

**EXPLORING THE STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE
MANAGERS – A CASE STUDY AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY**

by

ANNEMARIE DAVIS

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Promoter: Prof. M Jansen van Rensburg

Co-promoter: Prof. P Venter

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Student number: 33824231

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis **Exploring the strategising practices of middle managers – a case study at a South African university**, is my own work, and that all the sources I have used or cited have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

26 February 2013

Signature

Date

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PREFACE

The purpose of this preface is to present the researcher's lens. In line with Yin (2011:270), and in accordance with qualitative research reporting principles, it is necessary to describe the reflective self first. The reflective self exists in all scientific enquiry, but due to the nature of qualitative research, the reflective self needs greater exposure. My reflective self expresses how I know what my declarative self has presented. The purpose of this detailed description of my "lens" is to provide the reader with sufficient information to enable him or her to make his or her own assessment of the potential effects of my lens. I am therefore providing insight into the relationship between what I am reporting and the circumstances of the data collection.

Why I chose this topic

There are several reasons why I chose this topic. Firstly, I had many debates with friends and family members who claimed that academics do not know what it is like in the real world. As such, I wanted to do research that would give me insight into how things in the real world are done. The strategy-as-practice perspective offered me the theoretical framework to conduct research on micro-strategising and to contribute to the practical relevance of management research.

Secondly, I have been teaching strategic management to undergraduate and postgraduate students for more than 10 years. In line with most strategy textbooks and curricula, middle managers are only there to implement strategies. I have been teaching this to students for a long time, but did so with uneasiness. Given my own work experience, I have come to realise that middle managers do more than merely implement strategies and directives from top managers. However, I felt that this "more" is not described in textbooks. At the start of my research journey, I identified with a quote by Richard Whittington from 2002, whose interest in strategising also springs from his activity as a teacher: "I have been teaching strategy and organising for about 15 years but I know very little about how to *do* strategising" (Whittington, 2002:124). He states that, when called in to help with others' strategising, he does not turn to the leading journals of strategy. He actually turns to his wiser and more experienced colleagues. Essentially, when he made this statement in 2002, there was very little knowledge available on the actual doing of strategy. I concur with him,

“New directions in teaching require new kinds of research.” To understand strategising we need close observation of strategists as they work their ways through their strategy-making routines (Whittington, 1996).

Thirdly, I believe that a sound understanding of the middle manager perspective within a SA university gives me a unique view and prepares me for growth and promotion within the university environment – not just as a scholar, but also as a future manager.

The researcher

Everything reported about the strategising practices of middle managers, and the organisational context, have been selected by me and was filtered by me, so it is important that I tell the reader something about myself and my prejudices.

I conducted all the interviews myself. I am a senior lecturer in Strategic Management at the chosen institution. I am 35 years old and have worked in the SA higher education industry for thirteen years. In addition to being part of the academic team, I also serve on several committees within the institution and have participated in sub-unit planning within the chosen institution.

The reflective self

I will be describing my reflective self in various sections in this thesis. Chapter 5, for instance, includes a description of the methodology I used as well as of the way I used a reflective research journal. In addition to reporting on the findings, sections in Chapter 6 describe my experiences and observations during the interviews and the analysis process. Chapter 7 describes my views on the interpretation of the findings and recommendations for future research and managerial action.

A description of my research lens

My lens led to selectivity in the scope of my study, the choice of relevant data to be collected and the interpretation of the findings. My rendition of the real-world setting and this entire study are coloured by my meanings and interpretations. Throughout this thesis, my declarative self will present evidence and my reflective self will present information to know the circumstances where the evidence was sought and collected. My reflective self comments on my work; it does not present the work (the declarative self will present the work).

SUMMARY

Exploring the strategising practices of middle managers – a case study at a South African university

by

Annemarie Davis

Degree: Doctor Commercii

Subject: Business Management

Promoter: Prof. M Jansen van Rensburg

Co-promoter: Prof. P Venter

Key terms: middle managers; strategising practices; materiality of strategy work university management; strategy-as-practice perspective; qualitative case study; enablers of strategy work; constraints on strategy work

This study set out to explore the strategising practices of middle managers and thereby expand the body of knowledge in terms of middle management practices in strategising in general, and makes an original contribution at the frontiers of middle management practices in a university context in South Africa. Although some research has been done on middle managers and strategy, a knowledge gap still exists, especially regarding strategising in emerging economies, such as South Africa. More specifically, the actions of middle managers at universities are open for exploration. Universities are increasingly exposed to new challenges in a competitive environment due to declining state funding, changing student demographics, new technological developments and increased market pressures. The sustainability of universities is also threatened by changes inside the universities, such as the drive for corporatisation and a changing internal focus. The way universities respond to and pre-empt dealing with these challenges will influence the sustainability and competitiveness of the university and subsequently the nations it serves. However, very little is known about the university managers who are powerful in terms of the administrative systems and decision processes. In order to understand strategy work

and to know what enables or constrains it, it is necessary to look at middle managers at universities. This research puts forward three main arguments: firstly, strategy is dispersed throughout the entire organisation and includes middle managers' strategising activities. Secondly, a need exists for practically relevant research founded in the organisational realities. Thirdly, universities present a relevant context within which to study strategising practices. An exploratory qualitative case study was followed to answer the research questions. Findings indicate that university middle managers, who operate within a machine bureaucracy, create systems within systems in order to cope with the organisational demands. Middle managers are mostly responsible for strategy implementation and the support role of university managers is prominent. Findings also indicate that the strategy loses its meaning and in an environment where the strategy textual artefacts and talk are abundant. In such an environment compliance takes precedence over buy-in. Finally, this study identified the enablers of and constraints on the strategy work of university middle managers. This research confirmed that strategy and strategising are human actions and confirmed that knowledge of what people do in relation to the strategies of organisations is required.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

EXPLORING THE STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS – A CASE STUDY AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
PREFACE	v
SUMMARY	vii
CHAPTER 1	11
RESEARCH ORIENTATION.....	11
1 INTRODUCTION	11
1.1 BACKGROUND	11
1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	14
1.3 RESEARCH PURPOSE.....	15
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	15
1.4.1 Central research question.....	15
1.4.2 Sub-questions.....	15
1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH	16
1.6 IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY	17
1.7 DELIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS	17
1.7.1 Delimitations.....	17
1.7.2 Assumptions.....	18
1.8 RESEARCH ETHICS	19
1.9 CHAPTER OUTLINE	20
1.10 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	23
1.11 CHAPTER CONCLUSION	24
CHAPTER 2	25
THE STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE.....	25
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	25

2.2	DEVELOPING A THEORY OF PRACTICE	28
2.2.1	Origins of the strategy-as-practice perspective.....	29
2.2.2	Activity-based perspective	43
2.3	STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	45
2.3.1	The three elements of the strategy-as-practice perspective	47
2.3.2	Selected concepts from the strategy-as-practice perspective.....	54
2.4	STRATEGISING	60
2.4.1	Deliberate and emergent strategising.....	61
2.4.2	Strategising: actors and context	63
2.5	CRITICISM AGAINST THE STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE .	65
2.6	THE STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE RESEARCH AGENDA	69
2.7	CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH.....	82
2.8	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	84
CHAPTER 3.....		86
THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE		86
3.1	INTRODUCTION.....	86
3.2	THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE	90
3.2.1	The importance of middle managers	93
3.2.2	Describing the middle manager	98
3.3	INTEGRATED OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE IN STRATEGY	99
3.4	THE STRATEGIC ROLES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS	110
3.4.1	Implementing deliberate strategy.....	111
3.4.2	Synthesising information.....	113
3.4.3	Championing alternatives	115
3.4.4	Facilitate adaptability	116
3.4.5	Dealing with role conflict.....	118
3.5	ORGANISATIONAL COGNITION AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF MIDDLE MANAGERS IN STRATEGISING	120

3.6	MIDDLE MANAGER ACTIVITY AND ORGANISATIONAL OUTCOMES .	126
3.7	MIDDLE MANAGER STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING.....	129
3.8	STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS	136
3.8.1	Routines	139
3.8.2	Committees	140
3.8.3	Project management and symbolic artefacts	141
3.8.4	Workshops and/or away-days	143
3.8.5	Meetings	144
3.8.6	Strategic discourse	145
3.9	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	147
CHAPTER 4		149
ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT		149
4.1	INTRODUCTION.....	149
4.2	THE CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT	151
4.3	CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT ENVIRONMENT	154
4.3.1	Goal ambiguity, divergent professional interests and multiple strategic directions	154
4.3.2	Autonomous workforce.....	155
4.3.3	University structures	156
4.4	PREVIOUS STRATEGY RESEARCH IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT .	157
4.4.1	General strategic management research in the university context	157
4.4.2	Research in the university context using strategy-as-practice and middle-management perspectives	160
4.5	THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE	167
4.6	THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA.....	169
4.6.1	Unisa's unique strengths	169
4.6.2	Challenges faced by Unisa	170
4.6.3	The Unisa institutional structure	173

4.6.4	Development of the Unisa 2015 plan.....	179
4.6.5	Overview of the Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation strategic plan 180	
4.6.6	Implementation of the Unisa 2015 plan	183
4.7	CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH.....	189
4.8	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	189
CHAPTER 5.....		191
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY		191
5.1	INTRODUCTION.....	191
5.1.1	Defining research	192
5.2	RESEARCH SCOPE.....	195
5.2.1	Aim of this research.....	195
5.2.2	Research questions.....	197
5.2.3	Research philosophy	197
5.2.4	Research strategy	198
5.3	PARTICIPANT SELECTION.....	202
5.3.1	The sample of participants.....	204
5.3.2	Informed consent.....	207
5.4	DATA PRODUCTION	208
5.4.1	Semi-structured qualitative interviews	209
5.4.2	Reflective research journal	211
5.5	DATA ANALYSIS	212
5.6	LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN	217
5.7	QUALITY AND RIGOUR/RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY	219
5.8	RESEARCH ETHICS	222
5.9	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	223
ANNEXURE TO CHAPTER 5.....		224
CHAPTER 6.....		226

RESEARCH FINDINGS	226
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	226
6.2 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS.....	227
6.3 INTERPRETATION AND REPORTING	228
6.4 PARTICIPANTS	232
6.5 INSTITUTIONAL OPERATIONS.....	243
6.5.1 Organisational structure.....	243
6.5.1.1 Acting	244
6.5.1.2 Power	246
6.5.2 Organisational culture.....	247
6.5.3 Operational realities within the institution influencing middle managers' performance.....	251
6.6 STRATEGIC ROLES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS.....	259
6.6.1 Implement strategy	260
6.6.2 Championing alternatives	262
6.6.3 Synthesise information	264
6.6.4 Facilitate adaptability	268
6.7 MATERIALITY OF STRATEGY WORK	273
6.7.1 Text.....	274
6.7.2 Talk.....	293
6.7.3 Tools.....	303
6.8 THE STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS.....	310
6.8.1 Training.....	311
6.8.2 Collaboration with outside parties or experts.....	311
6.8.3 Systems within systems.....	312
6.8.4 Unique practices by academic managers	314
6.8.5 Unique practices by non-academic managers.....	314
6.9 ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS OF MIDDLE MANAGERS' STRATEGY WORK.....	315

6.9.1	Enablers of strategy work	316
6.9.2	Constraints on strategy work	322
6.10	CHAPTER CONCLUSION	330
	CHAPTER 7.....	332
	INTERPRETATION, RESEARCH CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION.....	332
7.1	INTRODUCTION.....	332
7.2	FINDINGS	335
7.2.1	Research questions.....	336
7.3	STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS IN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT.....	337
7.3.1	The university organisational context	337
7.3.2	The strategising practices.....	339
7.4	ROLES OF UNIVERSITY MIDDLE MANAGERS IN STRATEGISING	340
7.5	MIDDLE MANAGER'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MATERIALITY OF STRATEGY WORK	343
7.6	ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS ON UNIVERSITY MANAGERS STRATEGY WORK	346
7.7	LIMITATIONS.....	346
7.8	RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	347
7.8.1	Research contribution.....	347
7.8.2	Recommendations for future research	350
7.8.3	Recommendations for management.....	351
7.9	RESEARCH CONCLUSION	353
7.10	REFERENCES.....	355
	APPENDIX A	388

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The structure of this thesis	22
Figure 2: The structure of Chapter 2	26
Figure 3: Four perspective on strategy.....	35
Figure 4: A conceptual framework for analysing strategy-as-practice	47
Figure 5: An exploded map of strategic management.....	72
Figure 6: Typology of strategy-as-practice research by type of practitioner and level of praxis.....	74
Figure 7: The structure of Chapter 3	89
Figure 8: A general picture of the middle-level strategy-formation process.....	96
Figure 9: A typology of middle management roles in strategy.....	111
Figure 10: Theoretical model of middle management involvement in strategy.....	122
Figure 11: Structure of Chapter 4.....	151
Figure 12: Framework for operational planning.....	185
Figure 13: Unisa management structure	188
Figure 14: Structure of Chapter 5.....	192
Figure 15: Research process followed in this research	202
Figure 16: The conceptual depiction of the interview guide.....	210
Figure 17: Structure of Chapter 6.....	230
Figure 18: The structure of Chapter 7	334
Figure 19: The research conducted in this study.....	354

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Abbreviations used in this thesis	23
Table 2: Different research interests between strategy process and strategy-as-practice.....	39
Table 3: The unanswered questions on the strategy-as-practice research agenda .	82
Table 4: Foundations of the choice perspective in strategy.....	91
Table 5: Chronological summary of strategy research within a middle management perspective.....	100
Table 6: A summary of the themes and main findings of strategic management research in the university context.....	157
Table 7: A summary of the strategy-as-practice studies in the university context (2000–2012).....	160
Table 8: An outline of middle-management research in the university context (2000–2012).....	163
Table 9: The composition of the institution and its key stakeholders.....	174
Table 10: Key performance areas for middle managers at Unisa	177
Table 11: Staff by personnel category.....	178
Table 12: The Unisa 2015 key goals compared 2007 versus 2009.....	182
Table 13: Defining the middle manager within the research context	204
Table 14: Inclusion and exclusion criteria.....	205
Table 15: Population and research sample of middle managers.....	207
Table 16: The reference system used in reporting on qualitative data	231
Table 17: The interviewee number and corresponding document number and demographical information.....	231
Table 18: The interview context	233
Table 19: Researcher observations during first-order coding.....	239
Table 20: A summary of the codes used to analyse the organisational structure...	244
Table 21: A summary of the codes used to analyse the organisational culture.....	248
Table 22: A summary of the codes used to analyse the operational realities.....	251
Table 23: A summary of the strategic roles of middle managers at Unisa.....	260
Table 24: A summary of the codes used in analysing the implementing strategy role	261
Table 25: The code used in analysing the championing alternatives role	263

Table 26: A summary of the codes used in analysing the synthesising information role	265
Table 27: A summary of the codes used in analysing the facilitate adaptability role	268
Table 28: A summary of the codes used to analyse text	274
Table 29: A summary of the codes used to analyse talk	294
Table 30: A summary of the codes used to analyse this theme	303
Table 31: Codes used to describe strategising practices	310
Table 32: Codes used to describe the enablers of strategy work	316
Table 33: Codes used to describe the constraints on strategy work	323

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH ORIENTATION

1 INTRODUCTION

“The most powerful ideas did not come out of multiple examples. They came out of single-industry studies and single case studies. Big impactful ideas are conceptual breakthroughs, not descriptions of common patterns. You can’t define the “next practice” with lots of examples. Because, by definition, it is not yet happening”

Prahalad (in Kleiner, 2010)

1.1 BACKGROUND

Crafting and executing strategies are demanding management tasks which managers must perform. Literature, however, reveals that the demanding task of executing strategies is plagued with low success rates: Miller (2002) reports that organisations fail to successfully implement more than 70 per cent of their new strategic initiatives. This is supported by Norton (2007:1) who states that between 85% and 90% of organisations fail to execute their strategies. This is a startling statistic that requires the investigation of strategic management from both an academic and practice perspective.

As a management process, strategic management essentially involves many activities to ensure successful strategy-making (strategising) and execution. The role allocation of these fundamental activities has led to many debates with various conflicting views being expressed. Conflicting views on this matter do not only reside amongst different levels of management and stakeholders within companies but it is also presented in textbooks and in the perspectives expressed by academia (Hambrick & Frederickson 2001:48–59; Hambrick, 2004:91–98; Nag, Hambrick & Chen, 2007:935–955).

Building on these conflicting views, Baldrige, Floyd and Markóczy (2004:1063) state that a gap exists between the academic quality and practical relevance of managerial research. Previous research suggested that managers very often do not consider research findings and theories from academics when developing and implementing strategies and best practices (Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001:340). Worren, Moore and Elliot (2002:1227) claim that managers rely primarily on tacit, procedural knowledge, derived from direct experience and trial-and-error learning.

Although many managerial tasks are routine, many managerial tasks may also be emergent, necessitating managers to endeavour formal, analytic and systematic processes (Whittington, 2003b:117). In order to facilitate this, academic research that is compatible with practical reasoning processes could be useful: a research agenda that incorporates the “messy realities” of doing strategy in practice (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008a:282). Jarzabkowski (2004:529) calls on the necessity to examine strategy, not as something that an organisation has, but as something that an organisation and its members *does*.

In addition to the gap between academic quality and practical relevance, it is also necessary to consider the role allocation of different levels of management in organisations with regard to strategising. Traditionally, the focus of strategy research has been on those in the upper echelons of organisations. However, the scope of strategy process research has been expanded to include middle managers and other mid-level professionals (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008:1190). Furthermore, research on individuals in organisations is gaining popularity.

This study responded to several calls for research on micro-strategising, such as Jarzabkowski (2005:1), Hodgkinson and Clarke (2007:243) and Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008a:282). Whittington (2003b:117) makes it clear that there is a need to further understand how the work of strategising is organised. In response, this study specifically investigated the “messy realities” of how individual middle managers do strategy at a university. Studying locally institutionalised practices as embedded in the organisational culture or routines has the power to impact on the practical relevance of business research. The choice of the research context, namely a university in South Africa, was informed by the numerous calls for research in the African context, specifically for higher education institutions in developing economies such as South Africa (Rowley & Sherman, 2001b; Pityana, 2009; Kuanda, 2012).

Within the strategy-as-practice field, a need exists to understand how everyday behaviour in organisations creates strategic choices and consequences. According to Johnson and Bowman (1999), the new focus of strategy research should be on individuals and their interactions within groups. This implies a concern for activities and routine processes. Previously, strategy research has been about “know what”, whereas strategising research looks for “know how”, “know when”, and “know where” (Garud, 1997:81–101). Within strategy-as-practice and micro-strategising research areas, individuals at the different management levels in organisations can be investigated. The current study took a middle-management perspective on strategy practice by investigating the strategising practices of individuals who are operating in middle-management positions.

Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003:197–224) suggest that methodological challenges of strategising create a growing need for researchers to be close to the phenomena of study, to concentrate on context and detail, and simultaneously be broad in the scope of study. In addition, strategising research should be anchored in the organisation’s realities. These authors specifically call for deep data gathering around the unique characteristics of organisations.

The unique context of this study was middle managers’ strategising practices at a South African university. It corresponded with previous research by Jarzabkowski (2000:1-300) for a doctoral degree. Whereas Jarzabkowski investigated how the top management teams at three UK universities put strategy into practice, this study investigated how individual middle managers put strategy into practice at a South African university.

The institution chosen is considered a mega university, described by Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson (2006:44) as the seventh largest mega distance education institution in the world. Not only is this institution the largest university on the African continent, but it is also considered a key contributor to social justice in the post-apartheid South Africa.

The current study set out to develop theory and thereby expand the body of knowledge in terms of middle-management practices in strategising in general and makes an original contribution at the frontiers of middle-management practices in a university context in South Africa.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The focus on human actors and their actions is noticeably absent from strategy theory and research (Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007:3). The studies that do incorporate individuals focus primarily on the top management team and senior management levels. By accepting that strategy is something that an organisation does, it is also necessary to accept that not only one elite group, namely top management, can act strategically. This view is supported by many strategy-as-practice scholars, such as Huy (2001), Currie and Procter (2005), Herzig and Jimmieson (2006), Wooldridge *et al.* (2008), Rouleau and Balogun (2011), Gratton (2011) and Huy (2011). The strategising in an organisation is not only limited to top management, but is also dispersed throughout the organisation, among different management levels and individuals (Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

Although research has been done on middle managers and strategy, a knowledge gap still exists, especially in strategising in emerging economies such as South Africa. More specifically, the actions of middle managers at universities are open for exploration. An extensive search on the specialist subject databases, including SABINET, specifically indicated that no previous research has solely focused on individual middle managers within the South African university context.

Universities are increasingly exposed to new challenges in a competitive environment due to declining state funding, changing student demographics, new technological developments and increased market pressures. The sustainability of universities is threatened not only by these external environmental challenges but also changes within the universities such as the drive for the corporatisation and a changing internal focus. How universities respond to and pre-empt dealing with these challenges will influence the sustainability and competitiveness of the university and subsequently the nation it serves. However, very little is known about the university managers who are powerful in terms of administrative systems and decision processes. In order to understand strategy work and knowing what enables or constrains it, it is necessary to look at middle managers within universities.

1.3 RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of the study was to explore the strategising practices of middle managers at a South African university. The outcome of this study is new theory on the materiality of strategising practices at the chosen university and the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Fundamentally, this research aimed to explore the strategising practices of middle managers by providing rich data in a unique organisational context. This research was guided by the following research questions:

1.4.1 Central research question

What are the strategising practices of middle managers that have arisen from the interaction between middle managers and the university's organisational context?

1.4.2 Sub-questions

1. What roles do university middle managers fulfil in strategising?
2. How do university middle managers engage with the materiality of strategy work? and
3. What are the enablers and constraints of the strategy work of university middle managers in the unique institutional context?

This research was conducted on the stream of activity in which strategy is accomplished within the university context thereby making the strategising practices of middle managers in an academic institution the unit of analysis. Essentially, this study's contribution is in the development of theory on middle managers at

universities, specifically, the roles of middle managers in strategising, their practices, how they use materiality to accomplish strategy work and the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work. For this study, the theme of materiality was divided into three categories: text, talk and tools. Only those material aspects that fell within these three categories were considered in this study.

1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

Throughout this thesis, the literature review confirms that the strategising practices of university middle managers are open for exploration. A gap currently exists in the strategic management theory and offers therefore a research opportunity. This gap in the knowledge on university middle managers' strategising practices lends itself to an exploratory and descriptive study and the pursuit of new theory. An exploratory study was deemed a valuable means to gain insight into the strategising practices of middle managers at a South African university. A descriptive study creates an opportunity to develop coherent theory in narrative form. Descriptive studies enable researchers to understand what exists by asking questions. The selection of the research strategy was guided by the research questions and the philosophical foundation to this research.

This research was conducted mostly within the constructivism-interpretivism research paradigm. According to Hansen (2004), constructivism holds that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than being an externally singular entity. Interpretivism is the epistemological position that advocates the necessity to understand differences between humans in their role as social actors (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009:893). According to Creswell (2007:8), the goal is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. A qualitative case study was deemed appropriate for this case study in order to examine the many nuances and complexities of middle managers' strategising practices.

1.6 IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY

As noted in the background section, research interest in strategic management has been limited in the case of individual middle managers. The outcome of this research will make four valuable contributions to the body of knowledge on the strategising practices of middle managers: First, unlike previous studies that mainly focused on the top management teams in universities, the current research provided an analysis of how individual middle managers put strategy into practice at a university. Second, the research showed what the unique characteristics of the university organisational context are in relation to the strategising practices of the middle managers. Third, new theories on middle manager practices and the materiality of strategy work within the university context were developed. Fourth, new theory on the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work was developed.

Studying middle managers' strategising practices contributes to insight into the organisational dynamics of strategising. Studying middle managers within the university context can inform the practices of the institutions responsible for teaching and researching. This may shed light on contextual influences upon practice, how individual practitioners deploy practice and it may provide a basis for relating these specific micro-findings to other institutions. This research set out to expand the body of knowledge in terms of middle manager practices in the strategising process in general and makes an original contribution at the frontiers of middle manager practices within a university context in South Africa. Also, this study may contribute to reduce the gap between theory and practice through investigating lived experiences of middle managers and providing rich descriptions grounded in the organisational realities as described by the middle managers themselves.

1.7 DELIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

1.7.1 Delimitations

The core focus area of this study was the practice of strategy on middle management level. The research therefore investigated middle managers'

strategising practices at a South African university. This study was a qualitative study and generalisation was not possible.

No other industries or individuals on any other management level were investigated. Individual academic and non-academic middle managers were the participants as the study investigated their practices in the strategic management process. The top management team was not included in this study.

1.7.2 Assumptions

An underlying assumption guiding this study was that it was relevant to study strategy-as-practice from the perspective of individual middle managers. This assumption was derived from the literature. Specifically, previous research within a professional bureaucracy indicated that organisational performance is heavily influenced by what happens in the middle of the organisation rather than at the top (Currie & Procter, 2005:1325). This means that actions at middle management level in organisations influence not only how the strategy is practiced, but also how it impacts on the performance of the organisation. According to Wooldridge *et al.* (2008:1190), middle managers and other mid-level professionals' practices and behaviours have important consequences for the way strategy forms within organisations. Strategy-as-practice scholars advocate research on the practitioners in strategy. Practitioners are the individuals who draw upon practices to act – ways of behaving, thinking, emoting, knowing and acting (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007). In the case of this study, practitioners were assumed to be, amongst other, individual middle managers.

Furthermore, this study assumed that the research questions could be achieved through a qualitative research approach. For this study, this implied that information on the individual middle managers' strategising practices could be collected through interviews with middle managers.

1.8 RESEARCH ETHICS

In addition to adhering to quality criteria, this research study conformed to generally accepted norms and values. Indeed, any researcher has the right to search for truth, but this cannot be done at the expense of the rights of other individuals in society (Mouton, 2006:239). Research ethics covers not only criteria pertaining to privacy and anonymity of the participants or the case study organisation, but also includes responsibilities towards the practice of scientific research and the subjects of the research.

In terms of a researcher's responsibility towards the practice of science, a number of conventions exist. Amongst others, researchers should at all times strive to maintain objectivity and integrity. Given the nature of this research design, objectivity in qualitative studies was often a challenge. However, the various criteria in use to ensure high-quality qualitative research, described in Chapter 5, were implemented and met. Another convention pertains to the recording of the data. In this research study, the researcher kept detailed research notes and maintained and updated a reflective research journal. As will be explained in Chapter 5, the methodology and techniques will be available for examination by fellow researchers.

In terms of publication practices, the researcher acknowledged all sources used and rejected any form of plagiarism. The researcher will not submit identical copies of articles, based on this research study, to more than one publisher or journal at a time.

In terms of the researcher's responsibilities towards the subjects of the science, the researcher did not to apply pressure when seeking access to the institution. Furthermore, the participating participants were recruited on a voluntary basis without any offer of an incentive and both the institution and its participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. The willing commitment of the participants was sought through informed consent. Saunders *et al.* (2009:593) explain that informed consent takes place when the intended participants are fully informed about the nature, purpose and use of the research to be undertaken and their role within it. According to the requirements of the University of South Africa's College of Economic and Management Sciences' Research Ethics Committee, an informed consent form (Appendix A) was given to the participants where the data

production method was described, the way in which it would be reported and the details of the research supervisor. Participants were asked to complete this informed consent form at the start of each interview. Consent was also sought from the senior management of the institution prior to data production. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were ensured and an effort was made to ensure that no participant could be identified by the answers given during the interview. The researcher also avoided pressing participants for responses. Ethical clearance was granted by the College of Economic and Management Sciences Ethical Committee in April 2012.

1.9 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The following is the chapter outline for this thesis:

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the background to the study, the problem statement and the central research question and sub-questions.

Chapters 2 and 3 form the literature review for this thesis. Chapter 2 reviews the strategy-as-practice perspective literature and provides an overview of the development of strategy and the emergence of the practice perspective. The chapter offers a review of previous research conducted within the strategy-as-practice perspective and describes the research agenda.

Chapter 3 offers a review of the growing body of knowledge on middle managers and strategy. This chapter offers a detailed review of all strategy research involving middle managers and confirms the importance of middle managers. This chapter also reviews the existing knowledge of the strategising practices of middle managers.

Chapter 4 provides the research context. It offers a description of the higher education environment and reviews previous research conducted within the university management environment. This chapter also describes the University of South Africa – the chosen case for the current research.

In Chapter 5 the research design and methodology employed in this study are explained. The content of this chapter revolves around the research strategy

adopted, the selection of the participants, the data production method, data analysis process and the limitations and strengths of the research design.

Chapter 6 reports on the findings of the current research. This chapter provides rich descriptions which are substantiated by verbatim quotes and describes the institutional operations, the roles of the middle managers in the chosen institution, the way middle managers engage with the materiality of strategy work, and the enablers and constraints that impact on their strategy work.

Chapter 7 interprets the findings and links it back to the theory. The new theoretical contributions are described as well as the conclusions drawn from the deductive approach. This chapter also indicates how the central research question and sub-questions were reached. This chapter further outlines the limitations of the study and makes recommendations for future research.

Figure 1 depicts the structure of this thesis.

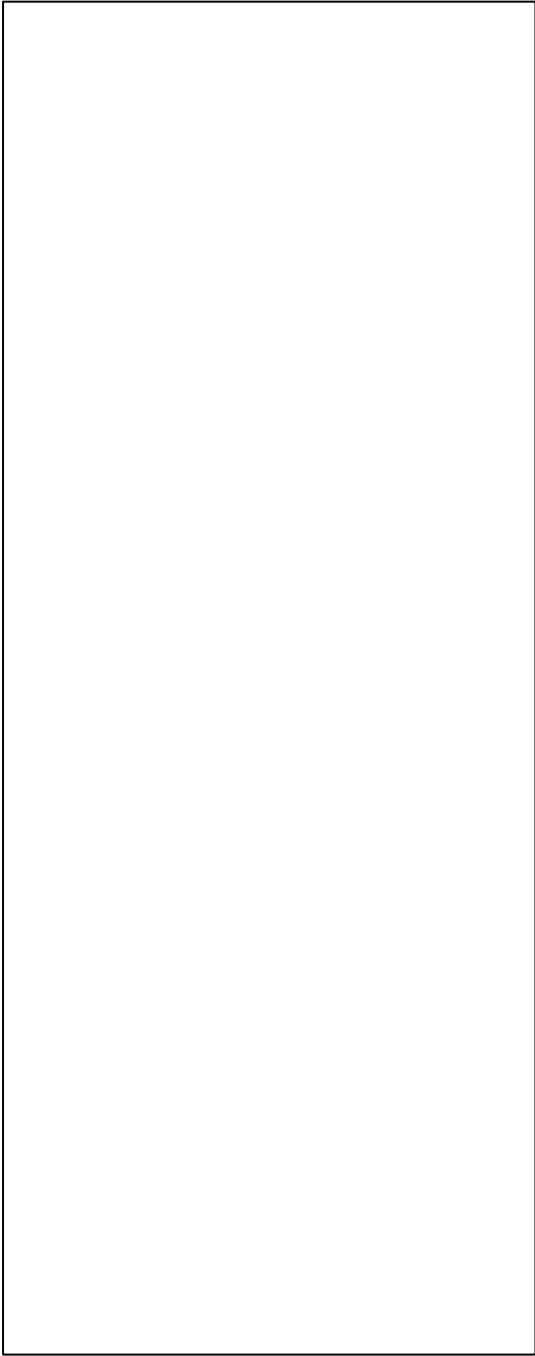


Figure 1: The structure of this thesis

Source: Own compilation

1.10 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Within this thesis, the following abbreviations will be used:

Table 1: Abbreviations used in this thesis

Abbreviation	Meaning
COD	chair of academic department
DoE	Department of Education
DOP	departmental/directorate operational plan
DSAA	Department of Student Assessment Administration
DSPQA	Department of Strategy, Planning and Quality Assurance
EXCO	executive committee
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HOD	head of department (academic or administrative)
IOP	institutional operational plan
IPMS	integrated performance management system
KPI	key performance indicator
MANCO	management committee
MOOC	massive open online courses
MTEF	medium term expenditure framework
ODL	open distance learning
OER	open educational resources
PVC	pro-vice chancellor
RBV	resource-based view
SMME	small medium and micro enterprise
SPCC	strategy and planning coordination committee
SRC	Students' Representative Council
TMT	top management team
TSA	Technikon Southern Africa
VC	vice-chancellor
VP	vice-principal

1.11 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a brief orientation to the current research by specifying the background to the research, the research questions and an overview of the research approach. The strategising practices of university middle managers are open for exploration and the strategy-as-practice perspective calls for a research agenda that incorporates the messy realities of doing strategy in practice. This research put forward three main arguments: firstly, strategy is dispersed throughout the entire organisation and includes middle managers' strategising activities. Secondly, a need existed for practically relevant research grounded in the organisational realities. Thirdly, universities are a relevant context within which to study strategising practices. Universities around the globe face sustainability challenges due to new competitive forces, declining state funding and the drive for corporatisation. This chapter explained that the strategising practices of university managers are open for exploration. This study aimed not only to explore the strategising practices of middle managers at a university in a developing economy, but also to develop new theory on the role of materiality in university strategising and the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work. An exploratory qualitative research approach was followed to answer the research questions in an attempt to make a contribution to the knowledge on middle managers' strategising practices.

CHAPTER 2

THE STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

“Ultimately, the key issue in practice-based research is reflexivity: to be able to constantly reflect upon the enabling and constraining effects of social practices and to focus special attention on what is easily taken-for-granted by researchers and practitioners alike” (Vaara & Whittington, 2012:41)

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to expand on the orientation provided in Chapter 1, to present an in-depth account of the origins of the strategy-as-practice perspective, to explain the three elements of the strategy-as-practice perspective and to describe selected concepts within this research. This chapter also covers the criticisms against the strategy-as-practice perspective and offers defences from various advocates for the strategy-as-practice perspective. In addition, this chapter provides an overview of the strategy-as-practice research agenda. The content of this chapter is based on the view that strategy is not something that an organisation *has*, but something its members *do* (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:6).

Practice-based analyses of organisations are becoming increasingly widespread in the management disciplines because of their special capacity to understand how organisational action is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). The key insight in practice-based studies is that strategising relies on organisational and other practices that significantly affect the process and the outcome of resulting strategies. Vaara and Whittington (2012:287) explain that strategy-making is an umbrella term that describes the myriad of activities that lead to the creation of organisational strategies. This includes strategising in the sense of more or less deliberate strategy formulation, the organising work involved in the implementation of strategies, and all the other activities that lead to the emergence of organisational strategies, conscious or not. Hence, in the case of this thesis, it also refers to strategising activity.

Figure 2 offers a diagrammatical depiction of the structure of Chapter 2.

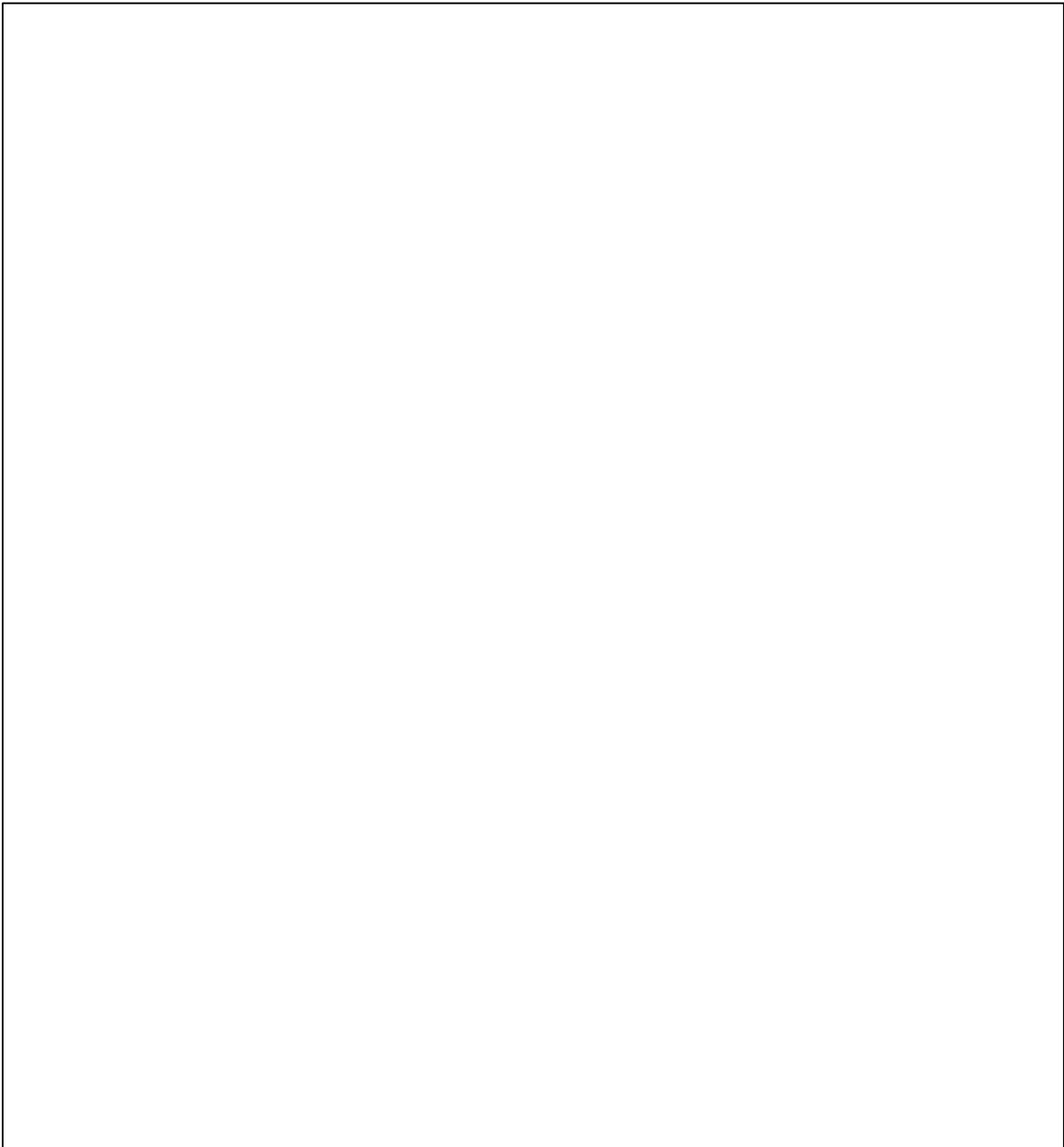


Figure 2: The structure of Chapter 2

Source: Own compilation

The argument put forward in this chapter pertains to the new realities of competitive advantage, which calls for more relevant research in practice to influence and shape the practices and actions of strategy practitioners. According to Ambrosini, Bowman and Collier (2009:S14), organisations operate in environments characterised by fast-paced change, unpredictable events and unanticipated discontinuities in dynamic environments (D'Aveni, 1994). In such a context, the organisation's ability to create, adapt and reconfigure resources, i.e. its dynamic capabilities, is critical. Barley and Kunda (2001) claim that work practices, workplace interactions and activities are

changing rapidly and that the traditional methods are no longer suited to studying work as it is being done.

The power of the strategy-as-practice perspective lies in its ability to explain how strategy-making is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices (Vaara & Whittington, 2012:285). Furthermore, this perspective allows researchers to investigate how contextual elements shape knowledge and how competence is built around a contingent logic of action. The strategy-as-practice perspective contributes to the dynamic capabilities of organisations by understanding *how* and *why* strategy is *done* (practiced) and by *whom*.

A further argument supported by this thesis is that it is not only senior executives who act strategically but also middle managers. This argument is in support of the views of many strategy-as-practice scholars, such as Huy (2001), Currie and Procter (2005), Herzig and Jimmieson (2006), Wooldridge *et al.* (2008), Rouleau and Balogun (2011), Gratton (2011) and Huy (2011). Strategy-as-practice analysis also focuses on the strategising activities of middle managers and non-managerial personnel and the way managers act and interact in the entire strategy-making process (Whittington, 1996:732). The term “practice” has the connotations of being something transferable, teachable, transmittable and reproducible (Turner, 1994). This view is supported by Jarzabkowski (2000:1) who suggested that when the term practice is considered, three main implications for studying strategy come to the fore:

- **practice** as a verb implies action and suggests that strategy is an activity that may be cumulatively learned, since to practice something, such as a craft or a sport, is to gain competence through repetition;
- **going into practice** means to commence acting in a role; and
- lastly, **in practice** is commonly understood as in reality.

The above consequently indicates a study of the practices, which comprise daily life, as opposed to, for example, a strategy-as-planning perspective which may suggest a much more rational debate, set apart from actual practice. Studying locally institutionalised practices as embedded in the organisational culture or routines has the power to impact on the practical relevance of business research. Vaara and Whittington (2012:289) support this view and explain, in short, that practice implies more than simply practical; it links strategy research to deep traditions of theoretical and empirical work in other disciplines.

The research reported in this thesis was concerned with middle manager practices and explored how middle managers practice strategy through daily experiences within a university context. This reporting will therefore reflect the tacit knowledge that guides strategy practices as well as the micro-behaviours in which strategy occurs. Central to the research was the locally institutionalised practices embedded in organisational routines and cultures. As such, this thesis is situated within the broader domain of strategy process research, focusing on strategy practices, actions and reactions occurring within the university context over time (Pettigrew, 1992:8; Van de Ven, 1992:169; Chakravarthy, Mueller-Stewens, Lorange & Lechner, 2003).

2.2 DEVELOPING A THEORY OF PRACTICE

As a management process, strategic management essentially involves many activities to ensure successful strategy-making and execution. The role allocation of these fundamental activities has led to many debates with various conflicting views being expressed. Conflicting views on this matter do not only reside amongst different levels of management and stakeholders within organisations but such views are also presented in textbooks and in the perspectives expressed by academia (Hambrick, 2004:91–98; Hambrick & Frederickson, 2005:48–59; Nag *et al.*, 2007:935–955).

Building on these conflicting views, Baldrige *et al.* (2004:1063) state that a gap exists between the academic quality and practical relevance of managerial research. Past research suggests that very often managers do not consider research findings and theories from academics when developing and implementing strategies and best practices (Rynes *et al.*, 2001:340). Barabba, Pourdehnad and Ackoff (2002:5) put it eloquently, “a significant proportion of the advice produced by such management gurus is either incorrectly inferred from data or is unsubstantiated by genuine evidence”. This view is supported by Worren *et al.* (2002:1227) who claim that managers rely primarily on tacit, procedural knowledge, derived from direct experience and trial-and-error learning. Other proponents of this view are Szulanski, Porac and Doz (2005:xiv) who describe the challenges of empirical research in the strategy process. They claim that the accumulation of scientific evidence in the strategy process has progressed slowly because of the relative paucity of studies

and its often idiosyncratic nature. Accordingly, scholarly insights took longer to accumulate, perhaps too long to serve as the sole basis for helping the eager practitioner in search of simpler but applicable advice. Szulanski *et al.* (2005:xiv) even go so far to say, "... the field [of strategic management] seems to have ebbed in and out of favour with practitioners".

Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008a:282) agree with these views and call for a research agenda that incorporates the "messy realities" of doing strategy in practice. Earlier, Jarzabkowski (2004:529) called on the necessity to examine strategy, not as something that an organisation has, but as something that an organisation and its members *do*.

The purpose of the following section is to provide a description of the development of strategy as a business concept but also as an academic concept. It also offers a description of the emergence of strategy consultants. The argument in favour of a new approach to studying strategy is embedded in the discussion on the practice perspective in the last part of this section.

2.2.1 Origins of the strategy-as-practice perspective

2.2.1.1 *The concept of strategy in business*

In a review of theories of competition and business strategy over the last 60 years, Ghemawat (2002:37) states that the term strategy can be traced back to the ancient Greeks for whom it meant a chief magistrate or a military commander in chief. According to Kiechel (2010:25), it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the term strategy began to creep into the corporate vocabulary with any regularity. The scope for strategy as a way to control market forces and shape the competitive environment started to become clearer in the second half of the nineteenth century. In some industries, Adam Smith's invisible hand was gradually tamed by what the historian Alfred D Chandler jr. has termed the visible hand of professional managers (Ghemawat, 2002:38). Along with improved access to capital and credit and exploitation of economies of scale and scope, a new type of firm emerged, first in the United States and then in Europe: vertically integrated, multidivisional (or M-form) corporations (Ghemawat, 2002:38). These M-form corporations made large

investments in manufacturing and marketing and in management hierarchies to coordinate those functions. The need for a formal approach to corporate strategy was first articulated by top executives of M-form corporations.

World War II presented several organisational challenges, which were a vital stimulus to thinking about strategy. The problem of allocating scarce resources across the entire economy in wartime led to many innovations in management science. Drucker (2007:11) argued, “management is not just passive, adaptive behaviour, it means taking action to make the desired results come to pass”. He noted that economic theory had long treated markets as impersonal forces, beyond the control of individual entrepreneurs and organisations. However, in the age of M-form corporations, managing implied responsibility for attempting to shape the economic environment, for constantly pushing back the limitations of economic circumstances on the enterprise’s freedom of action. This insight became the rationale for business strategy – by consciously using formal planning, a company could exert some positive control over market forces (Ghemawat, 2002:39).

However, according to Kiechel (2010:25), Chandler’s definition of strategy did not offer much guidance to practitioners who might want to emulate its corporate examples: “Strategy can be defined as the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals” (Chandler, 2003:13). Viewing strategy as the determination of basic long-term goals and objectives has proved fruitful for those who favour economic- and positioning-based models of strategy formulation and choice, but has been found wanting in analytical depth by scholars interested in delineating and describing strategy processes, implementation and emergent, rather than planned strategic decisions (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004:14). This shortcoming laid a foundation for practice-oriented approaches.

2.2.1.2 *The emergence of strategy as an academic concept*

To understand the academic underpinnings of the term strategy fully, it is necessary to consider the role and impact of the business schools. The Second Industrial Revolution witnessed the founding of many elite business schools in the United States (Ghemawat, 2002:40). Harvard Business School (HBS) was founded in 1908 and was one of the first to promote the idea that managers should be trained to think

strategically and not just to act as functional administrators. Harvard introduced a compulsory course in Business Policy in 1912 (Ghemawat, 2002:40), which was designed to integrate the knowledge gained in functional areas like accounting, operations and finance, to give students a broader perspective on the strategic problems faced by corporate executives.

Ghemawat (2002:41) continues that professors of Business Policy in the early 1950s at HBS taught students to question whether an organisation's strategy matched its competitive environment. In the late 1950s, other Harvard professors built on this thinking and argued that every business organisation, every subunit of organisation, and even every individual ought to have a clearly defined set of purposes or goals which keeps it moving in a *deliberately chosen direction* and prevents its drifting in undesired directions (Ghemawat, 2002:41; Kiechel, 2010:134).

By the 1960s, classroom discussions in the Business Policy course focused on matching a company's strengths and weaknesses with the opportunities and threats it faced in the marketplace. This was followed by attempts to define an organisation's distinctive competence. To define distinctive competence, strategists had to decide which aspects of the firm were enduring and unchanging over relatively long periods and which were necessarily more responsive to changes in the marketplace and to the pressures of other environmental forces (Ghemawat, 2002:42).

Prior to the 1970s, there was no academic subject "Strategy" taught at business schools. What was then known as "Business Policy" was built on Barnard's (1938) interest in strategy challenges facing general managers. As such, according to Johnson *et al.* (2007:4), the standard classroom question for students in their case-based courses was: What would you do as a general manager faced with a problem? The classroom debate would be about both why and how, with the emphasis as much on how as on why. Johnson *et al.* (2007) posit that there was little academic research to back up either the **why** – the rationale for strategy – or the **how** – what managers might do to manage strategic issues.

Strategy had the blessing of those who helped found business schools, placing strategy as a capstone course. With economics as the basis of strategy and by linking the strategy subject with other sub-disciplines of management, business schools formed the key features needed to educate strategic managers (Andrews, 1969). Unlike any other management discipline, strategy was predominantly seen as

on top - looking down on the rest of the organisational disciplines and the world of organisation itself (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004:14). The course content focused on the entire organisation and its future direction, building on the functional disciplines known as the elements of administration. The HBS policy course was advertised as the place where it all comes together, given heavy emphasis on integration and practice (Greiner, Bhambri & Cummings, 2003:403).

In 1979, Schendel and Hofer (in Pettigrew, 1992:5) provided a definition of strategic management, which showed its processual character. This definition stated that strategic management is a process that deals with, amongst others, developing and utilising the strategy, which is to guide the organisation's operations. Building on this definition, Chakravarthy and Doz (1992:5) suggested that strategy is concerned with choice processes (strategic decision-making) and implementation processes (strategic change). This was supported by Van De Ven (1992:169) who took a historical perspective and focused on the sequences of incidents, activities and actions unfolding over time.

These relatively early views have evolved with the rising and falling of different schools of thought that brought even more views on strategy and strategy process. Strategy process research has also evolved and contributed to an even bigger literature base from which to work. The field is characterised by an ever-increasing plurality of concepts and frameworks.

2.2.1.3 *The emergence of strategy consultants*

Acknowledging strategy as a business concept also led to developments in the management consulting industry. Not only is strategy something that an organisation has, but it is also something that can be taught and thus implicitly consulted on. Whereas strategy's academic roots originated from economics, strategy consulting originated in management engineering.

Even though McKinsey Incorporated was founded in 1926 (Kiechel, 2010), true growth in strategy consulting practices only took place about 35 years later. James O McKinsey founded McKinsey and Company in 1926 and by 1935, after merging with Scovell, Wellington and Company, McKinsey and Company had an accounting practices and management engineering focus (Kiechel, 2010:103). Following James

McKinsey's early death, Marvin Bower began to shape the firm into a management consulting firm. No longer was its services coined management engineering, and the professional management consultant was born. McKinsey survived the challenges of World War II and launched the McKinsey Quarterly in 1964 (Kiechel, 2010:103). The McKinsey Quarterly published articles concerning innovative work on management theory to business leaders and organisations worldwide (McKinsey, 2011).

Frederick W Gluck joined McKinsey and Company in 1967, just as Bower was stepping down as managing director (Kiechel, 2010:103). Gluck built a reputation as a hound for data and in-depth analysis. By 1972, Gluck was dismayed to find out that the company had no way to capture the knowledge it had gained from each consulting project in a systematic way. There was no effort to sit down formally at the end of a project, distil the generalisable lessons that could be of help in other projects and to share them across the firm (Kiechel, 2010:103). Gluck criticised Ronald Daniel, who was elected managing partner in 1976 (Kiechel, 2010:104) and claimed that McKinsey and Company was falling behind its competitors on several fronts, particularly in its approach to the subjects of strategy, operations and organisation. Daniel responded by appointing Gluck as the head of the firm's strategy practice. One of Gluck's first initiatives was to invite thirty "guys from around the firm" to come and spend two days "telling how *they* did strategy" (Kiechel, 2010:105). He also arranged with HBS to conduct weeklong seminars. Gluck and his team would bring in groups of fifteen to twenty partners and provided a forum in which the participants could discuss insights and debate them (Kiechel, 2010:105). In 1978, Gluck and two members published the first ever McKinsey staff paper entitled: The evolution of strategic management (Kiechel, 2010:105).

During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of new strategy consulting practises were established. Bruce Henderson founded the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) in 1963 and on his death in 1992, the *Financial Times* reported that few people have had as much impact as Henderson on international business in the second half of the twentieth century (Kiechel, 2010:ix). Bruce Henderson believed that a consultant's job was to find meaningful quantitative relationships between a company and its chosen markets.

One of Henderson's unlikely recruits was Bill Bain. Their paths crossed when Bain called on Henderson, as a Vanderbilt alumnus, for fundraising. Henderson

considered Bain as someone “very smart” (Kiechel, 2010:77), who understands and can work with and motivate senior executives and be respected by them, and someone who understands business. Bain accepted Henderson’s offer and by 1967, Bain headed, together with Patrick Graham, one of the BCG minifirms. Bill Bain was in charge of many of BCGs biggest client relationships. He departed BCG in 1973 and founded his own firm, Bain and Company (Kiechel, 2010:77).

At that time, according to Kiechel (2010:115), the world’s most prestigious consulting firms embraced strategy as a requirement for every organisation. The consulting firms and the business schools pushed strategy as a driving force for organisational success.

