

UDC 657

DOI 10.30546/JIECM.2026.01.310

MODERN CHALLENGES IN STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: FORESIGHT AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN AZERBAIJAN AND KAZAKHSTAN

¹Mehriban Huseynova, ²Turkan Sheydai, ³Aidana Makatova

¹Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University

²Almaty Management University

Summary.*In the context of globalization, digital transformation, and intensifying competition between universities, strategic planning is becoming a key tool for the effective management of higher education institutions. Foresight methods, which allow for the anticipation of long-term changes in the educational environment, are gaining particular importance, as are stakeholder engagement mechanisms that ensure the alignment of interests between the state, society, business, and the academic community.*

This article examines modern approaches to strategic planning in higher education and analyzes the role of foresight research and stakeholder participation in shaping a sustainable university development model. Special attention is paid to contemporary challenges related to digitalization, the development of artificial intelligence, and shifts in the labor market.

Using Azerbaijan as a case study, the article explores prospects for improving the strategic management of universities.

Keywords: *strategic planning, higher education, foresight, stakeholders, university, sustainable development, digitalization, innovation.*

Introduction. Higher education in the 21st century is undergoing large-scale changes driven by globalization, technological progress, and the transformation of the global economy. Universities are no longer viewed solely as institutions providing educational services. In the modern context, they are becoming centers for innovation, scientific research, human capital development, and the formation of sustainable socio-economic development.

The growth of international competition among universities necessitates the implementation of modern management methods focused on long-term development. In this regard, strategic planning has become a crucial instrument for ensuring the competitiveness of educational organizations. An effective strategy allows a university to adapt to changes in the external environment, respond promptly to new challenges, and build sustainable advantages.

The use of foresight approaches in strategic management is becoming particularly relevant. Foresight is a system of methods for forecasting and modeling the future, aimed at identifying promising directions for the development of science, technology, and society. The application of foresight in higher education allows universities to account in advance for changes in the labor market, the emergence of new professions, the development of digital technologies, and evolving student needs.

Equally important is stakeholder engagement. In the current environment, the successful operation of a university is impossible without the active participation of students, faculty, employers, government bodies, and public organizations in the strategic decision-making process. Engaging stakeholders contributes to improving the quality of education, transparency of governance, and the effectiveness of implementing development strategies.

The purpose of this article is to examine the role of strategic planning, foresight, and stakeholder engagement in the higher education system, as well as to analyze the prospects for their application in modern universities.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Planning in Higher Education

Strategic planning is the process of defining an organization's long-term goals, selecting directions for development, and allocating resources to achieve set objectives. Strategic planning in higher education is a systematic process of defining the mission, long-term goals, and mechanisms for a university's adaptation to changes in the external environment. Unlike traditional long-term planning, which focuses primarily on forecasting the future state of an organization, strategic planning involves adapting to dynamic changes in the external environment, building sustainable competitive advantages, and developing organizational agility.

Strategic planning became particularly relevant in the second half of the 20th century, when higher education began to experience the influence of international rankings and globalization processes. As a result, universities came to be viewed not only as educational institutions but also as complex organizations operating in a competitive environment and interacting with numerous stakeholders.

Modern research emphasizes that strategic planning in higher education goes beyond university administration and becomes a mechanism for institutional development. It contributes to shaping the university's organizational identity, strengthening its reputation, and enhancing its ability to respond to global challenges. Strategic planning has acquired particular significance in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Thus, the evolution of strategic planning in higher education reflects a transition from administrative management to a flexible model of strategic management, while utilizing new adaptive strategic management tools for the further development of higher education institutions.

The main elements of strategic planning are the mission, vision, strategic goals, and performance indicators of the university. The mission reflects the primary purpose of the educational organization, while the vision defines the desired state of the university in the future.

In recent years, universities have increasingly utilized SWOT analysis methods to evaluate the internal and external factors affecting their operations.

Table 1

Example of a University SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Qualified staff	Limited funding
International cooperation	Insufficient digitalization
Scientific potential	Weak integration with business
Opportunities	Threats
Development of AI and EdTech	Growth of international competition
International grants	Brain drain (outflow of personnel)
Digital transformation	Rapid obsolescence of programs

2. Foresight as a Tool for University Strategic Management. In conditions of high uncertainty, traditional planning methods are becoming insufficiently effective. This is particularly relevant for higher education institutions operating in an environment of technological, economic, demographic, and social transformations. In this regard, foresight—a tool for long-term forecasting and modeling of future changes—is gaining particular importance.

The term "foresight" is used to denote a systematic process of exploring possible futures with the aim of identifying promising directions for development and formulating strategic decisions. Unlike "forecasting," which is oriented toward the extrapolation of existing trends, foresight is aimed at considering various scenarios of future events. Foresight involves the participation of various stakeholders: experts, faculty, students, employers, and representatives of government and society. This contributes to the formation of a more comprehensive and legitimate vision for the development of future events.

