planning policy	a	27 (72.9)	5(13.5)	5(13.5)
Planning is not valued		30 (81.1)	5(13.5)	2(5.4)

*a*Corresponding Likert-type scale self-measures: 1 (very little), 2 (little), 3 (some), 4 (great), 5 (very great).

Both hypotheses tested by the study were supported. Chi-square analysis  $\chi^2(2, N=37)=2.811, p=0.245$  showed that the extent to which an athletic department uses strategic planning is indeed independent of the size of the university. No significant relationship was found between the extent of strategic planning and university size ( $p = 0.57$ ). Similarly, Chi-square analysis  $\chi^2(3, N=37)=7.192, p=0.66$  showed that the extent to which strategic planning is used by athletic departments is independent of their athletic directors' backgrounds. No significant relationship was found between the extent of strategic planning and the background of athletic directors ( $p = 0.35$ ).

## Discussion, Implications, Recommendations

In this study of member institutions in the British Universities Sports Association, more than 75% of responding athletic departments indicated that they were involved in such strategic planning activities as developing a vision statement, developing a mission statement, formulating goals and objectives, establishing short- and long-term strategies, and developing plan and performance evaluation procedures. However, only 59.5% of the sample could be classified as practicing authentic strategic planning, defined here as participation in three specific things: the formalizing of long-range written plans, the assessing of the external and internal environments, and the establishing of strategies based on departmental mission and objectives. With more than 40% of the athletic departments practicing either nonstrategic planning or no planning, the need clearly exists to outline formal strategic-planning committees, processes, and systems for these departments' better management.

According to Harvey (1982), a strategic plan is developed in order to gain or maintain a position of advantage relative to one's competitors. Following the development of the strategic plan, its implementation becomes critical. The present study did not rigorously assess such implementation, and it remains to be determined whether athletic departments that can be identified as strategic planners are also actual implementers of their strategic plans. Such knowledge would be useful for decisions about committing athletic department resources to reach desired objectives.

The present study did provide evidence that whether and how much a university athletic department engages in strategic planning is unrelated to the size of the university. David (1989) noted that small firms pursue a less formal kind of strategic planning than large firms do. Despite this study's first hypothesis, then, it was a surprise to this author that large universities' and small ones' athletic departments generally pursue strategic planning and a strategic approach to decision making in rather similar fashion.

Evidence was also provided by the study suggesting that the extent of strategic planning carried out by the athletic departments is unrelated to athletic directors' backgrounds. Some of the athletic directors who participated in the survey had private-sector work experience. Nevertheless, either knowledge of and experience with strategic planning was not transferred to the university environment, or such knowledge and experience had not been a meaningful part of the private-sector background. Failure to transfer knowledge and experience may, however, be attributable in some cases to athletic department decision makers' lack of access to financial and human resources. Alternatively, it could be that some university administrations do not encourage formulation and implementation of strategic plans.

The findings presented above have implications for the development and use of the strategic planning process in athletic departments. First, since the most significant constraints on strategic planning, according to the survey, were insufficient financial resources and insufficient time, athletic departments need to recognize, and then to remove, these constraints if they are to enjoy the benefits of an implemented strategic plan. Second, if athletic departments are to respond to the scientific literature by accepting strategic planning as an important administrative responsibility, then departments must address a third significant constraint, insufficient training and experience in strategic planning procedures. They can do so by providing staff with strategic-planning educational opportunities. Programs meant to develop skills like human relations, analytical thinking, time management, and participatory decision making can greatly assist athletic departments in preparing to carry

out the strategic planning process. In taking these two steps, athletic departments will encourage the perception of strategic planning as one of the primary responsibilities of management—not an auxiliary task.

The literature about strategic planning in intercollegiate athletics remains limited for now, even though interest in the topic appears to be growing. Further studies are needed, and the present study's findings indicate that some of these future investigations might take up the following:

Three to five years from now, a follow-up study with the same sample of BUSA member institutions should seek out any changes in the way the university athletic departments are using the strategic planning process.

Also, further investigation with the same population might assess the extent of strategic planning from a qualitative perspective, one concerned with data from interviews, observation, and the study of official documents. Through observation and interview, for example, such issues as the membership of a strategic planning committee, the type of data applied to strategic planning, the methods by which those data were obtained, the leadership behavior involved in strategic planning, and resistance encountered to strategic planning could all be addressed in detail. Through study of official documents, researchers might gauge the extent to which documents reflect strategic issues like the assessment of external and internal environments.

Another useful investigation might be the evaluation of the relationship between how extensive the strategic planning activities of an athletic department are and the financial performance or productivity of the department. Such a study would require establishing appropriate measures of financial performance or productivity. An example would be the percentage of self-generated, not university-provided, revenue (e.g., sponsorships, concessions, ticket sales); or alternatively, the national performance of the total athletic program provided by the department.

Finally, future research should be undertaken to establish a valid, reliable strategic planning survey instrument for use in any United Kingdom university athletic department to evaluate the quantity and quality of its ongoing strategic planning activities, as well as the quality of the implementation of strategic plans it has previously developed.

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