2.2.1.4 *The rise of the practice turn in strategy*

In previous sections, reference has been made to strategy process, doing strategy and focusing on the how and why of managing strategic issues. Essentially, these references provided direction to the establishment of an activity-based view of strategy as an entry point into the study of interrelated phenomena.

The notion of practice is interpreted in various ways, but departs from the process view, as a common thread is an appreciation of the skill by which people make do with what they have in their everyday lives. Chia (2004:29) states that there is an increasing call to attend to the myriad micro-processes and practices of organisational life that are woven together to form meaningful strategic outcomes. Strategy-as-practice may be seen as part of a broader concern to humanise management and organisational research (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:6). There is a stronger focus on people than on organisations, on routine as opposed to change and on situated activity rather than on abstract processes (Whittington, 2003b:118). What strategic actors actually do and the kinds of activities they get themselves involved in have become a central concern in the practice- or activity-based forms of inquiry (Whittington, 1996; Whittington, 2002, Jarzabkowski, 2003; Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Several years later, Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) proclaimed that practice-based analyses of organisations are becoming increasingly widespread in the management disciplines because of their special capacity to understand how organisational action is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices.

To understand the emerging practice approach to strategy, it is necessary to consider the more established approaches to strategy. For example, the strategy process approach is a more established approach to strategy. Figure 3 depicts the distinction between the four main approaches to strategy, namely planning, policy, process and practice, according to their target levels and their dominant concerns (Whittington, 1996:731). The vertical axis contrasts the large body of strategic thought that is essentially directional, concerned for *where* strategies should go with the equally important stream focused on the *how* issues of actually getting there. The horizontal axis divides the attention between those who concentrate on organisational units as wholes and those who are more concerned for individual actors – the actual managers and consultants involved in strategy-making.

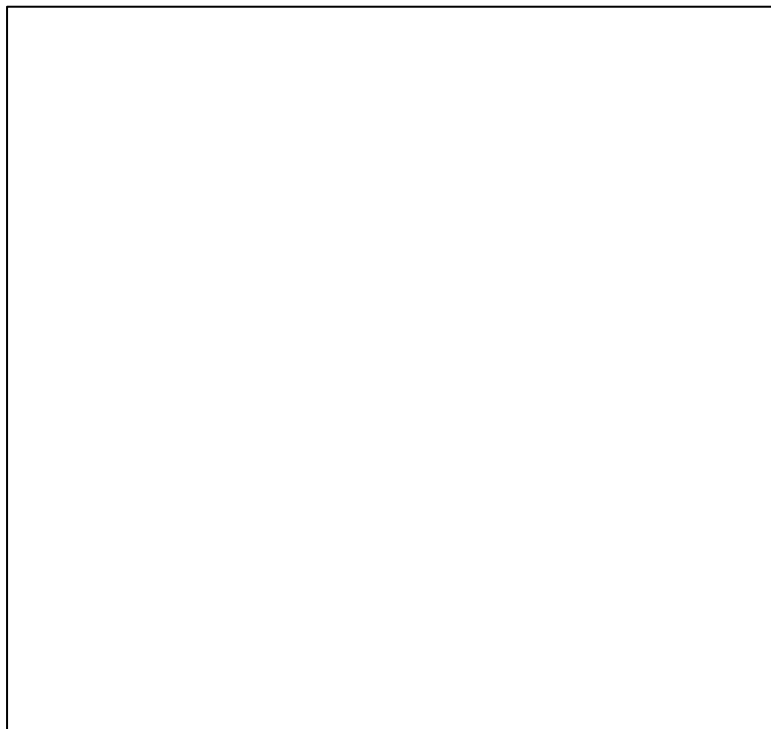


Figure 3: Four perspective on strategy

Source: Whittington (1996:731)

The *planning* approach emerged in the 1960s, and focused on tools and techniques to help managers make decisions about business direction. This period was characterised by many studies demonstrating positive planning relationships and it was common to see planning-as-panacea statements like “The top management of any profit seeking organisation is delinquent or grossly negligent if they do not engage in formal, integrated, long-range planning” (Karger & Malik, 1975:60). The approach followed by corporate planning departments entailed a focus on long-range

planning, cost reduction, minimising financial risk and using quantitative analyses as the basis for strategic decision-making. However, a more complex reality influenced by high oil prices, international competition and economic instability was not accommodated by the planning approach. According to Segal-Horn (2004:3), too many organisations across all industries make use of the same mechanical and formulaic application of the same techniques.

From the 1970s onwards, the policy approach developed from analysing the organisational pay-offs to pursuing different strategic directions. Additionally, this period was characterised by the interpretive turn.

In the 1980s, the strategy process approach surfaced and explored how organisations first come to recognise the need for strategic change and then to actually achieve it (Whittington, 1996:731). To encapsulate the processual elements of strategy meant that the sub-discipline of strategy had to move away from its basic foundations in the discipline of economics and predominantly positivistic epistemologies (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004:14). Process-oriented scholars were originally largely in disciplines outside strategy so that most works were located centrally in organisation theory. Other scholars, now located in the field of strategy, began their academic careers outside it, for example, Henry Mintzberg, Gerry Johnson, Richard Whittington, Leif Melin and Jay Barney among others (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004:15). It was not until these scholars from organisation theory and other cognate areas began to interrogate strategic management that a process view of strategy began to emerge. Jarzabkowski (2005:3) confirmed this by stating that the strategy process school of research introduced a dynamic view of strategy as a process in which the role of the managerial action is problematised. However, this led to a question about what happens, in broad terms, when strategy, organisation and individuals meet. Enquiry into this nexus of strategy, organisation and individuals created a range of perspectives on strategy that largely focused upon an activity-based view of strategy (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004:15). The question that emerged was what happens when strategies are put into practice and whether individuals (especially managers) contribute to a process.

2.2.1.5 From process to practice

Process, as defined by Pettigrew (1997:337) is a sequence of individual and collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time. Accordingly, certain key presuppositions need to be adopted in researching strategy process:

- processes are deemed to be embedded in context;
- processes are viewed as temporarily connected to contexts and actions are taken as a result of interacting with one another;
- processes are linked to outcomes; and
- holistic explanations of process are to be preferred.

Although the process approach gained support from many scholars, it was later criticised by Chia (2004:29) who stated that the process approach does not go far enough in attending to the actual micro-practices and everyday routines of strategy formation. The process approach is primarily concerned with explanations at the organisational level of analysis and thereby sacrifices more fine-grained analysis of activity construction. This view is supported by Whittington (1996) who contends that the main focus of processual research continues to be the whole organisation and not enough is said about the “unheroic work of ordinary strategic practitioners in their day-to-day routines” Whittington (1996:734). Balogun *et al.* (2003) as well as Regnér (2008) echo these observations by stating that in strategy process studies, not enough is understood about the unique characteristics and micro-level particulars of managerial activity.

Within the strategy process approach, the change process approach developed, which considered the managerial actor instated within the strategy process as a political entity with interest and intent (Jarzabkowski, 2005:5). The change process school (Van de Ven, 1992) examined three senses of what “process” might mean within the context of strategy research. First, it may describe a causal logic used to explain relationships in variance theory. Second, it may be used as a category to describe the activities of individuals or organisations. Third, it may be construed as a sequence of events that describe how things change over time. Both the second and third of these categories of explanation are adopted in the strategy process approach (Chia & MacKay, 2007:221). To this extent, the change process school of strategy is most closely associated with strategy-as-practice but its focus is on the sequence of events involved in change (Jarzabkowski, 2005:5). This school deals with the

organisation as the level of analysis and the sequence of events within a change as the unit of analysis.

While the process research made important steps forward in humanising strategy research and generating more dynamic theories, the practice perspective takes it further. The practice approach is seen as a necessary corrective to researching the nitty-gritty details of strategy-making. Brown and Duguid (1991) applaud advocates for strategy-as-practice because, according to them, these advocates redirect attention to the internal life of the organisational micro-processes themselves. Chia and MacKay (2007:219) emphasise that the strategy-as-practice perspective is an attempt to progress strategy scholarship beyond being a mere extension of the process perspective. The key insight of strategy-as-practice studies is that strategy work (strategising) relies on organisational and other practices that significantly affect both the process and the outcome of resulting strategies. The focus on the ways in which actors are enabled by organisational and wider social practices in their decisions and actions provides a distinctive contribution to research on strategic management (Vaara & Whittington, 2012:286).

However, the relationship between strategy-as-practice and the process approach to strategy may be confusing. Whittington (2007) confirms that this confusion is understandable as the relationship between strategy-as-practice and the process approach is close. This view is supported by Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007:107) who conclude that practice and process are similar in their focus on events and activities inside organisations, with just fine-grained distinctions to tell the two apart.

To clarify the distinction between process and practice, Whittington (2007:1578) differentiates between these two approaches to strategy research under praxis, practices, practitioners and profession. Table 2 indicates the different research interests between strategy process and strategy-as-practice.

Table 2: Different research interests between strategy process and strategy-as-practice

Strategy process	Strategy-as-practice
<p>Praxis</p> <p><i>The activities of strategy, for instance, planning, issue-selling and decision-making done formally – the work of strategy-making</i></p>	
<p>Researchers trace processes and activities over time and link these to organisational outcomes</p>	<p>Researchers use ethnography rather than interview-based, organisation-level case studies</p>
<p>Practices</p> <p><i>Refer to the routines and norms of strategy work – the stuff of strategy without which strategy could hardly happen</i></p>	
<p>Researchers find such practices of little interest in and for themselves; they are merely incidentals in the evolving histories of a particular organisation</p>	<p>Researchers find these practices to have a pervasiveness that gives them greater significance, abstracted from the unfolding of particular organisational processes and compared in their own right as important practices within societies</p>
<p>Practitioners</p> <p><i>A diverse set of actors, including managers at the top and below and actors both internal and external to the organisation</i></p>	
<p>Researchers focus on practitioners' organisational roles and purposes</p>	<p>Researchers de-centre the organisation and recognise classes of strategy practitioners as having origins, interests and effects that are more than organisational. They consider practitioners as people who struggle to realise their own purposes in and beyond the organisations that happen to pay them</p>
<p>Profession</p> <p><i>Strategy is a specialised institutional field and a kind of profession like law, medicine or journalism</i></p>	
<p>Researchers tend to focus on longitudinal organisational case studies</p>	<p>Researchers are interested in the sociology of the profession in which professional boundaries, membership, regulation and standards are held to public account</p>

Source: Adapted from Mantere (2005) and Whittington (2007:1575–1586)

Where most strategy-as-practice scholars only refer to praxis, practices and practitioners, Whittington (2007:1576) also adds a fourth theme: the profession of

strategy, which is considered as an institution within societies; as an occupational group with a collective identity and a set of connections that go far beyond particular organisations. It is only in the sphere of praxis where practice and process substantially overlap. These four themes – praxis, practices, practitioners and profession – have only a limited overlap with the traditional process approach. With regard to praxis, the practice research interest and process research interest are not so far apart, but the difference is mainly a matter of degree.

In decentring the organisation, the strategy-as-practice perspective opens up an agenda far wider than implied simply by extension or enrichment of the strategy process. Whittington (2007:1581) concludes that the practice approach needs to pursue its own questions and performance issues, and draws on whatever methods are most appropriate. He states that strategy-as-practice can build on the achievements of process but that it has its own agenda to pursue. Thus, the scope of strategy-as-practice is wider than just strategy process. Geiger (2009:130) also confirms that practice-based approaches demand a theoretically sound understanding of the concept of practice, otherwise they refer to nothing other than process and render the critical intention of the concept meaningless.

Practice theories or theories of social practices form a conceptual alternative that seemed attractive to an audience dissatisfied with both classically modern and high-modern types of social theories, but which, at the same time, has never been systematically elaborated (Reckwitz, 2002:243). As Johnson, Melin and Whittington (2003:12) put it, “advocates for the practice-based approach to strategy analysis have a desire to immerse themselves as researchers into the precarious and fluid goings-on of organisational strategising and sensemaking.” Accordingly, the strategy-as-practice perspective injects a much-needed sense of realism into academic theorising.

In order to gain a better understanding of the practice orientation, one needs to go back to the origins of social practice theories. Theories of social practice originated from diverse theoretical origins through the works of social theorists like Giddens (1984), Butler (1990), Taylor (1993), Garfinkel (1994), Schatzki (1996) and Bourdieu (2007). These theories are all different, but what they share is recognition of the deep connectedness of everyday activity to the structural properties of the wider society (Whittington, 2002:C2).

As stated earlier, much strategy theory originated from microeconomics with a focus on organisation and industry analysis. Legacy to microeconomics theory is a consideration of human actors as simplistic figures represented by few demographic variables. Strategies are theorised as somehow disembodied. Hamel (1998:10) claims that the strategy industry does not have a theory of strategy creation. This is supported by Jarzabkowski (2005:2) who claims that these strategy theories are limited and out of touch with the complexities of strategy in practice. This claim is not new. In 1979 already, Karl Weick, in an attempt to understand organisations better, called for more generous use of verbs and gerunds to ensure more attention is being paid to process and how to manage it (Weick, 1979:44). For Weick, the point of privileging verbs over nouns was to re-envisage organisations as processes rather than states (Whittington, 2003b:118). According to Pettigrew (1992:11), meaningful relationships between theory and practice could be better assisted by dynamic, locally contextualised theories that can reflect the complexities of practice. The contributors to management knowledge have spread beyond contributions from the university sector to include submissions from consulting firms, training agencies and contract research institutions (Pettigrew, 2001:S63). Yet, Pettigrew (2001:S67) calls for a wider and deeper form and range of engagement between management researchers and practitioners.

This view of Pettigrew is supported by Whittington (2002) who calls for more humanised theories that bring actors and action into the research frame. Whittington (1996:732) posits that the practice approach draws on many of the insights of the process school, but returns to the managerial level and is concerned with how strategists “strategise”. In 2003, Whittington (2003b:117) speculated about six sets of research questions:

- where and how is the work of strategising actually done;
- who does this strategising work;
- what are the skills required for this work and how are they acquired;
- what are the common tools and techniques of strategising;
- how is the work of strategising organised itself; and
- how are the products of strategising communicated and consumed?

Within the strategy-as-practice research agenda, these questions are practically important and in tune with the practice turn in contemporary organisation and social theory (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Orlikowski, 2002).

According to Jarzabkowski (2005:2–3), the strategy-as-practice perspective forms part of a broader practice turn in contemporary social theory and the management sciences. Building on this view, Chia and MacKay (2007:219) state that the practice approach focuses on social practices as the basis for explaining strategy emergence. It seeks to identify the strategic activities reiterated in time by the diverse actors interacting in an organisational context (Corradi, Gherardi & Verzelloni, 2010:272). The strategy-as-practice perspective is concerned with the detailed aspects of strategising – how strategists think, talk, reflect, act, interact, emote, embellish, politicise, which tools and technologies they use, and the implications of different forms of strategising for strategy as an organisational activity. On the whole, practice research aims to understand the messy realities of doing strategy as lived experiences. There has been a tendency to regard strategies as being decided upon through relatively formal structures and systems, with less attention given to the messiness of interpersonal relations and political processes (Johnson *et al.*, 2007:5). According to Reckwitz (2002), the turn to practices seems to be tied to an interest in the “everyday” and “life-world” (Reckwitz, 2002:244). However, the strategy-as-practice research field is interested in more than the literal meaning of day-to-day; there is an interest in what people do more occasionally during board meetings, strategy breakaways and other strategy episodes that contribute to strategy-making. Strategy-as-practice researchers recognise the complexity of the process that gives rise to strategy and the potential influence of many organisational members in doing so, not only through formal organisational processes, but also in the everyday activities (Johnson *et al.*, 2007:6). The strategy-as-practice research field is not only focused on the micro-activities but also on the context within which these micro-activities take place.

Strategy and strategising are human actions. It places human interaction at the centre of practice-based research. Economic, theoretical and empirical reasons exist why knowledge of what people do in relation to the strategies of organisations are required.

Although the previous section described the development of the strategy-as-practice perspective, it is also deemed necessary to describe the activity-based perspective. The following section describes the activity-based perspective and how the study of activity contributes to the strategy-as-practice perspective.

2.2.2 Activity-based perspective

In 2005, Jarzabkowski observed that the strategy-as-practice research agenda is still largely theoretical. According to her, the empirical focus and the choice of analytic units for operationalising practice remain open. She then proposed that the activity-based view offers studying practice as a flow of activity. This approach offers an entry point into the study of interrelated phenomena, as the study of activity will, inevitably, bring into play practitioners and their practices (Jarzabkowski, 2005:10). The benefits of an activity-based view of strategy cover an extension of existing traditions of research, transcending divisions within the discipline and offering practical, actionable guidance to practitioners (Johnson *et al.*, 2003:14).

An activity-based view links macro-phenomena with micro-explanations (Johnson *et al.*, 2003:14). This view responds to the call, from within the macro-phenomena, for extended explanations to the practices and activities, which underpin and constitute such phenomena. The activities and processes, which underpin strategy content, are equivalent to those that explain strategy development or the management of strategic change. The level of analysis is the same. By emphasising the activity-based perspective, researchers are able to overcome the divide between content and process.

On a daily basis, managers and organisational actors engage in activities. Johnson *et al.* (2003:15) define activities as the day-to-day stuff of management, i.e. what managers do and what they manage. It also deals with what organisational actors engage in more widely. Thus, an activity-based perspective research agenda matches the lived world of organisational actors. To some extent, an analysis of strategy can be conducted at any level of the organisation, but it is necessary to define which type of activity is considered strategically important. The activity-based view suggests that such activity will relate to strategic outcomes (Johnson *et al.*, 2003) and thereby provides the opportunity to translate research findings into organisational action more directly. An activity is considered strategic to the extent that it is consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival and competitive advantage of the organisation (Johnson *et al.*, 2003) even where these consequences are not part of an intended and formally articulated strategy (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:8).

The activity-based view offers an agenda worth following, but this does not come without challenges. Johnson *et al.* (2003:15) consider the identification of the dependent variable as a challenge by asking what an activity-based view is trying to explain. Some may argue that the search for some sort of dependent variable is irrelevant or pragmatically premature. A less ambitious aim for an activity-based view might simply be to encourage reflexivity. Another concern is that of knowledge accumulation. The challenge for micro-studies of strategy activities is to rise beyond the specific (Johnson *et al.*, 2003:16).

There are also challenges regarding the design of research. Micro-studies have to be constrained in terms of their scope and unit of analysis. However, it is possible for researchers to identify particular units of analysis that could contribute to the more general occurrences. These could include the events or episodes that are typically critical to strategy development, activities and processes, which commonly underpin and explain competitive advantage or the ways in which the standard tools and techniques of strategy are actually employed. While each of these can be studied quite minutely, wider resonance is given because these are activities that are common and comparable across many organisations. It is important that such fine-grained studies be located in the wider context. The challenge is in the need to span levels: the level of individual interaction, the organisational level and the level of the organisation's context (Johnson *et al.*, 2003:17).

Lastly, activity-based research requires a close engagement with practice. The challenge is to uncover strategic activities in their real form rather than just their reported form. The onus is on the researcher to provide convincing evidence that such processes and activities have been captured as accurately as possible; or at least that retrospective accounts are convincingly crosschecked (Johnson *et al.*, 2003:18).

In closing this section on the activity based view, it is necessary to quote Jarzabkowski, *et al.* (2007:7) who stated,

The original term, "Activity Based View", used by Johnson, Melin and Whittington (2003) has thus been subsumed within the broader research agenda for "strategy-as-practice", where "practice" refers both to the situated doings of the individual human beings (micro) and to the different

socially defined practices (macro) that the individuals are drawing upon in these doings.

In concluding the discussion on developing a theory of practice, it is perhaps fitting to quote the late Prahalad. During an interview with Kleiner (2010), Prahalad said,

If you look historically at the strategy literature, starting with Alfred D. Chandler Jr.'s *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the Industrial Enterprise*, the most powerful ideas did not come out of multiple examples. They came out of single-industry studies and single case studies. Big impactful ideas are conceptual breakthroughs, not descriptions of common patterns. You can't define the "next practice" with lots of examples. Because, by definition, it is not yet happening.

Concluding comments on the origins of the strategy-as-practice perspective

The preceding section illustrated how the term "strategy" originated from the ancient Greeks and later as an established management approach with its roots in economics and later business policy. Not only has the concept of strategy emerged and developed, but also those practitioners associated with the profession and the doing of strategy. The strategy-as-practice perspective is a fairly young perspective, not only the younger sibling of strategy process, but also an approach with a substantial research agenda and potential footprint in the strategy literature. The strategy-as-practice perspective offers the ability to explain that strategising is enabled and constrained by established organisational and societal practices.

The following section describes the theoretical framework that forms the foundation of the strategy-as-practice perspective. This theoretical framework is also the foundation for this research.

2.3 STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before a theoretical framework for the strategy-as-practice perspective can be presented, the concepts "strategy", "strategising" and "strategist", from a practice perspective, need to be clarified.

“Strategy” is conceptualised as a situated, socially accomplished activity – a particular type of activity that is connected with particular practices such as strategic planning, annual reviews, strategy workshops and their associated discourses. “Strategising” comprises those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:7). Strategising is the doing of strategy. Consequently, a “strategist” is the doer of the strategy. These concepts will be elaborated upon in sections 2.3.1 and 2.4.

Linking in with strategy, strategising and strategists, Whittington (2002:C1) distinguishes between strategy praxis, strategy practitioners and strategy practices – in other words, the work, the workers and the tools of strategy. The strategy-as-practice perspective is concerned with studying strategy through the lenses of strategy praxis, practitioners and practices (Whittington, 2006a:613; Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2007:5).

“Praxis” refers to the work that comprises strategy: the flow of activities such as meeting, talking, calculating, form filling and presenting in which strategy is constituted (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008a:282). Practitioners are those people who do the work of strategy, which goes beyond senior managers to include managers at multiple levels of the organisation as well as influential external actors such as consultants, analysts and regulators (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008a:282).

Figure 4 offers a diagrammatical depiction of a conceptual framework for analysing strategy-as-practice. This framework will be used as the basis for discussing each of the three elements.

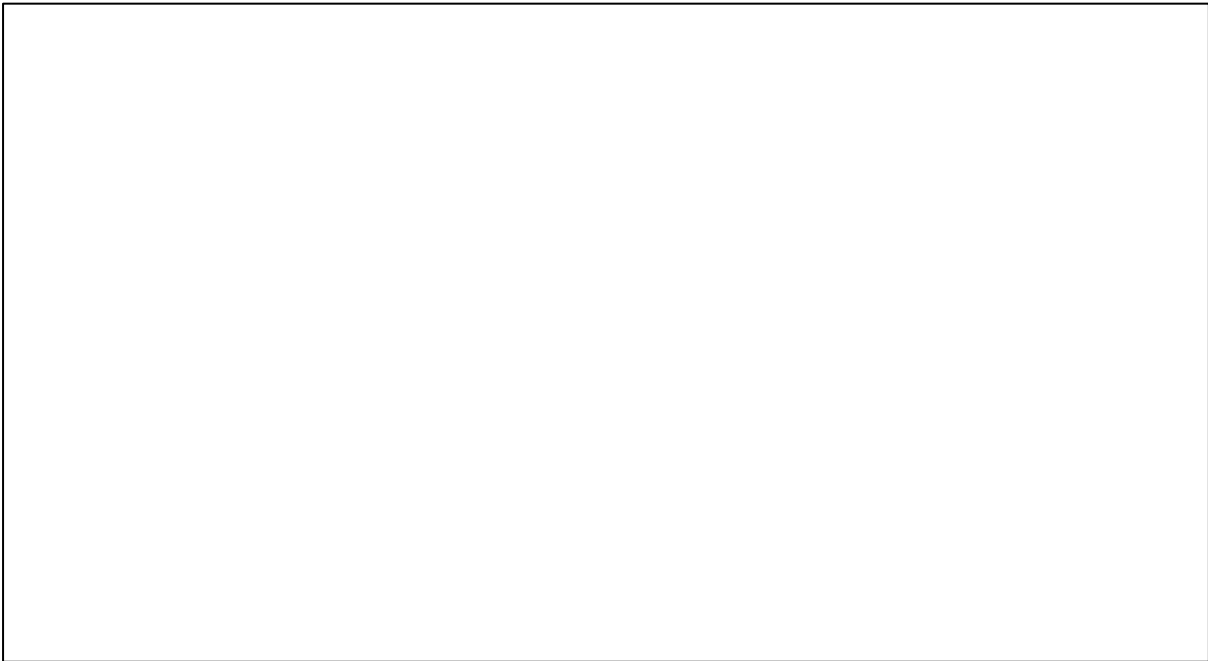


Figure 4: A conceptual framework for analysing strategy-as-practice

Source: Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:5)

The three elements praxis, practices and practitioners, depicted in Figure 4, are discrete but interrelated social phenomena. It is thus not possible to study one without also drawing on aspects of the others. Strategising occurs at the nexus between praxis, practices and practitioners. A, B and C represent stronger foci on one of these interconnections depending on the research problem to be addressed (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:11).

Following is an overview of the three elements in order to facilitate the further discussions.

2.3.1 The three elements of the strategy-as-practice perspective

In support of the view of Chia and MacKay (2007), in order to understand organisations, it is necessary to analyse the actions and activities within the organisation since organisations are constituted by processes of continuous enactment. The three elements, found within organisations, of the strategy-as-practice perspective are described below:

2.3.1.1 Praxis

The concept praxis was defined in the ancient philosophical era by Aristotle who referred to praxis as the art of acting upon conditions one faces in order to change them (Worren *et al.*, 2002:1228). Sztompka (1991) proposes that praxis unfolds at the nexus of what is going on in society and what people are doing. It is a chain of social events “where operation and action meet, a dialectic synthesis of what is going on in a society and what people are doing” (Sztompka, 1991:96).

In line with these views, Reckwitz (2002:249) defines praxis as an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action. This is a very broad definition and needs to be delineated to fit into the strategy-as-practice field. In practice research, the practice under investigation is strategy as a flow of organisational activity that incorporates content and process, intent and emergence, thinking and acting as reciprocal, intertwined and frequently indistinguishable parts of a whole when they are observed at close range (Jarzabkowski, 2005:8). In the words of Whittington (2006a:619), it encompasses “all the various activities involved in the deliberate formulation and implementation of strategy”. In everyday strategy terms, praxis refers to the work that comprises strategy as illustrated by the flow of activities such as meeting, consulting, talking, calculating, writing, presenting, communicating, form filling and other related activities that are employed to constitute strategies (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008a; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007).

This “work” (praxis) comprises the interconnection between the actions of different, dispersed individuals and groups and those socially, politically and economically embedded institutions within which individuals act and to which they contribute (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:9). This definition indicates that praxis is both an embedded concept that may be operationalised at different levels from the institutional to the micro, but also one that is dynamic, shifting fluidly through the interactions between levels.

2.3.1.2 Practices

From the strategy-as-practice perspective, the second element is practices and these are considered

... routinised types of behaviour which consist of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their uses, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (Reckwitz, 2002:243).

Building on this view, Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008a:282) explain that practices are the social, symbolic and material tools through which strategy work is done. Figure 4, taken from Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:5), indicates that practices are combined, coordinated and adapted to construct strategy practice. According to these authors, these practices include those theoretically and practically derived tools that have become part of the everyday lexicon and activity of strategy, such as Porter’s five forces, decision modelling and budget systems (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:5), and material artefacts and technologies, such as PowerPoint, flipcharts, and spreadsheets (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:5). Considering the unique characteristics of organisations, their managers and employees and the underlying culture, it is commonly agreed that practices are diverse and variable (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:5). Orlikowski (1996) and Seidl (2007:197) confirm that practices are combined and altered according to the uses to which they are put, and this transforms both the practices themselves as well as the practice that they construct.

The agreement on the diverse nature of practices does not come without heed: Gherardi (2009:115) warns that the term practice is often assumed to be synonymous with routine, or taken to be a generic equivalent of what people really do. This warning was considered earlier when Jarzabkowski (2004:531) stated that practice or routine is seen as an explanation of the way structure and agency are linked together. Interaction between agents and socially produced structures occurs through recursively situated practices that form part of daily routines. She then defines practice as the actual activity, events or work of strategy. This definition led to the question of what strategists do and how their doing shapes strategy. The answer to these questions focus on the specific, situated practices that practitioners engage when they are doing strategy. Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:13) believe that, although these questions might classify specific practices such as meetings, workshops, analytic tools, management processes and rhetorical or discursive forms, they go beyond simple classifications of what practitioners do to how they go about that doing, incorporating their situated and person-specific knowledge. Beech

and Johnson (2005) indicate that an analysis of what strategists do is very proximal to who a strategist is.

Taking a different route in describing practices, Rouse (2001:190) conceptualised practices as normative constructs which, on the one hand, define the norms of a particular society or group and on the other hand, reproduce these norms through ongoing practicing: actors share a practice if their actions are appropriately regarded as answerable to norms of correct or incorrect practice. Reckwitz (2002:249) took Rouse's concept further and defined practices as routinised types of behaviour which consist of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. In line with these views, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:9) assert that practices are connected to doing because they provide the behavioural, cognitive, procedural and physical resources through which multiple actors are able to interact in order to accomplish collective activity socially.

The question is then raised: how do practices differ from praxis? Carter, Clegg and Kornberger (2008:89) declare it confusing that the singular and the plural of the word practice mean different things. Campbell-Hunt (2007:796) indicates that the differences between practices and praxis are threefold: practices are larger assemblies of interdependent social activity, practices are repeated over time, and practices produce practice in a more structured and orderly form. As practices differ from praxis, practices are accessible to the conscious representations of schemata (Balogun & Johnson, 2004), scripts (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) and narratives (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:69) confirm that there is no dominant view on practices. Practice seems similar to action whereas practices become the formal procedures of organisations.

The distinction of practices from praxis follows Turner (1994) (in Whittington, 2002:C2) particularly, in his separation of the sociological heritage of traditions, norms, rules and routines from the actual events that make up practical activity. Practices are the done things, both in the sense of accepted as legitimate and in the sense of well-practised through repeatedly doing it in the past. Praxis is what is actually done, in other words, the work of strategising.

2.3.1.3 Practitioners

Who is *homo strategicus*? This question was posed by Clegg, Carter and Kornberger, (2004:25) in their quest to find answers for the questions how strategists are constructed and which material makes them up. At the core of their investigation was the question on the rites of passage that strategists experience in their move from the realm of operational activities to the rarefied heights of strategising. These authors also highlighted that these questions should be addressed within the education and training context.

Practitioners are the actors – the individuals who draw upon practices to act. Practitioners are thus interrelated with practices and praxis. They derive agency through their use of the practices, namely ways of behaving, thinking, emoting, knowing and acting prevalent within their society, combining, coordinating and adapting the practices to their needs in order to act within and influence that society (Reckwitz, 2002). Such agency is embodied, being part of who a practitioner is and how that individual is able to act, but is also always connected to the situation and context from which agency is derived (Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey & Willmott, 2005). From a strategy perspective, practitioners shape strategic activity through who they are, how they act and which practices they draw upon in that action (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:10). Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) concur that demographics such as age, tenure, educational and functional background, ethnicity and gender furnish some characteristics of the strategist. However, these should be considered as proxies for behaviour, an end in themselves, rather than as a starting point from which to study behaviour.

When one looks into practitioners in terms of strategy, the question asked as to who is a strategist emerges. Literature still considers, to a large extent, strategy as a top-down process of formulation separated from implementation, predisposing a focus upon top managers, their demographics and their decision-making processes (Karger & Malik, 1975; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Papadakis, Lioukas & Chambers, 1998; Wiersema & Bantel, 1992; Van de Ven, 1992; Carpenter, 2002). However, this assumption is not adequate to fulfil the theoretical framing of who a practitioner is.

In analysing strategy-as-practice, the strategist needs to be identified in terms of the agency and experience of individuals that play a role in constructing strategy. A practice perspective on who strategists are goes beyond truncated views of strategy

as deliberate, top-down processes, thereby identifying a much wider group of actors as potential strategists (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:12) Increasingly, strategy-as-practice studies indicate that middle managers and operational-level employees are also important strategic actors. While their actions and influence on strategy may be unintended at the organisation level, they are significant for organisation survival and competitive advantage. Hence, it is important to identify these actors as strategists, opening a research agenda that goes beyond top managers to study other levels of employees as strategic actors.

Through a broader definition of who a strategist is, incorporating lower-level employees and external actors as well as top managers, it is possible to discern a wider range of practices (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:13). As such, Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008b:101–102) assert that strategy practitioners include both those directly involved in strategy-making and those with indicated influence – the policy-makers, the media, the gurus and the business schools who shape legitimate praxis and practices.

In an attempt to re-humanise strategy research, Hodgkinson and Clarke (2007) profiled the cognitive characteristics of strategists, based on psychometrically robust procedures. In their research, they confirmed that strategists are not passive recipients of particular practices. Rather, strategy practitioners are artfully engaged in a series of improvisatory performances, variously adapting existing practices, synthesising new practices, and, on occasion, introduce entirely new practices and practitioners.

Hodgkinson and Clarke (2007:243–255) found that individual strategy workers will, cognitively speaking, fall into one of four broad types, depending upon the degree to which they are characterised by a marked preference for an analytical and/or intuitive approach to the processing of information. These four categories are detail-conscious, big picture-conscious, non-discerning and cognitively versatile.

Practitioners who are detail-conscious are highly analytic, driven by the minutiae of available data, with little or no regard for intuition. They have a tendency to approach problems in a step-by-step, systematic fashion. Practitioners who are bigger picture-conscious can become preoccupied with gaining an overview of the problem at hand at the expense of the details. They are highly intuitive in orientation, with little or no regard for analytic approaches to problem solving and decision-making. Non-

discerning practitioners, according to Hodgkinson and Clarke (2007), lack discernment in the sense that they deploy minimal cognitive resources in order to derive strategic insight, being disinclined to process the detail or to extract a bigger picture from such detail. They rely on opinion and received wisdom of others and thereby relieve themselves of the burdens of analytic and intuitive processing altogether. Lastly, cognitively versatile practitioners possess in equal abundance the inclination to attend to analytical detail and cut through that detail, as and when required. This type of practitioner is able to switch more readily between analytic and intuitive processing strategies.

These findings have important methodological implications for strategy research to understand the interplay between strategy practices, practitioners and praxis better.

Concluding comments on the three elements of the strategy-as-practice perspective

Praxis, practices and practitioners are discrete concepts that are interconnected. Thus, it is not possible to study one without also drawing on aspects of the others.

Practitioners within the strategy-as-practice perspective are defined as the people who do the work of strategy and include managers at multiple levels of the organisation as well as influential external actors such as consultants, analysts and regulators. Practitioners are interrelated with practices and praxis. Practices within the strategy-as-practice perspective are defined as the social and material tools through which strategy work is done and includes the theoretically and practically derived tools that are part of the activity of strategy. Lastly, praxis comprises the interconnection between the actions of different dispersed individuals and groups and those socially, politically and economically embedded institutions within which practitioners act and to which they contribute. Strategising occurs at the nexus between praxis, practices and practitioners.

This research focuses on middle managers as practitioners. It will contribute to an emerging literature in micro-strategy that aims at understanding the micro-activities of strategy, specifically the middle management practices that guide and fuel those activities. Chapter 3 provides a detailed review of the existing literature on middle managers, specifically relating to strategising.

This brief overview of praxis, practices and practitioners provides the conceptual framework for studying strategy-as-practice. Part of the contribution of this research is to offer a holistic overview of strategising activities of middle managers. Previously, concepts were considered separately and the following section attempts to blend these concepts into one entity.

2.3.2 Selected concepts from the strategy-as-practice perspective

As indicated earlier, this research is positioned within the strategy-as-practice perspective. Strategy-as-practice was described in section 2.3 and the three elements were described. This section describes additional concepts fundamental to the strategy-as-practice perspective and the context of this research. While reviewing the literature, many more concepts are identified, but the following section covers those concepts that are most relevant to this research.

The section commences with a description of the narrative nature of studying strategy, which is followed by concepts such as micro-strategising, sensemaking in strategy and tacit knowledge. Within the context of this research, the middle management perspective considers middle managers as central to explaining key organisational outcomes. Middle managers and the middle management perspective are discussed in Chapter 3.

2.3.2.1 *Strategy as a type of narrative*

As discussed earlier, strategy can be studied from a processual approach, a content approach or an activity-based approach. Narrativity provides theorists and practitioners with an additional interpretive lens to consider strategy. This approach to studying strategy emphasises the simultaneous presence of multiple, interlinked realities and it is thus well positioned for capturing the diversity and complexity present in strategic discourse (Barry & Elmes, 1997). According to Barry and Elmes (1997:430), the narrative turn has become increasingly popular in other organisational areas and they believe it to be particularly applicable to strategy. Boje (1991:106) states that if storytelling is the preferred sensemaking currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders, then surely strategy must

rank as one of the most prominent, influential and costly stories told in organisations (Barry & Elmes, 1997:430).

According to Barry and Elmes (1997:432), narrativity encompasses both the telling and the told; it can be applied both to strategising and to strategies. Extant, formalised strategies can be examined as artefacts: their rhetoric, tropes, metaphors and sequencing can be identified, compared and evaluated in various ways. Strategy can also be examined as a narrative process, one in which stories about directionality are variously appropriated, discounted, championed and defended. This view asks: “How do people make sense of and narrate their notions about directionality?” A narrative view of strategy stresses how language is used to construct meaning, it explores ways in which organisational stakeholders create a discourse of direction to understand and influence one another’s actions. Authors of traditional strategy frameworks virtually ignore the role of language in strategic decision-making, writers using a narrative approach assume that telling of strategy fundamentally influence strategic choice and action, often in unconscious ways. From a narrative perspective, the successful strategic story may depend less on such tools as comprehensive scanning, objective planning, or meticulous control/feedback systems and more on whether it stands out from other organisational stories, is persuasive and invokes retelling. Strategic effectiveness from a narrative perspective is intimately tied to acceptance, approval and adoption (Barry & Elmes, 1997:433).

2.3.2.2 *Micro-strategising*

As stated earlier, strategising takes place at the nexus between praxis, practices and practitioners. Strategising comprises the actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity.” For managers, strategising involves practical-evaluative agency in the face of situated, distributed activity that is in a continuous state of construction (Jarzabkowski, 2005:21–30). Essentially, it refers to the doing of strategy, that is, the construction of the flow of activity through the actions and interactions of multiple actors and the practices that they draw upon (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2005:8). Micro-strategy and strategising is concerned with the same strategic issues, but in terms of the organisational activities and practices, which are their fabric with the detailed

processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organisation life and which relate to strategic outcomes. The micro-level of doing strategy is referred to as micro-strategising. Samra-Fredericks (2003:141) argues that it is through talk that strategy is negotiated and in talk that knowledge relevant to strategy is articulated and embedded. This everyday strategy talk forms part of micro-strategising.

The difficulties in sustaining the dialectic between the organisation as a whole and its parts have been described by Johnson (1987), Pettigrew and Whipp (1993), as well as Spender and Grinyer (1995). According to Salvato (2003:84), organisations that engage primarily in strategic activities at the macro-level are likely to find it difficult to implement strategic actions and to take advantage of opportunities emerging from daily activities at lower organisational levels. Maintaining a balance between micro- and macro-aspects of strategy is, therefore, a primary factor in seeking an adaptive advantage. Salvato (2003) calls for more research on the micro-aspects of strategy, especially processes of strategic evolution. This view is shared by Johnson *et al.* (2003:3) who confirm that the field of strategy has traditionally concentrated on the macro-level of organisations. These authors call for an emphasis on the detailed processes and practices which constitute day-to-day activities of organisational life and which relate to strategic outcomes.

In an attempt to “put the micro in the macro”, Johnson *et al.* (2003:6) consider the frustrations of the traditional macro-approach by examining the resource-based view (RBV) and institutional theory. Accordingly, with the RBV, the micro-perspective highlights the value generated in the seeming minutiae of organisations and in the periphery as well as in the centre. Johnson *et al.* (2003) claim that the micro-strategising agenda is appreciative of action because it recognises that managerial activity and those involved in the activity or organisations – whether managers or not – are essential to the actualisation of potential value. The RBV will advance as it shifts towards a micro-perspective capable of capturing both details and activity. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:69) agree and claim that while people do strategy, strategy theory is populated by multivariate analyses of firm- or industry-level effects upon firm performance, and they posit that there is a serious absence of human actors and their actions in most strategy theories, even those that purport to examine the internal dynamics of the firm.

Similarly, the contribution of institutional theory has also historically tended towards the macro – a concern with the behaviour of organisations as entities and the nature and effects of their formal and collective parts (Tolbert & Zucker, 1997:75). Within the institutional theory, the concern has been to understand organisations in terms of norms and rules, and the emphasis has been on how individuals are captured within these, as distinct from the role they play in creating and amending them (Johnson *et al.*, 2003:9). There are those who recognise the need to introduce more micro-level explanation into institutional theory. Theoretically, micro-level explanations underpin much of what has become known as neo-institutional theory (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). However, there is little empirical work that engages with a truly micro-level. There is also potential to understand insights from institutional theory by building a bridge into the sensemaking literature by examining sensemaking as an organisational activity.

The micro-strategy and strategising perspective should be practical and capable of actually helping managers do their work differently. The issues of strategy content and performance need to be connected to micro-activity. To do all this, Johnson *et al.* (2003:13) affirm that the micro-strategy and strategising perspective will have to go much deeper into organisations, working from the kind of systematic theoretical basis that will allow the accumulation of practical knowledge.

2.3.2.3 Sensemaking in strategy

The concept of sensemaking is linked to strategy as narrative. By introducing more micro-level explanations into institutional theory, it is necessary to understand the influences of meaning systems and cognition on institutional processes. This view is confirmed by Weick (1995:36) who argues that sensemaking is the feedstock for institutionalisation. According to Weick, if institutionalisation assumes shared sensemaking, one needs to understand this as a recursive process of enactment to be explained in terms of how organisational actors influence and are influenced by organisational rules and norms (Johnson *et al.*, 2003:8).

According to Rouleau and Balogun (2011:956), sensemaking is a social process of meaning construction and reconstruction through which managers understand, interpret and create sense for themselves and others of their changing organisational context and surroundings. Samra-Fredericks (2003) explains that strategic

sensemaking is accomplished through the ability of managers to craft and share a message by referring to a complex mosaic of underlying knowledge that is subtly invoked in order to make that message meaningful within the context. Within the strategic context, Rouleau (2005:1415) adds that sensemaking has to do with the way managers understand, interpret and create sense for themselves based on the information surrounding the strategic change. She also expands the concept to include sensegiving, which she believes is concerned with managers' attempts to influence the outcome, to communicate their thoughts about the change to others and to gain their support.

When reviewing the literature on strategic sensemaking and sensegiving it is evident that these concepts evolved in two directions: a general pattern of sensemaking and sensegiving in regard to different dimensions of strategic change, and individual narratives to describe how managers make sense of the past, cope with the present and plan for the future (Rouleau, 2005). A further concept from the strategy-as-practice perspective is tacit knowledge, which is discussed next.

2.3.2.4 *Tacit knowledge*

Tacit knowledge is one of the most critical resources of the organisation (Sobol & Lei, 1994; Grant, 1996:111) and is best explained when compared to objective knowledge (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001:812). Objective knowledge is communicated from its possessor to another person in symbolic form and the recipient of the communication becomes as much in the know as the originator (Winter, 1987:171). Thus, objective knowledge can be readily written down, encoded, explained or understood, and such knowledge is not specific or idiosyncratic to the organisation or person possessing it. Accordingly, defining objective knowledge is a way of highlighting what tacit knowledge is not.

Polanyi (1966:4) introduced the concept "tacit knowledge" and described it as follows: "I shall reconsider human knowledge by starting from the fact that we can know more than we can tell or we have a power to know more than we can tell." Orlikowski (2002:250) supports this view and agrees with Tsoukas (1996) that tacit knowledge is the necessary component of all knowledge. Furthermore, it is a form of knowing and thus inseparable from action because it is constituted through such action (Orlikowski, 2002:249). Nonaka and Takeuchi (2007) take the concept even

further and explain that tacit knowledge is characterised by a difficulty to be written down or to be formalised. People who possess tacit knowledge cannot explain the decision rules that underlie their performance. "The aim of a skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them" (Polanyi, 1962:49).

Another characteristic of tacit knowledge is that it is personal knowledge. Tacit knowledge consists of mental models that individuals follow in certain situations (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2007). Earlier, Ravetz (1996:141) suggested that tacit knowledge could become so embedded in the individual that it appears entirely natural. This is the reason why it cannot be expressed and why it is attached to the knower.

Tacit knowledge is also practical (Sternberg, 1994) and is similar to know-how (Kogut & Zander, 1992). Nonaka and Takeuchi (2007) argue that know-how may be used as a synonym for tacit knowledge because tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills – the kind of informal, hard-to-pin-down skills captured in the term know-how.

Lastly, tacit knowledge is context-specific (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001:813). It is a knowledge typically acquired on the job or in the situation where it is used (Sternberg, 1994:28). This view is supported by Nonaka and Takeuchi (2007:165) who confirm that tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action and in an individual's commitment to a specific context, be it a craft or profession, a particular technology or product market, or the activities of a work group or team.

This research favours the definition by Raelin (2007:500): "... the knowing how that may serve as the basis for conscious operations; ones' sense of the correct action or response without the ability to explain why one behaved the way one did".

Hence, tacit knowledge is practical, similar to know-how and it is about how to do something rather than knowing what to do. It is a competence and partly composed of technical skills, sedimented into work practices and a form of knowledge with which one is intimately familiar (Spender, 1996:67). Lastly, tacit knowledge is evident in the organisational praxis (Spender, 1996:68).

Concluding comments on selected concepts from the strategy-as-practice perspective

It is clear that there is much more to strategy than meets the eye. With due consideration of the detailed processes and practices which constitute day-to-day activities, strategy-as-narrative offers an alternative lens through which to study micro-strategising. The narrative view of strategy stresses how meaning is constructed in the organisational context, going much deeper into organisations. Closely linked to this is strategic sensemaking and sensegiving where meaning is constructed and reconstructed. This sensemaking and sensegiving, combined with the managers' tacit knowledge, create meaningful messages within the unique context, resulting in knowing how to do strategy.

The next section deals with strategising as the actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors.

2.4 STRATEGISING

As indicated earlier, the words "strategising" and "strategy-making" are used interchangeably conveying the same meaning and they also refer to strategising activity.

Whittington (2003b:117) made a bold statement, "The work of strategising is a serious business". This statement is supported by Carter *et al.* (2008:83) who confirm that strategy's talismanic importance cannot be overstated. Accordingly, strategy has become the master concept with which to address chief executive officers of contemporary organisations and their senior managers.

There has been wide support for this consideration of the importance of strategy. Strategy is one the most prominent, influential and costly stories told in organisations (Barry & Elmes, 1997:430). This observation is maintained by Clegg *et al.* (2004:21) who state that strategy is an obligatory passage point linking the interior world of the organisation to the exterior worlds of the environments within which it operates for all but the most hermetically sealed organisation. Section 2.2.1.5 noted Whittington's view of strategy as a profession (Whittington, 2007:1578). Whittington (2007) considers the workers who strategise as an occupational group with a collective

identity and a set of connections that goes far beyond particular organisations. Subsequently, strategising involves consulting firms, business schools, business media, academic journals, professional societies, enterprises and management in a joint endeavour that all recognise as somehow strategic (Whittington, 2007:1580). He calls for a moment's contemplation of the size and influence of the strategy-consulting industry, the investment of business schools in strategy, the strategic focus of the business media and the status, power and rewards of all those managers deemed strategic. This contemplation will persuade anybody of the societal significance of this institutional field.

The questions that guide this section on strategising are:

- How do managers create and develop strategy?
- How do different types of managerial activities and actors shape strategy content?
- How to best decide on strategies?

Before attempting to answer these questions, it is necessary to distinguish between deliberate and emergent strategising and the influence of the strategy actors and context on strategising.

2.4.1 Deliberate and emergent strategising

Strategy has almost inevitably been conceived in terms of what the leaders of the organisation plan to do in the future and strategising had to be treated as an analytic process for establishing long-range goals and action plans for the organisation. Thus, strategy-making is followed by implementation. However, Mintzberg and Waters (1985:257) explain that this view is limited and they call for strategising to be viewed from a wider perspective.

Since the call by Mintzberg and Waters, many researchers and scholars investigated the process of strategy formation or strategy-making or strategising (Mintzberg, Ghoshal & Quinn, 1996; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Hendry, 2000; Whittington, 2003b; Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2006; Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson & Schwarz, 2006; Whittington, 2006a;

Maritz, 2008). Specifically, Mintzberg and Waters (1985:257) isolated streams of behaviour in organisations to identify strategies as patterns or consistencies in such streams. They investigated the origins of these strategies and paid particular attention to exploring the relationship between leadership plans and intentions and what the organisation actually did. By comparing intended strategies with realised strategies, these authors were able to distinguish between deliberate strategies (realised as intended) from emergent strategies (patterns or consistencies realised despite, or in the absence of, intentions).

Perfectly deliberate strategies are realised strategies that formed exactly as intended. In order for this to happen, three conditions need to be satisfied. Firstly, there must have existed precise intentions in the organisation, articulated at a relatively concrete level of detail, so that there will be no doubt about what was desired before any actions were taken. Secondly, because organisation means collective action, to dispel any possible doubt about whether or not the intentions were organisational, they must have been common to virtually all the actors, either shared as their own or else accepted from leaders. Thirdly, these collective intentions must have been realised exactly as intended, which means that no external force should have interfered with them (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985:258).

For a strategy to be perfectly emergent, there must be order – consistency in action over time – in the absence of intention about the strategy. Thus, strategy may suddenly be rationalised to mean something very different from what was originally intended (Maritz, 2008:52). According to Mintzberg *et al.* (1996), the emergence of strategies has to do with the actions taken by middle managers within the organisation, so that strategic initiatives may arise without the executives' awareness. Emergent strategy implies learning what works – taking one action at a time in search of that viable pattern or consistency. It is also frequently the means by which deliberate strategies change. This does not mean that managers are out of control, only that strategies are open, flexible and responsive. Emergent strategising enables management to act before everything is fully understood. Linking back to the earlier reference to middle managers, Mintzberg and Waters (1985:271) posit that emergent strategy enables management that cannot be close enough to a situation or who cannot know enough about the varied activities of its organisation, to surrender control to those who have the information current and detailed enough to shape realistic strategies. Whereas the more deliberate strategies tend to emphasise

central direction and hierarchy, the more emergent ones open the way for collective action and convergent behaviour. Perfectly deliberate and perfectly emergent strategies form poles of a continuum along which real-world strategising takes place.

The following section describes the influence of the strategy actors and the context on the strategising process.

2.4.2 Strategising: actors and context

Strategy process research, as discussed in section 2.2.1.5, provides rich and systematic descriptions showing that strategy-making comprises a variety of actors and contextual influences. However, there is still an imperfect understanding of the particulars of the actors and the contextual influences since less attention has been devoted to the micro-level and the actual activities, practices and actors involved in strategising (Whittington, 1996; Johnson & Huff, 1998; Whittington, 2002).

This view is also expressed by Hendry (2000:955–977) who suggests that the existing conceptualisations of strategising only offer partial and disconnected perspectives of the strategy process. He describes a situation where the executive committee of an organisation decides, after a strategic review, to launch a new strategy. This new strategy involves a range of commitments and most of the important commitments have been made, either in anticipation of the decision or in reactive response to market pressures (deliberate strategising). Many of the commitments agreed upon are modified along the way (emergent strategy) and at least one major part of the strategy is never implemented at all (unrealised strategy). Accordingly, the strategy of the organisation has changed and the change is reflected both in management thinking and in the organisation's actions and behaviours. However, it is not clear which part strategising played in the overall strategic change process. Hendry (2000) raises several questions concerning the relationships between strategic decision-making, strategic thinking and strategic action.

In his attempt to offer an empirically grounded conceptualisation of strategic decisions as elements of a strategic discourse, Hendry (2000) considered three perspectives on strategy decision-making: the traditional, action and interpretive

perspectives. According to the traditional or rational perspective, strategic decisions are unproblematic and ontologically straightforward; decisions are intentionally made, they exist and they are implemented, in other words, the basic stuff of strategic managerial life. This view resonates with Mintzberg and Waters' (1985) description of deliberate strategising.