In the face of growing competition, digitalization, demographic shifts, and the development of artificial intelligence, traditional models of strategic planning are proving insufficiently flexible to

ensure the long-term sustainability of universities. The application of foresight allows universities not only to react to changes but also to shape proactive development strategies.

3. Stakeholder Engagement in the Higher Education System

A modern university is a complex socio-economic system whose activities are linked to the interests of various groups of participants.

Effective interaction with stakeholders allows universities to more accurately define strategic priorities and improve the quality of decision-making.

Collaboration between universities and the business sector plays a particularly important role. Partnerships with industrial enterprises facilitate the development of applied research, the implementation of innovations, and the enhancement of the practical focus of educational programs. Unlike commercial organizations, which are oriented primarily toward the interests of owners and consumers, a university interacts with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders who possess diverse interests, resources, and expectations.

Table 2

Interests of Internal Stakeholders

Internal Stakeholders	Key Interests
Administration	Ensuring effective management
Faculty	Professional development e
Researchers	Development of scientific activities
Staff	Decent working conditions
Students	Receiving high-quality education

Each of these groups influences the formation of the university's strategic priorities. The state defines the regulatory and financial framework for the functioning of higher education, employers shape the demand for graduate competencies, students act as part of the educational environment, and international organizations influence the processes of internationalization and the implementation of global quality standards.

Table 3

Interests of External Stakeholders

External Stakeholders	Key Interests
Government bodies	Training personnel for the economy
Employers	Developing competent graduates
Professional communities	Development of industry standards and professional competencies
Accreditation agencies	Assessment and quality assurance of educational programs
International organizations	Development of international cooperation
Local community	Socio-economic development of the region
Alumni	Increasing career opportunities, professional realization

Modern research emphasizes that effective university strategizing is impossible without considering the interests of various stakeholder groups. Engaging stakeholders contributes to increasing the legitimacy of strategic decisions, strengthening organizational resilience, and developing partnerships between the university and its external environment.

4. Key Challenges of Strategic Planning in Universities. Despite the significant advantages of strategic management, many universities face a number of challenges when developing and implementing development strategies.

One of the most common problems is the limitation of financial resources. Insufficient funding hinders the implementation of innovative technologies, infrastructure modernization, and the

development of scientific research. The high speed of technological change remains a serious challenge. It is becoming increasingly difficult for universities to timely adapt educational programs to the requirements of the digital economy.

The key challenges of strategic planning in universities are associated with the high uncertainty of the external environment, the difficulty of reconciling the interests of numerous stakeholders, and the limited adaptability of the plans themselves. Universities operate under rapidly changing demographic, technological, and financial conditions, which complicates long-term planning and often makes strategy reactive rather than proactive. Another significant challenge remains the limited involvement of the academic community and other stakeholders, which reduces the level of acceptance and effectiveness of strategic initiatives. As a result, strategic planning in higher education institutions often faces issues of goal inconsistency, lack of flexibility, and a weak link between strategy, resources, and actual outcomes.

5. Prospects for the Development of Strategic University Management in Azerbaijan

In recent years, the higher education system of Azerbaijan has been actively modernizing in accordance with international standards. Special attention is paid to the digitalization of the educational process, the development of scientific research, and the strengthening of international cooperation.

One of the promising directions is the development of cooperation between universities and the industrial sector. For Azerbaijan, projects in the fields of energy, ecology, digital technologies, and sustainable development are of particular importance.

Another promising direction is the use of artificial intelligence technologies in the educational process and university management systems.

6. Prospects for the Development of Strategic University Management in Kazakhstan

Higher education institutions in Kazakhstan are gradually transitioning from a traditional administrative management model to a more flexible, strategically oriented system capable of quickly adapting to changes in the external environment. In the context of globalization, digitalization, and intensifying international competition, strategic planning is becoming one of the key tools for enhancing the competitiveness of higher education institutions.

One of the main prospects is the digital transformation of universities. As research in the field of strategic planning and the digitalization of higher education shows, universities must integrate digital technologies not only into the educational process but also into the management system.

Another promising direction is the integration of sustainable development principles into university strategies. International experience shows that modern universities consider sustainability, environmental responsibility, and social well-being as part of their long-term development strategy.

Furthermore, an strengthening of the international orientation of strategic management is expected. Kazakhstani universities strive to strengthen their positions in international rankings, expand academic mobility, and develop international research partnerships. This requires the implementation of an internationalization strategy and increasing the publication activity of faculty and researchers.