The action perspective sees organisations primarily as generators of action. Strategic actions are therefore created in advance of the decisions by which they are justified. Decisions are defined as commitment to action, and the decision points are difficult to identify (Mintzberg & Waters, 1990). In an organisational context, commitment evolves gradually and in a complex fashion. It varies from individual to individual and from group to group and it is as likely to follow actions as to precede them. In these circumstances, Mintzberg and Waters (1990) suggested the concept of decision is a distraction that gets in the way of research into strategy processes by diverting attention away from empirically identifiable actions and encouraging an over-rationalistic, theory-laden interpretation of the empirical data.

The interpretative perspective is based on social representation theory. Strategic decisions are best understood as socially produced and reproduced cognitive structures through which participants structure their images of reality and so are able to function within the social world. This perspective relates closely to the views of Weick (1979) and Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) on decision-making as part of a retrospective sensemaking which consists of locating, articulating and ratifying an earlier choice, bringing it forward to the present, and claiming it as the decision that has just been made (Weick, 1995). The interpretative perspective assists in understanding how strategic decisions may be created not only retrospectively, but also in advance of any commitment to action. Thus, strategising decisions are not only a way of making sense of an emergent pattern of activity, but also a way of creating sense in the absence of any such patterns, as a response to the anxieties of the human condition or to the uncertainties with which managers are characteristically faced (Spender, 1996). Strategic decisions cannot always await consensus, commitment or visible action. When strategies cease to carry conviction, the decision complexes associated with them cease to be effective carriers of meaning, and new rationalisations of the world in the form of new decisions, however provisional, must be constructed in their place.

After considering the three perspectives, Hendry (2000) concludes that none of the three perspectives offers an answer to the practitioner's question, "How should I best decide?"

Building on the research findings of Hendry (2000), Regnér (2003:58) investigated strategy-making and found that the specifics of managerial activities and actors seem particularly vaguely defined regarding the development of entirely new strategies, in strategy creation, where traditional planning and analysis practices and top management might play a less significant role. It appears as if what managers really do in terms of strategy creation and development remains as a residue.

Regnér (2003) looked into strategising with a specific focus on the micro-level and covered not only top management and strategic planning staff and traditional (deliberate) strategic management practices, but also middle and lower managers and more irregular strategy activities (emergent strategising). The findings revealed how managers develop strategy through inductive and deductive strategy-making, originating from diverse managerial settings, the periphery and the centre. Strategy creation grew out of everyday activities in the periphery in sharp conflict with the centre, which triggered strategic change (Regnér, 2003:79). Accordingly, inductive and exploratory actions are likely to be more applicable than deductive and exploiting ones in a strategy context characterised by ambiguity and complexity and vice versa. Both types of strategising and both periphery and centre play important roles in strategy.

To conclude this section: within the strategy-as-practice perspective, strategising is the result of the interaction between strategy praxis, strategy practices and strategy practitioners.

2.5 CRITICISM AGAINST THE STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

The previous sections offered detailed discussions on the origins of the strategy-as-practice perspective, its link within the existing strategy research arena and selected concepts foundational to the strategy-as-practice perspective. The preceding sections confirmed that the strategy-as-practice perspective is gaining ground in

terms of popularity as a perspective from which to study strategising in organisations, on different management levels and as the result of the work, workers and tools of strategy.

The rise of the strategy-as-practice perspective does not come without criticism. This section offers an overview of the criticism against the strategy-as-practice perspective, and counterarguments thereto. The main critics are Carter *et al.* (2008), and to a limited extent, Gherardi (2009) and Geiger (2009). These criticisms were published as articles in leading academic journals in 2008 and 2009. In response to the criticisms expressed by Carter *et al.* (2008), Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008b:101–104) defended their views in a rejoinder in *Strategic Organization*.

Clegg *et al.* (2004:24) commend the call by Whittington (2003a) for a European perspective on strategy, distinct from the dominant North American school which draws palpable inspiration from the field of industrial economics. Yet, in an article published four years later, the same authors criticise this geographical distinction. A special issue of *Human Relations* (Vol. 60, No. 1, 2007) appeared and was guest edited by Balogun, Jarzabkowski and Seidl. According to Carter *et al.* (2008), all the contributions in this special issue were from European-based authors. In the rejoinder by Jarzabkowski and Whittington in the same journal, this criticism is defused: strategy as practice is not an exclusively European movement (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008b:103). The 2007 special issue of *Human Relations* included three North American authors and the 2003 *Journal of Management Studies* issue included two other authors.

Additionally, the novelty of the strategy-as-practice research agenda is questioned (Geiger, 2009:132). Clegg *et al.* (2004:21) do not consider the key question of strategy-as-practice regarding what strategists actually do as groundbreaking. They feel that this question is reminiscent of the questions asked of management 30 years ago. They proclaim the relevance of the Mintzbergian tradition on managerial work. Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008b) resolve this proclamation by stating that strategy-as-practice scholars agree, and Whittington (2004) argues explicitly for a post-Mintzbergian perspective. Another criticism raised by Geiger (2009) is that understanding what actors do is not enough. Additional concerns are also raised about the claim of strategy-as-practice to integrate earlier epistemologically and ontologically more reflexive positions into a new orthodoxy (Carter *et al.*, 2008:83).

Building on this theme, Gherardi (2009:115) raises concerns about the loss of critical power of the practice concept to more orthodox accounts shaped by assumptions of rationalism and cognitivism in organisation studies. Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008b) invite more scholars, from all over the world, to join the strategy-as-practice movement as it is far from being a new orthodoxy or a conventional wisdom. The strategy-as-practice perspective can offer an open, pluralistic and frequently disputatious space for research.

The strategy-as-practice perspective displays a high degree of ambiguity which is, according to Carter *et al.* (2008:85–86), undoubtedly useful for creating a loosely coupled network of actions, ideas and people with different agendas. They admit that a certain degree of ambiguity is necessary to maintain the flexibility of locally meaningful interpretations in changing contexts, but the ambiguity that helped to institutionalise the strategy-as-practice perspective might, at the same time, hinder its theoretical advancement as improbable glosses accumulate.

The criticism of strategy-as-practice is not limited to the originality of its key question. Carter *et al.* (2008) also express their critique against the concept of strategy in the strategy-as-practice perspective. As stated earlier, within strategy-as-practice, strategy is not only an attribute of organisations but also an activity undertaken by people – strategy is something that people do (Jarzabkowski, 2003:529). The criticism lies in the empirical analysis of strategy-as-practice where strategy becomes somehow reified. Jarzabkowski (2003:41) declares that the strategic planning cycle is a powerful practice for distributing an increasingly consistent interpretation of desirable strategic activity based upon accountability and financial viability. Taking the claim that strategy should be treated more as a verb than a noun, Carter *et al.* (2008) argue that this is precisely what Igor Ansoff would have said several decades ago, namely that planning cycles are a powerful practice because they fix direction, albeit that it was couched in noun-terms. Jarzabkowski (2003:23) identified themes of direction setting, resource allocation and monitoring and control as passage points through which strategy is played out in practice. Carter *et al.* (2008) expand on their argument by stating that these passage points resemble Fayol's management principles (Carter *et al.*, 2008:86). Strategising as a verb would surely encompass other, more grey areas that remain unexplored in current approaches and which frame the labour of strategising.

Carter *et al.* (2008:83–99) also question what the RBV has to offer strategy-as-practice as the RBV bears the imprint of its industrial economics origin. According to them, the alliance with RBV makes no sense at all. Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008:102) disagree: the RBV is not tied to economics; RBV concepts such as routines are treated in sociological fashion.

As alluded to in section 2.3.1.2, the concept of practice is not clearly defined. Jarzabkowski (2004:545) differentiated between practice and practices: “Practice is the actual activity, events or work of strategy, while practices are those traditions, norms, rules and routines through which the work of strategy is constructed.” In so doing, practice resembles action whereas practices become the formal procedures of organisations. Carter *et al.* (2008:89) declare it confusing that the singular and the plural of the word practice mean different things. Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008b) respond with a clarification between praxis and practices. Praxis refers to the sheer labour of strategy, while practices involve the various routines, discourses, concepts and technologies through which this strategy labour is made possible.

Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008b:102) underline this difference with traditional approaches in the strategy discipline by confirming that the essential distinctiveness of strategy as practice lies in its decentring of the organisation. Consistent with this view, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:71) argue that strategic management research is concerned with performance outcomes. Whether with regard to types of strategies (diversification or whatever) in the case of strategy-content scholars, or types of decision-making or changes in the case of strategy-process scholars, the fundamental concern of traditional approaches is with the fate of organisations or sets of organisations. Strategy-as-practice is less exclusively concerned with the performance of organisations and more concerned with the performance of practices and practitioners in strategy praxis.

Geiger (2009) alleges that the strategy-as-practice perspective adopts a process perspective, and he expresses concern about the absence, according to him, of a philosophical paradigm. The idea of getting closer to reality by observing its micro-functioning is also questioned. According to Geiger (2009), it is unclear why observing micro-phenomena means being closer to reality. Just because observations focus on the micro does not automatically make them true and justifiable observations of a reality out there. Geiger further builds his case by stating

that it seems to be crudely naive to believe that being micro has anything to do with being close to reality. The question could be raised as to how one knows that one is micro enough and finally has reached a true and accurate understanding of reality. Geiger concludes by setting an agenda: practice-based approaches in organisation studies should not simply explore what people do in organisations, but rather try to answer the question why and how practices continue to be practices in organisations, which normative and institutionalising power they unfold and how they are changed and how their implicit norms are questioned and reflected. Specifically, Geiger calls for practice-based studies that can unfold and potentially enrich their critical power firstly by explaining how practices get sustained and continue to be practiced, and secondly by exploring how practitioners speak and reflect upon practices, thereby reaching a new and revised understanding of what good practice is.

Given these views, the following section outlines the strategy-as-practice research agenda. Studying strategy-as-practice also offers some methodological challenges. These methodological challenges of studying strategising will be discussed in Chapter 5.

2.6 THE STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE RESEARCH AGENDA

In 1996, Whittington already called for more research about strategising. He acknowledged that since the 1960s a great deal was learnt about different types of strategies (Whittington, 1996:734). He also claimed that by then, relevant bodies of research existed, but they did not, at that time, cohere and called for some direction. He commended process research that focuses on the fate of the whole organisation, but explained that process research does not address the performance of the individual practitioner. Although the leadership tradition of research contributed greatly to establish the characteristics and behaviours of transformatory and charismatic business leaders, it did not say enough about the work of ordinary strategic practitioners in their day-to-day work routines. Whittington (1996) stated that the practice label could give coherence to a range of existing streams of research while at the same time highlight areas for further development. He concluded his argument by stating that the practice research agenda is large.

Ten years later, in 2006, Whittington confirmed that in a sense, examining the practice of strategy simply extended a long tradition of research closely examining managerial work. However, he claims that an individualist focus on micro-level managerial activity and roles left larger social forces on one side in an under-theorised category of context. At that stage, with some emergent exceptions (e.g. Rouleau, 2005:617), practice-orientated research has tended to bifurcate between intra- and extra-organisational levels. Accordingly, there was a growing body of work on the influence of strategy practices on whole societies (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Oakes, Townley & Cooper, 1998; Whittington, 2003a, Grandy & Mills, 2004). Other practice-orientated studies have grappled more directly with intra-organisational strategy activity (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2003).

Whittington (2006a:617) states that these intra- and extra-organisational studies have achieved considerable insight. He cautions, “tricks are being missed”. Appreciation of wider contexts can help make intelligible many of the complex details revealed by intimate investigations. Reciprocally, close engagement can uncover the real ambiguity and fluidity of the broad strategy trends found in sectoral or societal analyses. Whittington maintains that, in order to complete the practice turn, these two levels need to be looped more closely together.

The most recent work on mapping the strategy-as-practice agenda is by Vaara and Whittington (2012). They reviewed research in strategy-as-practice through the lens of social practice by explaining how strategy-making (strategising) is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices.

The strategy-as-practice perspective enriches traditional strategy research with four distinctive features. Firstly, by including the work of strategic management research social theorists such as Bourdieu, De Certeau and Foucault, the strategic management discipline is taken well beyond its economic roots. Secondly, strategy-as-practice research expands the scope of what strategy research explains. Strategy-as-practice research moves away from performance in economic terms, which has been the most important keyword in the strategic management literature in the period 1980–2005 (Furrer, Thomas & Goussevskaia, 2008). Rather, it is concerned with a range of outcomes such as how managers perform their roles or performativity – how strategy as a social practice produces that which it purports

simply to describe or explain (MacKenzie, 2006). Thirdly, strategy-as-practice research has widened the types of organisations being studied. Many strategy-as-practice studies have examined not-for-profit organisations, city administrations, universities and public hospitals. Strategy-as-practice research enables the investigation of institutional contexts, moving away from narrowly defined economic environments. Fourthly, strategy-as-practice research shows a strong orientation toward various qualitative research methods, often in single organisations. The strategic management discipline has traditionally preferred statistical studies with ever-increasing sample sizes. Strategy-as-practice research is the mirror image of the traditional methods. Strategy-as-practice methods may include participant observation (Samra-Fredericks, 2010), action research (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008), research subject diaries (Balogun & Johnson, 2005) and work shadowing (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). Strategy-as-practice research has also opened opportunities to analyse various kinds of discursive practices, such as strategy talk and text (Vaara, Kleymann & Seristö, 2004; Clarke, Kwon & Wodak, 2012). One of the strengths of the strategy-as-practice research perspective is to uncover the activity inside the process (Brown & Duguid, 2001), in other words, delving deeper into what is actually going on.

The review by Vaara and Whittington (2012) acknowledges the contribution of strategy-as-practice research towards advancing social theories in strategic management. In their review of research in strategy-as-practice, Vaara and Whittington (2012:285-336) explain that the power of the strategy-as-practice perspective lies in its ability to explain how strategy-making is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices.

Earlier, Johnson *et al.* (2007:16–18) used a diagram to indicate where practice research fits into the strategic management discipline. They used this exploded map of the strategic management discipline (Figure 5) to show the links between parts of the strategy field.

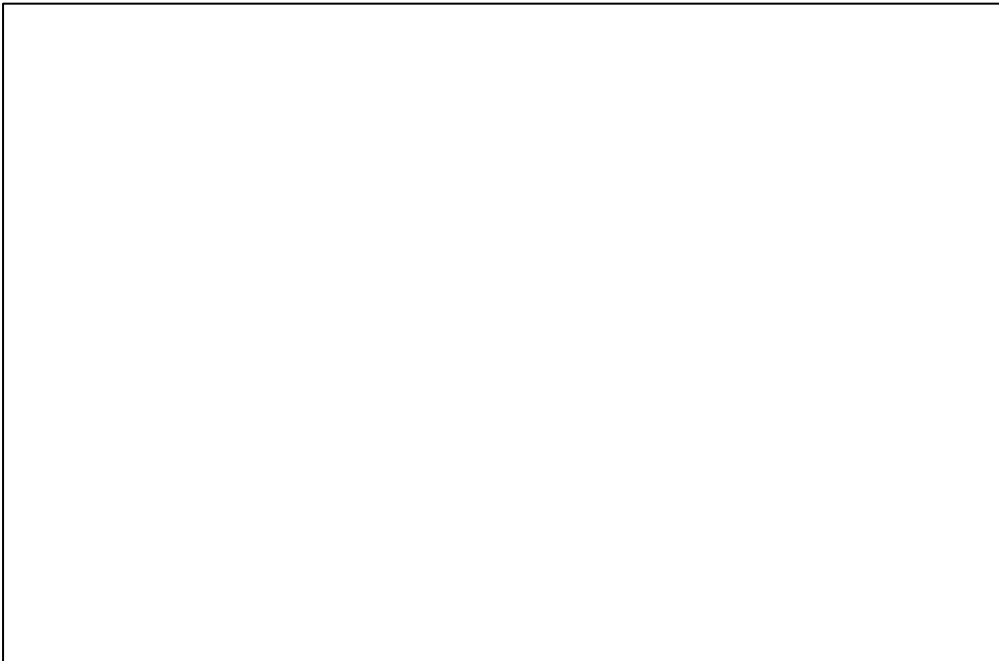


Figure 5: An exploded map of strategic management

Source: Adapted from Johnson *et al.* (2007:18)

Vertically, the map shows that there are micro-levels and more macro-levels of concern relevant to strategy. The map offers six blocks with three levels. The middle-level block represents the central current orthodoxy of the strategic management discipline. Here the typical endeavour is to link organisational decisions and actions to organisational performance. Traditionally, these organisational actions are categorised as either content (left-hand column), or process (right-hand column). Content research considers what strategies are while process research considers how strategies are achieved.

The other two levels in the exploded map of the strategic management discipline are generally considered relevant in relation to organisational strategy, but do not represent mainstream research in the strategy field. The top level is concerned with macro-level practices that take on legitimacy at institutional level and which people in organisations encounter and with which they engage. The main focus is on macro-level institutions and institutionalisation, such as strategic planning processes or managing for shareholder value.

The traditional organisational level of strategy research and the institutionalised practices that inform it both assume the lower level of micro-activities in Figure 5, but traditionally do not enter it, at least not explicitly. However, strategy-as-practice is

concerned with this micro-level: with the activities of those who enact, develop and deliver strategies, i.e. the activities related to the doing of strategy.

The map presented in Figure 5 reflects divisions that, through the practice lens, become less rigid. What people do in relation to strategy straddles all the categories.

In the same way that Johnson *et al.* (2007) mapped the strategy-as-practice research domain, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:69–95) reviewed and mapped the growing body of research in the strategy-as-practice field.

Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:70) start their review by referring to the statements by Weick (1979) and Whittington (2002) who confirmed that strategy research has been influenced by wider concerns to humanise management and organisation research by bringing the individual back in. According to Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), there appears to be little room in mainstream strategy research for living beings whose emotions, motivations and actions shape strategy. The developing field of strategy-as-practice research has taken this concern seriously, bringing human actors and their actions and interactions to the centre stage of strategy research.

Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:73) base their review of the body of research in the strategy-as-practice field by confirming the definition of praxis, as defined by Sztompka (1991) and Reckwitz (2002). This definition is helpful in linking the macro and the micro in strategy-as-practice research because it indicates that praxis is both an embedded concept that may be operationalised at different levels from the institutional to the micro-level, and also dynamic, shifting fluidly through the interactions between levels. Praxis is found where more than two levels meet, a dialectic synthesis of what is going on in a society and what people are doing (Sztompka, 1991:96). Thus, praxis may occur at more than one level.

Drawing upon this definition, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:73) distinguish three levels within the existing strategy-as-practice literature. **Micro** refers to those studies that explore and attempt to explain the strategy praxis at levels of the individual or group's experience of a specific episode, such as a decision, meeting or workshop. **Meso** refers to studies that explore and attempt to explain strategy praxis at the organisational or sub-organisational level such as a change programme, or a strategy process, or a pattern of strategic actions. **Macro** refers to studies that

explore and attempt to explain strategy praxis at the institutional level, which are most typically associated with explaining patterns of action within a specific industry.

Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) then classified the literature around the two dimensions of practitioners and praxis and subsequently developed a typology of nine domains of strategy-as-practice research, based on three types of practitioner (internal individual and aggregate practitioners and external aggregate practitioners) and the three levels of praxis (micro, meso and macro). Each of these domains represents a possible area of strategy-as-practice research. It is important to note that these domains are not mutually exclusive domains for conducting strategy-as-practice research. Figure 6 depicts the typology of strategy-as-practice research by type of practitioner and level of praxis.

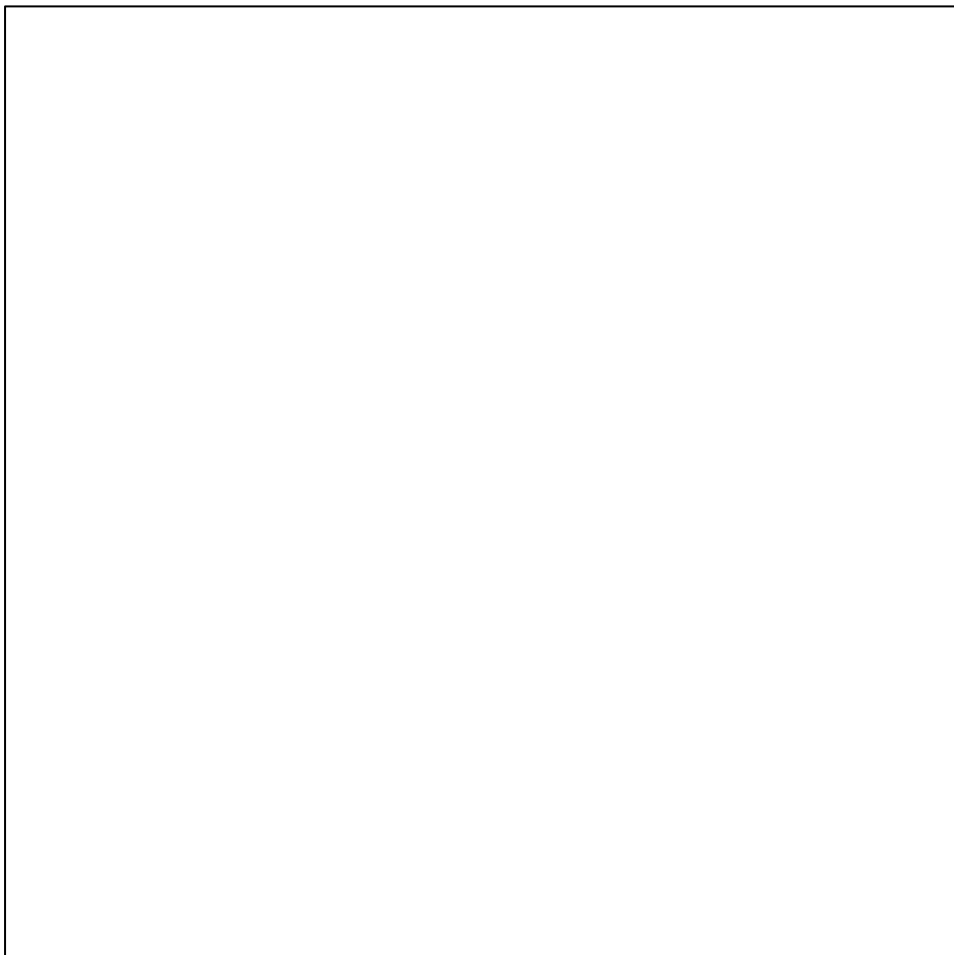


Figure 6: Typology of strategy-as-practice research by type of practitioner and level of praxis

Source: Adapted from Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:74)

The nine domains, as depicted in Figure 6, are explained next. Reference is made to previous studies in the domains.

Domain A: Individual practitioners and micro-praxis

Domain A represents studies where practitioners, as individual actors, are examined and focuses on micro-levels of praxis that are largely proximal to the experiences of those actors. This domain may include studies aiming to understand the association between individuals' experiences and their personal strategy praxis, in terms of their perception of contributing to strategy. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) contend that this domain, focusing upon the micro and the individual, might be considered one of the most pertinent to the strategy-as-practice agenda in terms of uncovering what strategists do. Notable contributions in this domain include Mantere (2005; 2008) who studied how individuals interpret their strategy role and which strategy practices enable or disable individuals to go beyond their operational responsibilities in influencing strategic issues. Samra-Fredericks (2003) used ethnomethodology to demonstrate the relationship between senior managers' talk and the praxis of a specific strategic decision. Hodgkinson and Clarke (2007) investigated the actions of strategists as they engage with particular strategy practices in their praxis. Stensaker and Falkenberg (2007) contributed to the understanding of how the individual interpretations of employees and middle managers affected the implementation of a strategic change. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:75) claim that there are many opportunities to further develop the understanding of what practitioners do within their immediate locales as they engage in strategy-making.

Domain B: Individual actors and meso-praxis

This domain includes studies that attempt to explain individuals' engagement in organisational or sub-organisational praxis. It is argued that what individuals do may impact on how the organisation shapes strategy or how it shapes what sub-organisational units do. Potentially, studies in this domain can construct links between individual actors, their actions and interactions and organisational level outcomes. Studies within this domain also provide a means of explaining meso-level praxis by establishing how individual actions and interactions shape and are shaped by aggregate practitioner actions, which in turn shape and are shaped by organisational praxis. This may be helpful for establishing an association between what practitioners do and what organisations do, particularly in large or complex organisations where direct relationships between actors and organisational activities are hard to substantiate (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009:75).

Domain C: Individual practitioners and macro-praxis

Domain C examines the relationship between individuals and macro-praxis where macro refers to institutions, markets or industries. Given the expressed aim within strategy-as-practice research to make stronger links between micro-analysis and macro-phenomena, this domain appears to be a rich context for future studies. However, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:76) warn that it may be difficult to establish links between individual actions and interactions and the praxis occurring at the macro-levels empirically.

Domain D: Aggregate practitioners and micro-praxis

This domain examines the relationship between practitioners as aggregate actors and the micro instance of praxis. Examples of practitioners considered as aggregate actors are found where practitioners are considered according to position, such as middle managers, (e.g. Floyd & Wooldrdige, 2003; Currie & Procter, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Mantere, 2008) or top management teams (e.g. Wiersema & Bantel, 1992; Jarzabkowski, 2000; Carpenter, 2002; Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002), or function, such as engineers (Laine & Vaara, 2007). An alternative approach is to explain how aggregate actors construct themselves and their own identities and positions within the strategy-making process, and to examine their own praxis as an aggregate actor within the wider strategy process, such as in the study by Balogun and Johnson (2004). Another example is found in a study by Sillince and Mueller (2007) who describe the deliberate activities of middle managers to frame and reframe responsibility for a strategic initiative, according to its evolving prospects for success. These authors show how middle managers change the understanding and the nature of the strategy over time. According to Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), a potential, broad question that indicates the nature of research in this domain relates to how the interactions between top managers and middle managers within a strategy workshop, shape the conduct and outcome of that workshop.

Domain E: Aggregate practitioners and meso-praxis

In domain E, studies may examine one class of aggregate actor or multiple groups of aggregate actors or peripheral and corporate actors. This may lead to a comparison and contrasting of the different types of strategy praxis of each group. Examples of studies in this domain are those by Balogun and Johnson (2004) who investigated middle managers or Jarzabkowski (2000) and Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002) who investigated top management teams. Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) considered the

peripheral actor while Ambrosini, Bowman and Burton-Taylor (2007) compared service quality of two divisions in a financial service provider. Hoon (2007) compared the formal and informal interactions between middle and senior managers and the way that these interactions enable middle managers to have their ideas incorporated into the organisation's strategy. Rather than studying the actors who made the decisions, Salvato (2003) studied the decisions taken over time as the praxis of each organisation, linking it to the organisation's development. Drawing from Bourdieu (2007), Gomez (2010) studied how actors adopt and internalise specific practices. Gomez (2010) argues that such a process of internalising involves the development of a particular kind of habitus, i.e. dispositions that make individuals become strategists over time.

According to Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:78), most studies in domain E explored links between the praxis of the aggregate actors they had defined and sub-organisational or organisational level praxis. A key feature in this domain is the links between what classes of actors do and what organisations or their divisions do.

Domain F: Aggregate practitioners and macro-praxis

Domain F deals with the relationships between aggregate practitioners within organisations, industries or sectors. According to Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:78), relatively little empirical work exists within this domain. One study (Hodgkinson *et al.* 2006) examined the extent to which strategy workshops, as a type of practice in which aggregate actors are engaged, have become diffused and institutionalised across multiple sectors. Another study (Parker, 2007) attempted to explain how boardroom actors as aggregate practitioners attempt to shape new institutional arrangements at state and institutional level. However, this study on boardroom strategising did not identify explicitly with the strategy-as-practice perspective. Another area of study within domain F framed the interaction between corporate managers in retail transnational companies as aggregate organisational actors and extra-organisational actors, such as securities analysts, in shaping and reshaping the corporate governance system and, hence, the praxis of retail transnational companies (Palmer & O'Kane, 2007). A potential broad question in domain F may be: How do executives in a specific firm take account of an attempt to influence the industry analyses that shape investment in their industry?

Domain G: Extra-organisational aggregate actors and micro-praxis

This domain, as well as domain I, examines the relationship between extra-organisational practitioners and various levels of praxis. In line with strategy-as-practice literature, extra-organisational practitioners include external actors such as consultants, media, gurus and institutional actors such as business schools and environmental groups. Domain G examines how extra-organisational actors shape micro-level practice. Despite the fact that there has been a large conceptual debate on how strategy knowledge is shaped by various actors, the interactions between extra-organisational actors and micro-level practice have been neglected in empirical strategy research (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009:79). However, within the strategy-as-practice field, some studies have indeed attempted to capture the interactions between organisational members and extra-organisational actors. As stated earlier, Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006) investigated the consultants who participate in strategy workshops and who are likely to influence the praxis thereof. Molloy and Whittington (2005) considered reorganisation initiatives while Sturdy, Schwarz and Spicer (2006) regarded the role of consultants during strategising by examining their interactions with organisational actors during business dinners. These dinners were incidents of micro-praxis during which trust between organisational and extra-organisational actors could be established and important or sensitive information could be exchanged. Within this domain, the focus is on the interplay between external actors' praxis and internal actors' praxis.

Domain H: Extra-organisational aggregate actors and meso-praxis

The focus of domain H is on the relationship between extra-organisational actors and strategy praxis at the sub-organisational level. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:79) confirm that there are few studies within the strategy-as-practice field that indicate the role of extra-organisational actors in shaping strategy praxis. Whittington *et al.* (2006) note how the regulatory and governmental pressures impacted upon an organisation and shaped its workshop discussions. Other studies refer to external consultants and their influence upon strategy implementation and strategic planning in organisations (e.g. Sminia, 2005, Laine & Vaara, 2007). These studies show direct and indirect involvement of extra-organisational aggregate actors in the strategy praxis of organisations. Yet, this topic has not been a central focus of either theoretical or empirical studies within the strategy-as-practice field.

Domain I: Extra-organisational aggregate actors and macro-praxis

Domain I examines the association between extra-organisational actors and macro-praxis. According to Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:80), there is a growing interest in this domain. A number of theoretical papers conceptualise the association between multiple actors and the construction of strategy as a field. Whittington (2007:1580) suggests that strategy may be seen as an institutional field with a collective identity and a set of connections that go far beyond particular organisations. Actors within the institutional field include, amongst others, organisations, business schools, the media, the state and financial institutions (Whittington, 2006). Another approach may be a more specific focus upon the interaction between particular types of actors, such as researchers, policy-makers, businesses and analysts in institutionalising specific business forms and governance systems (Palmer & O'Kane, 2007). There is substantial interest in studying domain I, particularly in terms of understanding particular types of strategy and strategy resources as institutionalised practices as well as how these practices emerge, evolve and are modified through interaction between multiple actors.

Figure 6 and the discussion above demonstrate that the strategy-as-practice field has been dominated empirically by studies in domains A, B, D and E. It is noteworthy that studies, which examine domain E, aggregate actors engaged in meso-praxis, indicating that strategy-as-practice researchers continue to be interested in how groups of actors shape or are shaped by activity at sub-organisational and organisational level. These studies are, to some extent, consistent with the earlier strategy process traditions of research.

The majority of practice studies have been in the domains in the bottom left-hand corner of the typology, depicted in Figure 6, which focuses upon the individual or the aggregate organisational actor engaged in micro- or meso-praxis. More empirical work has been conducted at the micro- and meso-levels than at the macro-level, despite considerable theoretical interest in the macro-level of strategy as a social practice and a profession.

Using the typology of strategy-as-practice research by type of practitioner and level of praxis, this research is poised within Domains A and B, investigating what individual practitioners (middle managers) do and how their doing shapes micro- and meso-praxis and how their doing is shaped by macro-praxis. From a theoretical

perspective, this research will make three valuable contributions to the extant body of knowledge on the practices of middle managers: First, unlike previous studies that mainly focused on the top management teams in universities, this research will provide an analysis of how individual middle managers put strategy into practice at a university. Second, this research will show what the unique characteristics of the university organisational context are in relation to the strategising activities of middle managers. Third, the macro-environmental factors that influence the strategising activities of middle managers will be identified.

As stated earlier, Vaara and Whittington (2012:285–336) also conducted a review of research in strategy-as-practice. In their review, these authors point out how strategy-as-practice research brought new theoretical resources to strategic management, how it has gone beyond the focus of strategy discipline on economic performance per se, how it has broadened the scope of organisational types in strategy research, and how it has mobilised a variety of qualitative methods that have been under utilised in research on strategic management (Vaara & Whittington, 2012:292). These authors structured their review around the three elements of the strategy-as-practice perspective. In doing so, they described

- the research that contributed to understanding the enabling and constraining effects of strategy practices;
- the research that contributed to understanding the activity of strategy-making; and
- the research on the roles and identities of the actors.

According to the review by Vaara and Whittington (2012), 24 studies were conducted on the enabling and constraining effects of strategy practices. The research context of the majority of these studies was the profit sector using a qualitative research approach. Only 4 of the 24 studies were conducted in the not-for-profit sector. Further, in their review of studies on praxis, Vaara and Whittington (2012) identified 18 studies with only five conducted in the not-for-profit sector. All the studies on praxis identified by Vaara and Whittington (2012:301–304) followed a qualitative research approach. Finally, Vaara and Whittington (2012) identified 15 studies that investigated the roles and identities of the strategy actors. Again, the dominant methodology was a qualitative research approach, mostly in the profit sector. It is clear that the dominant methodology within strategy-as-practice research comprises

a qualitative approach. Most of the previous studies were conducted in the profit sector, which confirms that strategy-as-practice studies using a qualitative approach in the not-for-profit sector are open for exploration.

The review by Vaara and Whittington (2012) also shows that research within the strategy-as-practice perspective has contributed significantly to the strategic management discipline. However, these authors argue that more needs to be done to realise the full potential of the strategy-as-practice perspective. They call for analysis of agency where the practice approach allows one to go beyond methodological individualism. They also call for studies of practices where an appreciation of fields or systems can link micro-activities to macro-level institutional phenomena. Vaara and Whittington (2012:310) claim plenty of research still needs to be done on strategy emergence, the role of materiality and critical interpretations of strategy.

Concluding comments on the strategy-as-practice research agenda

Although previous studies have made important advances, a need exists to investigate the other organisational practices that are not often recognised as strategic, but still have an important role vis-à-vis strategy-making (Chia & Rasche, 2010; Tsoukas, 2010). Studying middle managers' strategising practices would contribute to insight into the organisational dynamics of strategising and emphasise the diversity of these practices and the polyphony that they often produce in and around strategy-making (Vaara & Whittington, 2012:311). Studying middle managers within the university context could inform the practices of the institutions responsible for teaching and researching. It may shed light on contextual influences upon practice and on the way individual practitioners deploy practice and it may provide a basis for relating these specific micro-findings to other institutions. This research set out to expand the body of knowledge in terms of middle manager practices in the strategising process in general, and made an original contribution at the frontiers of middle manager activity in a university context in South Africa. The current research fell within the not-for-profit sector and used a qualitative research approach to investigate the strategising practices of middle managers at a university as strategy practitioners.

2.7 CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH

The research questions were included in Chapter 1. The central research question asks what the strategising practices are that have arisen from the interaction between middle managers and the organisational context. The first sub-question of this research asks what roles do academic and non-academic middle managers fulfil in strategising in the university context. The second sub-question asks how middle managers engage with the materiality of strategy work. The materiality of strategy work is explored through the strategy talk, strategy tools and strategy text. Finally, the third sub-question asks what the enablers and constraints are of the strategy work of middle managers in the university institutional context.

In answering the call for more practice-based research, this research used the strategy-as-practice perspective to explore the locally institutionalised practices embedded in the organisation culture, routines and reality. With reference to the domains of research as developed by Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), this research was conducted within domains A and B. It firstly explored the micro-level practices of individual middle managers. It also explored how these actors shape the strategising in their sub-units positions this research within domain B.

The unanswered questions identified in the existing body of knowledge, as described by Jarzabkowski (2001), Whittington (2003b), Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) and Vaara and Whittington (2012), and the way the current research attempted to answer those questions, are stipulated in Table 3.

Table 3: The unanswered questions on the strategy-as-practice research agenda

Source	Unanswered questions	Contribution of the current study
Jarzabkowski (2001)	How can the practical relevance of business research be improved?	The research investigated the locally institutionalised strategising practices of middle managers as embedded in organisational culture, routines and reality and reports on the lived experiences of middle

		managers instead of abstract practices.
Whittington (2003a)	How can the strategy field provide more humanised theories that bring actors and actions into research frame?	The research was humanised as the focus was not on empirical variables, but explored the messy realities of strategising with a focus on actors (not the organisation) and the situated activity of these actors instead of abstract processes.
Whittington (2003b:117)	Where and how is the work of strategising actually done? Who does the strategising work? What are the skills required for this work and how are they acquired? What are the common tools and techniques of strategising? How has the work of strategising organised itself? How are the products of strategising communicated and consumed?	This current research investigated one group of actors and the way they did strategy through exploring their strategising practices. The tools and techniques used by these practitioners were described by the practitioners themselves. The practitioners also provided descriptions of how they used and communicated the socio-material artefacts in their strategising practices.
Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009)	What do strategists do? How does that which individual actors do impact on the way the organisation shapes strategy and how does it shape that which sub-organisational units do?	The current research asked middle managers how they do strategy. The chosen methodology allowed for rich descriptions of the practices and provided an understanding of what practitioners do within their immediate locales as they engage in strategising. The research investigated how

		individual actions and interactions shape and are shaped by academic and non-academic middle managers (as aggregate actors) who in turn shape and are shaped by organisational praxis.
Feldman and Orlikowski (2011)	How is organisational action enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices?	The current research identified the enabling and constraining conditions within the unique context that impact on the strategising practices of middle managers.
Vaara & Whittington (2012)	Which practices have a strategic role in the sense that they form the basis of organisational success or survival?	

Source: Own compilation

The current research not only provides insight into the strategising practices of university middle managers, but also contributes to theory development on the conditions that enable and constrain the strategising practices of middle managers.

2.8 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was to offer a review of the existing body of knowledge on the strategy-as-practice perspective. It commenced with a review of the origins of strategy starting as an ancient Greek concept and developing into a business concept. The chapter further offered a review of the rise of strategy, from business policy to an academic and business concept considered as the most expensive story told in organisations. Strategy-as-practice was introduced as a consequence of the activity-based perspective. This was followed by a detailed description of the theoretical framework on which the strategy-as-practice perspective is built. Selected concepts within the strategy-as-practice perspective were then discussed in more

detail. A review of the criticisms against the strategy-as-practice field was offered with defences from the most popular strategy-as-practice authors and researchers. Lastly, this chapter reviewed the research agenda within strategy-as-practice and ended with a confirmation of where this study fits into the research agenda.

Strategy-as-practice, as a subject field and a research agenda, offers support in favour of social practices in strategy, thereby moving away from the focus on economic performance. The strategy-as-practice perspective helps to advance sociological theories in strategic management and offers alternative outcomes to economic performance, expands the empirical contexts of strategy research and promotes new methodologies for studying strategising. It offers the potential to identify the enabling and constraining aspects of strategic practices, the role of skilled performance in changing the course of events and the social construction of strategy practitioners. The in-depth analysis of micro-strategising practices has practical implications for managers, and in the case of this research, middle managers and other organisational actors. The strategy-as-practice research agenda also has the potential to develop strategy as a profession and contributes to research that is practically relevant. An analysis of organisational practices and the way in which practitioners at times pause to strategise is important in allowing researchers to comprehend how some organisational practices – that have evolved over time – form the basis for organisational success or survival. A close processual analysis may also reveal the very ways in which practices may change – either incrementally or precisely in and through deliberate strategising. Such analysis may help to comprehend better how and why some practices – and not others – come to be seen as strategic (Vaara & Whittington, 2012:315).

This research delved deep into institutional realities to learn what is actually going on in terms of strategising at middle management level. The locally institutionalised practices, the inherent, tacit knowledge and the sociomaterial artefacts were explored and contributed to the growing knowledge base on the work, the workers and the tools of strategy in a university context.

CHAPTER 3

THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

“... the conception that top managers formulate strategy while middle managers carry it out is not only unrealistic, it is also self-defeating” (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994:47)

As described in Chapter 2, within the strategy-as-practice perspective, the focus cannot solely be on senior executives, but consideration should be expanded to the middle manager and non-managerial personnel. In the previous chapter, it was indicated that the current research investigated what the individual practitioner does and how this doing shaped micro- and meso-praxis. Specifically, this research considered middle managers and their strategising practices. Previous research has indicated that organisational performance is heavily influenced by what happens in the middle of the organisation, rather than at the top (Currie & Procter, 2005:1325). This implies that actions in organisations at middle management level influence not only how the strategy is practiced, but also how it impacts on the performance of the organisation.

Chapters 1 and 2 indicated that this current research was concerned with middle managers in action and observed how they practiced strategy through daily experiences within a university context. Chapter 3 reviews the existing literature on middle managers, specifically their strategic roles and strategising practices and how middle managers engage with the material aspects, such as the talk, text and tools, of strategy work.

As a management process, strategic management essentially involves many activities to ensure successful strategy-making (strategising) and execution. In the past, the role allocation of these fundamental activities has led to many debates with various conflicting views being expressed. One of these debates pertains to the management levels in organisations presenting conflicting views about who is responsible for these strategising activities. Traditionally, the focus of strategy

research has been on those in the upper echelons of organisations. Literature still considers, to a large extent, strategy as a top-down process of formulation separated from implementation, predisposing a focus upon top managers, their demographics and their decision-making processes (Karger *et al.*, 1975; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Wiersema & Bantel, 1992; Van de Ven, 1992; Papadakis *et al.*, 1998; Carpenter, 2002; Hambrick, 2007; Lyles & Schwenk, 2007). Floyd and Wooldridge (1994:48) are considered to be some of the first scholars to warn against looking at middle managers only from an operational viewpoint. According to them, when top management looks at middle managers from only an operational viewpoint, they fail to make distinctions about the variety of contributions made by middle managers and, in particular, overlook the possibility that middle managers play strategic roles. This view was later supported by Thomas and Linstead (2002:72) who explain that the role of middle management has not so much expired as it has been transformed. Considering the contemporary organisational structure, middle management is now much closer to the strategic apex in the flattened, delayed organisation. Consequently, the new model of the middle manager is one that has a more strategic focus and is more concerned with making strategic decisions impacting the strategic direction of the organisation, than the traditional model of the middle manager.

In line with the strategy-as-practice perspective, strategists consist of a much wider group of actors – managers at multiple levels of the organisation as well as influential external actors, such as consultants, analysts and regulators. Increasingly, strategy-as-practice studies indicate the importance of middle managers and lower-level employees as strategic actors. By identifying middle managers as strategists, the research agenda expands beyond top managers.

The body of research on middle managers is inspired by Floyd and Wooldridge's work (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1996; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2003; Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008). In addition to these authors, the work by Huy (2001; 2002, 2011), Carney (2003), Balogun and Johnson (2004), Mantere (2008) and Nordqvist and Melin (2008) contributes significantly to the body of knowledge on middle managers. From a conceptual perspective, some studies on middle managers within the higher education sector have been done, such as those by Slaughter and Leslie (1997), Smith (2002), Rowley and Sherman (2003), Deem

(2004), Parker (2004), Wolverton, Ackerman and Holt (2005) and Floyd (2012). A review of the contributions of these authors will be provided in Chapter 4.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive review of the existing knowledge base on middle managers as strategy practitioners. It provides an explanation of the foundations of the middle manager perspective and offers an integrated overview of previous research on middle managers. The chapter also includes a description of the practices of middle managers. Figure 7 diagrammatically depicts the structure of this chapter in relation to the thesis.

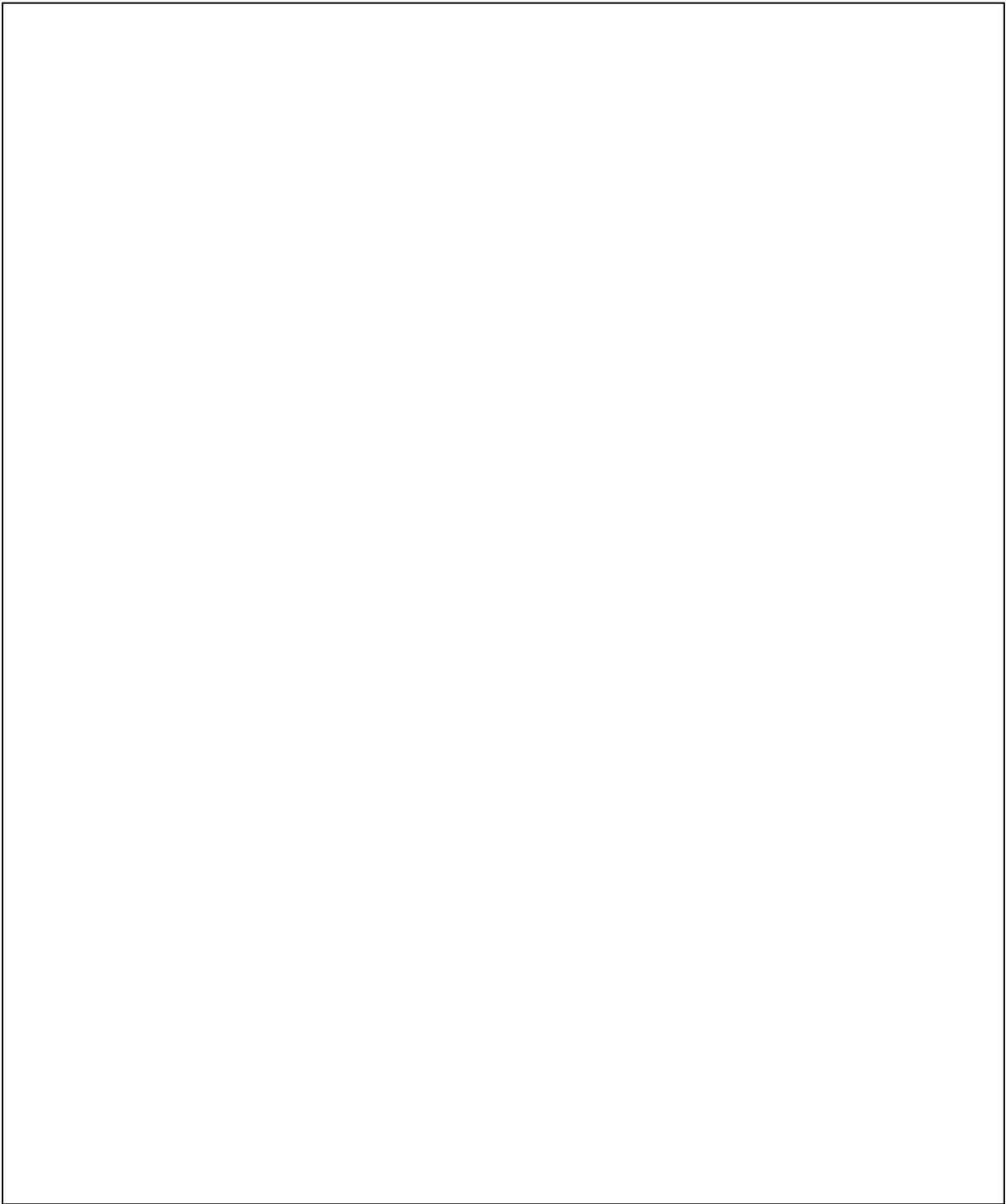


Figure 7: The structure of Chapter 3

Source: Own compilation

3.2 THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Academic literature in strategic management has predominantly focused on the actions and decisions of top managers. To a large degree, other managers have been seen as administrators or implementers (often termed “executors”): organising, directing and controlling predetermined plans. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994:48) refer to the “misunderstood middle manager”, as the middle manager has always been associated with the organisation’s control system. This description has applied for decades, and in the language of strategic management, the middle manager role has been defined as that of an implementer. However, by accepting that strategic management is about explaining differences among organisations and helping managers create economic value (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000:xi), it then needs to be acknowledged that strategic management is not merely formulation and implementation but also a culmination of various processes and inputs involving many stakeholders. According to Floyd and Wooldridge (2000:xiv), top managers are viewed as strategic architects and not as strategic decision-makers – they are designers and coordinators of a process and involve people at many levels to develop new capabilities.

In the late 1980s, Nonaka (1988) made the observation that strategic leadership occurs at all levels of the organisation. This view was later supported by Bartlett and Ghoshal (1993) who stated that strategising is being decentralised. A more substantive position for middle managers in the strategy process emerged in conjunction with a flatter and more entrepreneurial model of organisation that competes in knowledge-intensive environments (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008:1195). This new model and competitive business environment has contributed to changes in the roles and contributions of the different management levels in the organisation. Gratton (2011) acknowledges that, even though changes are needed to middle manager roles and competencies, it is not the end of the middle management position.

In describing the business environment, Floyd and Lane (2000:154) refer to the ever-tightening resource constraints that managers face as well as the blurring industry boundaries that increase the pressure to internalise new information. Furthermore, the nature of this environment complicates the strategic management process as top

managers are not in a position to analyse and execute a carefully conceived strategy – often, the time and information to follow a comprehensive process are not available. As stated in Chapter 2, strategies often emerge and may be rationalised to mean something very different from what was originally intended. This emerging approach to strategy is often due to actions taken by middle managers within the organisation, and strategic initiatives may arise without the awareness of top managers. Emergent strategy enables management that cannot be close enough to a situation, or those who cannot know enough about the varied activities of its organisation, to surrender control to those who have the information current and detailed enough to shape realistic strategies. Whereas the more deliberate strategies tend to emphasise central direction and hierarchy, the more emergent ones open the way for collective action and convergent behaviour.

In line with deliberate strategies, Wooldridge *et al.* (2008) describe the choice perspective as a model of strategising. Table 4 contrasts this choice perspective with the social learning perspective. The choice perspective developed from the strategy field's intellectual roots in economics and organisational theory.

Table 4: Foundations of the choice perspective in strategy

	Choice perspective	Social learning perspective
Intellectual roots	Chandler, 1962; Andrews, 1971; Child, 1972; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Porter, 1980	Moss-Kanter, 1982; Schilit, 1987; Mintzberg, 1978; Bower, 1986; Burgelman, 1983a
Process model	Decision-making	Social learning process
Key actors	Top management team	Multiple actors with middle managers as important mediators between levels and units
Process mechanisms	Analysis, decision-making and implementation	Generating ideas, initiative taking, strategic reintegration
Context	Complexity manageable by one central actor or team	Complexity beyond single actor's ability to integrate fragmented power and knowledge base

Source: Wooldridge *et al.* (2008:1193)

With TMT or upper echelons, strategy-making is assumed to be a decision-making process involving one top manager or a relatively small group of upper-level actors. The central question with this perspective revolves around how to formulate and

implement high-quality strategy decisions (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008:1193). From the choice perspective, the primary role of middle management is to implement strategy. Accordingly, the role of middle managers in the formulation of strategy is limited to providing input.

Strategy-making, or strategising, from the social learning perspective, is less a process of choice and more a matter of social learning. From this perspective, managers and others in the organisation learn how to adapt to a changing environment. This view opens up the strategy process for substantive, emergent influence by middle managers.

Middle managers are at the centre of the two processes that have become the basis of strategising – knowledge creation and the development of core competence. The social learning perspective provides both motivation and theoretical grounding for this shift and continues to be the basis for much contemporary work in middle-level strategic management (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008:1195).

The current research questioned the validity within the current business environment, challenging the views held by Andrews (1969), Child (1972), Hambrick (1987) and Porter (1980) who are considered the originators of the choice perspective in strategy. These authors argue that the members of the TMT are considered the key actors in strategy.

The current research was based on the assertion that much of what separates the performance of organisations occurs not at the top but in the middle of organisations, especially in the current business environment. This research supported the view of Floyd and Wooldridge (2000:15) who assert that strategising is a middle-level social learning process. According to these authors, top-level research is not sufficient to address strategising in organisations. This view is later expanded by Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:5) who state that a practice perspective on who strategists are goes beyond truncated views of strategy as a deliberate, top-down process, identifying a much wider group of actors for consideration.

3.2.1 The importance of middle managers

The body of knowledge on the contributions of middle management in the strategy process has increased substantially over the past 25 years. The importance of middle managers in strategy, considered as one group of practitioners, has been observed by a number of authors (e.g., Izraeli, 1975; Bower, 1986; Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Nonaka, 1988; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Huy, 2001; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Ikävalko, 2005).

According to Wooldridge *et al.* (2008:1190), the increasing interest in the middle management perspective is based on three motivations. Firstly, middle managers serve as important interfaces between otherwise disconnected actors and domains such as top and operating-level managers. Secondly, complex and geographically dispersed organisations require distributed leadership throughout the organisation. Complex and geographically dispersed organisations require middle managers that function as mediators between levels and units (Balogun & Johnson, 2004:523). Thirdly, middle management is a necessary point of observation from which to study the organisational process associated with building and renewing capabilities because middle managers may play a greater role than top managers in activities associated with capability development.

Some writers in management literature made early contributions to a general understanding of the middle management challenge (e.g., Burgelman, 1983a; 1983b; Moss-Kanter, 1982; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Guth & MacMillan, 1986) but their work did not focus on understanding their strategic role. Schilit (1987), for example, examined middle managers' strategic influence and found that attempts by middle management to influence strategy were often successful. Burgelman (1983a) developed a model of strategy-making that provided a theoretical basis for a new division of work between middle and top management in strategy-making. Later, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) hypothesised that middle management could influence strategy either by improving the quality of decisions or by increasing the efficiency of implementation. Their findings indicated effects on the quality of decisions to be more important than those flowing from improved implementation. Hart (1992) incorporated the involvement of organisation members in strategy-making and calls

for research that assesses not only the top but also the middle and operating-level managers' perceptions of strategy (Hart, 1992:346). Through their research at Asea Brown Boveri (ABB), Bartlett and Ghoshal (1993) redefined and realigned the strategic roles at various levels of management. Their findings indicated that middle managers should be recognised as a resource for frontline managers, coaching and supporting the entrepreneurial activities. Top managers, in contrast, were now seen to focus more on managing the entrepreneurial process such as developing broad objectives and setting performance standards (Hart & Banbury, 1994).

Initially, the importance of middle managers related to their central organisational position to detect weak signals from the market and customers, and to contribute to strategic issues (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1984; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill & Lawrence, 2001). Compared to top management, middle managers' direct access to, and intensive working with, the customer interface give them superior opportunities for more strategic activities. Their central position in the organisation opens up opportunities for them to influence the action in the organisation by acting as mediators between top managers and personnel. Middle managers also have an effect on the implementation of a deliberate strategy as their sense-making influences their actions (Balogun *et al.*, 2003) and their interpretation of the context effects the actions they take (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Dutton *et al.* 2001).

Floyd and Wooldridge (1997:465–485) investigated relationships between middle managers' formal position, their strategic influence and organisational performance. Among the 259 middle managers represented in their study, managers with formal positions in boundary-spanning sub-units reported higher levels of strategic influence activity than non-boundary-spanning managers. The authors theorised that managers in boundary-spanning positions mediate between the organisation's external and internal constituencies and, as a result, have more power to exert strategic influence. The study found that organisational performance was associated with more uniform levels of downward strategic influence, and more varied levels of upward influence among middle management cohorts. These findings were also confirmed by Pappas and Wooldridge (2007:323) who sampled 89 middle-level managers in a US-based urban hospital and found that boundary-spanning managers were more strategically active than their non-boundary-spanning counterparts.

Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) refer to strategic renewal, based on the theoretical contributions of Lindblom (1959), a political scientist who questioned the idea of analytically objective top management decisions formulated to achieve unambiguous goals. According to Floyd and Lane (2000:155), strategic renewal is an evolutionary process associated with promoting, accommodating and utilising new knowledge and innovative behaviour in order to bring about change in an organisation's core competencies and/or a change in its product market domain. This definition asserts that successful changes in organisational domain are preceded by bottom-up learning and internal selection. Building on Lindblom's argument, Quinn (1980) developed the notion of logical incrementalism and claim that strategies are not planned as much as they are emergent. The distinction between deliberate and emergent strategies was made in section 2.4.1 of Chapter 2. According to Quinn (1980), decisions are made at the last possible moment to take maximum advantage of available information and to minimise strategic risk. For Quinn, strategies are not formulated in a comprehensive master plan. Circumstances and assumptions are constantly changing, and it simply is not practical or logical to commit the organisation to a major new strategy at once. Floyd and Lane (2000:154) explain that the problem of strategic renewal manifests itself as strategic role conflict: middle managers face inconsistent behavioural expectations based on the need to deploy existing competencies efficiently and to experiment with new ones.

Supporting Quinn (1980), Mintzberg and McHugh (1985) confirm that strategy is a living construct that evolves and develops through time. Moreover, multiple actors are present in the strategy process, and strategy emerges from the activities of participants throughout the organisation.

Nonaka (1988) describes how strategies emerge through a middle-out process. His theory describes a spiral where middle managers interact in both horizontal and vertical directions to combine and recombine tacit and explicit forms of knowledge. For Nonaka, strategies develop from middle-level experiments, expanding outward at first, then upward, and, finally, when implemented as part of official strategy, downward (Nonaka, 1994).

To illustrate the ideas of Lindblom (1959), Mintzberg and McHugh (1985), Quinn (1980) and Nonaka (1988), Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) developed a general

picture of the middle-level strategy-formation process. Figure 8 identifies the core elements of a middle-level perspective on strategic renewal.

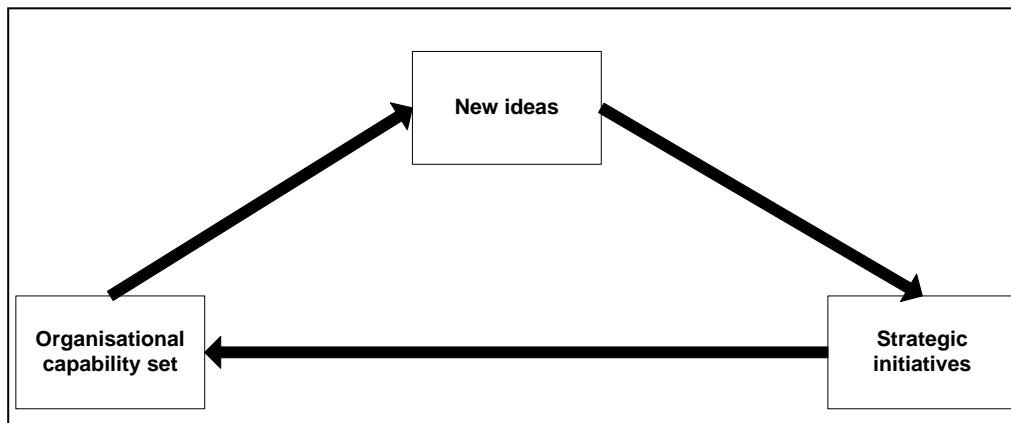


Figure 8: A general picture of the middle-level strategy-formation process

Source: Floyd and Wooldridge (2000:xvii)

The process depicted in Figure 8 begins when an individual within an organisation identifies an opportunity or idea that could take the organisation in a different strategic direction. Managers opt to pursue some of these divergent strategies and discard others. Ideas become initiatives when they become associated with a strategic issue and when they begin to receive support within an evolving social network. Initiatives, in turn, evolve into capabilities as members begin to adopt new work routines in the form of, for instance, feasibility studies, experimental programmes, trials and pilot projects. Ultimately, surviving ideas are championed by influential actors and when top management ratifies these, such ideas become part of the organisation's capability set.

According to Floyd and Wooldridge (2000), the three elements shown in Figure 8 may be broadly conceived as a set of process capabilities required for strategic renewal. Organisations need the ability to generate a variety of divergent ideas. Importantly, they need access to knowledge that deviates from the collective wisdom and that threatens established routines (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1999). Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) argue that individual subjectivity creates the potential for deviance and that information asymmetries created by weak social ties provide the raw material to fulfil this potential. Strategic renewal requires dynamic and flexible leadership from the middle of the organisation. Only when divergent ideas are associated with strategic issues facing the organisation can they become strategic

initiatives. This forms part of the interpretation process in organisations and links back to the collective sensemaking process, discussed in section 2.3.2 in Chapter 2.

Floyd and Wooldridge (2000:xix) confirm that individuals at middle levels of the organisation have the knowledge and experience to connect divergent ideas generated from within the organisation to strategic issues. Additionally, the unique position of middle-level managers makes them linking pins in the evolution of hierarchical social networks. In the process of sharing an idea, a belief that was once subjective begins to be articulated and thereby becomes more explicit in both its substance and the strategic logic supporting its adoption (Huff & Huff, 2000). Costanzo and Tzoumpa (2008:155) confirm this by explaining that, through the use of middle managers' personal networks, middle managers are knowledge seekers in the sense that they are able to gather explicit and tacit knowledge by simply looking for insights, judgement and understanding. Thus, with regard to knowledge transfer, the middle manager becomes a key link in the learning process within organisations, and a channel through which knowledge is transferred. This forms the foundation for broadening the network to include other functional subunits.

Moreover, as various middle-level representatives from different subunits interact with one another, they begin to learn new ways of coordinating their behaviour. These relationships trigger the emergence of new routines and the development of new procedural knowledge in the organisation. Lastly, the organisation needs the ability to integrate new initiatives and emergent routines into the existing capability set. In order to achieve this, informal support from top management becomes formal sanction to preserve coherence (Burgelman, 1983a; 1991; 1994). What began as informal social interaction, becomes established as the routine.

It is therefore clear that the knowledge and social influence processes at the middle play a key role in determining the organisation's capacity to innovate and renew its capabilities. The following section describes the middle manager, and is followed by an integrated overview of previous research on middle managers.

3.2.2 Describing the middle manager

Identifying who the top management team, or the upper echelons in an organisation are, is not that difficult. Carpenter, Geletkanycz and Sanders (2004) explain what upper echelons mean: the senior executives who make up an organisation's dominant coalition. In contrast, it is more difficult to explain what middle echelons mean. Pappas and Wooldridge (2007) confirm that identifying the most strategically influential and relevant middle-level professionals in an organisation can be problematic. Furthermore, understanding why some middle managers are involved in and influence the process more than others remains an important research issue. To complicate the identification of middle managers even more, one needs to consider the role of the management level in the strategy process. TMT research assumes that the role of the TMT is to make strategic decisions. According to Carpenter *et al.* (2004), the interactions and processes that underlie TMT decisions have generally been left unexplored. As was shown in Table 4 earlier, work from a middle-level perspective views strategising as a social learning process. The social learning perspective opens up the strategy process for substantive, emergent influence by middle managers. Rather than keeping the process in a black box, Wooldridge *et al.* (2008) continue exploring the strategy-making process and strategising activities to understand how managers are involved in and influence strategy as a key part of middle management research. Lastly, because of its heightened focus on process, identifying and understanding outcomes relevant to the middle management perspective is more problematic than identifying outcomes relevant to top management decisions. Middle management research is also concerned with intermediate outcomes such as subunit performance and initiative development. Given this added complexity, several sources were consulted in defining the middle manager (Nonaka, 1994; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Huy, 2001; Ikävalko, 2005).

From the outset, it should be noted that the term "middle management" or "middle manager" can be rather broad. It extends to managers located below top management and above first-level supervision in the hierarchy. Huy (2001:72) defines a middle manager as any manager two levels below the CEO and one level above line workers and professionals. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992:157) state that middle managers link the activities of vertically related groups and are responsible for at least sub-functional workflow, but not the workflow of the organisation as a

whole. This implies that middle managers are managers who operate in the middle of the organisational hierarchy.

However, Wooldridge *et al.* (2008:1190) warn that the distinguishing feature should not be the position in the organisation chart, but rather the middle managers' access to top management coupled with their knowledge of operations. Nonaka (1994:14) lauds middle management's ability to function as mediators between the organisation's strategy and day-to-day activities. This view is supported by Ikävalko (2005:26) who states, "middle managers are those actors who act as both subordinates and superiors". For the purpose of this research, and within the university context, middle managers were defined as the directors of schools, chairs of academic departments and managers of non-academic departments.

Section 3.3 offers an integrated overview of the body of knowledge of the middle management perspective in strategy. As will be indicated in the next section, this body of knowledge has developed substantially over the last two decades.

3.3 INTEGRATED OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE IN STRATEGY

In reviewing the literature on middle managers and the middle management perspective in strategy, three common themes were identified, namely:

1. the strategic roles of middle managers;
2. organisational cognition and the involvement of middle managers in strategising; and
3. the activities of middle managers and the organisational outcomes.

These three themes are discussed in the following three sections. It should be noted that some studies made contributions across these themes and are therefore discussed in more than one section.

Wooldridge *et al.* (2008:1196–1202) conducted an extensive review of the literature on middle managers and summarised it in table format. Their review forms the groundwork for the integrated overview presented in Table 5. Table 5 offers a summary of prior strategy research within a middle management perspective in

chronological order and indicates each study's focus in terms of one or more of these three themes. Several studies were conducted since Wooldridge *et al.* conducted their review in 2008. A summary of the studies from 2008 to date is also included in Table 5.

Table 5: Chronological summary of strategy research within a middle management perspective

Studies/Year	Research focus	Description of research/research findings
Moss-Kanter (1982)	Middle management outcomes	A study comprising 165 middle managers in five companies with a focus on innovation and the commonalities of most innovative companies was conducted. Research findings indicated that innovative middle managers tend to be visionary, comfortable with change and persistent.
Burgelman (1983a)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study reviewed previous studies on internal corporate venturing and a model of the strategic process in large, complex organisations, and focused on the interaction between the corporate level process of relating structure to strategy and the process of strategic behaviour at the product/market and middle levels in the organisation. Research findings indicated that autonomous strategic behaviour is likely to encounter nonrational obstacles in its efforts to convince top management that corporate strategy is necessary.
Guth and MacMillan (1986)	Middle management outcomes	The study focused on middle management motivation to implement strategy. Research findings indicated that middle managers who believe that their self-interest is being compromised can redirect a strategy, delay its implementation or totally sabotage the strategy.
Dutton and Duncan (1987)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated how an organisation's strategic planning process affected the set of strategic issues that captured organisational decision-makers' attention. Research findings indicated that middle managers framed individual issues as organisational issues, which increased the chances that their personal agendas became operational.
Nonaka (1988)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated middle-up-down management and introduced compressive management where top management creates a vision and middle management creates and implements concrete concepts to solve and transcend the contradictions arising from gaps between

		what exists at the moment and what management hopes to create. Research findings indicated that it was middle management's role to create and realise verifiable business concepts for the creative solution of contradictions and gaps between the ideal and the actual.
Wooldridge and Floyd (1989)	Middle management cognition and involvement Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the relationship between strategic consensus and organisation performance. Research findings indicated that consensus among middle managers was seen to be more important in incremental than synoptic contexts.
Wooldridge and Floyd (1990)	Middle management cognition and involvement Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the strategic involvement of middle managers in 20 organisations. Research findings indicated that involvement in the formation of strategy is associated with improved organisational performance.
Westley (1990)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the role of middle management in strategic processes in bureaucratic organisations and examined how middle managers' exclusion from strategy conversations leads to demotivation, alienation and conflict. Conditions that may increase and sustain feelings of inclusion and motivations were discussed. Research findings indicate that middle manager inclusion does not guarantee satisfaction.
Rumelt, Schendel and Teece (1991)	Middle management outcomes	The study examined the relationship between strategic management and economics by reviewing the various contributions from these two fields. Research findings indicated that amongst others, middle managers make considerable contributions to strategy.
Beatty and Lee (1992)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated leadership among middle managers. Research findings indicated that transformational leadership by middle managers were more effective in overcoming barriers to organisational change than transactional leadership.
Floyd and Wooldridge (1992)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated the strategic involvement of middle managers and developed a theoretical typology of middle management roles in strategy. Research findings indicated that the level and type of middle management strategic

		involvement varied with the type of strategy.
Hart (1992)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the roles top managers and organisational members play in the strategy-making process and identified five strategy-making modes. Research findings indicated that strategy-making cannot be limited conceptually to the chief executive or the top management team. Strategy-making is an organisation-wide phenomenon.
Dutton and Ashford (1993)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated issue-selling to top management. Research findings indicated that the characteristics of top- and middle-level managers, timing and the process used affected the success of middle managers' issue-selling efforts.
Floyd and Wooldridge (1993)	Strategic roles of middle management	This article describes middle management behaviour in developing organisational capability. The study identified middle management roles and found a strong relationship between the roles and organisational performance.
Sayles (1993)	Middle management outcomes	In this work, the author confirms that a consequential strategy-making process originates from managers and professionals who are at middle levels of the organisation.
Burgelman (1994)	Middle management outcomes (strategic roles of middle management)	The study investigated the evolution of an organisation's strategic position. Research findings indicated that an organisation's effective exit from its core business was found to result from emergent strategy and that middle managers' technology choices laid the foundation for the redefinition of corporate strategy and core competencies.
Floyd and Wooldridge (1994)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated middle management behaviour in developing organisational capability. Research findings identified middle management roles and found a strong relationship between the roles and organisational performance.
Judge and Stahl (1995)	Middle management outcomes Middle management cognition and involvement	This study refined and extended the strategy implementation literature specifically in terms of middle managers' implementation efforts. Research findings indicated that the personal characteristics of the middle managers influenced their perceptions as they prepared to implement a new strategic direction in a multinational strategic business unit.
Korsgaard, Schweiger and Sapienza (1995)	Middle management outcomes	This study investigated how decision-making procedures could facilitate positive attitudes necessary for cooperative relations in middle- and upper-level decision-making

		teams. Research findings indicated that middle- and upper-level managers expected some degree of consideration for their input and that their input be taken seriously.
Mangaliso (1995)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the impact of contextual variables of decentralisation and environmental uncertainty associated with increased strategic usefulness of information (in terms of aggregation) as perceived by middle managers in highly uncertain settings. Research findings indicated that there was a significant relationship between the management information characteristics and perceived environmental uncertainty.
Klein and Sorra (1996)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated implementation as a process of gaining targeted organisational members' appropriate and committed use of innovation. Research findings indicated implementation effectiveness as a function of the strength of an organisation's climate for innovation implementation and the fit of that innovation to targeted user's values.
Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes and Wierba (1997)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated issue selling and how managers' interpretation of the overall supportiveness of the organisational context influenced their decisions to sell issues. Research findings indicated that managers were not fully autonomous agents but rather conscious of aligning themselves with the social context.
Floyd and Wooldridge (1997)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated relationships between middle managers' formal position, their strategic influence and organisational performance. Research findings indicated that middle managers in boundary-spanning positions reported higher levels of strategic influence activity. Organisation performance was associated with more uniform levels of shift downward strategic influence on the part of middle management, and more varied levels of upward influence.
Floyd and Wooldridge (1999)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated corporate entrepreneurship as a multilayered process. Research findings indicated that middle managers were key actors who build and integrate knowledge domains, social networks and resources.
Floyd and Lane (2000)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated whether middle managers were more likely to experience conflict between strategic roles than other managerial levels. Research findings indicated that role conflict was inevitable in complex settings but that it could be reduced through control mechanisms

		appropriate to the environment.
Dutton <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated managers' implicit theories for successfully shaping changes from below by directing the attention of top management. Research findings indicated that the issue selling process was found to be politically and contextually embedded and managers actively shape the issue-selling micro-processes that contribute to organisational change.
Huy (2001)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated middle managers over six years. Research findings indicated that middle managers made valuable contributions to the realisation of radical change in organisations and also have a better understanding of the core values and competencies than executives.
King and Zeithaml (2001)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated managerial perceptions of causally ambiguous organisation competencies: top managers in high-performing organisations are more likely to believe that competencies were causally ambiguous. Research findings indicated that middle managers had a high degree of consensus regarding linkages between competencies and unit performance, indicating their important role in intraorganisation factor mobility.
Hornsby, Kuratko and Zahra (2002)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated key internal factors that influenced middle managers to initiate corporate entrepreneurship activities. Research findings identified five organisational factors that support middle-level corporate entrepreneurship: top management support, work discretion/autonomy, rewards/reinforcement, time availability, organisational boundaries.
Huy (2002)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated how middle managers influenced an attempt at radical change in a large organisation. Research findings indicated that middle managers balanced emotions during radical change, helped groups to adapt by committing passionately to individual change projects and, simultaneously, attended to change recipients' needs for continuity.
Marginson (2002)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated the relationship between management control systems and the strategy process. Research findings indicated that belief systems created a general climate for corporate entrepreneurship rather than instigating specific ideas, and administrative systems led to separation of entrepreneurial and support roles. Tensions

		resulting from multiple key performance indicators were resolved by prioritising single measures.
Thomas and Linstead (2002)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the state of middle management: the way middle managers constructed their identities, the discourses they drew on in the construction process and the tensions that were present in their attempts to secure economic and social legitimacy during organisation restructuring. Research findings indicated that as middle managers face the onslaught from the contemporary discourses of change and restructuring there were pressures to overwork, work long hours and other forms of presenteeism to secure their role, purpose and future.
Balogun and Johnson (2004)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the development of middle managers' mental models during an imposed shift from hierarchical to decentralised organisation. Research findings indicated a contingency logic between change type and schema development. Middle managers were found to rely on informal negotiations with peers to interpret and implement change because of distant top managers.
Boyett and Currie (2004)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated how middle managers mould international strategy. Research findings indicated that middle-level collaboration between parent organisation and new ventures were found to be critical to reconcile strategic intent and local context.
Canales and Vilá (2004)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated the interplay between top and middle-level managers as strategy-making settled and in subsequent managerial action. Research findings indicated that the interplay between top managers and middle managers was resolved through a legitimising mechanism taking place through deliberation, agreement and extensive participation.
Carney (2004)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated organisational structure and strategic management in a non-profit organisation. Research findings indicated that organisational structure, hierarchy and locus of control affected how middle managers perceived their role in the strategy process.
Ketokivi and Castañer (2004)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the effects of employees' pursuit of their subgroups' goals over organisational goals. Research findings provided large-scale evidence on how participation and communication in strategic planning complemented

		each other in achieving goal congruence among middle managers.
Kuratko and Goldsby (2004)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated unethical behaviour by middle managers in corporate entrepreneurship. Research findings led to the development of a framework that identified barriers to corporate entrepreneurship, resultant ethical dilemmas and remedial HR practices.
Balogun <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the boundary-spanning practices of individuals acting as change agents to implement boundary-shaking change initiatives. Research findings indicate that, amongst others, middle managers were identified as boundary shakers.
Ikävalko (2005)	Strategic roles of middle management Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the experiences of middle managers in strategy implementation and described the practices and strategy process in practice. Research findings indicate that, for strategic renewal to emerge, both the extent to which practices-in-use are coherent and the degree to which middle managers have enabling experiences were significant.
Currie and Procter (2005)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated the expectations of key stakeholders as primary antecedents to middle management's strategic contributions. Research findings indicated that inconsistent cues from stakeholders caused managers to be reluctant to perform needed roles (role ambiguity) and created role conflict.
Kodama (2005)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated middle management's role in building and leading informal strategic networks in and across organisations for open innovation. Research findings indicated that managers who play important roles in producing synthesising capability for the organisation use dialectical thinking and power to act in order to synthesise knowledge of good quality.
Kuratko, Ireland, Covin, Hornsby (2005)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated middle management's role in corporate entrepreneurship. Research findings led to the development of a model that depicted organisational antecedents, entrepreneurial actions and individual and organisational outcomes.
Lines (2005)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated how change that had been implemented effects organisational learning. Research findings indicated that social accounting and participative strategic planning were found to increase organisational

		learning at middle levels during strategic change.
Ling, Floyd and Baldrige (2005)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated local market responsiveness and the development of effective strategies in multinational organisations. Research findings indicated that how managers socialised by different national cultures vary and this impacts on the way they choose to sell issues.
Mair (2005)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the origins of performance differences between units within the same organisational and industry context. Research findings indicated that the way middle managers enact strategy, who they are, and where they are significantly affected profit growth in their units.
Mantere (2005)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated the practice or organisational strategy as centred on the work of individual strategists. Research findings indicated that a tension existed between recursive and adaptive practices that enable and disable strategic champions.
Rouleau (2005)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated the workings of ongoing primary sense-making and sense-giving micro-practices by which middle managers interpret and sell strategic changes. Research findings led to the identification of four micro-practices that managers used to interpret and sell strategic change: translating the orientation, overcoding the strategy, disciplining the client, justifying the change.
Meyer (2006)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the dynamics of middle management interventions in post-merger processes. Research findings indicated that merger implementation may result less from conflicts between merger partners than from intraorganisation tensions between middle management groups and top managers' inability to mediate them.
Herzig and Jimmieson (2006)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the factors that facilitate or inhibit middle managers' experience of uncertainty management during organisational change. Research findings identified the factors as being either facilitators or barriers to uncertainty management focused on themes related to the design of change, communication with both senior management and their own staff, support from senior management, role conflict and peer interaction.
Hoon (2007)	Middle management	The study examined the role of committees as strategic practice during the implementation of personnel

	cognition and involvement	administration in a public administration. Research findings indicated that middle managers and senior managers organised the discussion on strategic issues in informal interactions around committees.
Laine and Vaara (2007)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated strategic development in an engineering and consulting group. Research findings indicated that middle management resisted corporate-level attempts to control strategy by initiating a separate strategy discourse to increase middle-level influence and autonomy.
Pappas and Wooldridge (2007)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the relationships among three measures of network centrality and managers' divergent strategic activity. Research findings indicated specific relationships between alternative forms of network centrality and particular elements of the strategic renewal process.
Sillince and Mueller (2007)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the reframing of accounts of responsibility for strategy. Research findings indicated that the middle management team was found to reframe responsibilities and expectations based on the team's changing roles. Unclear top management intent favoured middle-level opportunism.
Mantere (2008)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated the role expectations and middle manager strategic agency. Research findings indicated that role expectations had the potential to both enable and constrain middle manager strategic agency. The study also identified enabling conditions for strategic agency.
Mantere and Vaara (2008)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated how role expectations can both enable and constrain middle management strategic behaviour and suggested a reciprocal role theory. Research findings indicated that eight enabling top management actions existed: narration, contextualisation, resource allocation, respect, trust, responsiveness, inclusion, referring.
Nordqvist and Melin (2008)	Strategic roles of middle management	The study investigated strategic planning champions as the strategy practitioners who introduced, promoted and guided the strategic planning process in an organisation. Research findings indicated that middle managers were strategic planning champions.
Vilà and Canales (2008)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the way an organisation approached strategic planning. Research findings indicated that middle managers' active participation in strategic

	involvement	planning increased their appreciation of priorities and goals and coordination during implementation.
Costanzo and Tzoumpa (2008)	Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the managerial processes that middle managers can employ to facilitate knowledge integration and transfer. Research findings indicated that middle managers played a relevant role in leading the integration and re-utilisation of knowledge within teams and across organisational boundaries.
Besson and Mahieu (2011)	Middle management cognition and involvement	This study investigated the involvement of middle managers in the strategy process. Research findings indicated that involvement in the strategy process went beyond the cognitive dimension and entailed the construction of new systems of roles and identities along with the development of appropriate dialogue modes.
Chuang, Jason, Morgan (2011)	Middle management cognition and involvement	The study investigated the factors that influenced middle managers' support for and participation in the innovation implementation. Research findings indicated that middle manager support for innovation implementation was at its highest when middle managers felt that the innovation fit their workplace needs and priorities.
Huy (2011)	Middle management outcomes	This study investigated how middle managers' group-focus emotions and social identities influence strategy implementation. Research findings indicated how top executives inadvertently activated middle managers' organisation-related social identities. The social identities of middle managers and group-focus emotions resulted in middle management behaviour that impacted on strategy-implementation outcomes.
Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk and Roe (2011)	Strategic roles of middle management Middle management outcomes	The study investigated the interaction of the TMT and middle managers. Research findings led to the development of the interface model of the TMT and middle managers
Rouleau and Balogun (2011)	Middle management cognition and involvement Middle management outcomes	The study investigated how middle managers contribute strategically to the development of an organisation and examined the way they enact the strategic roles allocated to them, with particular reference to strategic change. Research findings confirmed the importance of discursive competence for a middle manager.

Floyd (2012)	Strategic roles of middle managers	The study investigated the personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers. Research findings indicated that experiencing conflict between personal and professional identities can lead to a turning point and a decision that affects the person's career trajectory.
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Source: Adapted from Wooldridge *et al.* (2008:1196–1202); improved to include studies up to 2012

Table 5 summarised prior research in chronological order and indicated the focus of each study in terms of the three themes as well as the most prominent research findings. As the table suggests, studies have investigated a wide range of constructs. The body of knowledge on middle managers and strategy has increased, with the bulk of the research in the last 12 years. The increase in the number of middle management studies during the last four decades is also a significant response to the numerous calls for strategy research at other levels in the organisation.

3.4 THE STRATEGIC ROLES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS

As stated earlier, traditionally, middle managers have not been considered part of the strategy-making process. Their roles were limited to the implementation effort. However, theory suggests that middle managers regularly attempt to influence strategy and often provide impetus for new initiatives (Burgelman, 1983a:61). Research by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992:153) articulated four strategic roles of middle managers, namely championing, synthesising, facilitating and implementing. Later, Floyd and Wooldridge (1994:47) developed a theoretical framework which captures the roles of middle managers in dynamic capability. Two principles underlie these roles. Figure 9 shows the model that combines the upward and downward influence with integrative and divergent thinking to describe the four roles.

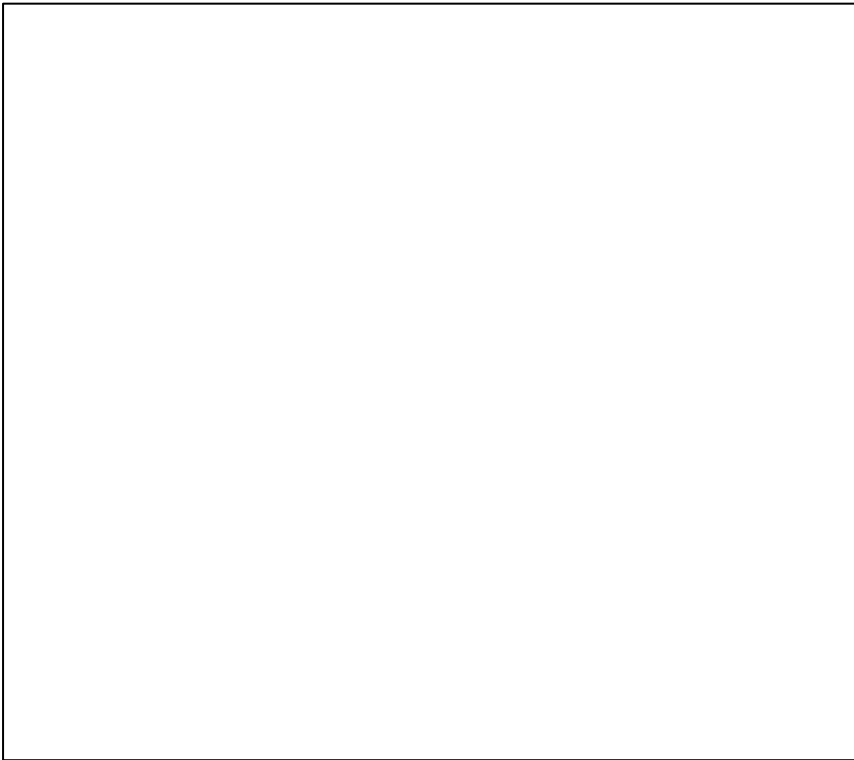


Figure 9: A typology of middle management roles in strategy

Source: Floyd and Wooldridge (1994:47)

While Floyd and Wooldridge articulated middle manager roles, Mantere and Vaara (2008:341–358) investigated how middle managers are able to fulfil those roles. Herzig and Jimmieson (2006:628–645) investigated the role of middle managers during change by exploring the uncertainty they experience as a result of change and factors that are facilitators in the management of their uncertainty. Middle manager roles often involve providing support to and facilitating communication between senior management and employees. The enablers of middle management agency, as identified by Mantere and Vaara (2008) are integrated in the following discussion that reviews the roles of middle managers in dynamic capability, based on the findings of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992; 1994; 1996).

3.4.1 Implementing deliberate strategy

The first role is that of implementing deliberate strategy. As stated earlier, middle management's role in implementing strategy has been advocated for many years. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) define this role as managerial interventions that align

organisational action with the strategic intentions of top management. Guth and MacMillan (1986:313–327) focused on middle management motivation to implement strategy. They concluded that the ability to understand, anticipate and manage processes needed to secure positive and pervasive commitment to strategy on the part of middle management is a critical general management implementation skill. Refining Guth and MacMillan's insights, Judge and Stahl (1995) investigated middle managers' effort in strategy implementation in a multinational context. They identified the relative importance of the three determinants of implementation effort, namely perceived ability, perceived probability of success, and perceived consistency between personal goals and the strategy goals. They found that the personal characteristics of the middle managers influenced their perceptions.

Middle managers implement strategy by translating corporate strategy into action plans and individual objectives (Currie & Procter, 2005:1325). Chia and Holt (2006:643) suggested that, in the case of deliberate strategy, there is much greater clarity about what is expected in terms of explicit purposes. Here the role of the middle manager is more related to obedience to strategic rules rather than through an invitation to take them on. With this in mind, Mantere and Vaara (2008) identified four enabling conditions in relation to the expectation to implement deliberate strategy:

- Firstly, top management needs to narrate the thought processes that led to the formulation of the goals to be implemented. According to Mantere (2008), this is instrumental in helping middle managers make sense of how the present objectives are linked to the previous ones.
- Secondly, the implementation expectation may also impact positively on middle manager agency when it involves a contextualisation of the top-down objectives to be implemented. When the objectives are well defined, they give focus to the work of the middle manager and support contextual decision-making.
- Thirdly, the implementation expectation may enable middle management agency if there is a sufficient shift in resource allocation to support implementation of the specified top-down objectives. According to Mantere (2008:305), when resource allocation is coherent with top-down objectives, middle managers perceive top management as walking the talk, in other words, indicative of top management commitment.

- The fourth and last enabling condition is respect, which involves another portrayal of top management commitment to implementation, which involves little or no expended resources. The implementation expectation may enable middle manager agency if top management shows respect towards everyday problem solving or practical coping (Chia & Holt, 2006). This allows the middle manager to perceive everyday work actions as meaningful and valuable. Respect in implementation may be based on the assumption that top management strategies have little value if they are not implemented effectively. Thus, the strategist needs the implementer and vice versa. According to Mantere (2008:306), the atmosphere of respect appears to be reached through an exchange where top management shows respect for the competences of middle managers and their teams who in turn respond by showing respect for the strategy work of top management.

3.4.2 Synthesising information

The second role is synthesising information, which is defined as the interpretation and evaluation of information. This affects top management perceptions and is the way middle managers upwardly influence the formation of strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992:155). Within this role, middle managers interpret and channel information upwards to top management. The information synthesised by middle managers may become the primary basis for top management decision-making. Middle managers act as uncertainty absorbers, resting their reputations on the robustness of their interpretations of the environment (Mantere, 2008:307). The synthesising role is closely related to the role Nordqvist and Melin (2008) call the artful interpreter. The role of the middle manager, within this role, is to interpret and combine localised adaptations with the generalised security and support provided by the strategic planning practice in use. However, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992:155) warn that not all ideas brought upward by middle managers are strategic proposals. According to them, middle managers also supply information to top management concerning internal and external events. This view is supported by Nonaka (1988:15) who refers to middle managers as linking pins who are equipped with the ability to combine strategic macro-information and hands-on micro-information. Nonaka

(1988:15) elaborates further, “Middle management is able to most effectively eliminate the noise, fluctuation and chaos within an organisation’s information creation structure by serving as the starting point for action to be taken by upper and lower levels.” Dutton and Duncan (1987) and Nonaka (1988) explain that synthesising may be a precursor to championing a strategic initiative. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994:47) state that middle managers are often able to control, or at least influence, top management perceptions by framing information in certain ways. Through issue-selling, middle managers help shape the strategic agenda by influencing which issues come to the attention of top management.

This is supported by Dutton *et al.* (2001:716) who sought to unravel and make sense of the micro-processes that compose strategic change. Dutton and her colleagues explored how managers assess the organisational context for issue-selling and the moves associated with both successful and unsuccessful issue-selling attempts. Their findings suggest that it is important to understand how managers read and navigate their strategic and structural contexts in order to benefit themselves and their organisations. They propose that senior management’s context design mandate can only be accomplished if it is based on an understanding of the thought patterns of those who are trying to work the context.

The views of Balogun and Johnson (2004) on middle manager sensemaking are also noteworthy. Balogun and Johnson (2004:523–549) examined the middle manager role in processes of change, and focused on the sensemaking of middle managers during a top-down change initiative. In their study, the middle managers were not only recipients of change, but also implementers. Ling *et al.* (2005) developed a model of middle manager issue selling in the context of a geographically dispersed multinational corporation. Their theory proposes that the intention to engage in issue selling and the packaging strategies used are subject to influence by national culture. Linking sensemaking to tacit knowledge, Rouleau (2005:1416) states that tacit knowledge seems to be as important to sensemaking and sensegiving as is the explicit, conscious knowledge that surrounds the intended strategy. According to Castillo (in Rouleau, 2005:1416), semantic tacit knowledge precludes managers from having to explain many of the words that form a given message. Often, the message core is contained in the full and implicit meaning of abstract expressions that managers refer to. In Mantere and Vaara’s (2008) analysis of 262 interviews, they found that, when middle managers provide top management information as a

basis for strategic decision-making, feedback assures that top-down strategic plans are rooted in past experience. A key element is an increased understanding of whether past work efforts have been successful. Additionally, the expectation to facilitate adaptability may allow middle managers a sense of involvement in strategy in terms of having something to contribute. It may also involve the further enabling aspect of being able to represent one's subordinates.

Finally, Mantere (2008:308) claims that the key enabling condition for synthesising information is top management responsiveness. He found multiple instances in strategy practice where top managers expect feedback but do not respond to it, which leads to multiple frustrated expressions by middle managers in the interview data.

3.4.3 Championing alternatives

Thirdly, by championing alternatives, middle managers have the potential to reshape the strategic thinking of top management by selling to them strategic initiatives that diverge from their current conception of strategy. Burgelman (1983a) demonstrates that middle managers frequently become organisational champions for initiatives developed at the operating level. This role is distinct from product championing as it centres on influencing corporate management to adjust their current concept of strategy. "Championing alternatives" is defined as "the persistent and persuasive communication of strategic options to upper management which is an important middle management function in strategy" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992:155). Middle managers use upward influence processes to champion issues and communicate information about potentially important issues for possible inclusion on an organisation's agenda (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Furthermore, by proposing and defining issues for top managers, middle managers provide important contributions to an organisation's strategic direction and thereby influence organisational effectiveness (Dutton *et al.*, 1997:407).

Mantere (2005:157–184) also investigated the strategic champions, and opted to treat the championing activity in terms of the management position and not the role. His extensive study describes strategy champions as organisational members who

try to influence strategic issues in a way that extends beyond their immediate and primary operational responsibilities as well as the expectations of others. Specifically, Mantere (2005) explored the enablers and disablers of the championing of strategy practitioners. He found that, in the context of championing activity, the biggest obstacle for middle management championing is a lack of proper control practices. Later, Mantere (2008:294) argued that role expectations have the potential to both enable and constrain middle manager strategic agency. Part of his research investigated the enabling conditions for agency. Some middle managers reported that they were expected to challenge their superiors with new strategic ideas, in other words, championing alternatives. Such activity is focused on impacting the future. The expectation of championing new ideas, often achieved through participatory practices in strategic planning, has the potential to help fulfil agency for middle managers (Mantere, 2008:308). Mantere and Vaara (2008) concluded in line with Westley (1990) in that the championing expectation is subject to inclusion – when top managers invite and expect middle managers to participate in planning, middle managers gain more control over the future.

3.4.4 Facilitate adaptability

Lastly, middle managers can exert a downward influence through facilitating adaptability where they support more radical activities within the areas they manage that lie outside top management's official expectations (Currie & Procter, 2005:1325). Nordqvist and Melin (2008:329) refer to this role as the social craftsperson. Facilitating adaptability is defined as fostering flexible organisational arrangements: within its scope, middle managers are expected to promote experimentation and autonomous development within their areas of responsibility. This expectation is placed on middle managers with the aim of work practices being adapted to the changing environment (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992:155). Moss-Kanter (1982) showed how middle managers make organisations more flexible and stimulate behaviour that diverges from official expectation. According to her, information sharing increases as organisational structures become more complex, as task teams within organisations increase and as informality in organisations increases. These conditions facilitate learning by encouraging organisation members to sense changing conditions, experiment with new approaches and adapt

accordingly (Chakravarthy, 1982). Moss-Kanter (1983) found that often, middle managers shield these activities from top management while they gather excess resources and lighten up on regulations to help emergent approaches get underway. This leads to a middle management activity where adaptability apart from the plans embedded in deliberate strategy, is encouraged. Not only do middle managers have upward influence, but also downward influence.

Beatty and Lee (1992) found that middle managers use a transformational leadership approach to effectively introduce technological change. Their findings prove that this transformation leadership approach was more effective than transactional leadership approaches that neglected the people and organisational issues. Floyd and Lane (2000) identified and distinguished roles for top, middle and operating managers and highlighted the potential for role conflict across these levels of management. Huy (2001; 2002) described the middle manager role in managing emotions during radical change. He referred to an emotional balancing process where middle managers help people make sense of and cope with change. According to Huy's (2001; 2002) research, middle managers facilitated smoother implementation by attending to subordinates' negative emotions regarding downsizing. This practical coping (Chia & Holt, 2006) is made possible through local improvisation. According to Chia and Holt (2006), action takes place often non-deliberately, and strategy emerges through the internalised predisposition to act and adapt unthinkingly to local contingent demands.

Mantere (2008:306) commented that the expectation to facilitate adaptability also has the potential to enable middle manager strategic agency. The enabling condition is trust, real or perceived, by top management which legitimises the efforts of middle managers to develop work practices. He continues by stating that failure to perceive such trust involves the propensity of middle managers to stick to their habitual activities and this involves a tolerable risk level.

In line with the strategic roles identified by Floyd and Lane (2000:153–177), Huy (2001:73) established that middle managers make valuable contributions to the realisation of radical change and that these contributions often go unnoticed. This latter author identified four areas where middle managers contribute: as entrepreneurs, as communicators, as therapists and as tightrope artists. Huy's description of middle managers as entrepreneurs (2001:73) link in with the role of

championing alternatives in Floyd and Wooldridge's typology. The entrepreneur is close enough to the action to influence it, but at the same time far enough from it to see the bigger picture. This enables the entrepreneur to be a great source of creativity. The communicator role is related to the role of synthesising information. Huy's (2001:73) description of this role is that middle managers conceive and implement change initiatives and they know who really knows what. Middle managers as communicators can spread the word and get people on board. Their understanding of outside market pressures and internal sensitivities and capabilities allows them to evaluate the relevance and feasibility of proposed corporate changes (Huy, 2001:72).

The therapist role indicates the important task of middle managers to address their employees' emotional well-being during times of radical change. They do a host of things to create a psychologically safe work environment and they are able to do this because of their position within the organisation. Lastly, the tightrope artist points towards middle managers' role to balance change and continuity. According to Huy (2001:72), middle managers are problem solvers and they find relief in rolling up their sleeves and figuring out how to make things work.

3.4.5 Dealing with role conflict

In addition to the four roles identified by Floyd and Wooldridge and Huy, middle managers also need to deal with role conflict.

Floyd and Lane (2000:154) highlighted the potential of role conflict across levels of management. Their findings suggest that some role conflict is inevitable during periods of strategic change. Marginson (2002:1019) also considered the control systems and the way it these shape middle management's perceptions of their strategic roles. He argued that the use of administrative controls affects the location of strategic initiatives and may lead to the polarisation of roles. These arguments are in line with Carney's (2003) findings: the number of hierarchical layers of management influences managers' perceptions of their strategic roles. In line with the inevitability of role conflict, Balogun and Johnson (2004:523) specifically investigated how middle managers resolve the cognitive disorder created for them by

organisational restructuring. These authors confirmed middle managers' role as change agents – being the recipients of change as much as its implementers.

As stated earlier, Mantere (2005:157) and Mantere and Vaara (2008:341–358) ascertained that consistent, reciprocal expectations between top- and middle-level managers are needed to avoid role conflict and enable middle managers' strategic behaviours. In line with Floyd and Lane's (2000) views, Canales and Vilá (2004:20) confirmed that disagreement in managers' perceptions regarding the need for change generates strategic role conflicts. These observations are consistent with the findings of Canales and Vilá (2004), which showed how vertical and lateral managerial interactions combine to legitimise both new and organisational strategies and the contributions of individual actors. The role conflict caused by different perceptions can be minimised through middle and top management interplay in the development of strategic initiatives. Furthermore, different perceptions also affect the capacity to generate commitment among organisational members. As suggested by Guth and MacMillan (1986), three perceptions of middle managers may hinder or favour strategic development:

- perceived inability to execute a proposed strategy;
- perceived probability that the strategy will work; and
- perception that outcomes will not satisfy individual goals.

Any of these perceptions, if negative, will inhibit any strategic intent from top management (Canales & Vilá, 2004:20).

Returning to the distinction between deliberate and emergent strategies as discussed in Chapter 2, as well as the traditional view of the roles of the different management levels in the strategy process, specifically the choice perspective, Floyd and Wooldridge (1994:147) summarise their view and state,

The conception that top managers formulate strategy while middle managers carry it out is not only unrealistic, but it is also self-defeating. Effective implementation requires that middle managers understand the strategic rationale behind the plan, in addition to the specific directives. Such understanding appears to result from broad participation in the strategic process, and middle management's effectiveness in implementing strategy is thus directly related to their involvement in other roles.

Concluding comments on the strategic roles of middle managers

On the whole, the literature on middle managers' strategic roles identifies various ways in which middle managers contribute to strategising. Specific techniques that managers use to influence strategy were identified. In addition, it was suggested that the functional view of middle manager strategic roles needs to be extended to a reciprocal view. Literature also indicates how organisational context affects managers' enactment of specific roles. Role conflict has been identified as an overarching factor accounting for differences in the strategic roles middle managers perform. Middle managers' contribution to strategy is also influenced by their network relationships inside and outside the organisation.

In concluding this section, the following quote of Mantere (2008:312) is considered apt: "Organisations do not create, implement or renew strategies. People do." Competent and active individuals are considered strategic resources. Given the literature on the strategic roles and contributions of middle managers, as reviewed above, middle managers are a crucial strategic resource.

3.5 ORGANISATIONAL COGNITION AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF MIDDLE MANAGERS IN STRATEGISING

The second theme of middle management research deals with the involvement of middle managers in strategising. This theme investigates relationships between such involvement and organisational cognition. According to Hodgkinson and Clarke (2007:244), this theme is related to one of the major challenges within the strategy-as-practice perspective (for example Balogun *et al.*, 2003; Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Johnson *et al.*, 2007), namely to advance understanding of cognition in practice. Research within this theme is grounded in the acknowledgment that middle managers come with a functional and/or subunit orientation that may influence their perceptions and turn their behaviour toward pursuit of goals that are suboptimal from the perspective of the organisational overall strategy (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982; Markoczy, 2001). Moreover, research in this theme has sought to contribute to the understanding of how middle management cognition influences and is influenced by strategy processes. Strategic consensus and shared strategic thinking are common topics within this research theme.

Closely related to cognition is strategic consensus. Kellermanns, Walter, Lechner and Floyd (2005) conducted an extensive review of the strategic consensus literature. The drive for their research has been the premise that strategic consensus enhances organisational performance by improving coordination and cooperation within the organisation. Their review of the literature indicated only limited agreement among researchers about the nature of the consensus construct and the way it should be measured. They also identified a gap in findings about how to conceptualise the consensus–performance relationship. Furthermore, a limited number of strategic consensus studies examined the effects of consensus among a broader group of managers, including middle managers. Wooldridge and Floyd (1989:295–302) maintain that, unless middle-level actors understand and are committed to top management’s strategic goals, they are unlikely to support strategy implementation. Wooldridge and Floyd (1989) also express that top management consensus is more relevant to performance in contexts characterised by a comprehensive strategy process, whereas more incremental, emergent approaches are likely to require broader shared understandings that include middle managers. Later, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990:231–241) investigated the strategic involvement of middle-level managers in 20 organisations. Specifically, they considered the extent to which middle managers’ agreement with top management’s strategic priorities was increased through involvement in the strategic planning process and the effect that this had on organisational performance. Figure 10 depicts the two grounds for a relationship between middle management involvement in strategy and organisation performance.

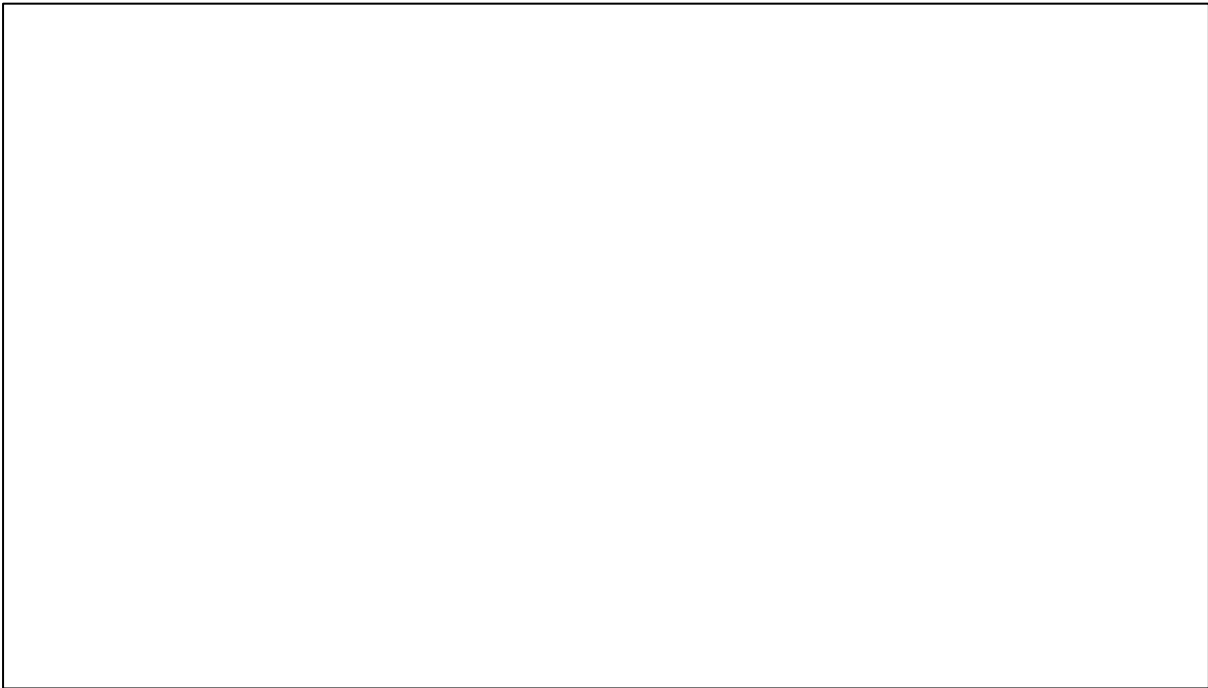


Figure 10: Theoretical model of middle management involvement in strategy

Source: Wooldridge and Floyd (1990:232)

Path A shows how middle management involvement in strategy improves performance by improving the quality of strategic decisions. Cumulatively, these decisions result in a superior organisational strategy and improved organisational performance. Following path B, middle management involvement improves performance by increasing the level of consensus about strategy among middle-level managers. According to Wooldridge and Floyd (1990:232), this higher level of strategic understanding and commitment facilitates the smooth implementation of strategy. Furthermore, previous performance and practice are likely to influence the level of middle management's involvement in the strategic process.

The processes depicted in path A indicate situations where strategy should be deliberately emergent and the contributions of middle managers are critical because they are often easier to recognise strategic problems and opportunities (Pascale, 1984).

The arguments supporting path B concern strategy implementation. Middle managers are responsible for implementing strategy, and involvement enhances implementation by providing opportunities for attaining consensus. In a deliberate mode, first-hand exposure to the plans of top management improves understanding by providing opportunities for communication and clarification. In an adaptive mode,

involvement increases the likelihood that middle management initiative will be in line with top management's concept of corporate strategy (Burgelman, 1983a). Whether in deliberate mode or in adaptive mode, without commitment improved understanding may be of limited value. Judge and Stahl (1995) suggest that the perceived consistency between individual and organisational interests may be the most critical determinant of middle manager's implementation effort because of the centrality of organisational trust in any strategic change programme. Uncommitted middle managers may give implementation a low priority, engage in foot dragging, create implementation obstacles or even sabotage strategy (Guth & MacMillan, 1986).