Conclusion

Strategic planning in the higher education system is a critical tool for ensuring the sustainable development of universities in the face of global changes. Modern universities operate in a complex and rapidly changing environment, where the processes of digitalization, international competition, technological transformations, and the global integration of educational systems are intensifying. Under these conditions, the ability of educational organizations to form long-term development strategies is becoming one of the key factors in their effectiveness and competitiveness.

The use of foresight approaches allows universities not only to analyze current trends but also to forecast potential changes in the scientific-technological, economic, and social spheres. Thanks to this, educational institutions gain the opportunity to timely adapt educational programs, develop innovative research areas, and build competencies in demand by the economy of the future. Foresight becomes an important mechanism for reducing uncertainty and preparing universities for the new challenges of the global world.

An equally significant factor is interaction with stakeholders. Active participation of students, faculty, employers, government agencies, and international partners contributes to improving the quality of strategic decisions and strengthening the competitiveness of universities. Engaging interested parties in the strategic management process allows for more effective consideration of labor market needs, increasing the practical relevance of educational programs, and ensuring the sustainable development of the educational system as a whole.

Modern trends in the development of higher education indicate the need to transition to more flexible and innovative management models. Universities must actively implement digital technologies, develop international cooperation, support interdisciplinary research, and foster an innovative educational environment. The use of artificial intelligence, big data, and digital platforms, which can increase the efficiency of both the educational process and managerial decision-making, is becoming particularly important.

For Azerbaijan, improving strategic planning in higher education is particularly relevant in the context of building an innovative economy, developing human capital, and achieving sustainable development goals. Modern universities in the country must become not only educational institutions but also hubs for scientific research, technological innovation, and international cooperation.

Strategic management is becoming a vital condition for the effective development of universities in Kazakhstan amidst global changes and intensifying competition in higher education. The prospects for its development are linked to digital transformation, internationalization, sustainable development, and expanding stakeholder participation in management processes. The implementation of these directions will allow for an improvement in the quality of education, the competitiveness of higher education institutions, and their ability to adapt to modern challenges.

Thus, an effective combination of strategic planning, foresight research, and stakeholder interaction creates the foundation for the sustainable development of universities, an increase in the quality of education, and the successful integration of the national higher education system into the global educational space.

REFERENCES

1. Bryson J.M. Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement. — 5th ed. — San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2018. — 576 p. DOI: 10.1002/9781119397106
2. Kotler P., Murphy P.E. Strategic Planning for Higher Education // The Journal of Higher Education. — 1981. — Vol. 52, No. 5. — P. 470–489. DOI: 10.1080/00221546.1981.11778130
3. OECD. Higher Education to 2030. Volume 2: Globalisation. — Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019. — 316 p. DOI: 10.1787/9789264075375-en
4. Makatova A.B., Kuchumova G., Moldashev K. STRATEGIC PLANNING IN UNIVERSITIES OF KAZAKHSTAN IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD. Central Asian Economic Review. 2023;(4):56-65. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.52821/2789-4401-2023-4-56-65>
5. Kuzu, Ö.H. (2020). Digital Transformation in Higher Education: A Case Study on Strategic Plans. Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii = Higher Education in Russia.vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 9-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31992/0869-3617-2019-29-3-9-23>
6. UNESCO. Thinking Higher and Beyond: Perspectives on the Futures of Higher Education to 2050. — Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2021. URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377529>
7. Drucker P.F. Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices. — New York: Harper & Row, 2008. — 839 p. ISBN: 978-0061252662
8. Mintzberg H. The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning. — New York: Free Press, 1994. — 480 p. ISBN: 978-0029216057
9. Ansoff H.I. Strategic Management. — London: Macmillan Education, 1984. — 236 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-1-349-17966-6
10. Porter M.E. Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors. — New York: Free Press, 2004. — 432 p. ISBN: 978-0743260886
11. Altbach P.G., Reisberg L., Rumbley L.E. Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an

Academic Revolution. — Paris: UNESCO, 2009. URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00000183168>

12. Scott D., Coates H., Anderson M. Learning Leaders in Times of Change: Academic Leadership Capabilities for Australian Higher Education. — Sydney: University of Western Sydney, 2008. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.4411.4084

13. Marginson S. Higher Education and Public Good // Higher Education Quarterly. — 2011. — Vol. 65, No. 4. — P. 411–433. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2011.00496.x

14. Salmi J. The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities. — Washington DC: World Bank Publications, 2009. DOI: 10.1596/978-0-8213-7865-6

15. Barnett R. The Future University: Ideas and Possibilities. — New York: Routledge, 2012. DOI: 10.4324/9780203802250

16. Clark B.R. Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation. — Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1998. DOI: 10.1016/B978-008043354-7/50016-1

17. Fullan M., Scott G. Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education. — San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009. DOI: 10.1002/9780470542743

Received: 20.02.2026

Accepted for publication: 15.04.2026