Wooldridge and Floyd's (1990:239) study demonstrated the importance of involvement as a strategic process variable. It is noteworthy that their study did not find consensus among middle managers to be related to organisational performance. The study did, however, demonstrate the importance of middle management involvement as a basis for increasing strategic consensus. They indicate that substantive involvement can be achieved best in organisational contexts where individuals are critically examining strategic decisions. They conclude that top managers need to articulate the context and develop organisational structures and reward systems that encourage middle managers to think strategically.

These findings are in accordance with the views of Westley (1990) who showed that middle managers' exclusion from strategy-related conversations led to alienation, lack of motivation to implement strategies and intra-organisational conflict. Contrary to this, two-way conversations between top and middle managers were shown to enhance organisational responsiveness and innovation in strategy (Westley, 1990). Laine and Vaara (2007) added a discursive perspective to research on shared understandings. In their study, middle managers started their own strategic conversation and thereby resisted corporate-level attempts to define shared understandings and control the development of strategy. The very act of talking about strategy involved important implications in terms of the role and identity given or not given to specific actors. It also indicated that non-participative approaches rarely lead to the enthusiasm and commitment called for in the implementation of strategies (Laine & Vaara, 2007:55). There are good reasons for all involved in strategising to attempt to go beyond the traditional top-down approaches and to

search actively for ways to encourage participation – even in situations where the interests of particular actors may seem contradictory.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that managers' involvement in various facets of the strategy process enhances their knowledge, understanding and support of strategy. Mangaliso (1995:231–250) sought to investigate the impact of contextual variables of decentralisation and environmental uncertainty on the strategic usefulness of management information as perceived by middle managers of a large, diversified multinational corporation. Findings indicated that decentralised, participative processes increased strategic usefulness of information at middle management level. Ketokivi and Castañer (2004) investigated the informational and motivational benefits of participation and communication in strategic planning. They found that involving middle managers in the strategy planning process and communicating agreed-upon priorities led to more integrated strategic thinking throughout the organisation and significantly decreased middle managers' pursuit of position-related subunit goals over organisational goals. Lines (2005) conveyed that middle manager participation in the strategy process was positively associated with organisational learning during a top-down change process.

Research from a sensemaking perspective also shows how the strategy process affects middle managers' strategic cognitions. Balogun and Johnson (2004:523) attempted to improve the understanding of how middle managers interpret change, and how their schemata, or interpretive frameworks, develop and change. Balogun and Johnson (2004) studied the sensemaking of middle managers during a top-down change initiative in which senior managers outlined the new structure that replaced a traditional integrated hierarchy with a more modular and decentralised organisation of semi-autonomous business units. The seniors then left it to the middle managers who were primarily individuals based outside the head office, to develop the operational details of the structure. The middle managers were thus recipients of change as much as its implementers. They had to make the new structure work but had little involvement in the up-front change design or decision-making. Their findings indicated how structured change imposed by top management initially created tension and conflicting interpretations of change among groups of middle managers. Middle manager strategic sensemaking is discussed in more detail in section 3.7.

Pappas and Wooldridge (2007:323–341) demonstrated that managers' network position both within and outside the organisation influences their level of divergent strategic activity. These findings are consistent with the notion that new strategies emerge through a social learning process where new knowledge is created, ideas generated and capabilities developed as managers and other organisational actors engage in complex social interactions (Nonaka, 1994; Floyd & Lane, 2000). Additionally, Pappas and Wooldridge (2007:339) found that, in order for middle managers to effectively engage in the strategy-making conversation, they must use their social position and cultivate a host of relationships that channel divergent strategic information. Following their research project to investigate the problem of participation in strategy, Mantere and Vaara (2008) suggested that lack of participation is not always a problem in organisations, but a lack of engagement often tends to a decrease in the quality of strategic planning and creates various kinds of problems for the implementation of strategic plans. This suggestion is confirmation of earlier findings by Westley (1990), Floyd and Lane (2000), Balogun and Johnson (2004) and Laine and Vaara (2007). Mantere and Vaara (2008) argue that, in order to understand lack of participation in strategising, one needs to examine the ways in which managers and other organisation members make sense of and give sense to strategy process.

Concluding comments on organisational cognition and the involvement of middle managers in strategising

Taken as a whole, research on organisational cognition and middle management involvement in strategy stems from the tension created by managers' tendency to view organisational issues from functional and subunit perspectives. Middle managers' involvement in strategic planning is associated with high levels of consensus and financial performance. In addition, the need to adopt a wider organisational perspective when contributing to strategy plays a role. Research in this theme attempted to identify associations between managers' shared understandings of strategy and organisational outcomes as well as to examine how characteristics of the strategy process affect the development of shared organisational cognitions.

3.6 MIDDLE MANAGER ACTIVITY AND ORGANISATIONAL OUTCOMES

The third theme of middle management research selected for discussion in this study, relates to the relationships between middle management activity and economic performance, and between middle management activity and emergent and realised strategy (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008:1208). A considerable amount of research findings and theories suggest that middle managers make important contributions to strategy, for example Miles, Snow, Miller and Coleman (1978); Moss-Kanter (1982); Burgelman (1983a); Wooldridge and Floyd (1990); Rumelt *et al.* (1991); Dutton and Ashford (1993); Dutton *et al.* (2001); Boyett and Currie (2004) and Mair (2005). Sayles (1993) informs that middle managers play a role in integrating and aligning organisational competencies. Research by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) provided empirical evidence for these arguments and confirmed a relationship between specific types of middle management strategic activity and an organisation's strategic orientation. Floyd and Lane (2000) suggest that strategic renewal often emanates from deeply embedded and socially complex processes within an organisation. They argue that the activities of middle managers largely determine how renewal occurs in organisations.

In a study investigating the strategic involvement of middle-level managers in 20 organisations, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990), found middle managers' involvement was associated with financial performance. This does not mean that the middle managers agreed with the CEO's priorities. It was also found that middle manager involvement in the formulation of strategic decisions was associated with higher financial performance. However, implementation remains important and strategies that lack middle management commitment suffer serious implementation problems (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994:49). Later, Floyd and Wooldridge (1997:365) investigated involvement as role enactment. In this study, they proved that positive effects on organisational performance depend on whether the overall pattern of upward influence is conducive to shifts in the network centrality of individual managers or whether the pattern of downward influence is consistent with an appropriate balance between the organisation's need for control and flexibility.

It has been argued that non-senior managers have a better understanding of which strategies are realistic (Mintzberg, 1994), that the ideas of lower-level managers are key to organisational knowledge creation (Hart, 1992; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000), and that these ideas help adapt organisational strategies to changing environments (Burgelman, 1983a; Bourgeois & Brodwin, 1984; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). Furthermore, participation improves the implementation of strategic plans through increased commitment (Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Klein & Sorra, 1996; Korsgaard *et al.*, 1995), integration of subunit goals (Ketokivi & Castañer, 2004), and collective sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As discussed earlier, several studies also investigated how middle management activity influences the emergence of realised strategy. For instance, noting an alignment between middle management strategic roles and strategy as defined by Miles *et al.* (1978), Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) declare findings linking middle management behaviour to realised strategy. Specifically, their findings advocate that a relatively high level of championing behaviour is important to the prospector's ability to uncover new market segments and explore new business opportunities.

Other studies demonstrated how middle managers lead processes of strategic change, for example Burgelman (1994), Balogun and Johnson (2004), and Balogun *et al.* (2005). In particular, Burgelman (1994) found that middle management emergent behaviour often diverges from, and eventually affects, the retrospective redefinition of official strategy by top managers. Boyett and Currie (2004) illustrate how middle managers in an Irish telecommunications organisation orchestrated an emergent strategy that became the basis for the corporation's new strategic vision. Huy (2001:73) confirm that middle managers make valuable contributions to the realisation of radical change in organisations in various roles.

Mair (2005:263–288) conducted research to identify the origins of performance differences between units within the same organisational and industry context. Her study highlighted the importance of middle managers' actions aligned with strategy, their demographic characteristics and their immediate competitive environment stimulating performance. Data on 119 managers and units of a European financial services organisation suggest that how middle managers enact strategy, who they are and where they are significantly affect profit growth in their units.

In contrast to the positive contribution of middle managers towards realised strategy, Guth and MacMillan (1986) found that middle managers' contribution towards realised strategy can also be a hindrance. The data and analysis in the Guth and MacMillan (1986) study provide strong evidence that middle managers who believe that their self-interest is being compromised cannot only redirect a strategy, delay its implementation or reduce the quality of its implementation, but can also even sabotage the strategy totally. These authors argue that in their study, middle manager perceptions of the strategy process were swayed by individual and unit self-interest. The negative impact that middle managers may have on realised strategy was also proved by Meyer (2006:397–419). According to Meyer (2006:398), previous literature on middle management focused on the tensions between top and middle management. However, she proposes a more complex view of middle management intervention that takes into account both the horizontal relations between middle management groups and the vertical relations between the top and middle management groups. Her findings showed that middle managers' individual and group-level self-interests led to destructive interventions, resulting in the failed implementation of a top management orchestrated merger. Sillince and Mueller (2007) found a middle management team in charge of implementing a top-down strategic initiative reframing responsibility for the initiative in line with the team's goals. According to Sillince and Mueller (2007), this is indicative of middle management opportunism and linguistic influencing in the absence of a clear top management mandate. Lastly, Kuratko *et al.* (2005) provide evidence that raises potential ethical concerns about the influence of middle managers on realised strategy. Costanzo and Tzoumpa (2008) attempt to provide a deeper understanding of the managerial processes that middle managers can employ to facilitate knowledge integration and transfer within project teams and across organisational boundaries. They found that, in order to enhance the performance of project teams, middle managers need to play a significant role with particular regard to that of facilitating knowledge transfer within and outside the team.

Concluding comments on middle manager activity and organisational outcomes

As described above, there is evidence of a positive association between middle management's involvement in strategy and organisational outcomes. Some evidence

of negative associations, or outcomes, was also described. On the whole, Wooldridge *et al.* (2008) purport that much more research is warranted. Middle managers should question strategic decisions through involvement. The current business environment demands middle management initiative and a recognition of the new roles of middle managers in the strategic process.

3.7 MIDDLE MANAGER STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING

Although sensemaking forms part of the synthesising information role of middle managers, it is deemed necessary to discuss middle manager strategic sensemaking separately. The synthesising information role incorporates elements of sensemaking but it is mostly aimed at upward influence towards top management. In this section, the aim is to report on sensemaking by middle managers that also incorporates the channelling of information downwards and horizontally.

The concept of sensemaking was introduced in Chapter 2. Weick and Roberts (1993:365) argue that the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs. Thus, sensemaking is defined as a social process of construction and reconstruction of meaning through which managers understand, interpret and create sense for them and others of their changing organisational context and surroundings (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011:956). Samra-Fredericks (2003) explains that strategic sensemaking is accomplished through the ability of managers to craft and share a message by referring to a complex mosaic of underlying knowledge that is subtly invoked in order to make that message meaningful within the context.

Studies by Dutton and Ashford (1993) and Dutton *et al.* (1997) demonstrate how middle managers shape organisational accounts by sensegiving to their leaders. Westley (1990) shows how middle managers could shape strategy through their participation in strategic conversations with their bosses, influencing the way in which an issue was understood and enacted. These studies demonstrate that, while leaders are uniquely placed to influence how issues are interpreted and understood

in organisations, their interpretations can be significantly shaped by the sensegiving efforts of others, including middle managers.

Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) propose that sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action. According to them, sensemaking fills important gaps in organisational theory. Compactly stated, sensemaking is a quest for meaning. According to Gioia, Thomas, Clark and Chittipeddi (1994:365), three important points about the quest for meaning in organisational life exist:

- sensemaking occurs when a flow of organisational circumstances is turned into words and salient categories
- organising itself is embodied in written and spoken texts; and
- reading, writing, conversing and editing are crucial actions that serve as the media through which the invisible hand of institutions shapes conduct.

Sensemaking is an ongoing, instrumental, subtle, swift and social process that is often taken for granted. Weick *et al.* (2005:409) explain that sensemaking tends to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world. They support the observations of Rouleau (2005) by referring to the micro-level actions. Sensemaking should occur when people are socialised to make do, be resilient, treat constraints as self-imposed, strive for plausibility, keep showing up, use retrospect to get a sense of direction, and articulate descriptions that energise. These micro-level actions are small actions, but have large consequences (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991:419).

Maitlis (2005:44) conducted a longitudinal study of the social processes of organisational sensemaking. She confirmed that sensemaking is neither a singular, homogenous process, nor a random, heterogeneous set of processes. She found that sensemaking unfolds in four forms: guided, fragmented, restricted and minimal. According to her findings, these forms result from the degree to which leaders and stakeholders engage in sensegiving – attempts to influence others' understandings of an issue (Maitlis, 2005:21).

Rouleau (2005:1413) considered the workings of primary sensemaking and sensegiving micro-practices by which middle managers interpret and sell strategic change at the organisational interface. She identified four micro-practices of strategic

sensemaking and sensegiving: translating the orientation, overcoding the strategy, disciplining the client, and justifying the change. She confirmed the importance of looking at the role of middle managers as interpreters and sellers of strategic change at the micro-level for a better understanding of their contribution in sustaining competitive advantage through their everyday activities. Her study also demonstrated how managers draw on their tacit knowledge to make sense of change and share it with others. Rouleau's (2005) analysis of routines and conversations demonstrates how mutual knowledge or tacitly understood procedures that middle managers draw on in strategic sensemaking and sensegiving can exist deep within their memory as familiar features of their professional, cultural and social praxis. She confirms the strategic role of the middle managers: middle managers' tacit knowledge used throughout their sensemaking and sensegiving micro-practices makes them strategic assets in a world where value creation lies in details (Rouleau, 2005:1437).

Later, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) initiated a research project to facilitate improved understanding of the way in which middle managers contribute strategically to the development of an organisation. They examined how managers enact the strategic roles allocated to them, with specific reference to strategic change. As indicated in the previous section, middle managers play an important role in both the formulation and implementation of strategies. However, strategic sensemaking capabilities are not unique to middle managers. There is increasing evidence from existing research on both senior and middle managers of the need for middle managers to exercise their strategic influence (Mangham & Pye, 1991; Pye & Pettigrew, 2005; Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Balogun, Pye & Hodgkinson, 2008; Buchanan, 2008; Fairhurst, 2008; Alexiev, Jansen, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2010). As noted earlier, the act of making sense and sharing it with colleagues forms part of one of the strategic roles of middle managers. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) take it further by stating that skilled managers are able to use their knowledge of the organisational context and their colleagues, subordinates and seniors to influence those around them to adopt their point of view. Middle managers are the linking pins who have upward, downward and lateral influence. As such, Maitlis (2005) and Wooldridge *et al.* (2008) suggest that discursive abilities are at the core of the way managers influence others.

Rouleau and Balogun (2011:955) explain that sensemaking is more than issue selling. The interest lies in the discursive abilities required to influence more generally at any stage of the change process, and on influencing activities across multiple stakeholders, upwards, downwards and horizontally. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) consequently developed a framework that shows two discursive activities: performing the conversation and setting the scene. These two activities are central to middle managers' situated sensemaking as they perform their strategic roles. Moreover, these two activities are underpinned by middle manager ability to draw on symbolic and verbal representations and the sociocultural systems the middle managers belong to.

Previously, Mangham and Pye (1991) described sensemaking more explicitly as a dual, cyclical and ongoing process of sense-reading and sense-wrighting to better portray the aspect of skilled practice concealed within sensemaking and sensegiving. "Wrighting" is used in the sense that a playwright "wrights" (Mangham & Pye, 1991:27). This distinction between sense-reading and sense-wrighting brings to mind the notion of individuals engaging in intertwined cycles of interpretation and action, where interpretation shapes action and vice versa in a reciprocal relationship through time, which is also intertwined with and influenced by the simultaneous cycles of interpretation and action of others (Balogun *et al.*, 2008). Maitlis (2005) shows that, when attempting to influence others' understanding of an issue through sensegiving, the interactions between diverse stakeholders are relevant and must be taken into account. Furthermore, sensegiving is a fundamental situated leadership activity within organisational sensemaking, based on a discursive ability to tell a story in the right way at the right time and in the right place (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Sonenshein (2006) shows how managers use specific language to influence others in issue-selling and emphasise individual effects on sensegiving. Other research on middle managers' strategic conversations reveals that nature of the micro-conversational mechanisms by which middle managers generate a shared understanding of a change or sell an issue to top management (Westley, 1990; Hoon, 2007; Laine & Vaara, 2007).

Furthermore, Sillince and Mueller (2007) found that, where top management was ambivalent about strategy, middle managers stepped into the void, often developing and implementing strategic initiatives with little involvement of their superiors. Where senior managers withdraw from strategising activities, middle managers develop

informal, lateral, peer-support networks and do a lot of experimentation as they continually make sense of the strategic information they encounter (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun *et al.*, 2005).

Whilst most of the research on sensemaking emphasises its social and interpretive character, research pays less attention to the relational process that is inherent to the process of meaning making. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence from research on both senior and middle managers of their need to be politically able, in other words, to be able to influence others, if they want to affect the course of the events around strategic change (Mangham & Pye, 1991; Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Pye & Pettigrew, 2005; Balogun *et al.*, 2008; Buchanan, 2008; Fairhurst, 2008). Rouleau and Balogun (2011:977) found that context plays a major role in understanding the political as well as discursive dimension of sensemaking. Some voices have more impact than others because of the contextual knowledge of the managers. To be able to act politically, middle managers need to be socialised within their context of action to understand the symbolic and verbal representations and sociocultural systems.

Rouleau and Balogun (2011) also express that research on middle manager sensemaking needs to include vertical and horizontal relationships as well. Middle managers not only has downward or upward influence or a combination of both, but also horizontal influence. These authors argue that strategic sensemaking is constituted and reconstituted in ongoing discursive activities of middle managers. Strategic sensemaking is accomplished through the ability of middle managers to craft and share a message based on underlying knowledge that is subtly invoked in order to make that message meaningful within the context. Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) propose that, since middle managers often lack the formal authority of those more typically associated with strategic work, such as members of the upper echelons, they are potentially more reliant on their ability to sense, read and wright, typically lacking other forms of persuasion or sanction, or the legitimacy critical to sensegiving that accrues to those with hierarchical resource-based means of influence.

As indicated previously, Rouleau and Balogun (2011:954) use the term “discursive competence” to refer to middle managers’ ability to knowledgably craft and share a message that is meaningful, engaging and compelling within his/her context of

operation through discursive performance. Their findings indicate that there are two discursive activities that are central to the way middle managers enact sensemaking to accomplish their strategic roles: performing the activities and setting the scene. These discursive activities are underpinned by middle managers' ability to draw on symbolic and verbal representation and the socio-cultural systems they belong to. Performing the conversation refers to the way that middle managers, in diverse circumstances, are able to craft and diffuse the messages they wish to get across to others to influence the recipients in the way they desire, as they are able to use the right words, the appropriate metaphors and symbols. It is more than language use or issue packaging. Performing the conversation goes beyond using the right words and phrases to conduct the entire conversational event, which cannot be scripted in all elements, as it has to allow for improvisation based on the way individuals present are responding.

"Setting the scene" refers to the capacity of middle managers to bring people together around a change project in order to make sense of it and build an alliance working towards the change, even if it is for different reasons. It refers to the knowledge of who to contact, who to bring together, and who to use to influence things. Rouleau and Balogun (2011:972) explain that, in strategic sensemaking, middle managers have to reassemble their subordinates and their peers, and at times their senior managers, around their cause and enrol them, which require them to mobilise the appropriate network formats and forums. Setting the scene also includes the appropriate means to reach the people, knowing how to set up the arena in which the conversations are to be performed and then putting this into practice.

These descriptions of performing the conversation and setting the scene also show that these sets of activities are discrete yet connected through practice. Once middle managers have identified how to get the attention of people by drawing on the right symbolic/verbal representations, they need to draw them in through different processes. Rouleau and Balogun (2011:972) further explain that middle managers draw on their tacit knowledge of organisational codes and sociocultural rules to make sense of change and to influence others. These verbal representations used by middle managers reveal more than they actually say and are also influenced by the manner in which they position themselves as they interact with others.

Earlier, Dutton *et al.* (2001) argued that, in the context of issue selling, the sensemaking process is political and contextually embedded. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) confirm this insight and advance it by highlighting the importance of not just language use but also the nuanced understanding of context underpinning the middle managers' strategic sensemaking. Existing middle manager research (Westley, 1990; Rouleau, 2005; Hoon, 2007) and general sensemaking research such as Maitlis (2005) and Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) point to the need to understand not just the form of middle manager conversations designed to influence but also the language use within them. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) demonstrate that the language use in particular settings with particular stakeholder groups allows managers to influence others. Moreover, by showing that language use is intertwined with the building of settings in which to use language, Rouleau and Balogun (2011:976) show that strategic sensemaking is enacted through language use over time. Strategic sensemaking is practically embedded through a chain of discursive acts that transform the chaos into locally situated meanings.

Closely related to sensemaking is analogical reasoning. Analogical reasoning is a cognitive operation involving the successful transfer of knowledge from a source domain to a target domain (Tsoukas 1991; 1993). Analogical reasoning is recognised as a central component of most organisational aspects and has been considered by cognitive scientists as a vital feature of human cognition that involves applying knowledge from a relatively familiar domain to another less familiar domain (Statler, Jacobs & Roos, 2008:134). These authors extended the concept of analogical reasoning by drawing on the strategy-as-practice lens, specifically interested in what, at a micro-level, people actually do when strategising. Using the definition of practice by Reckwitz (2002), Statler *et al.*'s (2008:135) analogical reasoning is considered as something more than an exclusively cognitive operation. The latter authors reframed analogical reasoning as a strategic practice and a micro-level activity associated with strategising. They extended the capacity of the concept of analogical reasoning to provide plausible explanations of what people are doing when, for example, they sit around conference tables, use flipcharts, spreadsheets, presentation slides and other traditional media to discuss the relationship between last year's strategic plans and their changing business circumstances. Building on the view of Tsoukas (1993:342) when people (organisational actors) interact and communicate, they intersubjectively generate meaning by using symbols and

metaphors that analogically refer from one domain of meaning or knowledge to another. Tsoukas (1993:342) argued that people who engage in knowledge generation and sensemaking processes in organisations employ analogical reasoning whenever they communicate using metaphors. Metaphors function by introducing an initial, superficial similarity at object level between source and target that may then be explored and tested for potential structural similarities through a process of analogical reasoning in a deeper, more systematic manner. According to Statler *et al.* (2008:136), an expanded, practice-oriented concept of analogical reasoning makes it possible for strategy researchers to focus not only on the discursive content of what people who make strategy say, but also, at an ethnological (or ethnographic) level, on the behaviour of individuals and groups as well as the physical spaces, material contexts and economic forces that are reciprocally structured by those behaviours. The practice may be quite common, even mundane, occurring whenever people perform competitive analyses or benchmarking studies, whenever people engage in scenario development or even any time performance success is measured. Analogical reasoning provides an analytical framework that can accommodate the material, embodied and performative aspects involved in strategic practices such as strategy meetings, management retreats and strategy workshops (Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006). Within such workshops, a wide range of different process techniques, including a variety of two- or three-dimensional objects as well as other more familiar materials such as white boards, PowerPoint slides are commonly employed. Gesture and posture are equally relevant aspects that deserve attention.

The following section specifically addresses the practices of middle managers in strategising.

3.8 STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS

As indicated earlier, it is not possible to study any one of the three elements of the strategy-as-practice perspective without also drawing on aspects of the others. This section deals with strategising practices, but cannot be separated from praxis and practitioners. Strategy practitioners do not act in isolation but draw upon regular, socially defined modes of acting that make their actions and interactions meaningful

to others (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Chia & McKay, 2007; Whittington *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, the social structures, tools, technologies and discourses through which micro-actions are constructed need to be investigated (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008:1392). Strategy is connected with particular types of practices, such as strategic planning, annual reviews, strategy workshops and budget cycles that are often overlooked as the mundane practices of strategy; which, as Whittington (1996; 2003) points out, neglects the way that these routine, institutionalised and often taken-for-granted practices socially structure strategic outcomes.

As discussed in Chapter 2, strategy-making is increasingly seen as strategising. It can be seen as a dynamic process that is socially accomplished by multiple actors, rather than as discrete phases of strategy formulation followed by strategy implementation (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, according to Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:8), strategy is a particular type of activity that is connected with particular practices, such as strategic planning, annual reviews, strategy workshops and their associated discourses. Hence, just as science may be defined as those activities that draw on scientific practices (e.g. methods, tools, scientific language), strategy might be defined as those activities that draw on particular strategic practices. It was stated in Chapter 2 that strategising occurs at the nexus between praxis, practices and practitioners. As this research used the strategy-as-practice lens to identify and analyse the strategising activities of middle managers, it was deemed appropriate to consider the situated activities located within the praxis of middle managers, i.e. the actual work of strategising, in other words, all the meeting, consulting, writing, presenting and communicating.

Equally important, the “routinised types of behaviour which consist of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their uses, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (Reckwitz, 2002:243) need to be considered as well. In accordance with the views of Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008a:282), the practices that practitioners – in the case of this research, middle managers – use to do strategy work are the social, symbolic and material tools. These practices are combined, coordinated and adapted to construct practice. Practices include those theoretically and practically derived tools that have become part of the everyday lexicon and activity of strategy,

such as Porter's five forces, decision modelling and budgets as well as material artefacts and technologies, such as PowerPoint slides, flipcharts and spreadsheets (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:5).

Whittington *et al.* (2006:616) declare that, in a world of continuous change, mastering the key practices, tools and procedures, for repeated reorganising and re-strategising matters at least as much as perfecting any particular strategic or organisational design. They support Mintzberg (1994) by confirming that strategy as a whole should be seen as crafted through emergent processes with formal strategy analysis as distraction. Managers are seen as craftspeople who shape the material with which they work in a hands-on, almost intuitive fashion.

Strategy tools are defined by Clark (1997:417) as numerous techniques, tools, methods, models, frameworks, approaches and methodologies which are available to support decision-making within strategic management. Kaplan and Jarzabkowski (2006:6) extend this definition by explaining that tools are artefacts around which activity and organising take place – it is conceptualised as boundary objects that mediate the initiation and implementation of strategic initiatives across boundaries within organisations. Strategy tools are not viewed as strategy itself; strategy tools are part of wider strategising activities (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011:1217). Strategy tools assume the status of an artefact, structuring information and providing grounds for interaction around a common tool that is easily recognisable by participants in a strategy task (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2006). Strategy tools may enable shared meanings among one group of actors, namely middle managers. It may also create barriers when communicating results to line managers or supervisors who have not been involved in selecting or using the tool. In particular, the strategic planning process may assign strategic responsibility for the selection and use of strategy tools to specific hierarchical levels and functions (Whittington & Cailluet, 2008), and so, unintentionally, create semantic boundaries to communicating strategy. In order for strategy tools to be effective, it is important to ensure participation in their selection and use (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). This is because the information encoded in a strategy tool, such as a strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) matrix or the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) matrix, is not meaningful in and of itself. Rather, strategy tools derive meaning through the interactions in which they are used.

The following section reports on the tools of the strategy trade: strategy tools, routines, committees, project management, symbolic artefacts, workshops/away days, meetings and strategic discourse.

3.8.1 Routines

Miettinen and Virkkunen (2005:437) explain that routines were originally introduced to account for the continuity of organisational life. Routines are based on theories of action and behaviour that focus exclusively on the pre-reflective and embodied aspects of human practice. Routines are considered a stabilised way of acting. Larsen and Rasmussen (2008) analysed how interplay through communication between routines and strategising takes place. They conducted a study of how management in 15 small and medium-sized Danish organisations strategise on a daily basis. The study revealed how routines influence strategising and how some routines create a specific framework for strategising processes. Their study also considered how routines occur and how they are reformed and created through strategising in a natural-becoming process. A routine is defined as a “pattern of behaviour that is followed repeatedly, but subject to change if conditions change” (Becker, 2004:664). Larsen and Rasmussen (2008:2) argue that routines represent more than repeated behaviour; routines are part of and elements to maintain or develop how people conceive the world and make sense of their behaviour. Organisational routines are patterned sequences of learned behaviour involving multiple actors who are linked by relations of communications and/or authority. According to Cohen and Bacdayan (1994:555–556), routines are a major source of organisational competence, and without routines, organisations would lose efficiency as structures of collective actions. Feldman (2003:727) makes clear that traditional explanations of stability in organisational routines suggest that organisational participants are not thinking about what they are doing, but repeating actions that they have taken in the past. However, she suggests that stability can also occur because organisational participants are making conscious efforts to understand what actions make sense in the context within which the work is being performed. The argument is that organisational participants (middle managers) use what they understand about how the organisation operates to guide their performances within

the routine. Relevant performances, such as the performances of middle managers or supervisors, are integral to what people understand about how the organisation operates. Organisational members use these understandings in choosing whether to enact the requested change. In so doing, they create and recreate the understandings about how the organisation operates. Feldman (2003:728) uses the performative perspective to analyse organisational routines. The performative perspective emphasises the role that performances, or the actions people take that enact the abstract idea of an organisational routine, play in what people understand they are doing when they enact organisational routines (Orlikowski, 1996; 2002). Miettinen and Virkkunen (2005:440) take this view further by stating that the routinising of activity in organisations constitutes the most important form of storage of the organisation's operative knowledge. Skills and routines are maintained by being exercised. Nelson and Winter (1982:105) include artefacts in the concept of routine. They also include forms of external memory – files, message boards, manuals, computer memories and magnetic tapes – that complement and support individual memories but which are maintained in a large part as a routine organisational function.

3.8.2 Committees

Hoon (2007) investigated committees as strategic practice. Her research was founded in the current trend in strategy literature that focuses on the strategic importance of middle managers where they are not only viewed as conduits of senior managers' orders, but also as strategic assets who play a pivotal role in strategic changes. Her study was longitudinal in nature and used a qualitative approach to examine the role of committees during the implementation of personnel development in a public administration. A committee is understood as a structured and pre-determined way of conducting strategy work. While the committee is a strategic practice that is formally organised, the interactions of strategic actors are framed by the various informal interactions between senior and middle managers. These informal interactions are understood as strategic conversations (Hoon, 2007:927). The results show that middle managers and senior managers organise the discussion on strategic issues in informal interactions around committees. The

informal setting is especially helpful to keep senior management informed about new issues and to negotiate novel proposals and innovative issues. According to Hoon (2007), these close informal interactions can be understood as a strategic conversation that entails the micro-mechanisms of generating an understanding, aligning towards an issue and making prearrangements which give support for the flow of discussion (Hoon, 2007:921). The findings show that the strategic conversations are beneficial in shaping strategy as they frame the committee as strategic practice and enable the strategic context to be reshaped and redefined. Although the findings confirm that the committee is helpful in structuring the formal interactions between managers and stakeholders, Hoon's study leads to the more general conclusion that the committee-based interactions between middle and senior management are pushed forward in important informally scheduled strategic conversations. The strategic conversations lead to prearrangements that feed into the committee by setting the strategic context for the formal decision-making routines (Hoon, 2007:947).

3.8.3 Project management and symbolic artefacts

Whittington *et al.* (2006:615–629) examined project management of strategic and organisational initiatives and the creation of symbolic artefacts to communicate strategic change. They argue that, in a world of accelerating change, it is more effective to approach strategy and organising as interlinked and practical activities than as traditionally static and detached activities. They propose that, as changes drive repeated strategising/organising, it is mastery of the tools and procedures that matters.

Project management has become an increasingly widespread practice (Whittington *et al.*, 2006:621). Project management is employed in activities such as product launches, IT projects, strategy and organisational change. Söderlund (2004) suggests that two thirds of strategic transformation projects fail in some degree, with inadequate project management an important cause.

Whittington *et al.* (2006) found that in many organisations the crafting of symbolic artefacts is a deliberate and effective part of strategising/organising. According to

these authors, such artefacts have long been recognised as playing important roles in organisations, though often treated as somewhat superficial manifestations of deeper phenomena. However, there is greater theoretical recognition of the role that these artefacts' shared creation and communication can have in both innovation and organisational change (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005).

Cetina (1997) suggests that, in today's knowledge society, the construction of epistemic objects is increasingly becoming an important part of any expert work. These objects are not things with fixed qualities but rather open-ended projections oriented to something that does not yet exist. For this reason, these objects are also generators of new conceptions, and solutions can be regarded as a central source of innovation and reorientation in societal practices. Strategy consulting sometimes even involves the deliberate construction of Lego-based models of competitive positions (Whittington *et al.*, 2006).

Findings of a qualitative study of ten strategic reorganisations conducted by Whittington *et al.* (2006) offer several examples of symbolic artefacts. One example shows how the change team deliberately decorated the main project meeting room at the company headquarters in artfully naive fashion using bold colours, pasted-up collages, hanging mobiles and childish pictures. These artefacts represented the new organisational identity, with change team members themselves involved in creating these artefacts. Another example of the skilled use of striking artefacts is found where the change team themselves had built a garden shed in a corner of their open-plan project room, purportedly as a place for quiet reflection, but effectively more a symbol of the need for such reflection (Whittington *et al.*, 2006:622). Another example considered an organisation launch of a new strategy at a major headquarters event. Employees were invited to build a pledge wall symbolising their support for the strategy, adding photographs of themselves, with their names and their own personal commitment to change. This wall was left standing for more than a year afterwards as an enduring symbol of the new strategy and the employees' commitment to it.

3.8.4 Workshops and/or away-days

The practice of taking time out from the day-to-day routines to deliberate on the longer-term direction of the organisation is common practice (Whittington *et al.*, 2006). Workshops or management away-days typically lasts for one or two days and are held off-site (hence “away-day”). Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006) explored the role of workshops in strategy development through a large-scale UK survey of managerial experience of these events. These authors suggest that analysis of these workshops can shed light on three broad issues in strategy management practice:

- the question of how strategies develop in both formal strategic planning practices and the more informal strategy-making processes;
- the new roles that formal strategy-making may now be developing; and
- who is actually included in these important parts of strategy development, given the acknowledgement of the strategic role of middle managers.

The findings show that strategy workshops play an important part in formal strategic planning processes. In terms of purpose, Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006:484) found that the majority of workshops address both strategy formulation and implementation. It was also found that strategy workshops are typically linked to regular processes of formal strategic planning. According to the survey results, strategy workshops appear to be forums in which the existing experience of managers is brought to bear on issues, rather than new research and analysis. In terms of the tools used at strategy workshops, the most common tool is SWOT, which is an organising framework for discussion rather than a tool for analysis. In addition, strategy workshops rely on discursive rather than analytical approaches to strategy-making and reinforce elitist approaches to strategy development (Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006:479). These findings are confirmed by Whittington *et al.* (2006:620) who state that the kinds of practice represented by the workshops rely not just on analytical strategic or organisational design, but also on the crafting of processes and accomplished performance in the moment.

Strategy workshops offer a vehicle for middle managers and wider stakeholder inclusion for the emergence of strategy. However, strategy workshops are predominantly for senior management; middle managers are present in less than

half the workshops. Further analysis by Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006) indicates that middle managers tend to be more involved in workshops related to strategy implementation and in larger organisations.

For many organisations, strategy workshops have become an essential managerial practice. However, Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006:480) warn about the risks of badly handled strategy workshops: inertia, cynicism and the departure of employees may result.

3.8.5 Meetings

Sturdy, Schwarz and Spicer (2006:929) refer to the activities of business dinners and back-stage management consultancy. They found that the use of wider norms and routines of eating and socialising as well as of hierarchical patterns of working and of exclusion and inclusion shape structured organisational activities, including strategising.

Based on a dataset of 51 meeting observations, Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008:1391) examined how strategy meetings are involved in either stabilising existing strategic orientations or proposing variations that cumulatively generate change in strategic orientations. Meetings are planned gatherings of three or more people who assemble for a purpose that is ostensibly related to some aspect of organisational or group function and are distinct from casual encounters (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008:1394). Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) found eleven significant structuring characteristics of strategy meetings. Based on a taxonomy of meeting structures, these two authors contribute to the literature on strategy-as-practice by explaining how the practice of meetings is related to consequential strategic outcomes. They also demonstrate the role of meetings in shaping stability and change by considering meetings as strategic episodes. Hendry and Seidl (2003:188) define strategic episodes as

“mechanisms by which (incremental changes in the organisation’s structure resulting from random perturbations) are reflexively monitored, not just to identify situations where the existing strategy may no longer be appropriate ... but also to realign the organisation, where appropriate, with the

existing strategy. A strategic episode that results in a positive confirmation is just as important for the organisational well-being as one that results in change”.

Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) conclude that meetings might be considered a space for choice opportunities about strategy, in which specific meeting practices, such as working groups and rescheduling, combined with various forms of turn-taking conduct, can shape the length of time that a choice opportunity remains open, so influencing the types of solutions it might attract.

Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011:1217–1245) addressed a call within the strategy-as-practice field to examine those often-routine practices of strategy planning. Their article considers the way that written texts within the strategy-planning process, such as PowerPoint presentations, planning documents and targets, are constructed in practice. These authors conceptualised strategy planning as a communicative process that occurs through the iterative and recursive relation of talk and text. Communicative interaction occurs within different media, such as strategy meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008) and informal social occasions (Sturdy *et al.*, 2006) as well as through disseminated texts, such as documents and emails. Text is often referred to as both oral and written discourse, but Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011:1221) take the concept further by distinguishing between talk and text. According to them, talk is considered as any orally expressed discourse and it occurs in a current, immediate context-bound situation. They refer to any discourse or ideas expressed in writing as text. A text therefore may be based on anterior talk and/or an author’s individual ideas which she/he may not have voiced before.

3.8.6 Strategic discourse

Hendry (2000:955) conceptualised strategic decisions as elements of a strategic discourse, operating at both the structural level of social reproduction and the instrumental level of intentional communication. This strategic discourse constitutes the medium through which strategic choices are discussed and recorded, interpretations developed and expressed and strategic actions initiated, authorised and acknowledged. In his article, Hendry (2000) describes how a new strategy and

the accompanying actions and the range of commitments required to realise the strategy are launched. According to this author, when the strategy changes, the change is reflected both in management thinking and in the organisation's actions and behaviour. However, it is not immediately clear which part the strategic decision-making has played in the overall strategy process. As such, he investigated the relationship between strategic decision-making, strategic thinking and strategic action. Hendry (2000:957) suggests that strategic decisions can be identified as part of an organisational discourse or body of language-based communications that operates both at the structural and at the communicative levels and that constitutes a central feature of the strategy process. Furthermore, this strategic discourse is not only the medium in which decisions are discussed and recorded, but also the medium through which interpretations are developed and expressed and strategic actions initiated, authorised and acknowledged. According to Hendry (2000:973), it is not enough simply to make a decision, or to make a decision and announce it. A decision takes its meaning from the social practice and discourse within which it is located, and for an announcement to be effective, it must take account of that context. Speech is ephemeral and in an organisational context, even texts are short-lived, so a decision must not only be communicated effectively but also be recommunicated through text and speech until it becomes embodied in action. At the same time, it must also continually be refined and adapted through dialogue so as to meet the specific and ever-changing needs of different actors and different circumstances.

Concluding comments on the strategising practices of middle managers

In these examples, managers are not just designing abstract strategies and structures, but also physical objects with which to communicate these. Yet, Whittington *et al.* (2006:624) warn that the mastery of these practices (strategy tools, routines, committees, workshopping, project management, symbolic artefacts and meetings) on their own may not be enough for successful strategising. Inept handling of these kinds of practices can easily damage initiatives that might otherwise proceed more smoothly. These authors acknowledge the problem with traditional strategy, namely that it can be too analytical and too detached. Rather than rejecting formal strategy, their emphasis is on injecting craft directly into the process. They claim that strategic planning can be renewed by recognising it as a dynamic and

creative process in which strategy and organisation are closely tied, and where mastery of the practical can make a difference. Strategists run workshops and video-conferences, draw flip-charts, design PowerPoints, manipulate spreadsheets, hire consultants, manage projects, write reports, monitor metrics and talk endlessly. Their skills at these activities can therefore mean success or failure for entire strategy processes.

The strategy-as-practice perspective recognises these practices as essential parts of strategy work, equal to the analytics of traditional strategy. Organisations need to equip themselves with capabilities in these apparently everyday practical details of strategising and organising. Middle managers should attend closely to these crafts, applying their creativity and discipline as much to them as to the overall contours of strategy (Whittington *et al.*, 2006:625).

3.9 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The view of middle managers' place in strategy-making has developed historically from one where they essentially took direction from and provided input to top management to one where they now are at the centre of the two processes that have become the basis for strategy formation – knowledge creation and the development of core competence.

The relationship between middle management strategic behaviour and organisational performance provides the impetus for adopting a deliberately middle-level perspective in strategy research. Moreover, in studying the strategising activities of middle managers (individual practitioners), one can ascertain how their doing shapes micro and meso-praxis.

Middle managers are more and more involved in a wide range of organisational activities, ranging from strategic management of the organisation as a whole to the operational management of an organisational sub-unit. No longer is middle managers' power derived from their hierarchical position of authority but rather from having some specific knowledge that enables them to influence strategic and operational priorities and actions. Middle managers are increasingly deemed to play a crucial role with regard to team performance. By ensuring that certain activities are

carried out and by balancing organisational change and stability, middle managers ensure that the organisation is able to generate creative alternatives to its problems.

This chapter offered an integrated account of middle management research in strategy from 1983 to 2012. It is interesting to note that the bulk of the research was published in the period 2000 to 2009 (acknowledging that the new decade is at the time of writing this chapter, only two years old). The interesting phenomenon is how the focus of the research has changed. Initially, the bulk of the middle manager research was within the middle management cognition and involvement and middle management outcomes themes (1983-1991). From 1992 onwards, the most common theme considered the strategic roles of middle managers. Although the number of articles published on the first two themes are similar, the number of articles dealing with the strategic roles of middle managers is exceeding the other themes and is still on the increase. This trend holds true even today, which could imply that middle managers are finally considered, and studied, as strategy practitioners. The increase in the number of middle management studies during the last four decades is also a significant response to the numerous calls for strategy research at other levels in the organisation.

CHAPTER 4

ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

4.1 INTRODUCTION

“... higher education does not need more good management techniques; it needs more good managers” (Birnbaum, 2000:239)

The previous two chapters offered reviews of the existing bodies of knowledge on the strategy-as-practice perspective and the middle management perspective in strategy. It was indicated in Chapter 1 that this research was focused on the strategising activities of middle managers within a university context. Unlike previous studies that mainly focused on the top management teams in universities, this study was aimed at exploring the strategising practices of middle managers within a university context. Chapter 4 introduces the university context used in this research and also reviews that selected strategy-related research conducted within the university context, and specifically within the strategy-as-practice and middle management perspectives. The review of the existing research included a description of the unique characteristics of universities that make them a unique and valuable context within which to study strategising practices. This chapter will also include a description of the strategic management process and planning methodology at the chosen institution.

Within the strategy-as-practice perspective, Whittington (2006b) highlights the importance of contextualising micro-action. This is confirmed by Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:6) who state that micro-phenomena need to be understood in their wider social context; actors are not acting in isolation but are drawing upon the regular, socially defined modes of acting that arise from the many social institutions to which they belong. Much of the social infrastructure, such as tools, technologies and discourses, through which micro-actions are constructed, has macro, institutionalised properties. This social infrastructure enables the transmission of the social within and between contexts, whilst being adopted and adapted differently within micro-contexts (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004; Seidl, 2007). Furthermore, as stated in section 2.3.1.3, practitioner action is always connected to the situation and context within

which agency is derived (Balogun *et al.*, 2005:261–278). As such, the purpose of this chapter is to describe the organisational context within which this research was conducted as well as the context within which the practitioners put strategy into practice. The process, socio-material tools and artefacts and praxis of the strategic planning process are described in the final section of this chapter.

Lave (in Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002:357) states that context is more than a static container of phenomena; it is rather an activity system in which actor, community, and the social cultural artefacts of interaction are integrated through activity. The current research study chose a South African university as an activity system in which to study the practices of the strategy actors, specifically academic and non-academic middle managers, and the material tools through which strategy work is done.

As indicated earlier, this research set out to develop theory and thereby expand the body of knowledge in terms of middle-manager practices in the strategising process in general, and will make an original contribution to the theory of middle-manager practices in a university context in South Africa. As indicated in Chapter 1, the strategising practices of middle managers in the university context are open for exploration. The choice of a university in South Africa was informed by the numerous calls for research in the African context, specifically for higher education institutions in developing economies such as South Africa (Rowley & Sherman, 2001b; Pityana, 2009; Kuanda, 2012). The institution chosen is considered a mega university, described by Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson (2006:44) as the seventh largest mega distance education institution in the world. Not only is this institution the largest university on the African continent, but it is also considered a key contributor to social justice in post-apartheid South Africa. The chosen institution has also been influenced in different ways by the policy on mergers as a tool towards restructuring the higher education landscape in South Africa. Furthermore, this institution, like other higher education institutions worldwide, is experiencing rapid changes associated with ageing facilities, changing technology, changing demographics, increasing competition, rising costs and funding cuts. Educational administrators are challenged to anticipate changes in the environment and are required to formulate proactive responses that will enhance the educational processes on college and university campuses (Rowley & Sherman, 2001a). Figure 11 diagrammatically depicts the content of this chapter in relation to the thesis.

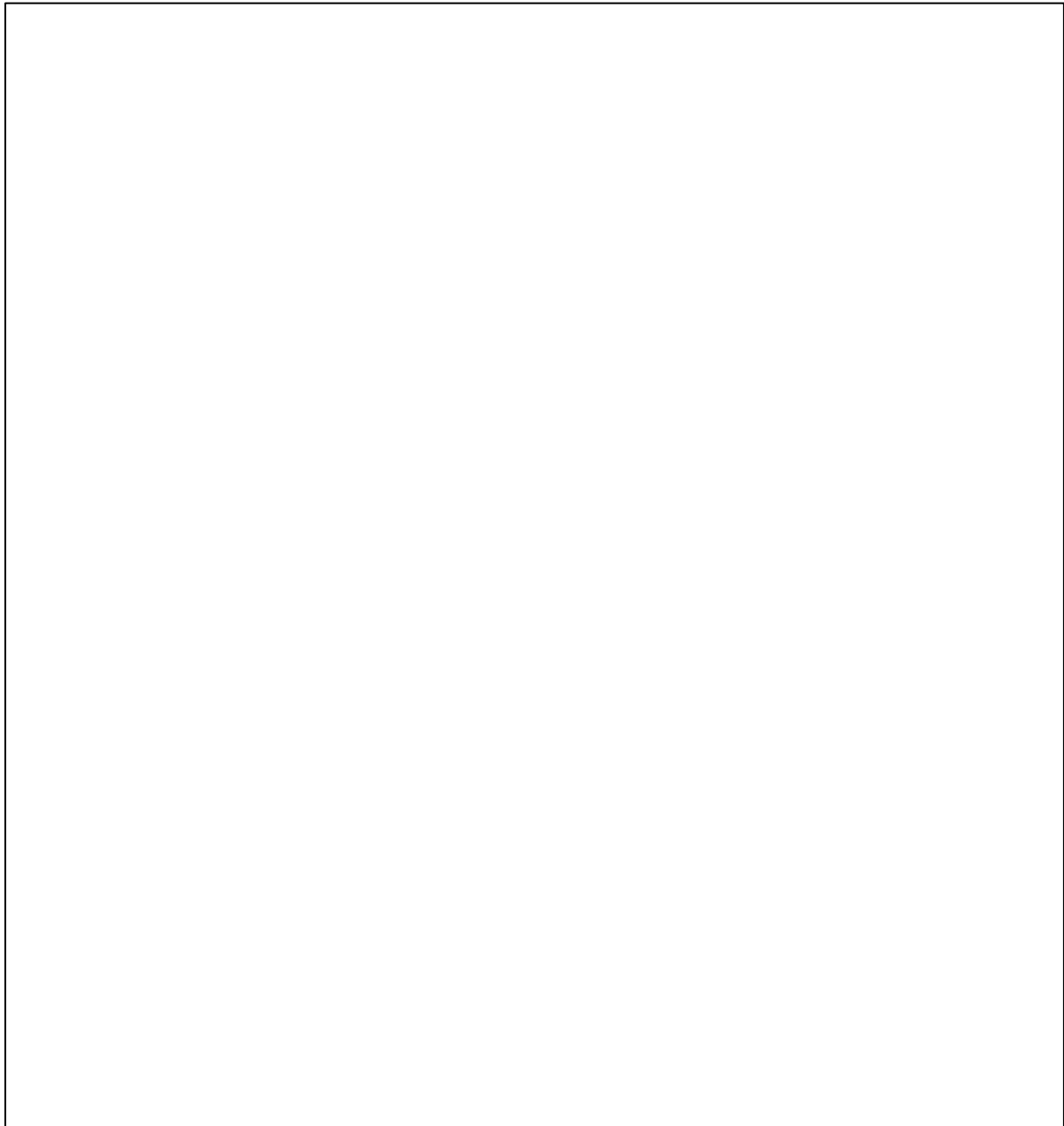


Figure 11: Structure of Chapter 4

Source: Own compilation

4.2 THE CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

Higher education is a large, complex and changing industry and it enrolls some 19 million students and employs 3.4 million people (Weisbrod, Ballou & Asch, 2010:9). The higher education industry consists of public colleges and universities and a rapidly growing number of private for-profit education providers. During UNESCO's

World Conference on Higher Education in 2009, reference was made to the academic revolution of the 21st century (MacGregor, 2009). In describing the higher education global trends, Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009) identified the most significant forces that shaped higher education in the previous decade. According to Altbach *et al.* (2009), massification of higher education will create more access and participation in post-secondary education. In developing countries, including those in Africa, massification of higher education is characterised by a very rapid increase in student enrolment maintained over several years (Mohamedbhai, 2008: vi). Along with massification have come major changes to funding higher education – financial pressures have changed the traditional view of higher education as a “public good” to a contemporary view of “private good”. Higher education institutions can no longer depend on state funding only and globally, students and families need to assume a share of the financial burden. Globally, student demographic trends indicate a continued expansion in student participation and systems with women forming the majority of the student population in developed countries. Based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Developments’ (OECD) key demographic trends up until 2030, the student population will become more varied, including more international, older part-time students (MacGregor, 2009).

The South African higher education sector also experiences the effects of these global trends. The average annual increase in South African universities for the period 2000—2007 for undergraduate student enrolments was 4.6%, for postgraduate studies it was 3.2% and for doctoral degree studies it was 6.6% (Higher Education of South Africa, 2010). South Africa has 23 public universities which employ 108 687 staff of which 41 383 are academics (Council on Higher Education, 2009:5). In July 2009, there were 103 registered and provisionally registered private higher education providers in SA (Council on Higher Education, 2009:11), offering a wide range of programmes. Since 2009, 24 new private higher education institutions registered with the South African Council on Higher Education (South Africa, 2012).

Organisations that are operating in developing economies such as South Africa are at risk of becoming marginalised by large, developed economies. Organisations need to position themselves in the changing world economic order and this is also true for institutions of learning (Baijnath, 2012). How universities respond to and pre-

empt dealing with these challenges will influence the sustainability and competitiveness of the university and subsequently the nations it serves.

According to Slaughter and Leslie (1997), universities are increasingly exposed to a competitive environment due to declining state funding and increased market pressures. These conditions contribute to top managers' responsibilities to ensure that the university makes a collective strategic response to funding bodies and to the market (Shattock, 2004). Slaughter and Leslie (1997) confirm the uneasy alignment between the traditional distributed nature of the university and the need for top managers to coordinate strategies. However, these authors also warn that, despite changing environmental conditions, professional actors persist in perceiving strategy from a personal or departmental, rather than university, perspective.

Traditional brick-and-mortar universities worldwide are facing competitive pressures introduced by virtual universities using open platforms to reach large numbers of students. Moreover, the growth in open educational resources (OER) offers students and faculty unlimited access to knowledge available through the Internet and has an influence on how universities construct teaching and learning. Another development is the rise of the corporate university. Weinberg and Graham-Smith (2012) explain there is strong evidence that, in the era of advanced capitalism, the university has lost its distinctiveness and has become just another corporation. According to Weinberg and Graham-Smith (2012), the corporatisation of the university has changed the focus of academics from enhancing the discipline to career paths and the university's own market share.

Barley (2007) refers to corporate universities as "University 2.0", because the evolution of the corporate university mirrors the evolution of the World Wide Web. The higher education environment has also seen significant growth in the number of private providers. Universities around the world now need to see themselves as competing with a whole range of new competitors and also with other organisations vying for public and private funding. Universities are increasingly developing third-stream income activities such as training, consultancy, contract research, short learning courses, executive development and SMME support (Barley, 2007:743).

The challenges in the higher education environment call for continuous change by universities, but Gioia and Thomas (1996:370) warn that universities have historically been comfortable only with slower, self-paced, incremental change. According to

Rowley and Sherman (2003), there are areas of convergence between private and public sector strategic behaviour and universities are therefore considered a relevant context for a study of strategising practices. More specifically, the strategising practices of those actors who are powerful in terms of the academic, administrative and decision processes, provide a rich research context.

4.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT ENVIRONMENT

The following section describes the unique characteristics of universities that impact on the management of universities and subsequently the strategising practices.

4.3.1 Goal ambiguity, divergent professional interests and multiple strategic directions

According to Jarzabkowski (2005), the university sector is characterised by goal ambiguity and divergent professional interest which highlight the complexity of distributed activity. University contexts pose problems for collective activity because of the different responsibilities and affiliations of their constituents. Jarzabkowski (2005:70) describes the university context using the following example:

... while universities may have research excellence as an overarching strategy, the motivation for and content of research activity is the responsibility of different departments and, within those departments, different individuals whose affiliation is to their discipline more than to their institution.

Many years earlier, Cohen, March and Olsen (1972:3) commented on this multiplicity of goals and interest and stated that strategic decision-making in universities can be viewed as a garbage can involving random confluence between streams of choice, problems, solutions and actors. Weick (1976) confirmed this view and stated that universities are not held together by shared activity; rather, top managers and other actors have loose-coupled relationships. Therefore, Jarzabkowski (2005:70) claims that a traditional university context is an extreme form of a distributed activity system

in which actors are fragmented in their objectives with little attention to strategy as a collective organisational activity.

The university management environment is further complicated because of the multiple strategic directions that universities pursue. In the past, universities have pursued research and teaching as two separate activities, which each gives a distinctive strategic character to the institution: teaching-dominated institutions versus top-of-the-league institutions that focus primarily upon prestigious research (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Nowadays, a third strategic activity is arising from competition for scarce public resources. This activity relates to commercial income. Jarzabkowski (2005:72) explains that these multiple strategies erode collective activity because they are inherently contradictory for many actors.

4.3.2 Autonomous workforce

Managing universities is complicated as university managers must take into account the divergent interests of an autonomous professional workforce. Cohen and March (1986) confirm that universities are characterised by an autonomous professional workforce who is resistant to overt formal control. Jarzabkowski (2005:71) explains that a strategy cannot occur directly through top-down influence. Rather, strategising practices that mediate managerial influence are important for shaping strategy. Yet, the strategising practices available to managers in the university contexts typically have low sanctions for non-performance. Jarzabkowski (2005:71) maintains that relevant sanctions and rewards in the university context may be outside management control because the nature of professional work commands external, peer-based rewards and recognition. She offers the example of high-quality research that attracts rewards of prestigious publications and peer recognition.

Earlier, Gioia *et al.* (1994) explained that university top management may achieve influence over others through their ability to construct an interpretation or ideology that others may understand and value while at the same time external demands increase the need for rational management techniques. University management must therefore balance competing demands for external legitimacy through the use of formal administrative practices, whilst also meeting the need to gain value-based commitment from an autonomous professional workforce (Stone & Brush, 1996).

4.3.3 University structures

The hierarchy of vice-chancellors (VCs), vice-principals (VPs), chairs, deans, registrars and directors must collaborate with the academic authority system that exists through various management committees (Hutchinson, 2009). As a consequence, dual authority structures exist in universities. Senior administrators are often in a position where they have to develop and implement strategy that reflects directives from various academic committees and not what is necessarily required for universities' strategic progress (Hutchinson, 2009:6). The duality of the university system is also described by Weinberg and Graham-Smith (2012). These authors explain that the practicing academic has been relegated to the role of mere functionary in a system whose core principles are essentially uncollegial. The key stakeholders are the administrators, council, the unions and the students. The lecturer, without whose work the university would cease to exist, ultimately carries out the of the administrators' decisions. Whereas before the administration served the academic staff, presently the roles are reversed (Weinberg & Graham-Smith, 2012:74). Baijnath (2012:26) says that academics have a strong tendency to perceive strategic changes as "fads that will pass" and calls for a great deal of support and communication to overcome this perception. Earlier, Rowley and Sherman (2003:1058) confirmed that the "presence of faculty and non-academic personnel in leadership roles can create ambiguity and confusion."

In addition to this duality of structure, Wilms and Zell (2003:16) explain that universities are not structured to chase opportunity like fast-moving corporations. Nor do university faculty members think like corporate employees. They explain further that universities and colleges are loosely linked alliances of administrators and faculty members. Furthermore, according to Wilms and Zell (2003), universities are buttressed by traditions of academic freedom and were designed not to change easily with times. As the higher education environment becomes more turbulent, administrators and academic leaders are frequently caught between opposing forces that at the same time both demand change and resist it.

4.4 PREVIOUS STRATEGY RESEARCH IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

Although there is evidence of an increasing research interest in the university context, the current review only considered completed research in universities pertaining to strategy. For the sake of completeness, section 4.4.1 briefly describes research on strategic management within the university context. However, a more detailed review of general strategy research in universities falls outside the scope of this research. The aim of sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2 is to review and describe the research in the university context that is considered relevant to this study.

4.4.1 General strategic management research in the university context

In reviewing the strategy research in the university context, four themes were identified. Table 6 offers a brief summary of these themes, with references to the specific studies within those themes and main findings of the selected studies.

Table 6: A summary of the themes and main findings of strategic management research in the university context

Theme	Studies/Year	Research context	Main findings
Use of strategic management in universities	Schmidtlein and Milton (1989)	Universities and colleges in the USA	Research findings indicated that rigid application of techniques at these institutions often resulted in planning failure because institutional context and constraints were overlooked.
	Groves, Pendlebury and Stiles (1997)	Universities in the UK	Research findings confirmed that strategic management techniques can make a substantial contribution to university management and that universities do not appear to conform readily to the corporate model of strategy-making.
Strategy implementation	Lillis (1990)	Universities in developing	Research findings confirmed that strategic planning is especially

in universities		countries	important for universities in developing countries because these universities are already disadvantaged in their ability to deliver cutting-edge research and education due to the dwindling of already scarce resources and the increasing management problems they may face in their countries.
	Rowley and Sherman (2001b)	Universities in developing economies	Research findings led to the development of methods that campus leaders and strategic planners have at their disposal to implement strategies, and concluded that strategic planning is an on-going process but also a flexible process.
	Rahimnia, Polychronakis and Sharp (2009)	A university in Iran	Research findings identified the impeters of strategy implementation.
Specific strategies within universities	Wilms and Zell (2003)	Universities in the USA	Research findings suggested that as the higher education environment becomes more turbulent, administrators and academic leaders are caught between opposing forces that both demand and resist change.
	Prince (2007)	Business schools in Europe	Research findings indicated that the ability of individual schools to develop a coherent strategy towards growing third-stream activity in a range of sub-markets is constrained by the schools' resources, capabilities, organisational arrangements and

			market opportunities in the region.
Top management teams	Birnbaum (1989)	Academic senates in universities in the USA	Research findings confirmed that when universities go through change, one of the most effective methods of ensuring campus-wide acceptance is to ensure that everyone has a voice and that that voice is undeniably heard as part of the overall system of strategic planning.
	Gioia and Thomas (1996)	Colleges and universities in the USA	Research findings indicated that under conditions of change, TMT members' perceptions of identity and image, especially desired future image, are key to the sense-making process and serve as important links between the organisation's internal context and the team members' issue interpretations
	Ensley and Hmieleski (2005)	High-technology university-based start-ups in the USA	Research findings indicated that university-based start-ups are comprised of more homogenous TMT with less developed dynamics than their independent counterparts.

Source: Own compilation

Although studies have been conducted on strategic management at universities in developing economies, none of the studies included in Table 6 was conducted in the South African university context. Further, none of the studies included in Table 6 focused on university middle managers.

The following section provides a summary of the studies conducted at universities using the strategy-as-practice and middle-management perspectives.

4.4.2 Research in the university context using strategy-as-practice and middle-management perspectives

As indicated in Chapter 2, the strategy-as-practice perspective is a fairly new perspective, but an approach with a substantial research agenda. Section 2.6 offered a review of the existing research within the strategy-as-practice perspective. The purpose of this section is not to repeat the literature reported on in Chapter 2, but to provide more detail on those strategy-as-practice studies conducted within the university context. The first part of this section reviews strategy-as-practice research in the university context, while the second part reviews middle-management research in the university context.

4.4.2.1 *Strategy-as-practice research in the university context*

As indicated earlier, the university setting has been the research context of many studies, but this section only considers those conducted using the strategy-as-practice perspective. The main contributor to research using the strategy-as-practice perspective in the university context is Jarzabkowski (2000) who authored and co-authored all of the research that will be reported on here.

Table 7 contains reference of the studies, their strategy-as-practice and empirical focus and main findings.

Table 7: A summary of the strategy-as-practice studies in the university context (2000–2012)

	Strategy-as-practice element focus	Empirical focus	Main findings
Jarzabkowski (2000)	Practitioner and practices	Top management teams' strategic practices at three UK universities	TMT engaged in strategy-as-practice through the use of situated and distributed practices which mediate between the TMT behaviour, the organisational contexts in which they act and the strategic activities which are pursued
Jarzabkowski	Practitioner and	Top	The university's strategy resulted

and Wilson (2002)	practices	management teams' strategic practices at a UK university	from an interplay of localised routines and patterns of action within an organisational context, which was both the product of such actions but also produced such actions
Jarzabkowski (2003)	Practices	Formal strategic practices	Formal strategic practices can promote change, if they mediate contradictions between constituents
Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008)	Practices	Strategy-meeting practices	Strategy-meeting practices (e.g. bracketing of issues, turn-taking, voting, and stage-managing) stabilised or destabilised strategies
Jarzabkowski (2008)	Praxis	The shaping of strategy as a consequential process	Strongly institutionalised contexts required shaping of strategy simultaneously in the action and the institutional realms
Sillince, Jarzabkowski and Shaw (2011)	Praxis	Shaping strategy through rhetoric	Rhetorical constructions of ambiguity (protective, invitational and adaptive) followed a processual pattern that shaped emergent strategic action
Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011)	Praxis	Strategic planning as a communicative process	The recursive interplay between planning text and talk enabled agreement and the minimisation of competing interpretations

Source: Adapted from Vaara and Whittington (2012:9–12, 15–18 & 21–23)

For her doctoral research, Jarzabkowski (2000:1–300) conducted an investigation into TMT action in the practice of strategy within three UK universities. Three levels of analysis were used to understand TMT engagement in strategy-as-practice. The first level considered the top team process of strategic thinking and acting. The second level dealt with the structuring characteristics of the organisational context. The third level considered the strategy processes which formed the interplay between top team actors and organisational context in the practice of strategy. Findings from Jarzabkowski's (2000) research indicate that strategy-as-practice occurs as the dynamic inter-penetration of TMT actors, structure and activity, mediated by practices. Further, situated and distributed practices mediate recursiveness and transformation in activity systems within time and over time.

Later, Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002) reported on an in-depth study of how a TMT puts strategy into practice at a UK university. A study of the TMT at Warwick University was conducted to analyse how strategy was formulated and implemented. The results suggest that that university's strategy result from the interplay between localised routines and patterns of action within an organisational context, which both produced action and was a product of such actions. Overall, Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002:355) concluded that, to understand how strategy is practised, analysis needs to focus on how patterns of action are associated with the characteristics of both the team and the wider organisation. The nature and characteristics of these patterns can be related to how strategy is put into practice.

Jarzabkowski (2003) used activity theory to investigate the micro practices of strategy and focused specifically on the formal strategic practices involved in direction setting, resources allocation, monitoring and control. Jarzabkowski concludes that activity theory has potential as an integrative methodological framework for examining the subjective and emergent processes through which strategic activity is constructed (Jarzabkowski, 2003:23).

Based on a dataset of 51 meeting observations, Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) examined how strategy meetings are involved in either stabilising existing strategic orientations or proposing variations that cumulatively generate change in strategic orientations. Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008:1139) found that the practice of meetings is related to consequential strategic outcomes and that meetings have a role in shaping stability and change.

Sillince *et al.* (2011) examined how different rhetorical practices in meetings, away days and presentations were used to construct forms of ambiguity. Their research was conducted at business schools and found that these forms of ambiguity allowed strategic action.

Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) closely observed the unfolding of a strategic planning document to determine how written texts are used to discipline the flow and content of managerial talk and at the same time enhance the agency of their producers. Findings indicate that, as individuals express their interpretations of the current strategic plan in talk, they are able to make amendments to the text, which then shape future textual versions of the plan. This cycle is repeated in a recursive

process in which the meanings attributed to talk and text increasingly converge within a final agreed plan (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011:1217).

Given the review above, a focus on middle managers on practitioners is noticeably absent from the review in Table 7. Furthermore, all of the studies reported on above were conducted at universities in developed economies. From the above review, it is clear that the strategising practices of middle managers at a university in a developing economy, such as South Africa, are open for exploration.

4.4.2.2 Middle management research within the university context

As indicated in Chapter 2, research within the middle-management perspective has increased substantially over the last two decades. The following section offers a review of the research on leadership at middle-management level within the university context, specifically academic leadership, heads of departments (HODs) and administrative managers.

Table 8 offers an outline of middle-management research in the university context and is followed by summaries of these studies.

Table 8: An outline of middle-management research in the university context (2000–2012)

	Empirical focus	Research focus
Smith (2002)	Role of the HOD	Universities in the UK
Rowley and Sherman (2003)	Challenges of leadership in academic and administrative units	Colleges and universities in the USA
Parker (2004)	Personal reflections on becoming an HOD	A university in the UK
Deem (2004)	Academics in management roles	Universities in the UK
Wolverton, Ackerman and Holt (2005)	Preparation of academic department leaders	A university in the USA

Bryman (2007)	A literature review of leadership effectiveness at departmental level	Literature derived from publications in the UK, USA and Australia
Floyd (2012)	Personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers	A university in the UK

Source: Own compilation

The review summarised in Table 8 indicates a shortage of published research on middle management in the university context, specifically universities in developing economies. No evidence of such research could be found within the South African university context.

The following section reviews the body of knowledge on middle managers within a higher education context. Smith (2002) investigated the role of the university head of department (HOD) at two British universities: a statutory university and a chartered university. Results of his survey support the contention that the role of the HOD at both types of university is becoming more managerial than was previously the case. The survey highlighted a number of issues that the universities need to address. These issues include –

- the do-ability of the work of the HOD by a single individual;
- the question of optimum size of academic units;
- the long working hours of HODs;
- the ubiquitously reported difficulty of dealing with underperforming staff; and
- the provision of appropriate training or development opportunities for and feedback on the performance of managers at all levels (Smith, 2002:309).

Rowley and Sherman (2003) also investigated the challenges involved in academic leadership. According to them, in academic departments, leadership is required for both academic and administrative functions. In contrast to the administrative departments, the faculty members who find themselves in these roles do not necessarily aspire to manager or leadership positions. Furthermore, most faculty members are at a college or university because they have been educated for, and they want to, teach and/or do research. Because academics follow the principle of

shared governance, decision-making involves both the central administration and the faculty members of a campus.

In an article comprising of autobiographical reflections, Parker (2004) compared the transformation from an academic to an academic manager to the metamorphosis of becoming a werewolf. He explains that being an academic manager is not an identity or occupation that is ever finished or fully occupied, and he then identifies three themes in his managerial work: the fragmented character of the managerial work; the changing relations between self and colleagues; and the seductions of power, centrality and speed. He also concedes that the term of office for heads of departments is often limited and that becoming an academic manager is merely an episode in the HODs career and not necessarily the beginning of a career as a manager. Parker's observation echoes the observations of Rowley and Sherman (2003:1059) who refer to "faculty-turned-more-permanent-managers" when describing faculty members who have entered management at the dean's level and moved into top administrative positions. Deem (2004:107–128) refers to the academic HOD as a career-track manager and explains that some academics deliberately want to move away from teaching and research and see taking on a management role as a way of achieving this goal. Deem examined the changes in expectations about the roles of academics holding leadership and management roles, referred to as manager-academics. Findings indicate that the notion of what constitutes an academic career is changing: studies reveal that differences in working conditions, such as the increase of fixed-term contracts and a perceived lack of loyalty from both institutions and individuals, has meant that the current concept of an academic career is very different to one of 15 or 20 years ago (Deem, 2004).

In a study examining mid-level academic leadership, Wolverton *et al.* (2005:227) attempted to identify what department chairs need to know to be effective leaders. These authors claim that the random selection of academic department chairs often produces a candidate who might understand departmental idiosyncrasies, but may not be inclined toward effective leadership. Moreover, if a department seeks an outsider to fill the position, it sometimes signals a desire for substantial change which in turn can put the new chair at a distinct disadvantage because he/she does not know or understand institutional and departmental culture and context.

More recently, Floyd (2012:272–284) investigated the personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers. According to Floyd (2012), a growing perception exists indicating that the pressures associated with being an academic middle manager outweigh the perceived rewards of the position. A perception exists that HODs are taking on an increasing amount of management and bureaucratic work at the expense of their teaching and research, the outcome of which, for some, is their reduced involvement in the very reasons for entering academe in the first place.

If these perceptions were true, then questions should be asked about the reasons why academics may want to become HODs. Smith (2005) claims that one of the reasons is that academics, who want to become HODs, are passionate about being seen as representative academics who ensure that the view of their colleagues is heard at senior management level. Another reason is that HOD positions enable the incumbents to be in positions where they can do something about the things that they feel are important (Parker, 2004). Bryman's extensive literature search found that HODs believe their role is to secure resources for their department and develop their staff (Bryman, 2007).

The main argument of Floyd's (2012) study is that it is impossible to fully understand an academic's career decisions without exploring the nexus and interrelationships between their personal and professional identities, manifested through different socialisation experiences over time.

When cross-referencing the research in the university context using the strategy-as-practice perspective with the research in the university context using the middle-management perspective, no study was identified that covered both perspectives. Furthermore, most of the research on middle managers in universities deals with *academic* middle managers. No research could be traced that investigated the strategising practices of *non-academic* middle managers. Coupled with the unique characteristics of universities and the apparent absence of research at universities operating in developing economies, it confirms that the strategising practices of academic and non-academic middle managers at a university operating in a developing economy are open for exploration.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two sections: firstly, a description is given of the higher education landscape in South Africa, and secondly, a description of the chosen institution and its strategic management process is given.

4.5 THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The South African higher education landscape has seen wide-ranging changes ranging from the fundamental reorganisation of the distribution and character of higher education curricula governed by a national qualifications authority (Ensor, 2006) to the reconstruction of the academic workplace (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001). Jansen, Herman, Matentjie, Morake, Pillay, Sehoole and Weber (2007) identified five major changes in the SA higher education environment.

According to Jansen *et al.* (2007), the single most important change in the higher education landscape over the past decade has been the overall restructuring of the higher education system. Government-mandated mergers reduced the number of South African institutions of higher education from 36 universities and technikons to 23 new institutions consisting of 11 universities, six universities of technology and six comprehensive institutions. A comprehensive university is an institution that offers academic as well as career-oriented (vocational) programmes. The purpose of the policy on mergers was to transform the South African higher education landscape in order to maximise integration and diversity, promote equity and increase access (Pityana, 2004:1). Secondly, the higher education environment witnessed unprecedented growth in private higher education, which challenged the public higher education system. Thirdly, the emergence of new models of delivery in higher education is another major change. Jansen *et al.* (2007:163) confirm that it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish contact and distance education institutions in SA as the former increasingly blurred the distinction in practice between these two forms of education delivery. The fourth major change has been the changing value of higher education programmes. There has been a serious decline in the enrolments in humanities and a rise in the enrolments in economic and management sciences. This led to several retrenchments in humanities and the termination of some humanities programmes. The fifth major change has been the changing nature of the academic workplace. This new environment is characterised by –

- a growing emphasis on performance, measurement and accountability;
- the increasing ethos of competition, a changing language that recasts students as clients and departments as costs centres; and
- the growing vulnerability of academic and administrative positions as outsourcing and efficiencies dominate the institution strategy (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001).

Furthermore, since 1994, the higher education sector has been subject to dramatic transformation both in terms of the institutional landscape and legislation governing this sector (University of South Africa, 2007:13). The demands of the regulatory changes have had an influence on academic policies, staff equity and quality assurance. These changes have resulted in growing administrative demands, compliance and reporting workloads for many staff members. At the same time, quite rigid parameters have been set for open distance learning (ODL) at the national level, in the absence of a clear policy on ODL (University of South Africa, 2007:13).

The most important consequence of the changes in higher education – both those initiated by government (such as the mergers) and those forced upon government (such as the growth of private higher education) – has been the changing role of the state and in particular expanding state intervention in higher education. The state argues that in terms of accountability, it has a vested interest in how the heavily funded public universities used public funds. In 2004 the Ministry of Education introduced a new funding framework that is used by government to distribute grants to individual institutions in accordance with national planning and policy priorities, with the quantum of funds made available in the national higher education budget and the approved plans of individual institutions (Ministry of Education, 2004:2). The new funding framework seeks to improve the overall efficiency of the higher education system by rewarding student success and throughput. All South African higher education institutions operate within the policy framework set by the state and receive state funding according to an agreed funding framework, with accreditation and quality oversight entrusted to the Council for Higher Education (Pityana, 2009:2). In addition, competitive forces have increased with the emergence of many private higher education institutions.

Considering similar global challenges as described in the previous two sections, Johnson *et al.* (2003:15) suggest that universities can be ideal research contexts for

placing managers at the centre of the complexity of the processes that go to make up and influence organisations.

4.6 THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is the largest university in South Africa, with roots going back over 130 years. Distance education plays a significant role in extending access to higher education to those who would otherwise not be able to participate. According to the Higher Education Monitor No. 8 of October 2009 (Council on Higher Education, 2009:14), the most significant development in distance education since 2004 has been the merger in 2004 of the University of South Africa, Technikon South Africa (TSA) and the distance element of Vista University to become the “new” University of South Africa. The intended purpose of this consolidated distance institution was to facilitate increased access to higher education, to develop learning materials that could be used nationally, to create learning centres and other forms of support and to expand access to students from the SADC region (Asmal, 2004).

Unisa’s character as a comprehensive institution is defined by its articulation between general academic and vocationally-oriented programmes in giving effect to its core functions of teaching, research and community engagement. The institution proclaims that it is located and rooted in the African context, developing knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for the development of the African continent. It intends to develop African knowledge and knowledge systems in their own right and thereby mitigate the dominance of western canons. The institution also espouses the values in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa – human dignity, the achievement of equality and social justice (University of South Africa, 2007:6).

4.6.1 Unisa’s unique strengths

Unisa is the only established distance education institution in South Africa and, due to the competitive edge established by Unisa, indications are that there will not be a proliferation of competition from contact institutions seeking to expand their student

base. Unisa's history and many years of operating in higher education, the wealth of experience in and knowledge of distance education delivery, its focus on ODL research and the use of emerging technologies lend considerable competitive advantage to the institution. Its dedicated distance education infrastructure for the production and despatch of materials as well as its registrations and examinations systems enables the institution to serve a large, geographically dispersed student population efficiently. It also has a regionally based infrastructure that can be leveraged to enhance student support and community engagement activities. The institution also has a substantial asset base which is not, for the largest part, mortgaged or burdened by debt, placing the institution in a favourable financial position (University of South Africa, 2010a:9).

In 2005, Unisa's brand identity was estimated at R157.9 million and the institution is a highly sought-after collaboration partner. Due to its inherent economies of scale, Unisa's academic offerings are more affordable than those of competitors in the public and private higher education sectors (University of South Africa, 2010b:9).

Whilst acknowledging that the merger created challenges, it also created a critical mass of resources and capacity which makes it possible to achieve synergies across its resources bases, to right size and streamline the university and to develop a critical mass of high quality staff, reduce costs and establish economies of scale, as well as develop new programmes that are responsive to the needs of society. The institution is also in a position to provide a range of inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary programmes within professional, governmental and public service fields. The alumni base of the institution also offers considerable potential to increase the streams of donor funding (University of South Africa, 2010b:10).

4.6.2 Challenges faced by Unisa

When the Unisa 2015 strategic plan was developed, the institution still faced several challenges resulting from the merger – such as where the staff would be located, how the organisation would be structured, the consolidation of conditions of service, the rightsizing of the organisation and the creation of a common organisational culture. Shortly after the merger, the morale of staff was indicated as being at a low level, largely due to uncertainties surrounding the merger. The institution also faced

challenges in phasing out programmes that were no longer financially feasible. In an attempt to focus its energies and resources on the improvement of quality, service delivery and improved throughputs, the institution had to consider the strategic value of the low-enrolment programmes. Throughput rates remained a priority, especially given the new funding framework. Not only does student success contribute to the institution's reputation, but according to the current higher education funding formula, government funding is also increasingly being linked to institutional throughput rates (Pityana, 2009). For the 2001–2007 cohort, it was found that between 36% and 51% of students entering Unisa for the first time had dropped out by their second year of study. By the third year of study, the dropout rates increased to between 49% and 61%. In subsequent years, the dropout rates reached 69% (Task Team 6, 2011:9).

The management of the institution is often criticised as being overly centralised and slow to make decisions with little devolution of power to line managers and executive deans and executive directors (University of South Africa, 2007:11). At the same time, middle managers are criticised for not adhering to due process, planning and deadlines. According to the University of South Africa (2007:11), the profile of the management, particularly at middle-management level, is highly skewed in terms of race and gender representation. Few positions on middle-management level were filled by incumbents from minority groups. Additionally, the staff complement, especially academic staff, is not yet representative of the population of the country. Another challenge pertains to the research output of the institution which is lower than that of competing institutions. The low research output impacts on the funding the institution receives, its reputation and opportunities for accreditation and recognition (University of South Africa, 2007:12). Although the size and diversity of the institution can count as strengths, they can also work against good management with increasing levels of management and wider spans of control. This can lead to silos or barriers among the institution's many parts, with little cross-sectional articulation and synergy and misalignment of resource allocation and use. Lastly, much of the institution's central infrastructure and many of its systems were designed to accommodate a student body far smaller than the current one. In 2007, the need to be cognisant of the current logistical problems that surround peak times of registration and assessment were identified (University of South Africa: 2007:12). During 2011, critical system failures hampered the efficiency and smooth running of the university. Examples of these system failures include the late production and

dispatch of study material and the breakdown of the learner management system at critical junctures in the formative assessment cycle. Such failures directly impact on student satisfaction and on the success and throughput of students, which in turn has subsidy implications. The threat of system failures is not new. The alignment and synchronisation of all systems, processes and databases at Unisa remain a key challenge.

In terms of government funding, Unisa's key challenges are to balance its drive for student access and equity with success and quality to ensure a sustainable stream of subsidy funding. With affordability being a major competitive advantage, it will be difficult to increase tuition fees at a rate that exceeds the prevailing inflation rate (University of South Africa: 2007:13). Additionally, given the steady pattern of decline in state funding of higher education, the pressure to generate third-stream income has increased. Third-stream income includes more commercially based activities such as short-learning programmes, contract research and business consulting that generates income in addition to government funding and tuition fees. As stated earlier, the government's new funding framework seeks to improve the overall efficiency of the higher education system by rewarding student success and throughput. As indicated earlier, generating third-stream income is a popular strategy at universities worldwide. Within the Unisa context, the need for financial stability was acknowledged. Also, as was the case with many other universities in South Africa and elsewhere, Unisa has experienced a steady loss of some of its best talent in terms of academic and management positions. According to University of South Africa (2007:3) this is attributable to mobility as a consequence of increasing globalisation and internationalisation as well as increased opportunities for those formerly discriminated against. Better incentive and reward systems in the private and public sectors also impact on the brain drain.

The quality of school leavers presents another challenge to Unisa and to other universities in the country. It is anticipated that school-leaving students will make up a growing proportion of Unisa's student profile based on the increase in the number of students who receive matriculation exemption annually. Residential universities cannot accommodate more than 30 000 of these students who may then turn to Unisa. As a result of the large number of under-prepared students entering the system there will be a greater need for differing levels of student support (University of South Africa, 2007:13). During the 2010 audit period, which forms part of the

university reporting to the CHE, the HEQC recommended that the institution develop strategies to address capacity adequately. When considering the economic conditions prevailing in South Africa, as well as the fluctuating economic conditions in other SADC and African countries, the institution will need to develop creative solutions on how to ensure its products are affordable to African students while at the same time ensuring financial sustainability and appropriate student support. Finally, the age group 18–30 forms the bulk of Unisa’s target student profile, and it is this age group that is at greatest risk of contracting HIV and AIDS. This has implications in terms of student enrolments, counselling, staff recruitment and retention. The possibility that increasing mortality rates may lead to a decline in enrolments cannot be ignored.

Unisa, like many other institutions worldwide, also faces new competitive challenges through massive open online courses (MOOCs). Maslen (2012) reports that these MOOCs offer a scaled consortium model for teaching delivery and universities could use MOOCs to extend their reach. Within the African context, 26 African universities have agreed to work collaboratively with the African Virtual University to offer open and distance learning programmes and cross-border delivery will escalate to “unimagined proportions” (Baijnath, 2012:5). The African Virtual University is a pan-African intergovernmental organisation with a vision to be the continent’s leading open, distance and e-learning network (Kyama, 2012). Coupled with the growth in OERs, it is likely that in the near future, Unisa may no longer be the largest ODL university in Africa.

4.6.3 The Unisa institutional structure

Unisa is a public institution contemplated in section 20 of the South African Higher Education (Act 101 of 1997). The institution consists of the chancellor, the council, the senate, the principal, six VPs (Advisory and Assurance Services; Operations; Finance and University Estates; Institutional Development; Academic: Teaching and Learning; Research and Innovation), a university registrar, the Students’ Representative Council (SRC), the institutional forum, seven colleges which include schools and academic departments, institutes, centres and bureaux, academic employees, non-academic employees, students, convocation and any other offices,

bodies or structures as established by Council. Table 9 depicts the composition of the institution.

Table 9: The composition of the institution and its key stakeholders

Chancellor
Council
Senate
College board
Institutional forum
SRC
Convocation
Management and senior management
Employees
Students
Donors

Source: Own compilation

The chancellor is the titular head of the institution and is elected by the Council. Unisa is governed by the Council in accordance with the provisions of the Act, institutional statute and generally recognised principles of good governance. The Council has full and effective control over the university and is responsible for monitoring management in respect of implementation of plans and strategies approved by the Council. The Council also plays a critical role in the development process by ensuring a sound strategic planning process and scrutinising the plan itself with rigour to determine whether it deserves endorsement (University of South Africa, 2012c:1–9). The Senate is accountable to the Council for all the teaching, learning, research and academic functions of the institution. College boards are appointed by the senate to assist senate with the regulation of activities of the colleges. The institutional forum advises the Council on issues affecting the institution such as implementation of the Act, race and gender equity policies, selection of candidates for senior management positions, codes of conduct, language policy of the institution and fostering an institutional culture which promotes tolerance and respect for fundamental human rights and creates an appropriate

environment for teaching, research and learning. The SRC represents the students of the institution and liaises with the Council, the senate, management, the general public, other institutions, SRCs of other institutions, student organisations, unions and the media. The convocation consists of the pro vice-chancellor (PVC), the vice-principals (VPs), the registrar, academic employees and all persons who are or become graduates or diplomates of the institution. For the purpose of the Act, “management” means senior management as well as management determined by the Council. “Senior management” means the principal, the VPs, the registrar, the executive deans of the colleges, and the directors of non-academic directorates.

The principal and the chancellor perform his or her functions with the assistance of a management committee consisting of the principal and vice-chancellor, the pro vice-chancellor, the VPs and the registrar.

The extended management committee acts as a consultative forum for members of senior management and engages in discussions on matters of a strategic nature and/or critical operational nature. The extended management committee also receives quarterly reports on the Institutional Operational Plan (IOP) and monitors the implementation of the plan.

The middle-management structure within Unisa is considered from two vantage points: academic and non-academic. The academic middle managers operate within the seven colleges and the non-academic middle managers operate within the 17 departments. For the purpose of this research, and within the university context, middle managers were identified in Chapter 1 as the directors of schools, chairs of academic departments, heads of institutes and directors of non-academic directorates (within non-academic departments).

When considering the description above and comparing it with Mintzberg's (1990) model on organisational structures, the Unisa structure resonates with the machine bureaucracy. Within the machine bureaucracy, the dominant thinking is that there is a group of people at the top who does the thinking and many people below who do the acting (Mintzberg, 1990:185). Machine bureaucracies commonly pursue highly articulated strategies that require periods of revision: a process whereby someone in central command somehow pulls the new revision together and then articulates it fully at some point in time so that everyone else can implement it and then pursue it (Mintzberg, 1990:192). Mintzberg elaborates further by saying that machine

bureaucracies are machines dedicated to the pursuit of efficiency in very specific domains. The whole array of mechanisms, such as performance measures, incentive systems, various other control procedures and the articulation of the strategy itself acts not to promote change in strategy, but to resist it. Formal implementation impedes reformulation (Mintzberg, 1990:192) Professional bureaucracies cannot rely on the conventional prescriptive approaches to strategy-making, whether design, planning or positioning school-oriented, but must instead tilt toward the learning end of the continuum, developing strategies that are emergent in nature through processes that have a grass-roots orientation (Hardy *et al.*, 1984; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985).

A further classification of Unisa can be made based on Greiner's (1972:37–46) phases of development. According to Greiner (1972:37), growing organisations move through five distinguishable phases of development, each of which contains a relatively calm period of growth that ends with a management crisis. Each evolutionary phase is characterised by the dominant management style used to achieve growth while the revolutionary phase is characterised by the dominant management problem that must be solved before growth can continue (Greiner, 1972:40). When classifying the organisation according to Greiner's phases of development certain conclusion can be drawn that can affect decision-making. From the descriptions above, it appears that Unisa falls within phase four with growth through coordination. During this phase, there is an increased use of formal planning procedures and top managers take responsibility for the initiation and administration of these new procedures.

Key performance areas (KPA) for the various middle managers, as identified above, are included in Table 10.

Table 10: Key performance areas for middle managers at Unisa

	Director of school	Director of non-academic directorate in department	Chair of academic department/head of institute¹
KPA 1	Participate in constructing a new ethical and servant leadership DNA for Unisa (10%)	Participate in constructing a new ethical and servant leadership DNA for Unisa (10%)	Provide leadership and oversight of tuition in the department (30%)
KPA 2	Develop creative and innovative approaches to transform Unisa's core business (15%)	Develop creative and innovative approaches to transform Unisa's core business (15%)	Provide leadership and oversight of research in the department (25%)
KPA 3	Establish Unisa as a leader in sound corporate governance and the promotion of sustainability (10%)	Establish Unisa as a leader in sound corporate governance and the promotion of sustainability (10%)	Provide leadership and oversight of community engagement in the department (5%)
KPA 4	Foster a people-centred and high performance culture through effective talent management (15%)	Foster a people-centred and high performance culture through effective talent management (15%)	Practise academic citizenship (10%)
KPA 5	Oversee effective implementation of the 2012 targets and milestones in the 2012–2013 Departmental Operational Plan (DOP) (30%)	Oversee effective implementation of the 2012 targets and milestones in the 2012–2013 Departmental Operational Plan (DOP) (30%)	Facilitate change and transformation in the department and Unisa (15–20%)
KPA 6	Enhance service excellence, quality and efficiencies through effective use of technology, processes and systems in line with Unisa's organisational	Enhance service excellence, quality and efficiencies through effective use of technology, processes and systems in line with Unisa's organisational	Enhance service excellence, quality and efficiencies through effective use of technology, processes and systems in line with Unisa's organisational

¹ No tuition performance area for the heads of institutes, the weight for KPA 1 is transferred to KPA 2 (Research)

	architecture (15%)	architecture (15%)	architecture (10%)
KPA 7	Practise professional citizenship (5%)	Practise professional citizenship (5%)	Maintain own scholarship (0–5%)

Source: University of South Africa (2012b)

It should be clear from the KPA's, as included in Table 10, that in terms of job responsibilities and deliverables, the directors of schools and directors of non-academic directorates are on a par. Because the academic structure provides for a further level of management within the schools, the heads of the academic departments are also considered part of the middle-management cadre.

During the 2010 reporting year to DHET, the Unisa staff full-time equivalent was 5 230 (Van Zyl & Barnes, 2012:27–28). The majority (56.5%) of the staff are in administrative positions. Of the 5 230 staff at Unisa, 83% are permanent staff. Table 11 indicates the 2010 staff by personnel category.

Table 11: Staff by personnel category

Personnel category	2010	
Instructional/Research professionals	1792.0	31.3%
Executive/Management professionals	125.0	2.2%
Specialised/Support professionals	541.8	9.5%
Total Professionals	2 458.8	43.0%
Technical	46.9	0.8%
Non-Professional Admin	2 837.9	49.6%
Crafts/Trades	216.7	3.8%
Service Workers	161.7	2.8%
Total non-professionals	3 263.3	57.0%

Source: Van Zyl and Barnes (2012:31)

From the total number of staff, 55.2% are female. The majority of Unisa staff is African (55%) in 2010. A further 37.8% of staff is white, with the balance fairly equally distributed between Indian (3.9%) and coloured (3.3%). In terms of years of employment, most staff members have been employed at Unisa for between one and 10 years (66.8%).

4.6.4 Development of the Unisa 2015 plan

One of the premises on which the Unisa strategic plan, Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation, was developed was that a decade of considerable flux in the higher education system will take place, following the immediate post-restructuring period. Additionally, the significant challenges of transformation had to be addressed as the stark inequalities and stratification in the Unisa society remained part of economic and social life. As indicated earlier, within the SA higher education environment, funding remains a key issue. Additionally, increasing pressure and policy interventions to comply with a considerably enhanced regulatory regime also have to be addressed.

From the early stages of the development process, Unisa made it clear that it wanted to establish itself as a leading provider of world-class higher education opportunities through open and distance learning: nationally, on the African continent and internationally. Moreover, Unisa's mission remains aligned with national development imperatives.

Given the continued expansion of the higher education system and the international context for distance education, Unisa aims to be recognised as a leading university among the mega-universities of the world. In an attempt to ensure that key development priorities were met while achieving economies of scale, Unisa reconsidered the range of programmes it offered. This required a redesign of the tuition model and establishment of leading-edge information and communication technology architecture. The tuition model needed to include an enhancement of learner support methodologies, processes and facilities, supported by the nurturing of quality staff to ensure quality products (University of South Africa, 2007:4). This also entailed a relentless focus on a service-oriented culture within Unisa. Furthermore, Unisa also committed itself to foster and advocate a regulatory environment at the national level and to pursue growth targets that were consistent with national development goals.

4.6.5 Overview of the Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation strategic plan

The Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation – strategic plan includes the unique Unisa context in relation to its society, region and the African continent as well as the international context for distance education. The plan also describes the institutional type, open and distance learning, and then confirms the institutional vision and values. A separate section addresses the role that Unisa plays in society, expressed through its mission statement. The strategic plan also includes the situational analysis by describing Unisa's competitive advantage and the constraints and challenges it faces. The strategic objectives and key strategies are outlined. Lastly, the implementation, evaluation and monitoring of the strategic plan are described.

Unisa has compiled ten key goals that it will pursue over the Unisa 2015 planning period in order to realise its mission. Each of the goals is amplified into key strategies and targets in terms of which progress can be monitored and the plan evaluated. Work started on the implementation of the plan across the institution in 2006. At that stage, it was anticipated that the real work would begin for the institution and that additional resources would be required to support the successful implementation of the devised strategies. As stated in Chapter 1, the majority of strategy failure takes place, not during the strategy formulation phase, but rather owing to poor implementation and monitoring of performance. As such, Unisa established a Strategy and Planning Coordination Committee (SPCC) that ensures the alignment between strategic, functional and operational planning and the coordination thereof with the institutional processes, systems and resources. The Project Management Office (PMO) builds and maintains a project management culture through economies of repetition in the implementation of strategic and transformational projects by managing and coordinating projects with the aim to provide specific deliverables through the balanced management of scope, quality, effort, risk and schedule of a project.

Furthermore, Unisa established an internal, external and international (consultant-based) capacity to support organisational units with the implementation of the strategic plan. Close monitoring and performance indicators based on the strategic objectives were also developed. Middle managers are held responsible and accountable for the implementation of strategic objectives in their areas of responsibility through the performance management system. The strategic plan was

to be reviewed and evaluated on an annual basis as well as an independent review of the plan on a 3-5 year basis.

In 2010, five years after the implementation of the *Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation*, Unisa reviewed its progress and reprioritised and reformulated some of the aspects due to the changing institutional and higher education context. The revision of the Unisa 2015 strategy is presented in a 7-page document entitled “Unisa 2015 Revisited”.

From the outset, the TMT confirmed its confidence that in the five years of post-merger consolidation, much had been done to liberate Unisa’s immense potential, to chart its future pathway and to direct it towards realising its vision. During the five years (2007-2012) Unisa put in place a properly conceptualised planning regime that has proved itself. Each iteration of the *Institutional and Operational Plan* (IOP) has given more practical expression of the institution’s strategic objectives. An institutional audit was conducted in 2008, and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) commended Unisa’s planning methodology and stated that these planning approaches should be shared with other higher education institutions (University of South Africa, 2010b:2). Although the accolades by the HEQC were welcomed, the TMT continues to look where they could improve in order to achieve the seamless planning environment and culture they aspire to.

The revisiting of the strategy was done in the context of worldwide concern about higher education as a public good. Also, higher education institutions are widely considered as centres for research, innovation and creativity. There were also pressures to revise the university strategy from within the higher education sector. It was acknowledged that national systems of higher education must be developed to the optimum. However, the increasing internationalisation of higher education and cross-border mobility meant that regional and international cooperation was required to promote quality assurance, authentication of qualifications and student mobility (University of South Africa, 2010b:2).

Within Unisa 2015 Revisited, the institution reconfirmed its vision, mission, values and value proposition. The plan also reformulated the goals and strategies. Table 12 offers a comparison of the strategies as included in Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation and Unisa 2015 Revisited.

Table 12: The Unisa 2015 key goals compared 2007 versus 2009

	The ten key goals of Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation		The seven key goals of Unisa 2015 Revisited
1	Effect a seamless transition to harmonised and coherent structures, policies, systems and practices for the merged institution	1	Revitalise the PQM, teaching and learning
2	Position Unisa as a leading provider of quality distance education programmes through an academic product range that expands on its comprehensive character	2	Increase innovative research and research capacities
3	Promote research, increased capacity and productivity aligned with national priorities for knowledge development	3	Grow community engagement activities
4	Utilise the resources and capacities of Unisa in community development initiatives and collaborative partnerships	4	Position Unisa as a leading ODL institution
5	Establish service-oriented, technology-enhanced learner support to increase retention and throughput	5	Create an enabling environment for persons with disabilities
6	Create a nurturing environment to promote student well-being, to foster a sense of belonging to Unisa, and to mobilise alumni in the service of the University	6	Establish Unisa as a leader in sound corporate governance and the promotion of sustainability
7	Establish quality governance, planning, administrative and management systems led by best practices	7	Redesign organisational architecture in line with institutional strategy and the ODL model
8	Manage financial, human and infrastructural resources rationally to monitor expenditure, optimise value, manage risks and ensure financial sustainability		
9	Foster a healthy, secure and stimulating environment for staff, students and visitors, and protect the assets of the University		

10	Establish a performance-oriented approach to management, promote quality assurance, and assess outcomes and reward productivity and excellence		
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Source: University of South Africa, 2007:14–15 and University of South Africa, 2010b.

During the review process, the original ten goals were reduced to seven goals. As was the practice in 2006, Unisa 2015 Revisited also included the key strategies to realise these goals.

4.6.6 Implementation of the Unisa 2015 plan

The strategies and key goals in the strategic plan are translated into actions and targets for each year, through the institutional operational plan (IOP). For the IOP to succeed, it must find expression at several levels and sites of implementation. As such, the deliverables are indicated and the IOP is distributed via extended management to executive deans and executive directors to formulate their short and medium-term targets, actions, tasks and deliverables within their colleges, schools and departments. As stated in the IOP 2009–2010:

The execution of the IOP must begin with a deep understanding of the planning issues, their implications for the functional are under the purview of an Executive Director/Dean, then a deliberate infusion of the relevant objectives throughout the domain of responsibility (i.e. beyond middle-management level) (University of South Africa, 2009:3).

There has been ongoing debate whether IOP objectives were translated into outcomes at directorate and functional levels. The TMT confirmed the challenge to give proper effect to their planning at middle-management level. The TMT also committed itself to more careful planning of IOP implementation (University of South Africa, 2009:3).

As indicated earlier, the implementation of Unisa 2015 is focused on project management. The end goal is that every manager from executive director level and below will be a project manager, charged with full responsibility for implementation, with the role of portfolio managers more decisively defined in terms of strategy,

oversight, performance management and accountability functions. A comprehensive project management training programme has been devised and is being extended to all project managers and members of extended management. It is expected that this boost of expertise will enable managers to utilise knowledge, skills and allocated resources to achieve the milestones in the IOP and plans flowing from strategic projects. One of the benefits of project management as a management tool is that it provides a sound and consistent framework for the monitoring and evaluation of progress on projects.

Following is a description of the planning methodology which was designed in such a way that executive directors and deans are integral to the development of the IOP, together with their portfolio managers, from beginning to end, so that they may become owners, advocates and implementers of the IOP. Vitally important to the IOP is the transfer of skills in planning to a large cohort of institutional leaders and managers who are responsible for the operationalisation of the plan. The bottom-up process is aimed at identifying blockages and encouraging planning by systematic engagement of line managers at all levels of implementation.

From the time when the institutional strategic plan, *Unisa 2015: An agenda for transformation*, was introduced, the TM has coordinated, aligned and integrated its operational planning processes to achieve the outcomes specified in *Unisa 2015*. As stated earlier, the *Unisa 2015* plan sets out the university's long-term vision, as well as the specific objectives and strategies required in order to achieve its stated vision. Translating this vision, mission and broad institutional objectives into achievable and measurable short- to medium-term objectives is necessary to ensure that all institutional efforts are coordinated in such a way that they steer the institution towards specific outcomes.

Initially, the IOP was done on an annual basis. Later, the cycle moved from a one-year operational planning cycle to a three-year cycle. For an institution of Unisa's size and scope, a one-year operational planning cycle proved limiting, especially in terms of large-scale projects as well as small-scale projects requiring dedicated effort over several years from conceptualisation to implementation (University of South Africa, 2009:8). The rationale for moving to a medium-term planning cycle was to provide for alignment of Unisa's plans with national enrolment plans, DoE funding cycles, specific infrastructural growth targets set by the DoE and government's

macro-funding and medium-term expenditure framework (MTEF). One of the potential benefits of extending the operational planning cycle is the alignment between the national planning and policy goals and processes at institutional level. (University of South Africa, 2009:7). In an attempt to ensure that Unisa’s planning and implementation efforts are not ad hoc or arbitrary, the TMT introduced key focus areas intended to cohere, concentrate and prioritise the institutional efforts. Furthermore, the shift to a three-year operational planning cycle is calculated to steer away from every year’s planning process having the same degree of intensity, breadth and depth, which requires strenuous effort across the entire institution and which entails multiple iterations of the planning process until the IOP is finalised. The shift to a three-year operational planning cycle means that the intensive analytical, consultative, conceptual and distillatory processes will occur with the same level of intensity only once every three years. The intervening two years will be “light-touch” planning processes (University of South Africa, 2009:8).

Figure 12 depicts how the three-year operational planning framework translates Unisa 2015 into operational planning outcomes down the line.

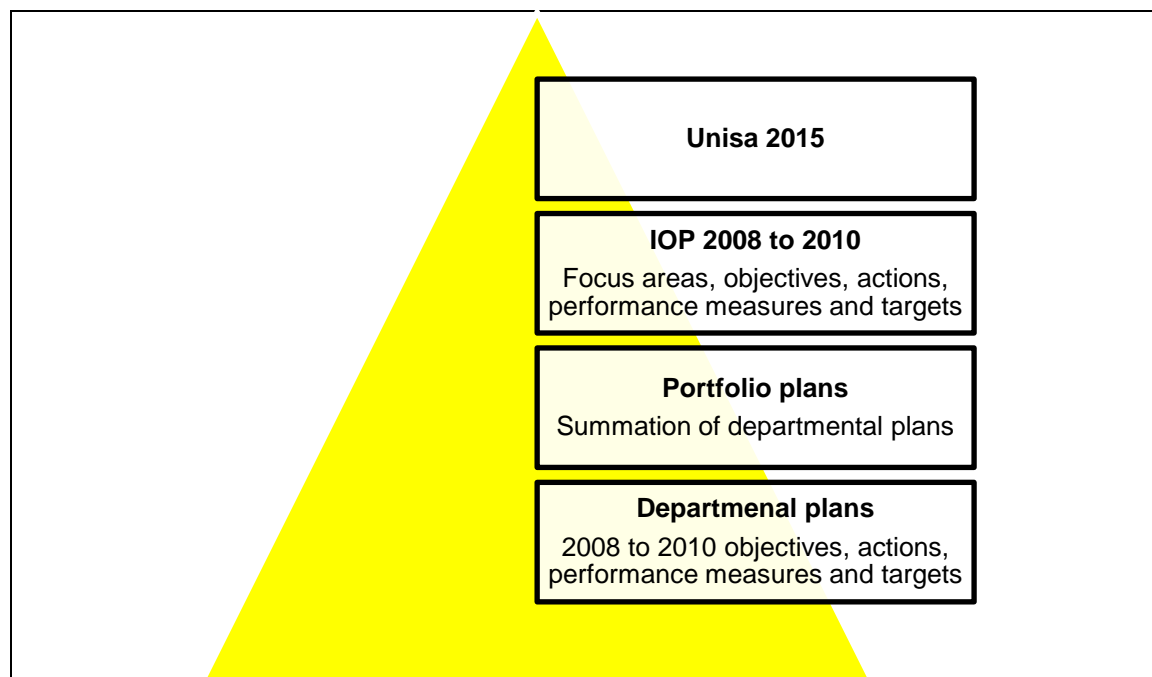


Figure 12: Framework for operational planning

Source: University of South Africa (2009:9)

As indicated in Figure 12, the IOP sets out broad institutional outcomes on a three-year planning horizon. Departmental plans detail how these outcomes will be

realised at functional level, ultimately finding expression in individual performance contracting, and performance management to middle-management level.

Unisa also makes use of “conversation circles” to facilitate structured dialogues between managers and leaders within and across portfolios, to identify and address joint responsibilities and interdependencies and to achieve consensus on actions, targets and milestones for delivery.

Finally, the monitoring and evaluation of the progress on the IOP in relation to Unisa 2015 is embedded in the management processes of the institution, with a mid-year review and end-of-year evaluation process. Additionally, budgetary review processes during the year ensure that resourcing is shifted as priorities change and new unanticipated challenges emerge. Monitoring and evaluation of all plans are underpinned by a well-crafted business intelligence framework to track actual performance against the expectations articulated in Unisa 2015 and the IOPs.

During 2011, the Department: Strategy, Planning and Quality Assurance (DSPQA) compiled an IOP progress report through a conscious process of conversations to more effectively facilitate the implementation of the IOP more effectively. As mentioned earlier, these conversation circles allow portfolio managers to address the management of interdependencies across portfolios leading to deeper understanding of shared responsibilities. It is believed that these collegial conversations serve to clarify and delineate actions, milestones and targets in the plan. The process of reflection on implementation provides opportunity to instil an even greater level of maturity with regard to the institutional planning regimen (University of South Africa, 2011:3). For example, the engagement with the operations portfolio offers an in-depth analysis improving synergies and effective implementation of the IOP.

Additionally, a comprehensive monitoring and reporting tool had been developed for the PVC Accountability Committee to support the monitoring of performance. The tool has also been adapted for wider use across the institution (University of South Africa, 2011). This is an interactive communication tool used to facilitate opportunities to influence the planning agenda-setting process. It also clarifies roles and responsibilities and identifies the extent to which shared actions have been consulted and negotiated collaboratively. An examination of the extent to which the allocation of resources enables stakeholders to achieve planned deliverables on time forms an important part of the analysis (University of South Africa, 2011:4). All

portfolios are required to account for the progress achieved by specified dates and to signal if there are any resource and budgetary constraints that will impede successful implementation. Where challenges have emerged, an indication of the risk mitigation actions and alternative solutions to achieving outputs needs to be solicited.

The IOP Progress Report 2011 is structured into three sections. The first section introduced the institutional trajectory and progress towards the set goals encapsulated in Unisa 2015 Revisited. The second section offers an overview of the key 2011 mid-year achievements and progress to date per strategic goal. The third section provides an overview of the salient impediments and barriers to effective implementation that deserve attention for the next reporting period.

During April 2011 and January 2012, the Council of the university approved a revised management structure to enable improved performance and the sustainability and growth of the institution. This entails the refocusing of functions to strengthen and harmonise implementation of the planning imperatives flowing from Unisa 2015 Revisited and the IOP 2011–2013. The new structure also enables stronger management capacity in order to enhance management focus on tuition and research, the primary responsibilities of the institution. Homogeneous functions are grouped together under the appropriate departmental and portfolio responsibilities to ensure cohesion and synergy. The revised management structure is designed in such a way that it ensures effective organisational architecture in removing the disjuncture between the enterprise strategy and the strategic support portfolios such as the VPs and executive deans. Solid reporting lines to the vice-chancellor (VC) by all portfolio managers have been established. A dotted reporting line (communication) to the PVC by all VPs in the academic sector has also been established.

The College of Education was also established to enable strategic guiding of the planning and provision of high-quality educational opportunities in accordance with the strategic objectives of Unisa (Makhanya, 2011).

The School for Graduate Studies that has already been established within the previous structure was changed into a College. This College is responsible for increasing innovative research by promoting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches and by providing a supporting and enabling research environment

across the entire university, inclusive of the provision of service-oriented, technology-enhanced student support to master's and doctoral students in order to enhance the quality and output of postgraduate research at the institution. The Dean of Students position was moved to the Office of the Registrar so as to form part of the group of cognate responsibilities that deals with administrative student support and student development.

The VC has the following direct reports: the VP Operations, the VP Finance and University Estates, the VP Institutional Development, VP Academic and VP Research and Innovation. The assistant principal reports to the VC in respect of matters pertaining to internal audit, enterprise risk management and the legal services office. The PVC has the following direct reports: the executive director, academic planner, ICT, director for acquisition and contract management, accreditation and community engagement. The PVC also has dotted (communication) direct lines with the registrar, VPs Academic: Teaching and Learning and Research and Innovation. (Makhanya, 2011:4–9).

The new management structure is depicted in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Unisa management structure

Source: Makhanya (2001:9)

At the time of writing (2012), the structure, as depicted in Figure 13, was fully implemented. However, more changes are yet to come. During 2012, the PVC led the development of a high-level discussion document on an organisational architecture for Unisa for a digital future (Baijnath, 2012:1–26). This document raises the most important high level issues which are expected to shape the future organisational architecture of the institution. The future competitive edge of Unisa will come from harnessing the new and emerging potential of ICTs to catapult the university into a digital future. It is imperative that staff and students are part of this new competitive mindset, and Baijnath (2012:5) confirms that it means changing the way the university does business. This requires the development of a new organisational architecture as the current organisational architecture is admittedly not adequate to take advantage of the new possibilities that have emerged.

4.7 CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH

Chapter 1 described the research questions of this research. These research questions were formulated to be achieved within the university context. Chapter 4 indicated that only a limited number of research studies have been conducted at universities that operate within developing economies. This research not only contributes to the strategising practices of university middle managers, but specifically contributes to the knowledge base on strategising practices of both academic and non-academic middle managers within a mega-university operating in a developing economy. The research is also considered to be of practical relevance given the reality of constant change and adaptation. As such, the data produced about the know-how of strategising may be comparable with other universities and it can be of value to the participants and organisations involved.

4.8 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The unique context of this study is middle managers' strategising practices at a South African university. This chapter provided a description of the university context and considered the unique characteristics of the university management

environment. The traditional university context is a form of distributed activity system in which actors are fragmented in their objectives. The chapter also reported on previous research conducted within the university management environment, specifically focusing on research within the strategy-as-practice and middle-management perspectives. After the global university context was described, the focus of the chapter turned to the South African higher education landscape and then provided background on the chosen institution. Section 4.6.5 provided an overview of Unisa's strategic plan, Unisa 2015, and its planning methodology. This chapter set the research context of the study and Chapter 5 will describe the research methodology.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter described the unique context for this research. As stated in the first chapter, the aim of this research was to explore the strategising practices of middle managers. Studying strategy calls for “deep” data gathering around the unique characteristics of organisations. According to Balogun *et al.* (2003:199), the researcher is close to the phenomena of study, concentrates on context and detail, while remaining broad in the scope of studying strategising practices. Furthermore, this research was anchored in the organisation’s realities, as described in Chapter 4.

As stated in Chapter 1, the central research question asked what the strategising practices of middle managers were that have arisen from the interaction between the middle managers and the university’s organisational context. Furthermore, this research also asked what the strategic roles of academic and non-academic middle managers were in the university context. The second sub-question asked how middle managers engaged with the materiality of strategy work. Specifically, the materiality of strategy work was explored through talk, text and tools. The last sub-question asked what the enablers and constraints were of the strategy work of middle managers in the university institutional context. To answer these questions, rich data were required that could examine context-specific factors, drawn from experiences and practices of middle managers. This chapter provides details of the units of analysis, justifies the research design and strategy and explains the process of data production and analysis. The research design adopted for this study aimed to incorporate the integration between the organisational factors, middle-manager practices, their experiences and the materiality of strategy work holistically. The structure and content of Chapter 5 are depicted diagrammatically in Figure 14.

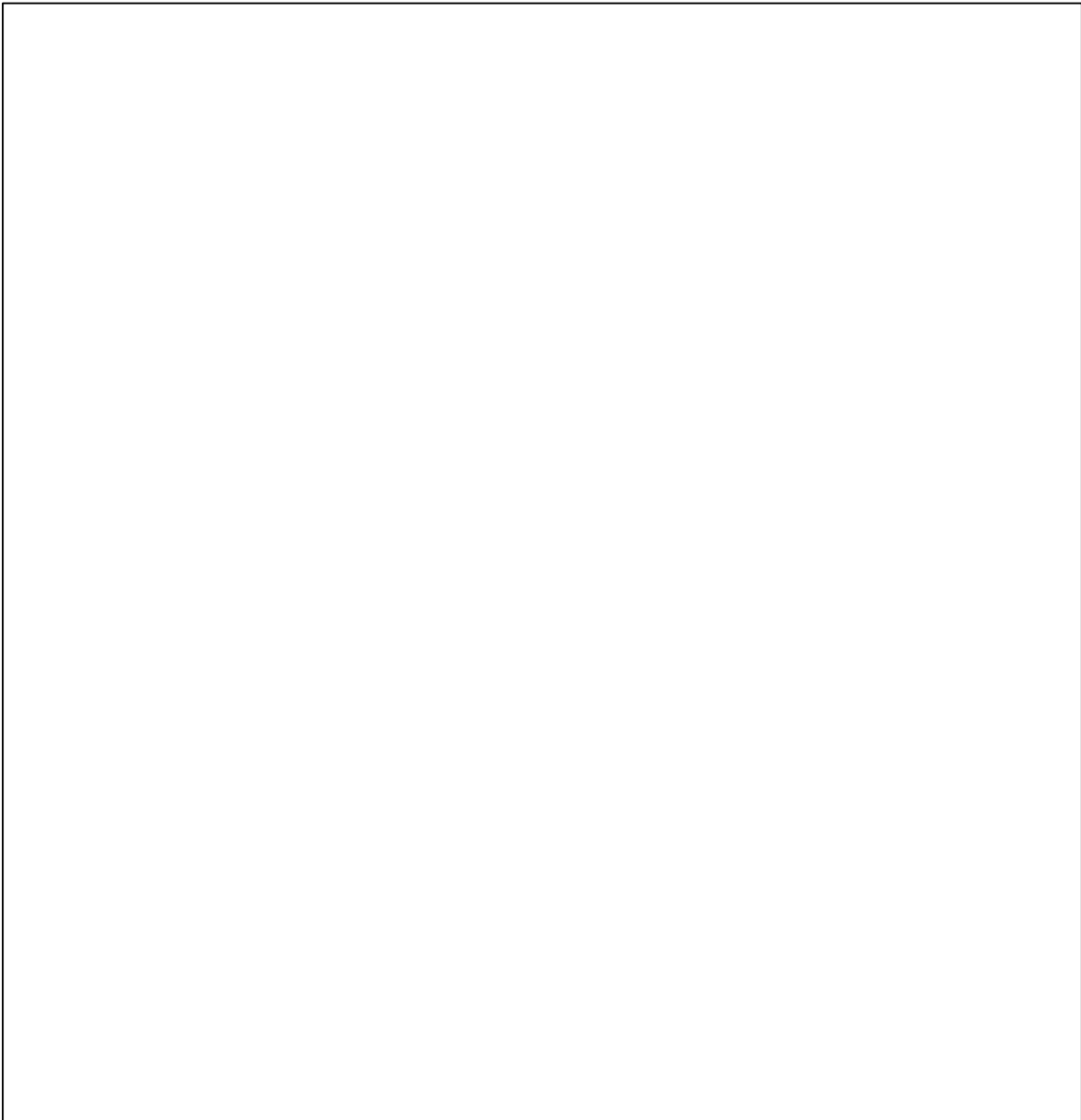


Figure 14: Structure of Chapter 5

Source: Own compilation

5.1.1 Defining research

In defining research, this section will commence with a brief explanation of what cannot be considered research in the true sense of the word. Walliman (2005) argues that the term “research” is used wrongly when just collecting facts or information with no clear purpose, or reassembling and recording facts or information without interpretation, or as a term to get a product or idea noticed or respected. As

such, to explain the true meaning of the word “research”, it is necessary to consider some of its characteristics. Firstly, research is data that are collected systematically. Secondly, research is data that are interpreted systematically. Thirdly, research has a clear purpose, namely to find things out (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:5). The research process comprises several activities and is a “systematic process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information (data) in order to increase our understanding of a phenomenon about which we are interested or concerned” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010:2). More specifically, according to Zikmund, Babin, Carr and Griffin (2010:5), business research is the application of the scientific method in searching for the truth about business phenomena. Research activities include defining business opportunities and problems, generating and evaluating ideas, monitoring performance and understanding the business process. As alluded to in Chapter 2, business and management research should have some practical consequence. Whittington, a well-known strategy scholar and researcher quoted many times in this research, confessed in a 2003 article that “... I have been teaching strategy and organising for about 15 years but I know very little about how to do strategising” (Whittington, 2003:122). He states that, when called in to help with others’ strategising, he does not turn to the leading journals of strategy. He actually turns to his wiser and more experienced colleagues. Whilst acknowledging Whittington’s call for new kinds of research, Saunders *et al.*, (2009:6) explain that business research should have some practical consequence. Furthermore, using knowledge from a range of disciplines enables management research to gain new insights that cannot be obtained through various disciplines separately.

The current research was grounded in the strategy-as-practice perspective with philosophical influences from the rational view, phenomenology (Taylor, 1993; Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001), hermeneutics, linguistics, incorporating social theory and social psychology (Weick, 1976; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick, 1995; Bourdieu, 2007).

Research aims to find things out, and can be classified as exploratory studies, descriptive studies and explanatory studies. Exploratory studies offer valuable means to establish what is currently happening, to seek new insights, to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light (Robson, 2002:59). Exploratory research can be conducted through a literature search, interviewing experts on the subject and conducting focus group interviews. Descriptive studies aim to portray an

accurate profile of persons, events or situations (Robson, 2002:59). This may be an extension of a piece of exploratory research or a piece of explanatory research itself. Lastly, explanatory studies emphasise studying a situation or a problem in order to explain the relationships between variables (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:140). It is important to have a clear understanding of the phenomena about which data are to be collected before commencing the study. The current study adopted an exploratory approach.

Research can be differentiated further according to the research strategy that is chosen. A research strategy is the general plan of how the researcher will go about answering the research question(s) (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:600) or meeting the research objectives. Research strategies are differentiated based on the specific outcome required. According to Pellissier (2007), pure research leads to theoretical development, whether the research has practical implications or not. Applied research intends to solve a specific problem and find answers to specific questions. Research strategies can further range from a purely quantitative approach to a purely qualitative approach, as well as a mixed-method approach.

Quantitative research is mainly concerned with the degree to which phenomena possess certain properties, states and characters, and the similarities, differences and causal relations that exist within and between such properties. According to Labuschagne (2003:100), quantitative research is usually based on theoretical or empirical considerations and quantifying phenomena.

Qualitative research is mainly concerned with the properties and the state or character of phenomena. According to Labuschagne (2003:100), the word “qualitative” implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are rigorously examined, but which are not measured in terms of quantity, amount or frequency.

Mixed-method research is recognised as the third major research approach or research paradigm (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007:112). According to Saunders *et al.* (2009:152), mixed method research uses quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques and analysis procedures either at the same time (parallel) or one after the other (sequential), but does not combine the two data collection techniques.

The research scope and strategy are selected based upon the type, nature and extent of the question or problem, the nature and availability of the data, and control over actual events by the researcher and the focus on contemporary as opposed to historical phenomena (Pellissier, 2007).

The following section describes the research methodology, which includes the scope, objectives, research philosophy and research strategy.

5.2 RESEARCH SCOPE

The research scope explains the focus of the research. The rationale for this research originated from the researcher's interest in middle managers' strategising practices. The starting point of the research interest lay in the strategy-as-practice and middle-management perspectives, as described in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. As indicated in those chapters, academics and practitioners have called for more research on micro-strategising and practically relevant research. This research scope described the problem, the purpose and the objectives of the current research. As indicated earlier, the research scope determines the research methodology and design, and this will be described in the remainder of this chapter.

5.2.1 Aim of this research

Although the interest in the strategy-as-practice perspective and the middle-management perspective has increased over the last two decades, the focus on individual human actors and their actions is noticeably limited in strategy theory and research. The strategy studies that incorporate individuals focus primarily on the top management team (TMT) and senior management levels. By accepting that strategy is something that an organisation does, it should also be acknowledged that strategising is not limited to only one elite group, top management. As indicated in Chapter 3, strategising in an organisation is not only limited to top management, but it is also dispersed throughout the organisation, among different management levels and individuals. While research has been done on middle managers and strategy, a knowledge gap on middle manager strategising still exists, especially in strategising

in emerging economies such as the South African economy. In an attempt to address this problem of limited knowledge of middle managers' strategising practices, this research aimed to provide rich data by examining how individual middle managers put strategy into practice at a South African university.

The outcome of this research will make four valuable contributions to the extant body of knowledge on the strategising practices of middle managers. First, unlike previous studies that mainly focused on the top management teams in universities, this research provided an analysis of how individual middle managers put strategy into practice at a university. Second, the findings of the current research show what the unique characteristics of the university organisational context are in relation to the strategising practices of the middle managers. Third, new theories on middle manager practices and the materiality of strategy work, in the form of talk, text and tools, within the university context were developed. Fourth, new theory on the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work was developed.

Studying middle managers' strategising practices within the university context contributes to insight into the organisational dynamics of strategising and can inform the practices of the institutions responsible for teaching and researching. Although it is acknowledged that the results of this study cannot be generalised due to the case study and qualitative research approach, the interpretive research findings may help other universities to understand their own situations by transferring, applying and comparing findings to their own settings (Silverman, 2006; Bryman, 2007). Research findings of this current study may shed light on contextual influences upon practice, on how individual practitioners deploy practice, and it may provide a basis for relating these specific micro-findings to other institutions. Furthermore, findings from this research may identify unique differences, or similarities, between the strategising practices of academic middle managers and non-academic middle managers within the chosen institution. Studying the materiality of the strategy work within the unique context may also identify material aspects that enable or constrain middle managers in their strategy work.

The overall research question to be answered was: **How do middle managers put strategy into practice at a South African university?**

5.2.2 Research questions

Fundamentally, this research aimed to explore the strategising practices of middle managers by providing rich data in a unique organisational context. This research was guided by the following research questions:

5.2.2.1 Central research question

What are the strategising practices of middle managers that have arisen from the interaction between middle managers and the university's organisational context?

5.2.2.2 Sub-questions

1. What roles do university middle managers fulfil in strategising?
2. How do university middle managers engage with the materiality of strategy work? and
3. What are the enablers and constraints of the strategy work of university middle managers in the unique institutional context?

This research was conducted on the stream of activity in which strategy was accomplished within the university context thereby making the strategising practices of middle managers at an academic institution the unit of analysis. Essentially, this study's contribution was the development of theory on middle managers at universities, specifically, the roles of middle managers in strategising, their practices, how they use materiality (talk, text and tools) to accomplish strategy work and the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work.

5.2.3 Research philosophy

This research was conducted mostly within the constructivism-interpretivism research paradigm. According to Hansen (2004), constructivism holds that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than being an externally singular entity. Interpretivism is the epistemological position that advocates the necessity to

understand differences between humans in their role as social actors (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:893). According to Creswell (2007:8), the goal is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. In line with Creswell's (2007) view, the interview questions in this research were broad and general so that the participants could construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. Further, constructivist researchers often focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Constructivism is based on several assumptions (Crotty 1998):

- meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting;
- human beings engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspective – thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally; and
- the basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community.

In addition, a distinguishing characteristic of constructivism is the centrality of the interaction between the investigator and the object of the investigation. Only through interaction can deeper meaning be uncovered. In this study, constructivism was combined with interpretivism in order to construct the reality in the minds of the middle managers as social actors. This combination provided for the rich descriptions and interpretations required to achieve the research objectives. This research paradigm was deemed appropriate for this research as the researcher aimed to collect deep data on middle managers' strategising practices.

5.2.4 Research strategy

An exploratory study was deemed a valuable means to gain insight into the strategising practices of middle managers at a South African university. The selection of the research strategy was guided by the overall research question, the objectives of the research and the philosophical foundation to the research. This research study made use of applied research. According to Leedy and Ormrod

(2010:44), applied research aims to provide a practical contribution to deal with practical problems. In line with the strategy-as-practice orientation of this research study, applied research has direct and immediate relevance to practitioners and is presented in ways they can understand and act upon (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:587). Given the limited research available on this topic, findings will be used to develop new theory on middle managers' strategising practices, the materiality of strategy work within the university context and the enablers and constraints of the strategy work of middle managers.

5.2.4.1 Design: Qualitative research

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life (Saldaña, 2011:3). The object of qualitative research is qualitative data and according to Miles and Huberman (1994:1), qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. Saldaña (2011:12) explains that the data collected and analysed is primarily non-quantitative in character, consisting of textual materials such as interview transcripts, field notes and documents, and/or visual materials such as artefacts, photographs, video recordings and internet sites that document human experiences about others and/or one's self in social action and reflexive states. However, Cassell, Bishop, Symon, Johnson and Buehring (2009:515) caution that qualitative research can "... mean many different things to different researchers". In an attempt to clarify qualitative research, Leedy and Ormrod (2010:94) state that qualitative research involves looking at characteristics, or qualities, that cannot easily be reduced to numerical values. This research aimed to examine the many nuances and complexities of middle managers' strategising practices. Micro-practices are context-sensitive and embedded in practice. Balogun *et al.* (2003:203) stress that it is important for the researcher to have experience in the given context. As explained in Chapter 1, the researcher is an academic at a higher education institution and has more than ten years' experience in higher education. This experience contributed to her understanding of the organisational context within which this research study took place.

Hence, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this case study. In agreement with the views of Balogun *et al.* (2003:198) on the methodological

challenges of studying strategising, this study was anchored in the organisation's realities.

5.2.4.2 *Scope: Exploratory*

Relatively little research exists on middle managers' strategising practices. Moreover, this research study was the first of its kind conducted on individual middle managers at a South African university. This implies that the proposed study was exploratory in nature. Yin (2009:1) states that a study can be considered exploratory when the knowledge base is insufficient to make good theoretical propositions prior to the start of data collection. As stated earlier, exploratory studies aim to seek new insights into phenomena, to ask questions and to assess the phenomena in a new light.

5.2.4.3 *Approach: Case study*

A case study approach was used to produce the qualitative data. The case study approach investigated the practices at one institution. Case studies allow the researcher to explore a phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2009). According to Stake (1995), the case is bounded by time and activity and the researcher collects detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures. Stake (2005:445) further distinguishes two types of case studies: intrinsic case studies and instrumental case studies. He deems a case study intrinsic if it is undertaken because one wants a better understanding of a particular case. It is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but instead because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, the case itself is of interest (Stake, 2005). The researcher at least temporarily subordinates other curiosities so that the stories of those "living the case" will be teased out. The study was undertaken because of a fundamental interest in this particular phenomenon. Stake (2005:445) uses the term "instrumental case study" if a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or redraws a generalisation. The case is of secondary interest. It plays a supportive role and it facilitates understanding of something else. In this research study, an intrinsic case study was adopted whereby the researcher aimed to get a better understanding of middle managers' strategising practices and the material aspects of their strategy work at the chosen university.

A further distinction, also applicable to this research study, is the qualitative case study. Stake (2005:450) explains that a qualitative case study is characterised by researchers spending extended time on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising descriptions and meanings of what is going on. In intrinsic case studies, researchers cannot avoid generalisation totally. Certainly, researchers generalise to events, behaviour and characteristics of their case at times still to come in other situations. Thus, the methods for case work actually used are to learn enough about the case to encapsulate complex meanings into a finite report but also to describe the case in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can experience these happenings vicariously and draw their own conclusions.

The research process followed in this research study is depicted in Figure 15.



Figure 15: Research process followed in this research

Source: Own compilation

As can be seen from Figure 15, a sequential series of actions were followed to identify the participants, produce the data, prepare the data, analyse the data and present the findings.

5.3 PARTICIPANT SELECTION

This section describes the number of participants and the selection of the participants for the study. Choosing the number of participants in qualitative studies are neither mathematic nor systematic. Yin (2010:88) adds to this by saying that with

qualitative research there is no formula for defining the desired number of participants. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005:280), sample size considerations involve making a series of decisions not only about how many individuals to include in a study and how to select those individuals, but also about the conditions under which this selection will take place. As mentioned earlier, the researcher did not attempt to make generalisations to underlying populations; hence, the conclusion that sampling is not an issue in this type of research. However, within an interpretive research design, some generalisations can be made. In support of the view of Stake (2005), in qualitative case studies some level of generalisation cannot be avoided: researchers generalise to events, behaviour and characteristics of the case at times still to come in other situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:450). Furthermore, Miles and Huberman (1994) confirm that qualitative researchers tend to make analytic generalisations, which are “applied to wider theory on the basis of how selected cases fit with general constructs”. In qualitative research, credibility of the findings is not measured in terms of the number of participants, but in terms of the richness of the information gathered. Hence, the size of the sample selected is not as important as the actual sample. The aim for the sampling in this research study was therefore to select appropriate cases to study that would yield thick rich data.

As indicated earlier, the unit of analysis in this research study was the strategising practices of middle managers. The sample was selected from the population of middle managers at the institution. The terms “middle managers”, as seen within the context of this research study, was defined in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. This definition showed that middle managers link the activities of vertically related groups and are responsible for at least sub-functional workflow, but not for the workflow of the institution as a whole. In the context of this research study, middle managers included directors of schools, chairs of academic departments and managers of non-academic departments. Table 13 offers the definition criteria used to identify middle managers.

Table 13: Defining the middle manager within the research context

Source	Description of middle manager	Unisa context
Huy (2001:72)	"...any manager two levels below the CEO and one level above line workers and professionals."	For the purpose of this research, and within the university context, middle managers were identified as the directors of schools, chairs of academic departments, heads of institutes and directors of non-academic directorates (within non-academic departments).
Floyd and Wooldridge (1992:157)	"... middle managers link the activities of vertically related groups and are responsible for at least sub-functional workflow, but not for the workflow of the organisation as a whole".	
Nonaka (1994:14)	"... function as mediators between the organisation's strategy and day-to-day activities".	
Ikävalko (2005:26)	"... middle managers are those actors who act as both subordinates and superiors".	

Source: Own compilation

Balogun *et al.* (2003:200–201) confirm the importance of willing commitment from research participants. According to these authors, individual participants need to feel some personal benefit before they are likely to commit time and thought to a research project, particularly since the depth requirement of data for strategising research places a heavy burden on participants. Hence, effort was made to choose participants who were prepared to commit themselves to this research study.

5.3.1 The sample of participants

From the target population a non-probability purposive sample was drawn. Johnson *et al.* (2007:25) state that the aim of purposive sampling is not to establish a representative sample but rather to identify key informants whose context-specific knowledge and expertise regarding the issues relevant to the research are significant and information rich. The purposive sample enabled the researcher to use her judgment to select cases that would best enable her to meet the research objectives.

It was also considered an appropriate form of sampling in case study research (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:239).

Although the sample was selected arbitrarily, the sample elements were still selected based on their adherence to certain criteria. Participants from different business units within the institution were chosen, i.e. academic and non-academic as well as core business and support business. Stratified sampling was used to select participants who represented the demographics of the institutional middle management structures. A stratified judgemental sample was taken, in other words the number of academic and non-academic participants chosen was the same as the number of academic and non-academic middle managers in the population. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 14.

Table 14: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Be responsible for translating the Unisa 2015 strategic plan and IOP into tasks and activities for his/her directorate/department	Not supervisor or section head in job designation
Be more than 2 years in middle-management position	Not less than 2 years in the management position
Reporting directly to either deputy executive director, executive director	Not executive in job designation
Have at least two management levels above and two levels of subordinates below	Have only one management level above and more than two levels of subordinates below
Responsible for subunit workflow	Not responsible for workflow of entire organisation
In academic or non-academic department	Not a contractor or consultant

Although the titles of the positions are similar between academic and non-academic managers, it proved a difficult task to identify the middle manager within Unisa. The post-grade levels between the academic and non-academic managers differ to such an extent, that when looking at the non-academic post grade levels, the levels are comparable to that of executive deans. Hence, the selection/sampling criteria were adjusted for non-academic middle managers. The researcher scheduled a meeting with Louis Eloff (HR consultant) on 17 April 2012 to discuss the structures, and his advice was incorporated into the selection criteria. Further communication between

the researcher and Eloff was facilitated through electronic communication. As such, the post-grade level was not the deciding criterion in identifying the middle manager; rather, the nature of the position, the management responsibilities, the authority and the vertical link within the non-academic structure were used.

As already mentioned, the participants for this research sample were selected by means of purposive sampling. The population of middle managers, comprising of directors, chairs of departments (COD) and heads of departments (HOD) or managers of departments at Unisa, was compiled from the information on the Unisa staff portal and the organisational chart. The population was divided into two sections: academic and non-academic. The directorates and departments were identified and the number of directors (academic and non-academic), managers/heads of departments (non-academic) and chairs of departments (academic) were calculated. The participants who were selected represented the demographics of the middle-management structure at Unisa. An initial list of 28 potential participants was compiled. Each of these potential participants was evaluated against the criteria listed in Table 14 and discussed with the HR consultant and research supervisors. Participants, with the potential to provide rich data, were identified on the basis of unique characteristics such as experience and exposure to institutional forums. From the 28 potential participants, 20 were identified as potential rich sources of information. These 20 potential participants were contacted telephonically. The purpose of the telephone call was threefold:

- firstly, it was to introduce the study and invite participation;
- secondly, it was to establish a rapport before the actual interview; and
- thirdly, it was to confirm a date and venue for the interview.

One participant agreed to the interview but later cancelled. Another participant asked for more information in an email and then failed to respond. A third participant also requested more information in an email, agreed to participate, but was unavailable as he went on leave. A total of 17 participants agreed to the research and participated in this research study. Table 15 indicates the population and research sample.

Table 15: Population and research sample of middle managers

n=17	Academic		Non-academic	
	Population	Sample	Population	Sample
Director	15	5	14	7
COD/Manager	69	2	59	3
n	84	7	73	10
% of population		8.3%		13.7%

As indicated earlier, there is no formula for defining the desired number of participants (Yin, 2010). Perry (2000:313) advises that the validity, meaningfulness and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with the sample size. Mason (2010) proposes that the guiding principle in deciding on the sample size should be the concept of saturation. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006:59–82) studied the concept of saturation in purposive samples and provide practical guidance for estimating sample sizes. Saturation is the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data. Based on the data set, Guest *et al.* (2006) operationalised saturation and made evidence-based recommendations regarding non-probabilistic samples sizes for interviews. Guest *et al.* (2006) found that saturation occurred within the first twelve interviews, although basic elements for metathemes were present as early as six interviews. Creswell (2007) recommends between five and twenty-five interviews. Green and Thorogood (2009:120) state, “the experience of most qualitative researchers is that in interview studies little that is new comes out of transcripts after you have interviewed 20 or so people”.

5.3.2 Informed consent

The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis without any offer of an incentive, and both the institution and its participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any stage. As explained earlier, the willing commitment of the participants was sought through informed consent. Saunders *et al.* (2009:593) explain that informed consent means the intended participants are fully informed

about the nature, purpose and use of the research to be undertaken and their role within it. An informed consent form (Appendix A) was drafted and given to intended participants. This form described the data production method, the way in which the data were to be reported and the details of the research supervisor. Upon confirmation of the interview appointment, the informed consent letter was distributed to the participants via email. At the start of each interview, the participant was asked to complete the informed consent form. These signed informed consent forms are stored with the primary data. Written consent was also obtained from the senior management of the institution prior to data production. The researcher also received permission to continue with the study from Unisa's College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were ensured and every effort was made to ensure that no participant could be identified by the answers offered during the interview. The researcher avoided pressing participants for responses.

5.4 DATA PRODUCTION

In accordance with Labuschagne (2003:100), qualitative data provide depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of situations, events, interactions and observed behaviours. This implies an interactive researcher–participant dialogue. In this research, the assumption of the constructive nature of reality was followed by an epistemological assumption that the researcher interacted with those being researched. The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, which implied an orientation towards data *production* and not data *collection*. The research methods used under an exploratory research design are qualitative in nature and include literature reviews and in-depth interviews (Tustin, Ligthelm, Martins & Van Wyk, 2005), which can be structured or semi-structured (Wright, 2008:165). Within the qualitative research methodology, understanding is gained through words or pictures, or behaviour, instead of numbers or diagrams (Ikävalko, 2005:65).

Interviews, ranging from open-ended to more structured, are a characteristic method in qualitative research, with the aim of eliciting the thoughts and experiences of the respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2007). According to Saunders *et al.* (2009:600), semi-

structured interviews let the interviewer commence with a set of interview themes, but being prepared to vary the order in which questions are asked and to ask new questions in the context of the research situation. Yin (2010:134) refers to qualitative interviews and explains that, with qualitative interviews, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is not strictly scripted. During the current research, the researcher had a mental framework of study questions, but the specifically verbalised questions as posted to any given participant differed according to the context and setting of the interview. Additionally, the researcher did not try to adopt any uniform behaviour or demeanour for the individual interviews. Rather, the qualitative interview followed a conversational mode and the interview itself led to a social relationship of sorts, with the quality of the relationship individualised to every participant. In line with Yin (2010:134), the conversational mode presented the opportunity for two-way interactions in which a participant could even query the researcher. Moreover, collecting qualitative data is a skilful performance where it is possible to respond to and amend data collection processes as necessary in a given research encounter (Cassel *et al.*, 2009:520).

An interpretive approach is characterised by taking human interpretation as a starting point for analysis. The research setting was the University of South Africa. It focused on individual middle managers' strategising, which involved interaction between middle managers and other organisational members to increase participation in the organisational strategic plan. Included in these practices were the conversational and narrative processes through which middle managers create sense for themselves based on the information surrounding the strategic plan as well as the tools used in strategising.

5.4.1 Semi-structured qualitative interviews

The current research study was carried out through an inductive process of building abstractions, concepts and theories about middle managers' strategising practices using a combination of semi-structured and qualitative interviews following a conversational mode, as explained above.

In order to gain an accurate understanding of middle managers' strategising practices, an inductive approach to producing empirical evidence was used. The

objective was not to generalise, but to create rich descriptions of the strategising practices of middle managers at a South African university.

The semi-structured interview outline served as a framework of questions, but the actual questions posed to each participant were different, based on the context and setting of the interview. The interview guide is included as an annexure to Chapter 5. Figure 16 offers a conceptual depiction of the interview guide.

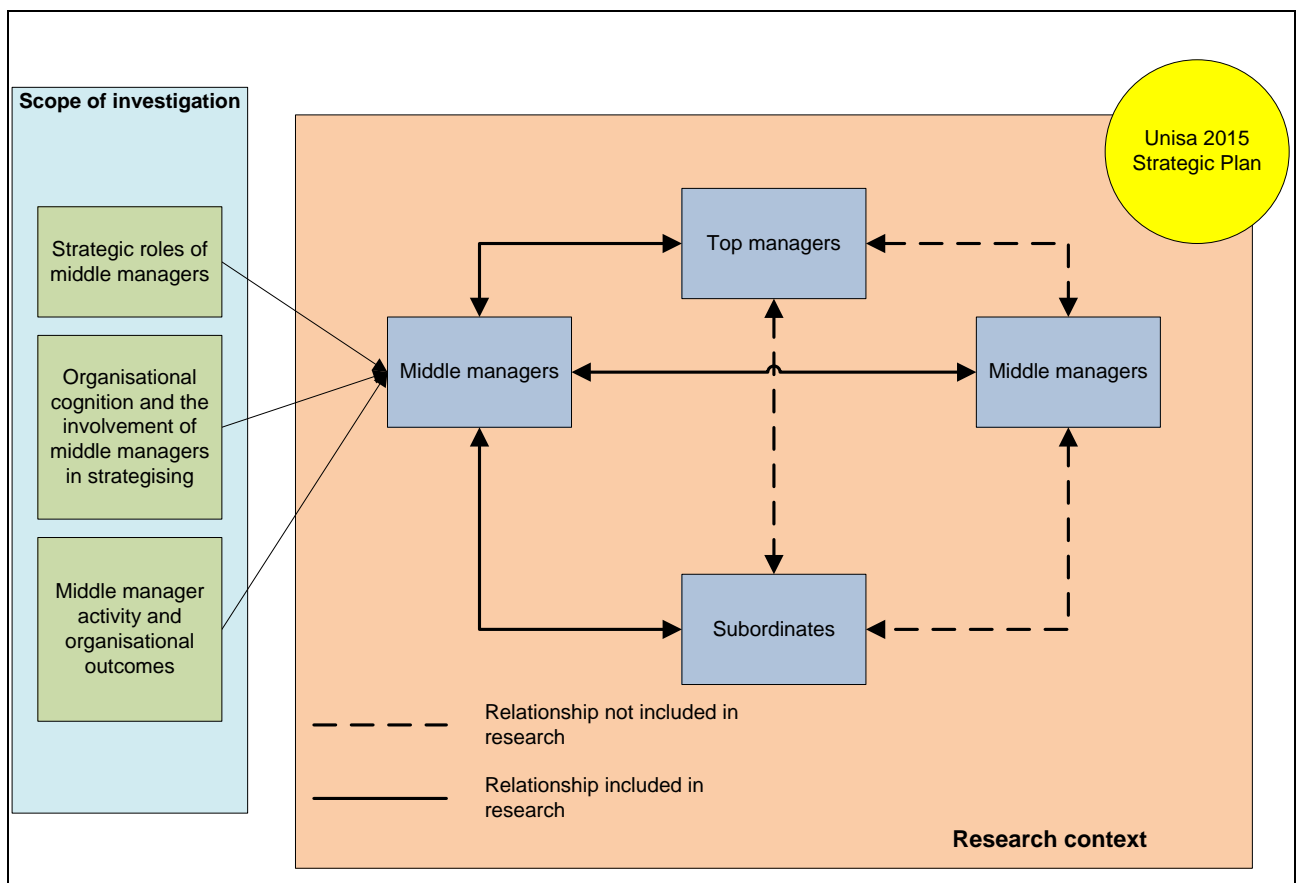


Figure 16: The conceptual depiction of the interview guide

As indicated in Chapter 4, the relationships indicated by the broken line fell outside the research scope of this thesis. The relationships indicated by the solid line formed part of the research scope and have been addressed in the interview questions. The semi-structured interview outline incorporated questions related directly to the participants' conceptions of strategy, their roles in strategy at the institution and their engagement with colleagues in terms of the strategy. A theme within the questions was the daily practices of the participants. Strategies were identified as those strategies that are important for the institution and those that had been

communicated shortly before in the institution, whether through a communication campaign or the publication of the institutional strategic plan or other material artefacts.

In addition, the interview outline focused on strategic issues at the university, as described in the Unisa 2015 Revisited Plan and the IOP2011-2013, which forms part of the material artefacts to accomplish strategy work. For clarification, strategic issues were described as issues that concern the whole institution and its goals and which have an effect on the position and performance of the institution. Strategic issues can be either inside or outside of the institution and are likely to have an important impact on the ability of the institution to meet its objectives (Ansoff, 2006:133).

Interviews were conducted in June 2012 at the offices of the participants. All the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. The transcribing function was outsourced to a reputable research organisation, Emoyeni Research Collaborations. A hired professional was used to transcribe the interviews. The use of a hired transcriber creating the verbatim transcript implied that the researcher had to audit every transcript against the original audio recording. This auditing was considered extremely important for gaining close contact and familiarity with the data and, therefore, overall trustworthiness (Tuckett, 2005). Transcribed interviews were not treated as text, but as reflections of realities of those being studied (Schwandt, 1994:118).

5.4.2 Reflective research journal

Reflexivity forms an important part of qualitative research (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Watt, 2007). Because data collection is inevitably influenced by the researcher's own assumptions and values, the researcher needed to acknowledge her bias openly during the current research and speculate how these may have affected what she did, which data she collected and how she interpreted the results (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Vaara and Whittington (2012:326) confirm that the key issue in practice-based research is reflexivity: "to be able to constantly reflect upon the enabling and constraining effects of social practices and to focus special attention on what is easily taken-for-granted by researchers and practitioners alike". Cassel *et al.*

(2010:524-525) explain that reflection has an underlying experimental logic where the researcher explores the impact of the research in a problem-solving manner with the intention of generating some form of learning on which future action can be based. Reflection is an active and purposeful process of exploration and discovery, often leading to unexpected outcomes. In keeping with this theme, Yin (2010:264) distinguishes between a declarative self and a reflective self. The declarative self wants to share what the researcher has learned and what has become known with the world. The reflective self needs to admit how he/she has learned what he/she knows, including possible reservations about his/her methods (of learning and knowing). Good qualitative research expresses both selves.

The researcher used the reflective research journal i to record her bias and own assumptions and values. The journal contained methodological notes for continued reference and was combined with the primary data and later imported into the software package. These methodological notes were considered together with the transcribed interviews for interpretation.

5.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative analysis of data involves the non-numerical organisation of data in order to discover patterns, themes, forms and qualities found in field notes, interviews, transcripts, open-ended questionnaires, diaries and case studies (Labuschagne, 2003:102). The diverse, complex and nuanced nature of qualitative research calls for an analysis approach that allows for flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006:78). Qualitative analytic methods include conversation analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis and thematic analysis. In agreement with Mantere (2008:299), the data analysis for this research followed an inductive design as the researcher continuously iterated and focused her research interest, moving upwards to the level of theoretical generalisation.

Several techniques have been presented on how to analyse qualitative data. One example of these techniques is that by Miles and Huberman (1994:8). The techniques outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) include a variety of devices such as tabular displays and graphs to manage and present qualitative data, without

destroying the meaning of the data through intensive coding. Other researchers have also contributed to the qualitative analysis techniques, such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005); Stake (2005); Braun and Clarke (2006); Cassel, *et al.* (2009); Yin (2010) and Saldaña (2011).

One of the approaches to analysing qualitative data is thematic analysis which is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006:79). Thematic analysis methods seek to describe patterns across qualitative data in an attempt to understand people's everyday experiences of reality in great detail. This is done in an understanding of the phenomenon in question (McLeod 2001 in Braun & Clarke, 2006:80). However, in the case of this research study, thematic analysis went further and also interpreted various aspects of the research topic. Schutz (1967) refers to interpretive understanding and recommends a two-stage process: first-order and second-order analysis. First-order analysis is the process by which the researcher makes sense of the phenomena under investigation. Second-order analysis involves generating ideal types through which to interpret and describe the phenomenon under investigation. In the case of this research, the first order analysis merely identified a multitude of codes. Second-order analysis attempted to identify patterns or themes through which to interpret the strategising practices of middle managers. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:78), thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. According to Willig (in Braun & Clarke, 2006:81), thematic analysis is known as a "contextualist" method between the two poles of essentialism and constructivism and characterised by theories. This contextualist method acknowledges the ways by which individuals make meaning of their experience and also the ways by which the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of "reality".

To code collaboratively is to bring multiple minds and multiple ways of analysing and interpreting data together (Saldaña, 2009:27). As such, the researcher invited a co-coder to build codes and create a shared interpretation and understanding. The coding consultant was from a different subject field (health sciences) and did not review the literature on which this study is based, in advance. As such, the themes

that were identified through the inductive approach were not driven by any theoretical interest in the area or topic. The data were coded without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame and were data-driven.

The data for this study was analysed according to the process developed by Saldaña (2011). He explains that the purpose and outcome of data analysis was to reveal to others through fresh insights what was observed and discovered about the topic (Saldaña, 2011:89). Furthermore, during the current research, analysis ranged from the factual to the conceptual to the interpretive. Since qualitative research design, fieldwork and data production are most often provisional and emergent, reflection on and analysis of the current research data took place as it was gathered. Saldaña (2011:91) also describes the qualitative data analysis process as a series of stages, and the data analysis in this study was conducted according to those stages. In agreement with Saldaña (2011), from the vast array of interview transcripts and field notes there was an instinctive, hardwired need to bring order to the collection – not just to reorganise it, but also to look for and construct patterns out of it.

The formal process of developing the coding scheme began shortly after the first few interviews and was regularly evaluated throughout the process of data production, further coding and analysis. A factor that contributed greatly to the development of the coding scheme was the researcher's review of the literature chapters and subsequent discussion with peers. Preliminary jottings were made as the data were produced. These jottings were not accurate or final, but represented ideas for analytic consideration as the study progressed. Following the auditing process, the complete and corrected transcripts were read carefully several times. Furthermore, through the writing of field notes, relistening to interviews, rereading transcriptions, writing in the reflective research journal, importing data into the software program, and other documenting processes, the researcher gained cognitive ownership of her data and the intuitive, tacit synthesising capabilities began sensing patterns, making connections and seeing the bigger picture. The researcher used Saldaña's (2009) advice on the mechanics of manual coding. Manual coding consists of several stages and starts with a process of pre-coding. For the current research, pre-coding was done through circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining or colouring rich or significant quotes or passages, and there were referred to as "codable moments" worthy of attention. These data became key pieces of the evidentiary warrant to

support propositions, assertions or theory and serve as illustrative examples throughout this research report.

The next stage in manual coding was to code contrasting data. When working with multiple participants in a study, it is useful to code one participant's data first and then to proceed to the next participants' data. The researcher coded one academic manager's transcript followed by a non-academic manager's transcript. After the first six transcripts had been coded manually using the printed copies of the transcripts, the researcher imported all the documents into the software program, Atlas.ti, to manage the large amount of data efficiently. A record of emergent codes was kept in a separate file within the Atlas.ti hermeneutic unit, which also contained the codes and content descriptions.

Preliminary jottings took place throughout the process and these jottings were deliberated with peers and research supervisors. As such, coding took place by constantly comparing current transcripts with previous ones in order to allow the emergence of categories and their properties. As the coding proceeded, additional themes and practices emerged, that had not been considered initially. Codable moments were identified by underlining significant quotes. These preliminary jottings represented the first attempt at coding the data. This was a process whereby tags or labels were used to assign units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information within the verbatim text (Miles & Huberman, 1994:56). The researcher collected the data, developed the coding and conducted the analysis on her own. Ongoing discussions with professionals and peers were solicited for opinions on the research process. In considering the practical aspects of the data analysis for this research study, the following approach was followed:

- audio files of the interviews were transcribed into text documents, which served as the primary source of data for content analysis;
- preliminary jottings were recorded and discussed;
- field notes and reflective research journal entries were added to the primary data;
- literature chapters were reviewed;
- each interview transcript was read and annotated by incorporating the field notes and observations during relistening of the interviews;

- texts were combined into one unit and concepts were highlighted and labelled;
- codable moments were recorded;
- early coding took place manually, which enabled speedy sensemaking and facilitated the back-and-forth process for further coding and analysis;
- manual co-coding was conducted by an independent qualitative researcher for verification of early analysis;
- coding units were defined as a group of words that could be coded under a criterion category – some word sets attracted multiple code allocation;
- as the research data grew in scale, the data were imported into Atlas.ti software;
- transcripts, fieldwork notes, and reflective research journal entries were imported as independent hermeneutic units;
- the Atlas.ti software enabled the researcher to track the analysis and enhance the credibility of her findings through the auditability of the research study.
- where verbatim data extracts were utilised, a data reference system, or configuration, was used, for example: (17:25:121:122), where 17 refers to the primary document (transcribed interview), 25 refers to the quotation number and 121:122 refers to the lines; and
- coding consensus meetings between researcher and independent qualitative research consultants to contribute to triangulation.

Through category construction, the researcher attempted to cluster the most seemingly alike things into the most seemingly appropriate groups. Categorising refers to organising and ordering the data from a study because it is from these larger and meaning-rich units that the researcher could better grasp the particular features of each one, and the possible interrelationships of the categories with each other (Saldaña, 2009). Next, the researcher explored the ways in which the patterns and categories interact and interplay in an attempt to identify and understand the interrelationships. Interaction refers to reverberative connections, for example, how one or more categories might have influenced and affected the others (Saldaña, 2009). Interplay refers to the structural and processual nature of categories, for example, whether some type of sequential order, hierarchy or taxonomy existed.

All sources of information gathered, all interviews in both sound and text format, field notes, reflective research journal entries, organisational documentation and artefacts have been retained in an audit-ready format. This process provided for triangulation processes by enabling others to examine the same phenomenon from multiple perspectives and enrich the research understanding by allowing for new or deeper dimensions to emerge.

The model of approaching the interview text was that of hermeneutics – to deepen the understanding of the meaning of the text in a circular movement where the details of a certain text are contrasted with emerging, more generalised theoretical thoughts. The aim of a hermeneutical researcher is not to arrive at the “original meaning” of the text but to seek to enter into a dialogue with it, seeking to “merge horizons” between the interpreter and the text. This initially involved accepting the position of the interviewee as granted, yet engaging in a critical dialogue, conscious of the researcher’s own perceptions (Mantere, 2008).

The analysis was conducted on two levels: semantic and latent. Initially, the aim of the analysis was to provide a description of the semantic content and then to interpret it for broader meaning and implication in relation to the literature. With the involvement of the independent co-coder, the analysis was taken to a latent level, especially with due consideration of the reflective research journal. Thematic analysis on latent level goes beyond semantic content; rather, it identifies and examines the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations (Braun & Clarke, 2006:84). Thus, the development of the themes themselves involved interpretive work. The latent level analysis formed part of the social constructivism.

The remainder of this chapter presents the limitations and strengths of the research design and explains how quality and rigour were ensured.

5.6 LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design adopted in this research study had inherent limitations. Miles and Huberman (1994:2) identified several limitations that pertain to qualitative research. Conducting qualitative research is labour-intensive and is characterised by frequent data overload. Researcher bias and the time demands of processing and

coding data are often cited as reasons not to follow a qualitative research design. Although some generalisation within a specific setting may be possible, the qualitative researcher can rarely make claims about the representativeness of the setting for wider populations. Credibility and quality of findings are often questioned in qualitative research projects.

The nature of this research study has indeed been time-consuming, and a disciplined and methodological approach was therefore necessary to conclude this research study in 2012. Extensive time was spent in the field as well as in the analysis process. The labour intensity of the data production and analysis, as well as the peer collaboration during the process, translated this research study into a lengthy study. The software program, Atlas.ti, was utilised to manage the data and to aid the efficiency and quality of the data analysis. Researcher bias was alleviated through the peer review process. Limitations in terms of the research topic and setting pertain to the practice of strategy at middle-management level. It investigated middle managers' strategising practices at a South African university. No other industries or individuals at any other management level were investigated. Individual middle managers were the participants as the study investigated their strategising practices. The top management team was not included in this study.

Despite these limitations and challenges, this research study was also characterised by some strengths. The study focused on naturally occurring, ordinary events in realistic organisational settings, which resulted in a solid perspective on what it is like to be a middle manager at the University of South Africa. A further strength is the local groundedness – the data were produced in close proximity to a specific situation, i.e. the university's strategic and operational planning and execution with specific emphasis on middle-manager practices. Richness and holism offer potential for revealing complexity – the rich descriptions in this research study, which were grounded in the organisational realities, offered a ring of truth that exerted a strong impact on the reader. Finally, there was an emphasis on middle managers' lived experiences, which is well suited to locating the meanings middle managers place on the events, processes and structures of their jobs as well as their perceptions, assumptions, prejudgement and presuppositions.

The following section will consider the criteria for ensuring quality and rigour in qualitative research, thematic analysis and constructivist research.

5.7 QUALITY AND RIGOUR/RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

Defining high-quality qualitative research is problematic. The reliability criterion for qualitative research focuses on identifying and documenting recurrent accurate and consistent (homogenous) or inconsistent (heterogeneous) features as patterns, themes, world views and any other phenomena under study in similar or different human contexts (Labuschagne, 2003:103). In the case of this research study, the aim was to identify and document middle managers' strategising practices. When one considers quality in qualitative research, it is alarming to note that there is no one accepted definition of what is meant by high-quality qualitative research (Cassell *et al.*, 2009:515). Rather, it is a contested terrain and there are a variety of criteria in use exist. This section offers a review of these and explains how the researcher met these criteria.

Yin (2010:19–20) explains three objectives for building the trustworthiness and credibility of a qualitative study. The first objective deals with transparency, and requires the researcher to describe and document the research procedures so that other people can review and try to understand them. The scrutiny can result in criticism, support, or refinement, but peers, colleagues and participants should be able to undertake such an examination. The second objective pertains to the methodological order of the research – there needs to be adequate room for discovery and for unanticipated events. Being methodical also includes avoiding unexplained bias or deliberate distortion in carrying out research (Yin, 2010:20). To cross check the procedures and data of research is another way of being methodical. Eisenhart (2006:575–579) encourages qualitative researchers to demonstrate that the data and interpretations are accurate from some point of view, which leads in particular to a sensitivity to report, in a self-reflexive manner, the presumed interplay between the researcher's positioning and the events and participants. The third objective is that qualitative research should be based on an explicit set of evidence (Yin, 2010:20). In agreement with and in line with the goal of this research study, this implied that the evidence would consist of participants' actual language as well as the context within which the language would be expressed. In such situations, the language is valued as the representation of reality. Participants' words are viewed as "self-reports" about their behaviour, i.e. practices.

In the case of this research study, the researcher achieved these objectives in the following ways:

Transparency – the research process was documented in the proposal and depicted in a flow-chart. Input from the supervisor and peers were gathered at each stage. Notes were made of telephonic conversations with the participants, email communication was recorded and stored and all interviews were digitally recorded. The field notes are also stored and available for scrutiny.

Methodic-ness (Yin, 2010:19) – when the participants were identified, a contingency list was generated. This list comprised of additional participants who met the inclusion criteria. In addition, a reflexive diary was created which contained field notes of all communication with the participants and the researcher’s own account of the actual interviews, including observation notes.

Adherence to evidence – all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. A hired professional was used to transcribe the interviews. The use of a hired transcriber creating the verbatim transcript meant that the researcher then audited every transcript against the original audio recording. This auditing was considered extremely important for gaining close contact and familiarity with the data and, therefore, overall trustworthiness (Tuckett, 2005). The explanations given by the participants were recorded and transcribed verbatim and supplemented with the field notes.

Schwandt (1994:118) claims that trustworthiness of constructivist research is based on functional fit (i.e. whether the inquiry and its results allow one to achieve goals and how the findings fit into a given context or discourse). Guba and Lincoln (1994:163), offer the following criteria by which constructions can be evaluated:

- “fit” – how the findings fit within current knowledge;
- “work” – the degree to which the constructs develop a more sophisticated level of knowledge;
- “relevance” – how applicable the inquiry is to the given context; and finally,
- “modifiability” – the ability of the constructs to be modified as new data emerge.

Balogun *et al.* (2003:200) consider the following, potentially contradictory, criteria important in judging contextually grounded data:

- data that are broad and deep because it is contextual, longitudinal, facilitates comparison across sites and can be collected at multiple organisational levels;
- data that elicit full and willing commitment from informants (participants) because it is interesting enough to engage organisational commitment and enjoyable enough to sustain commitment over time; and
- data that make the most effective use of researcher time because it collects, organises and analyses large and varied amounts of evidence.

In applying these criteria, this research study on middle managers' strategising practices was contextualised within the university management environment. Because the units of analysis were middle managers and their strategising practices at a South African university, the data produced about the know-how of strategising may be comparable with data from other universities. However, given the nature of qualitative research, the objective was not to generalise. The research ultimately went beyond the mere academic reporting of research findings and, because it is anchored in the organisational realities, it can be of value to the participants and organisations involved.

Furthermore, several authors such as Guba & Lincoln (1994); Merriam (2002); Robson (2002); Plack (2005); Bryman and Bell (2007); Balogun and Johnson (2004) and (Mantere, 2008) commented on a number of strategies exist to ensure quality of constructivist research:

- member validation;
- triangulation or use of multiple investigators, theories, sources and methods of data collection;
- clear exposition of methods and processes or ensuring sufficient detail to allow the reader to view the context from which to judge the credibility of the research process and content;
- audit trail or use of an independent auditor to authenticate the findings by following the logic of the researcher;
- using independent academic peers knowledgeable in the research area to audit the research;
- reflexivity or critically reflecting on the self as a researcher;
- prolonged engagement in data collection and analysis to ensure in-depth understanding of the phenomenon;

- peer review such as the use of a devil's advocate to offer questions and raise alternative explanations throughout the process;
- searching for negative cases or those cases that do not apparently fit the emergent conceptual framework;
- using thick, rich descriptions that enable the reader to judge whether the methods used and conclusions drawn by the inquirer were justifiable; and finally
- a commitment to fair dealings or representing multiple perspectives in the research.

As stated earlier, the researcher attempted to provide thick descriptions with sufficient detail so that the reader can make judgments regarding the transferability of the data obtained. This implies that the onus of transferability is taken off the researcher and placed on the person who is attempting to generalise the information from one context to another (Plack, 2005:231).

5.8 RESEARCH ETHICS

In addition to adhering to quality criteria, this research study also had to conform to generally accepted norms and values. Indeed, any researcher has the right to search for truth, but this cannot be done at the expense of the rights of other individuals in society (Mouton, 2006:239). Research ethics covers not only criteria pertaining to privacy and anonymity of the participants or the case study organisation, but also include responsibilities towards the practice of scientific research and the subjects of the research.

In terms of a researcher's responsibility towards the practice of science, a number of conventions exist. Amongst others, researchers should strive at all times to maintain objectivity and integrity. Given the nature of the proposed research design, objectivity in qualitative studies is often a challenge. However, the various criteria in use were described earlier, and definite attempts were made during the current research to ensure that these criteria were met. Another convention pertains to the recording of the data. In this research study, the researcher kept detailed research notes and maintained and updated a reflective research journal. As discussed

earlier, the methodology and techniques are available for examination by fellow researchers.

In terms of publication practices, the researcher acknowledged all sources used and avoided any form of plagiarism. The researcher has not and will not submit identical copies of articles, based on this research study, to more than one publisher or journal at a time.

In terms of responsibilities towards the subjects of the science, the researcher did not apply pressure when seeking access to the institution. Furthermore, the participating participants were recruited on a voluntary basis without any offer of an incentive, and both the institution and its participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

No noteworthy ethical issues were encountered during the course of this research study. Some sensitivity toward information sharing was anticipated. As mentioned earlier, confidentiality was offered and participants have been kept anonymous.

By meeting the responsibilities as outlined above, the researcher met the ethical requirements of the University of South Africa's College of Economic and Management Sciences' Research Ethics Committee.

5.9 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter described the research methodology which was followed in this research study. A qualitative research design using a case study approach was followed to explore the strategising practices of middle managers. This chapter further described the steps in the research process, which included a description of the sampling, the data production and methods of data analysis.

Following this, the limitations of the study were described. The methods to ensure quality and rigour were described in the penultimate section of the chapter. Finally, the ethical considerations pertaining to this research were presented. The following chapters outline and present the analysis and findings resulting from the research process.

ANNEXURE TO CHAPTER 5

Interview guide

As a manager within Unisa, you have an important role to play in realising the Unisa 2015 plan. When answering my questions, please use the Unisa 2015 plan and formal planning structures in mind as the context for this interview. I am particularly interested in your 'doing' of strategy.

1	General	Tell me more about yourself and your career at Unisa
2	opening questions	Tell me more about your role in Unisa
Strategic roles		
	Implement deliberate strategy	How do you see your role in the realising/achievement of Unisa 2015 and what are some of the specific things you do to achieve it? Can you describe or give examples of some of the tools that you use in doing strategy?
	Synthesising information	In terms of communication with your team, how do you pass information from TMT on to them? For example, do you pass it on by forwarding the general email or do you interpret and formulate your own instructions etc? When reporting to TMT, how do you decide which information is relevant? Can you give examples of what a report to TMT will contain? Can you give examples of how you communicate upward to TMT in terms of the strategy processes? Examples of how you have contributed to the strategy; examples of how TMT responds
	Championing alternatives	How would you describe your unique contribution to the institutional strategy as a middle manager working in your department/directorate? Often, things do not go according to plan - either because of delays in committee decisions, system failure, staff resistance, capacity problems etc. When things are not going according to the plan, how do you bring these 'issues' to TMT attention? How do you deal with issues that require TMT attention? There are a lot of established protocols within Unisa – what are the alternative options to communicate with TMT outside protocol? Can you give examples of such issues and communication? In your opinion, was the issue handled? What would you do differently? Examples of initiatives that you developed in your section/directorate [to influence TMT?]
	Facilitating adaptability	Can you give examples of where you modified/changed activities to deal with changing conditions? How did you make the decision? Who was involved? How did you communicate it downward? If you are uncertain about a specific strategy/ies, how would you deal with it?
	Role conflict	Can you give examples of where you were required to perform in conflicting roles? (i.e. did not agree with the strategy); how did you deal with it?

Organisational cognition and involvement of middle managers in strategising		
		<p>Can you give me examples of situations where you felt that your department/directorate is operating separate from Unisa (silo view) / your department/directorate is working towards conflicting goals? What contributed to this feeling?</p> <p>Can you give examples of situations where you were involved in the strategic decision making?</p> <p>Describe instances where you were excluded/included from strategy-related conversations</p> <p>Explain how you communicate downwards.</p> <p>What changes have you made to your department/directorate in response to the IOP?</p>
Middle manager activity and organisational outcomes		
		<p>How do you engage/influence your colleagues in the strategy?</p> <p>Can you give me examples of how you contribute to strategy?</p> <p>Describe instances where you incorporated ideas of lower-level managers in your strategising activities?</p> <p>What do you think it is that you should do to implement Unisa 2015?</p>

CHAPTER 6

RESEARCH FINDINGS

“To generalise is to be an idiot. To particularise is the lone distinction of merit.

General knowledges are those that idiots possess” (Blake, 1982:641)

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The current research was conducted on the stream of activity in which strategy is accomplished within the university context. The units of analysis were the strategising practices of middle managers and the organisational context within which they strategise. The purpose of this chapter is to report on the findings of this qualitative study.

As indicated in Chapter 1, this research investigated the realities of how middle managers at a university practice strategy. The arguments that were put forward in the previous chapters proposed that the strategising in an organisation is not only limited to top managers, but is dispersed through the organisation among middle managers and lower managers. Another argument put forward in the previous chapters pertains to the new realities of competitive advantage and this led to a need for more relevant research in practice to influence and shape the practices of strategists. When this research study was conceptualised, no previous research existed that focused solely on middle managers within the South African university context. As described in Chapter 4, universities function mostly with dual authority structures, and middle managers within universities are powerful actors in terms of the academic and administrative systems and decision processes.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how individual middle managers practice strategy. Through the level of detail, this chapter presents the micro within the macro by describing the day-to-day activities of organisational life, which relates to strategic outcomes. The institutional context has been classified in Chapter 4 as a machine bureaucracy, and this chapter reports on this micro-level of doing strategy within this classical hierarchy, as described by the participants. In line with the view of Salvato (2003:84), organisations that engage primarily in strategic activities at the macro

level are likely to find it difficult to implement strategic actions and to take advantage of opportunities emerging from daily activities at lower organisational levels. Further, the institution has been positioned within Greiner's third and fourth phases with a crisis of control and centralisation.

By describing the strategising practices of middle managers at a South African university, this study makes four contributions to the extant body of knowledge on the practices of middle managers: First, unlike previous studies that mainly focused on the top management teams at universities, this study provides a description of how middle managers strategise at a university. Second, this study shows what the unique characteristics of the university organisational context are in relation to the strategising practices of middle managers. Third, this study develops theory that links the strategic roles of middle managers with the practices enacted within those roles and the materiality to accomplish strategy work. Fourth, findings of this study lead to the development of new theory on the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work. By using strategy-as-practice and middle management perspectives as lenses to analyse the strategising practices of middle managers, this study offers a novel perspective on strategising in a machine bureaucracy with formalised strategic planning processes.

6.2 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Social constructivism concerns itself with the construction of knowledge and therefore meaning through the social involvement of agents within a social context. Influenced by Charmaz's (1990:1165) social constructivism perspective, the researcher asked during data analysis, "Why do participants think and feel and act the way they do? Under which conditions do they think and feel and act the way they do? What are the consequences?" This approach accepted multiple constructions of meaning based on different constructions from those engaged in the analysis. As such, constant comparison and researcher triangulation were part of the analysis process.

6.3 INTERPRETATION AND REPORTING

As indicated earlier, the analysis process was carried out in two stages: first-order coding and second-order coding. The analysis of the data was conducted with due regard to the unique organisational context, as described in Chapter 4. The researcher therefore offers an insider perspective of the institution and an analysis of the middle managers' strategising practices within the organisational realities, as described by the participants. The insider perspective gave the researcher the benefit of being acutely tuned in to the experiences and meaning systems of the participants. It may be argued that interview accounts, retrospective in nature, are subject to informant biases, however, the researcher read and analysed the interviews with careful consideration to internal consistency. After completing the first-order coding, the researcher reconsidered all coded data looking for salient trends or patterns (second-order coding). In the review process, the researcher re-read the data with the intention of determining which relationships existed both between other data and within the coded data. Consequently, she linked the coded data and gradually unified it and in doing so progressed from the particular to the more general. For each developing theme, the researcher attempted to make sense of the data as a cohesive narrative. Consequently, a logic or story was developed which Charmaz (1990:1168) calls the "sculpting of contoured ideas". This process of data reduction and conclusion, drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994:10–11) that facilitated the generation of this level of abstraction was complemented by comparison of data within and across themes and accompanied by continuing simultaneous reading of literature. In turn, this meant that the researcher could refine, focus or alter the themes. Consequently, the early thematic or pattern schema evolved as the researcher moved between description and abstraction.

Additionally, the interviews were also read and analysed by the independent co-coder. Chapter 5 described the involvement of the independent co-coder and indicated that the coding consultant had a background in health sciences and did not review the literature, on which this study is based before coding commenced. As such, the themes that were identified through the inductive approach by the independent coding consultant were not driven by any theoretical interest in the area or topic. Although the researcher had a keen familiarity with the theory and topic, the

approach remained primarily inductive. The data were coded without attempting to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame. The researcher and coding consultant interacted in a consensus meeting where they shared their findings.

The assessment of individuals as well as their practices and its conditions are not based on off-hand remarks but rather on themes dominating the interviews. The researcher has sought to validate her findings by making her judgements as transparent as possible and illustrating her analysis with illustrative quotations best representing the central theme. Furthermore, the Preface, included at the beginning of this thesis, as well as the reflective research journal was used as tools to record the researchers' bias and own assumptions and values.

In line with the view of Stake (2010:199), the choices of action and methods to analyse the data were reached through interpretation. Those interpretations depended on the experience of the researcher, the experience of those who were studied and the experience of those to whom information was conveyed. The professional knowledge of this research report relies heavily on personal experience within an organisational setting. In composing this research report, the researcher followed Yin's (2011:260–264) inside-out approach. This approach honoured the predominantly inductive nature of this study as many of the initial insights and findings came from concrete and specific events from the empirical work. The "inside" consists of the specific field experiences and evidence that will be presented. The "outside" presents the narrative that surrounds these specific field experiences and data and reflects the researchers' entire line of thinking.

This research adopted a theory-building approach to explaining the themes arising from the interviews, rather than a theory-testing approach. In this interpretive, primarily inductive research method, the constructs and conceptual framing are grounded in the data. Although the reporting style may appear deductive, it should be considered the meeting place for induction and deduction.

In accordance with the qualitative research design, the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. As such, the reporting of the interview context and the researcher observations during first-order coding is carried out in the first person, i.e. in the voice of the researcher. Furthermore, the first-person writing style is considered appropriate as the researcher attempts to offer an insider perspective.

The chapter is presented in ten sections as illustrated in Figure 17.

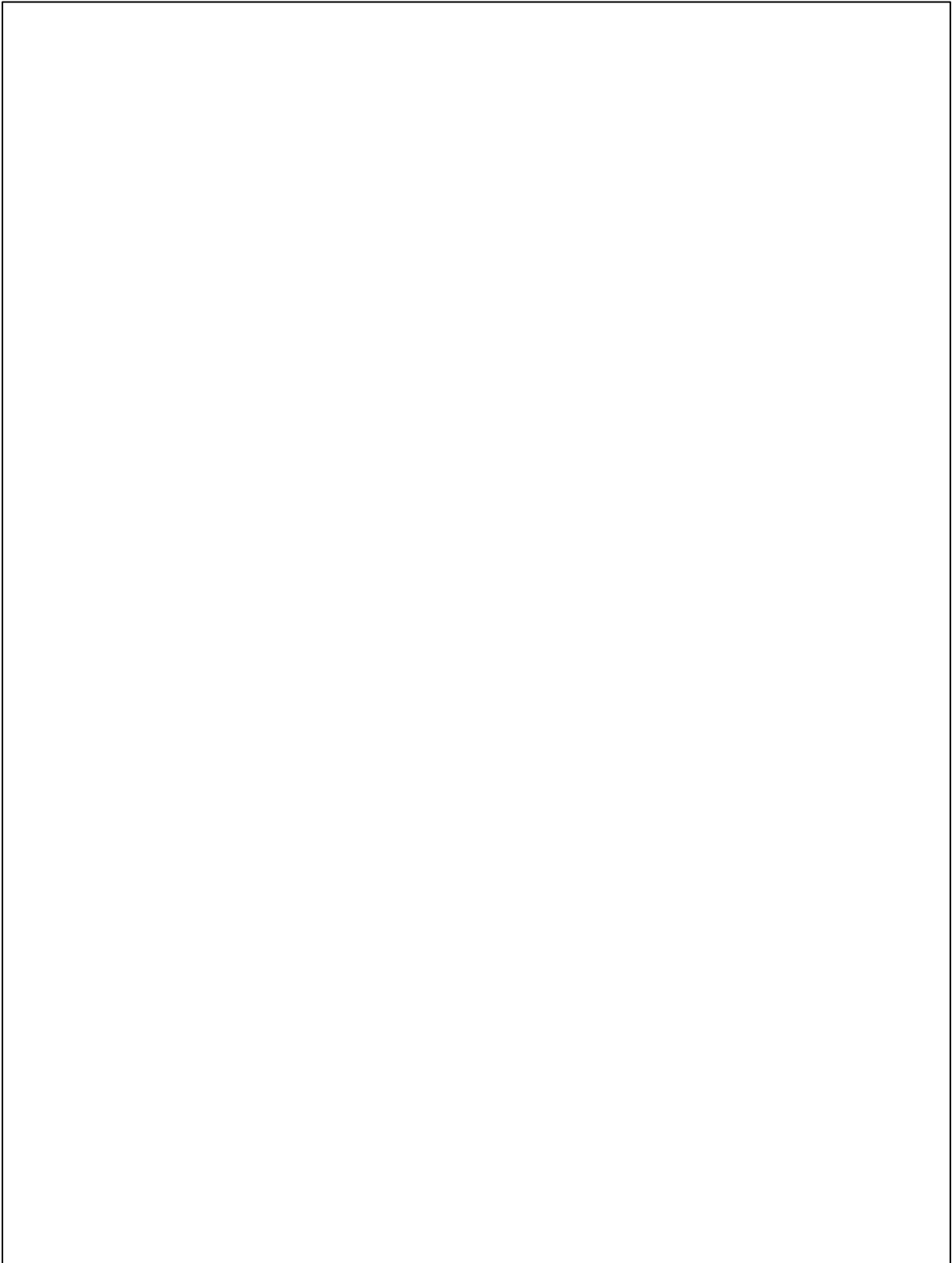


Figure 17: Structure of Chapter 6

Source: Own compilation

Table 16 and Table 17 indicate the reference system used to report on the findings.

Table 16: The reference system used in reporting on qualitative data

Example:	17:25:121:122
Where 17 represents the number of the primary document (i.e. transcribed interview) and not the interviewee	
Where 25 represents the quotation number in the transcription	
Where 121 represent the starting line	
Where 122 represents the ending line	

Several primary documents were imported into the software program to manage the information (such as the transcribed interviews, institutional documents, field notes and the reflective research journal) efficiently and the primary document number is not indicative of the interviewee number. Table 17 links the primary document number with the interviewee. The table also includes demographical information of participants.

Table 17: The interviewee number and corresponding document number and demographical information

Interviewee	Primary document number (transcribed interview)	Academic or non-academic manager	Race	Gender
1	1	Academic manager	White	Female
2	2	Academic manager	White	Male
3	3	Academic manager	White	Male
4	4	Academic manager	Black	Female
5	5	Academic manager	Black	Male
6	6	Academic manager	White	Female
7	7	Academic manager	Black	Male
8	8	Non-academic manager	White	Male
9	9	Non-academic manager	White	Male

10	10	Non-academic manager	Black	Female
11	11	Non-academic manager	White	Female
12	12	Non-academic manager	White	Male
13	48	Non-academic manager	White	Male
14	13	Non-academic manager	White	Male
15	14	Non-academic manager	Black	Male
16	15	Non-academic manager	White	Female
17	16	Non-academic manager	Black	Male

The remainder of this chapter presents the data obtained from the 17 interviews with the selected middle managers. The 17 interviews amounted to 864.05 minutes of recorded time and the transcribed interviews amounted to 427 pages. I took note of the recurring themes that emerged and believe that data saturation, the point at which no new information or themes were observed, was reached during the final stages of the second-order coding.

The reporting structure starts with descriptions of the participants and the researcher's observations during the interviews and first-order coding. This is followed by descriptions of the institutional operations and the strategic roles of the middle managers within the described institutional context. Next, the materiality of the strategy work is described and this is followed by the descriptions of the middle managers' strategising practices. Finally, the enablers and constraints to strategy work are described.

6.4 PARTICIPANTS

Balogun *et al.* (2003:199) explain that the case study is the typical approach for qualitative research and data are usually collected through interviews, observation and documentation. According to these authors, reports should emphasise detailed scene setting justified by quotes from participants, with a small number of reports moving from description to more abstract theorising by the researcher.

I described the composition of the sample of participants in Section 5.3.1. As this research followed the strategy-as-practice perspective, the participants were considered much more than simply figures represented by demographic variables, unlike the microeconomic foundations from which strategy originated. In the following section, I will therefore describe the interview context for each participant. The data analysis was inevitably influenced by my own assumptions and values. I used my field notes and my reflective research journal to describe the interview context.

Table 18 summarises the context for each interview.

Table 18: The interview context

Participant	Interview context
Interviewee 1	The interview was conducted in a colleagues' office as this participant shared an office with a recently appointed staff member and office space was a problem within the operational context in which this middle manager functioned. I found that the participant was at ease during the interview and considered each of my questions carefully before answering. The participant had been in the particular position for two and a half years. The participant had resigned shortly before the interview was conducted and this may have influenced the responses to the questions.
Interviewee 2	I experienced some difficulty in confirming the interview directly with this participant as this participants' office is situated away from the main campus and he serves on many committees and attends many meetings. I eventually confirmed the interview via his personal assistant. The interview took place in a meeting room away from his office. I have served on some of the same committees as this middle manager and our familiarity with each other contributed positively to the interview setting. Shortly after the start of the interview, the participant fetched his laptop computer to support his responses to the questions. Not only did he use the computer to provide additional information, but also demonstrated some of his strategising practices. My perception of this participant's ability was confirmed and I believe that this participant thrives on information and properly functioning systems. Although the participant shared many of the constraining conditions, he remained positive and the responses indicated innovative and high work ethic. At the time of the interview, this participant had been acting in the position for about 11 months and was subsequently appointed for a three-year period when the position was advertised.
Interviewee 3	I was able to arrange this interview directly with this middle manager and it was conducted in the participant's office. I had many dealings with this participant in the past and our familiarity with each other made the interview more conversational in nature. I especially noticed this participant's emotional reactions

	<p>that supported the responses, such as exclamations, humour, facial expressions and in describing one situation, actual tears. I was most amazed by this participant's ability to reframe the conditions in which he operated. Although the interview took place at a separate desk, the participant invited me to his desk and used his computer to show me some of the strategising practices. During the interview, the participant also pointed to the whiteboard in the office, which was filled with notes and comments. At the time of the interview, this participant had been acting in the position for about two years and was not appointed when the position was advertised.</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>I arranged the interview directly with this middle manager and it was conducted in the participant's office. On arrival for the interview, this participant was still engaged with other staff members who required attention. While waiting for the participant, I observed the office set-up – the walls were adorned with accolades and certificates and personal items such as pictures and religious memorabilia. I have served on committees with this participant and our familiarity impacted positively on the interview setting. The participant provided lengthy responses and rich descriptions of the operational circumstances. During the interview, there was an interruption from a staff member who demanded the participant's immediate attention. I actually wondered how much of this participant's daily functions are interrupted with demands from staff members for immediate attention. As the interview was scheduled for late afternoon, it carried on until well after official office hours. The participant had been appointed in this position for a three-year period and had completed two years of the contract prior to the interview.</p>
Interviewee 5	<p>The interview was arranged directly with this middle manager and was conducted in the participant's office. I have met this participant on a previous occasion, but have not had any formal dealings with him. The original interview was rescheduled as this participant had to attend to an urgent, unscheduled meeting and I actually wondered how often middle managers' daily activities are interrupted by ad hoc meetings. This middle manager asked for a copy of the interview guide in advance and had a printed copy of it available during the interview. The interview started 25 minutes later than scheduled due to the late arrival of the participant. I was most impressed by this participant's humble nature and perceive this middle manager as being willing to admit when uncertain about actions or tasks and his appearing to be not afraid to ask for assistance. At the time of the interview, the participant had been acting in this position for eight months and he was appointed for a three-year period when the position was advertised.</p>
Interviewee 6	<p>I arranged the interview via the participant's personal assistant and the interview was conducted in the participant's office. The interview started an hour late as the participant had to attend an earlier meeting that took longer than scheduled. Again, I wondered how often unplanned and unscheduled incidents interfere with middle managers' daily activities. I had not met this participant previously, but</p>

	<p>nevertheless felt comfortable in her presence. The participant's office testified of many years' experience and was adorned with memorabilia from travels and student interactions. During the interview, the participants' line manager arrived to greet the participant and I was pleasantly surprised by the casual nature and sincerity of the interaction. I also perceived a high level of peer support in this Directorate. The participant provided rich descriptions and provided many examples of the strategising practices. At the time of the interview, this participant had been acting in the position for about six months and was appointed director for a three-year period when the position was advertised.</p>
Interviewee 7	<p>I arranged the interview with this middle manager himself, and the interview was conducted in his office. I had met this middle manager informally, but have not had any formal dealings with him before the interview. The original interview had to be rescheduled due to an unplanned meeting that the participant had to attend – another confirmation of the regular occurrence of ad hoc meetings. This participant provided several examples of strategising practices and I perceived this directorate as a closed unit that creates many opportunities for interaction. At the time of the interview, the participant was appointed in this position and was currently serving a second contract term at that time.</p>
Interviewee 8	<p>When I contacted this participant to request participation in the study, the participant conveyed excitement about talking about strategy. I scheduled the meeting and it was conducted in a meeting room adjacent to his office. This participant could provide many examples of bringing issues to the TMT attention due to the nature of his position within the institution. I observed this participant as being open-minded. He provided evidence and examples of questioning TMT decisions and I perceived him as making valuable contributions. At the time of the interview, the participant had served in many roles within this directorate and was appointed permanently in his current position as director.</p>
Interviewee 9	<p>I arranged the interview with this middle manager directly. The interview was conducted in the participants' office. I had not met or had any formal dealings with this middle manager before. On arrival at the office, I was informed that the participant was busy in a planning meeting with his peers and sub-unit managers, but that he would meet with me at the scheduled time. The participant arrived and we moved into his office to conduct the interview. Upon completion of the interview, the participant rejoined the planning session. During the interview, the participant came across as very knowledgeable and I perceived evidence of highly conceptual thinking skills – the examples provided by this participant testified to a high level of autonomy. The participant provided rich descriptions of strategising practices and provided many examples of involvement in TMT discussions that affect this directorate and also many examples of exclusions from discussions that affected this directorate. Upon leaving the interview, I was very positive about the rich descriptions provided by this participant. At the time of the interview, the</p>

	participant was permanently appointed in the current position.
Interviewee 10	I arranged the interview via the middle manager's personal assistant and had neither met nor had any formal dealings with this participant before the interview. The interview started 10 minutes later than scheduled due to the participant's late arrival. The interview was conducted in the participant's someone who is easy to talk to. The participant maintained eye contact throughout the interview. The interview was interrupted by the telephone upon which the participant picked the receiver up and put it down immediately to cancel the call. The participant provided descriptions of the circumstances under which she and her directorate had to function. At the time of the interview, the participant was permanently appointed in the position.
Interviewee 11	I arranged the interview with this middle manager directly and have had several dealings with this middle manager in the past. The interview was conducted at the participant's office, away from the main campus. My first observation was that this middle manager looked tired. At the time of the interview, the participant was in the final stages of her doctoral studies and was, after several months, still acting in the current position. I considered this participant to be a highly skilled person and driven to succeed. The participant provided valuable comments on the strategising practices and rich descriptions of the operational circumstances. The participant indicated interest in applying for the position when advertised.
Interviewee 12	I arranged the interview with the participant directly and it was conducted in the participant's office. I have not had previous dealings with this middle manager. Upon arrival at the participant's office, I addressed the participant by his title and he immediately indicated that he preferred to be addressed by his first name. The participant asked the researcher not to record the first part of the interview while he provided background information. During the interview, the participant used the whiteboard in the office to depict the processes and some of the strategising practices. I perceive this participant as a hard worker, survivor and competent middle manager. Although examples were provided of constraining conditions, this middle manager portrayed a positive attitude and support for TMT decisions. At the time of the interview, this participant was permanently appointed in his position as director.
Interviewee 13	I arranged the interview with this middle manager directly and it was conducted in the participant's office. This participant requested a copy of the interview guide in advance. I considered the responses obtained from this participant as honest and frank. I perceived this participant to be a realist who spoke without reservation and from years of experience. Although the participant was generous with criticism of the institution and the TMT, he nevertheless offered valuable suggestions for change and verbally confirmed commitment to the position. At the time of the interview, this participant was permanently appointed in the position as director.
Interviewee 14	I had this participant previously, but have not had any formal dealings with him.

	<p>When I contacted the participant to invite participation in the study, he immediately agreed and the interview was conducted in his office. On arrival, I found him behind the computer, working on a colourful mindmap displayed over two computer screens. The interview was conducted at a boardroom table in the office, away from the desk. I observed this participant as energetic and passionate about the position and the role that he plays. I was surprised when the interview was interrupted by one of the VPs who wanted to discuss a matter with the participant and had arrived unannounced. I offered to excuse myself, but this member of the TMT assured me that I could remain. I observed the interaction and high level of familiarity in the interactions. Upon the VP's departure, the participant explained that such impromptu visits occur often. Later, the participant invited me to his desk and showed me some of the tools used in strategising. I perceived this middle manager to possess a high level of conceptual skills and a drive to see, and make others see, the bigger picture. At the time of the interview, this participant was permanently appointed in the position as director.</p>
Interviewee 15	<p>I arranged the interview via the participant's personal assistant and it was conducted in the participant's office. On arrival, the participant was engaged in a heated telephonic discussion and when ended, came out to share the experience with the personal assistant. I was told that the participant was asked to step in to deal with that particular matter and fire fighting is a regular occurrence. I asked the participant to describe his career to date as he had a background in the private sector. The participant could provide several examples of frustrations experienced within the operating context. I also perceived a high level of disempowerment, especially with reference to some of the centralised functions such as procurement and disciplinary actions. This participant had been appointed permanently in the post three years prior to the interview.</p>
Interviewee 16	<p>When I contacted this middle manager to invite participation in the study, I observed that there was no personal assistant or secretary who managed this participant's diary. The participant immediately agreed to be interviewed and I only met her for the first time during the interview. The absence of a personal assistant or secretary was confirmed upon arrival at her office. My first impression of this participant's demeanour was that she appeared worn down and caught in uncertainty about her position and future at the institution. The participant provided detailed descriptions of strategising practices and the operational circumstances. The participant was acting in a senior position for several years and was serving in a middle management position at the time of the interview. The participant indicated her intention to apply for the position when advertised.</p>
Interviewee 17	<p>I arranged the interview directly with this participant and had not met or had any formal dealings with the participant prior to the interview. I was disappointed when I arrived for the interview and the participant indicated that he was no longer available to conduct the interview at that time and suggested a new time slot for</p>

	<p>the same day. The interview was conducted in the participant's office and I observed hesitation from the participants' side when answering my questions. The participant avoided eye contact and I had to prompt the participant constantly for responses. The participant described several operational actions and my impression was that he did not have more strategic contributions to make. This participant had a background in the public sector and was permanently appointed as director two years prior to the interview.</p>
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According to Vaara and Whittington (2012:326), the key issue in practice-based research is reflexivity: to be able to reflect upon the enabling and constraining effects of social practices constantly and to focus special attention on what is easily taken for granted by researchers and practitioners alike. In keeping with the practice of reflexivity and the insider perspective, I observed some commonalities during the interviews and noted these in my field notes and reflective research journal. Out of the 17 participants, six had acted in the positions before being appointed. I noted this in my journal to keep it in mind during the analysis. In addition, six of the participants were late for the interview and I also noted this in my research journal. In keeping with my intention to answer the same questions as posed by Charmaz (1990) above, I asked myself why participants acted the way they did and whether the late arrival of the participants could be attributed to their very busy schedules, thereby indicating a further challenge in their work. Further, several of the interviews were interrupted, either by telephone calls or unannounced visitors. Two interviews were interrupted by executive managers dropping in. Initially, I noted these ad hoc visits as positive, but later considered that they could also point towards disrespect towards the participant and myself, especially in the case where the executive manager continued with his or her dealings with the participant despite my presence and our formally scheduled session. Again, I noted in my reflective journal whether these ad hoc interruptions from senior management were the norm in the daily lives of middle managers at Unisa and what the consequences were.

Table 19 summarises my observations while doing the first-order coding.

Table 19: Researcher observations during first-order coding

Participant	Researcher observations during first-order coding
Interviewee 1	<p>While reading through the transcription and doing the first-order coding, I got the impression that this middle manager encouraged consultation with subordinates and their input was considered and used. I also found it noteworthy that the practice in this directorate was to revise the operational plans by the middle of each year in order to accommodate changes. Although this seems to be a sensible practice, the participant implied that the institutional plans were not revised when circumstances changed. This could have been mere perception, but whether perceived or real, this would have an effect on the strategising practices of the middle manager. I also appreciated that this participant was honest in conveying disagreement with certain institutional objectives and provided evidence to indicate that the directorate did comply with the strategic objectives. Complying with the strategic objectives was different from buying into strategic rules and I noted in my reflective research journal to consider compliance as part of the institutional culture.</p>
Interviewee 2	<p>After the interview, I commented in my reflective research journal that this participant was not afraid to ask questions and demand answers to explain the rationale for decisions made. Although some may consider this middle manager overly critical, the criticisms were at all times during the interview coupled with valuable suggestions for change or improvement. One of my first impressions after reading the transcript was that this participant did not hesitate to create systems and processes to improve the working environment, operations and functioning in the directorate. It was clear that this participant had a wide reach of influence and is very open to share lessons learnt from others with the objective of improving institutional offerings and functioning. I could also see evidence of his influence where this middle manager acted as a barrier to protect the directorate and subordinates.</p>
Interviewee 3	<p>I enjoyed conducting the interview with this manager and I enjoyed reading the transcript as well. Not only were the answers honest but as an academic, I could identify with much of this middle managers' experience. This middle manager conveyed many successful practices and achievements and I had respect for what this participant had achieved in a relatively short time. Apart from being bogged down by meetings, filling in forms and often performing conflicting roles, this middle manager testified to the value of relationship building and networking. I wrote in my reflective research journal that this manager's ability to reframe situations in order to cope was remarkable. I believe I can learn a lot from this participant in terms of dealing with challenges.</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>I made notes in my reflective research journal describing my first impressions when I read the interview transcript. While reading the responses, I got the impression that there is a culture of "get in, do the work, and do not question why</p>

	<p>you do what you do". This participant was not only dealing with operational deliverables and work pressure, but commented several times on the challenges of racial transformation. A further observation was that this participant, like many of the others interviewed, was overworked and disempowered to a large extent. This middle manager also described that personal interactions with the executive dean only took place when there were problems to be discussed – in punitive cases with very little opportunity for positive reinforcement. This participant described many training opportunities, but very few that equipped middle managers to deal with real issues, such as disciplinary matters with staff members.</p>
Interviewee 5	<p>I noted in my reflective research journal that this middle manager did not have formal management training, but there was evidence indicating adherence to sound management principles. I could identify instances where the participant created templates and internal systems to cope with the operational challenges. Relationship building was also noted as an important practice for this participant.</p>
Interviewee 6	<p>I left this interview energised and positive and commented in my reflective research journal that I would also like to reach such heights in my career. I was very impressed with this middle manager's experience and ability to cope in challenging organisational circumstances. Most noteworthy was the peer support within this directorate, which testified to organisational coping. The choice of words by this middle manager was noteworthy – words like "fighting battles", "putting out fires" and "nudging others" may point towards the role this middle manager had to fulfill. This interview transcript was also the first where I got the impression that there were many requests from TMT for input from middle managers, but there was a perception that very little of that input was actually put to use.</p>
Interviewee 7	<p>Upon reading this transcript, I was reminded of the operational challenges that academics face in an environment with increasing pressure for research outputs, increased student numbers and many vacancies. I got the impression that this middle manager was empathetic towards the staff in the directorate because of personal experience in the lower ranks. The frustration with many formal but also with many unproductive meetings was clearly evident. I could also find evidence of complying with strategic objectives without understanding those objectives or the reasons for the existence of those objectives.</p>
Interviewee 8	<p>I was impressed with this participant's reasoning skills and willingness to learn. From all the interviews, this participant was the only one to ask for my input and suggestions into the functioning in this directorate. This attitude was also portrayed in the examples given of collaborations with various experts inside and outside the institution in order to bring the processes and operations up to date. One incident that really got my attention was when this participant described how he and his line manager were able to bring a serious matter to TMT attention only</p>

	in the absence of their executive manager.
Interviewee 9	I found many examples of this participant's proactive approach to managing the directorate. There were many descriptions of changes that affected the directorate and then even more descriptions of proactive practices to deal with potential challenges. I sensed that most participants felt disempowered, but this participant appeared to feel empowered and to have more authority than the others. Like other participants, there was evidence of fire fighting, but the overpowering impression was that this middle manager did not hesitate to take the lead in developing and adjusting policies and practices. This could have been due to the participant's relationship with the executive manager and the latter's management style, but may also have been due to the nature of the functions within this directorate. One of the comments made by this participant during the informal conversation after the interview was that valuable and good suggestions often originated within the institution, but these were not accepted by TMT – just for middle managers to be given the same suggestions by expensive outside consultants later.
Interviewee 10	I got the impression that this middle manager had been disempowered for a long time – having a directorate with deliverables but without an allocated budget. It appeared that this had changed and I could observe this participant's excitement about initiatives. The constant occurrence of meetings was again confirmed.
Interviewee 11	One of the comments made by this participant referred to the power of middle managers to resist change and thereby not implementing initiatives. I also sensed animosity between this participant and the executive manager which most probably impacted on the morale and practices within this directorate. This participant's voice probably reflected those of other middle managers who were not situated on the main campus – the perception was conveyed that TMT looked down on initiatives originating from the Unisa regional offices.
Interviewee 12	I found it interesting that this participant felt the need to describe the changes that the directorate had experienced in the preceding five years – several issues were mentioned and the participant described how those issues impacted on the practices at the time of the interview. This participant wanted several reassurances of anonymity. Some of the successful practices identified pointed towards regular personal communication.
Interviewee 13	I got the impression that this participant was very good at setting operational boundaries – the participant was held accountable for certain deliverables and would only work towards achieving those. I found many references and comments that confirmed this notion. This participant described the perception that the institution was functioning according to buzz words, and a new set of buzz words was favoured each year. The participant indicated where these buzz words were included and led to favourable responses by TMT. I also got the impression that this participant wanted to operate with minimum supervision and also that he

	followed a similar management style with subordinates. This participant conveyed scepticism about many of the TMT initiatives and actions.
Interviewee 14	While reading this transcript I got the impression that this participant empowered subordinates. The team appeared to be cohesive and functioning well. What I liked about this participant is the preference for face-to-face meetings instead of email communication. One of the most prominent practices of this participant is the constant positioning within the bigger picture – mention was made of the silo nature of the institutional operations and I saw evidence that this participant took deliberate steps to counter the silos.
Interviewee 15	While reading this transcript I realised that there were staff members within the institution who might not necessarily know what their contributions and roles were towards the six strategic goals of the institution. This participant was responsible for one of the support functions within the institution and I picked up several expressions of frustration where decisions had been made higher up in the organisation that affected the deliverables of the directorate, but the impact of the decisions were perceived not to be well thought through. I also got a sense of disempowerment from this middle manager, specifically referring to staff disciplinary issues and procurement practices that impacted on the daily operations of the directorate.
Interviewee 16	During the interview, I noticed the worn-down and tired demeanour of this participant and this was confirmed when reading the transcript. The participant described incidents that had led to the breakdown of trust and this affected the work morale. Despite this, I saw evidence of hard work and commitment with new initiatives. The participant used two computer screens and showed me some of the flow diagrams used as tools to implement initiatives. I could gather from the transcript that the participant yearned for recognition. There was also reference to disempowerment, especially with staff disciplinary issues. The participant also described a work environment with lots of pressure to deliver and unresolved conflict. I did not doubt the competence and commitment of this participant but realised that this participant was close to retirement and could therefore have decided to endure many negative conditions, to her own detriment.
Interviewee 17	I found this transcript the most difficult to code. Not only was there need for prompting from my side during the interview, but I also felt that the descriptions were not valuable. I acknowledged my personal bias and reconsidered the transcript. What I found most noteworthy was the vast differences in the scope and experience of this participant compared to the other participants appointed at the same level. I noted in my reflective research journal that I doubted whether this participant was sufficiently skilled to operate at this level.
General comments	It seemed that many of the participants regularly attempted to involve their staff in the decision-making within their directorates and departments, even though they themselves might have felt that they were not really involved in decisions higher

	<p>up (i.e. merely implementing deliberate strategy). I perceived that there was a yearning from middle managers to have their inputs heard and used, and they tried to do so with their subordinates.</p> <p>It was also clear how the four KPAs in the academic areas impacted on the activities of academic middle managers juggling priorities between tuition, research, community engagement and academic citizenship.</p>
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6.5 INSTITUTIONAL OPERATIONS

This section provides descriptions of the institutional operations within which middle managers perform. The aim is not to repeat what was described in Chapter 4, but rather to provide a richer description, taken from verbatim quotes of middle managers, of the institutional structure, culture and the issues that they face. The descriptions provide insight into the operational realities of the Unisa middle managers.

6.5.1 Organisational structure

The organisational structure forms the framework that establishes the lines of authority, reporting, task and role allocation, responsibilities and strategic and operational processes. Although no specific interview question dealt with the organisational structure of the institution, many of the participants referred to their position within the organisational hierarchy, the decision-making processes and authority lines. These rich references described the structural context within which middle managers practice strategy. As such, these descriptions provided contextual meaning for the lived experiences of the middle managers and these are reported on here. Descriptions by middle managers that refer to their positions and power were grouped into the organisational structure theme.

Table 20 offers a summary of the codes used in analysing the organisational structure.

Table 20: A summary of the codes used to analyse the organisational structure

Codes	Description
Acting	A temporary appointment, normally not exceeding a period of one year, in a higher or similar graded and funded position.
Power	The assumed authority or influence the middle manager holds over others by his or her <i>position</i>

As indicated in Table 20, the two sub-categories within this theme are temporary structures (acting) and power structures (decision-making that affects middle managers). The issues associated with these two sub-categories are discussed below. Issues that were mentioned in terms of the acting positions dealt with the period of acting, the operational realities managers who are in acting positions have to face and the support to managers in acting positions. Issues in terms of power refer to the middle managers' authority, the centralised structure and the decision-making processes.

6.5.1.1 Acting

Within the Unisa context, acting refers to a temporary appointment, normally not exceeding a period of one year, in a higher or similar graded and funded position. Normally, acting appointments are necessitated by a temporary absence or vacancy in which case the acting person assumes full accountability for his/her current position and the post within which he/she is acting (University of South Africa, 2012a:1). Many of the participants described periods when they acted in other positions. As indicated earlier, six of the participants had acted in their positions previously and at the time of the interviews, two of the participants were acting in other positions, in addition to their current positions.

One manager indicated that whilst being in an acting position, he was also asked to act in another position (3:1:13:13). Another academic manager indicated that she had also acted in various positions and at a stage was actually the acting dean:

... in that period [when a new College was established] most of us were acting. I think in that period I was acting for about nine months thereabout, and then appointed or seconded in a three-year contract ... we were joking that we didn't quite know on each day what we were going to be acting as. So – you ranged from acting manager to acting school director. I was even acting dean for a while (6:5:87:94).

The periods that middle managers were required to act ranged from weeks to months to “nearly two and a half years” (15:10:130:130). The requirement to act in positions complicates the operational realities that middle managers face, as explained by this non-academic manager:

... that [acting] is difficult because I have to look at it from two perspectives. First of all, I must bear in mind that I am acting in his [the director] position so I must alert him of things that are broadly relevant as well, not only things that are strategically relevant. So I involve him then in matters that he has the background or knowledge on that if he comes back into this position that he won't come in and not have a clear picture (11:52:114:114).

One non-academic manager commented on the support towards middle managers acting in positions “... because they are only there for a limited period of time, they don't have the support ...” (12:13:50:50).

In making sense of the acting position, one participant referred to the concept of “plug and play” when he described the notion of acting in various positions within the university. There was clear disappointment on the side of this participant for not being appointed in a position, and he reframed the situation:

... it sounds like plug and play, they [management] have a need, they plug you in, you play, they pull you out and plug you in somewhere else and you play and that's the acting. And mostly plug and play is not a bad thing. I think I have to change my mindset to say it is not second best. It is not qualitatively different from being in a permanent manager position or whatever.

It is a different skill set and it is maybe not something to laugh at, it is something to, if you are good at being a plug and play ... uh ... that is maybe a skill set in the 21st century workplace that one shouldn't laugh at. So the

acting bit has some insecurities but I think we should change our perceptions. Maybe acting is not such a bad thing (3:9:17:19).

6.5.1.2 Power

Middle managers also commented on the authority within their positions. The power code refers to the assumed authority or influence middle managers hold over others on account of their *positions*. One academic middle manager described how some of his staff members were contacted directly by a VP and "... they give a person a, b or c extra jobs or extra responsibilities or some extra promotion even ... without acknowledging that I am here. I sign their leave forms but that is the only thing I do" (3:39:109:110). This academic manager indicated that there was an appearance of democratic decision-making through various discussion forums, but that the real decisions were made elsewhere (2:11:25:25). Several of the middle managers referred to the limitations of some of the centralised functions within the institution. One non-academic middle manager explained his frustration with the centralised functions and the communication challenge coupled with it:

I'm asking myself, what am I doing? What am I managing? Because somebody will manage all my purchasing for me. I will just send a requisition and you know sign some document, it will be done. Uh, so we don't do anything in that regard. Disciplinary processes, we just refer it somewhere. Somebody has got an issue about ... refer it somewhere. It helps but at a certain point, you also feel that you know you don't have authority. I mean, even appointing a person. I was just asking my ED now, you see people you know that you've put an advert and the interview happens and everything else. You don't even get the letter that says we've now appointed this person, they will start. I mean, I push for that. Now they notify me, 10 people are starting in your department on this date. I tell you, when I started here I think I was [here] three months, 12 people rocked up, starting for work. And I had no clue that they are coming on that day. That's the frustration that you have (14:66:839:841).

There were also comments about the decision-making processes within the institution. Most of the comments referred to the top-down management approach and decision-making.

As described in Chapter 4 (section 4.6.3), a new management structure was introduced and implemented in January 2012. Descriptions from middle managers indicate uncertainty about the rationale for the new structure: "... we still could not put our fingers on it, why Procurement was moved to the office of the PVC [pro vice-chancellor]" (8:38:656:656). One of the non-academic middle managers questioned the continuity between different management structures:

... what would happen here [at a regional campus] was envisaged at least five years ago by the management structures that were in place at that time. Since then there has been quite a significant change in the management structure so the current management is questioning a lot of things that are now nearing completion ... (11:32:33:33).

Key insights on organisational structure

Findings suggest that acting causes uncertainty and complicated the operational realities that those in acting positions face. I consulted the policy, and established that the duration of acting positions should be no longer than one year. As described above, at the time of the study, one manager had been acting for over two years. Findings also suggested that there may be power and authority issues in the middle management position which could be indicative of a disempowered middle management cadre. This disempowerment, perceived or real, will certainly have an effect on the operations and attitudes of middle managers.

6.5.2 Organisational culture

Organisational culture is commonly referred to as "the way we do things around here". As this study explored the doing of strategy by middle managers, the organisational culture warranted attention. Not only does the organisational culture have an effect on the daily lived experiences of middle managers, but it also binds the middle managers as aggregate actors. Descriptions by middle managers that

referred to the norms, beliefs, and unscripted rules of enactment, were grouped into the organisational culture theme.

Table 21 offers a summary of the descriptions of the codes used in the analysis process.

Table 21: A summary of the codes used to analyse the organisational culture

Codes	Description
Compliance	Adherence to strategic goals, objectives, rules set by TMT
Institutional politics	Hidden agendas; use of power/influence to obtain advantage beyond legitimate authority; the way power is used in institution to support functions/actions outside official strategic agenda
Bullying	Bullying is the use of force or coercion to abuse or intimidate others

6.5.2.1 Compliance

Findings indicated a culture of compliance within the institution. In this context, compliance refers to adherence to the goals, objectives, rules and instructions given by TMT. Coupled with this culture of compliance is the “command-and-control” nature of the institution. One academic manager stated that at Unisa, “most of the time you have to do what you need to do, what you are asked to do” (4:51:224:224). Another academic manager indicated, in reference to the 11Cs + 1 (the principal’s vision and values for Unisa during the period of transformation), that the overriding C is compliance: “So it doesn’t, it doesn’t matter what you do as long as you comply” (6:50:724:725). Also, “... with Unisa most of the time you have to do what you need to do, what you are asked to do” (4:51:224:224).

One manager described how they “have been told that there are too many departments in the College” (7:49:388:388) and that they are now forced to merge some of the departments. Again, findings indicated that there was compliance with strategic objectives, even when the manager indicated, “We couldn’t really answer the question why there should be a merger because ... it was not that obvious to me myself” (7:52:400:401).

A non-academic manager explained how his directorate provided support to the academic offering and confirmed the need to align themselves with the 2015 core business (13:21:111:111).

An academic manager also stated that there was little room for questioning the strategic objectives:

And in Unisa it's like, you will get on with it, you won't be too problematic, you won't challenge anything. If we say that you do it ... and if you question something you're, like rebellious, you're this maverick (4:93:543:543).

Related to the culture of compliance and the structural power within the institution, were many descriptions of top-down objectives. According to the descriptions provided by the participants, many of them feel that they had no part in formulating many of the objectives and that it was merely given to them from the top down. With reference to the Unisa 2015 objectives, a manager stated:

I had no input in 2015 okay, so I know what 2015 stands for, I contracted that I would do A, B and C to achieve 2015 so on the one hand it is very top-down and I'm measured against outcomes that I had no input in deciding (3:12:23:23).

One academic manager described how the budget was cut, and she said she had no input into deciding where to cut. She explained, "It was top management that decided" (4:46:211:211). This same manager also indicated that some initiatives were pushed through from the top down, "and basically we have to implement". Again, reference was made to the signature courses and that "we didn't have much of a choice, you know, you just, just get on with it" (4:53:236:236). This was supported by another manager who indicated, "with Unisa's top-down management approach and decision-making it's not very open to creativity and innovation ..." (7:8:42:42).

6.5.2.2 *Institutional politics*

Another aspect of the institutional culture identified in the findings is that of institutional politics. In this study, institutional politics was defined as hidden agendas and the way power is used in the institution to support functions or actions outside

the official strategic agenda. Institutional politics can be real or perceived, but either way it has an influence on middle managers' strategising. In describing how he presented a new initiative to a member of the TMT, one manager indicated that the TMT member's response was positive, but "I understand the politics about the matter and the tension about it and people are marginalised in their activities" (2:17:65:65). With reference to the training workshop on trust, this academic manager stated, "No training will prepare me for the different political agendas [of TMT]" (3:33:85:85).

One academic middle manager described a situation with a subordinate whose behaviour was "toxic and destructive" and explained, "... he felt he could get away with it because he had connections in high places and they were listening to one side of the story and not both sides" (4:78:357:357).

Reference was also made to the political agenda in describing the closure of the call centre. "We still do not agree with it [the closure] but there were other political reasons for the closure of the call centre" (9:34:151:151). One non-academic manager explained that during the merger process, he "was privy to a lot of politics and so forth which was a bit of an eye opener" (12:4:26:26).

6.5.2.3 *Bullying*

Bullying was mentioned by most of the middle managers. Bullying was defined as the use of force or coercion to abuse or intimidate others. Findings indicate that bullying is high on all managers' agendas, and it was discussed at the Principal's Summit shortly before the interviews were conducted. One non-academic manager indicated that bullying is a problem and the fact that the principal raised the issue was a positive sign. According to her, "people were dying there in silence because how do you report such a thing [bullying]?" (10:79:460:460). Another non-academic manager described her work environment as "a very difficult department" and said "emotionally it can drain you ..." (15:14:162:162).

Key insights on organisational culture

Based on these descriptions, I made three conclusions. Firstly, middle managers perceived that they were exposed to organisational politics, which they could not influence. Secondly, middle managers felt that they were disempowered, that they

had no voice and that they were required to comply. Thirdly, the institutional environment was depicted as a “command-and-control” organisation. The descriptions by the participants concurred with the work of Hayes and Mintzberg published in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, Hayes (1985:117) explained that with a command-and-control organisation, major decisions are allocated to top management who then imposes those decisions on the organisation and monitors these decisions through elaborate planning, budgeting and control systems.

6.5.3 Operational realities within the institution influencing middle managers’ performance

The descriptions below were coded under the theme “operational issues that middle managers face”. These issues can be broadly classified as frustrations and satisfiers and these issues testify to the operational realities that influence middle managers’ strategy work. One of the objectives of this study was to describe the strategising practices that had arisen from the interaction between the middle managers and the university’s organisational context. As such, detailed descriptions of the university organisational context are required in order to make meaningful conclusions on the strategising practices. The participants’ own descriptions are reported here as they shape their micro-strategising within the macro context.

Table 22 offers a summary of the descriptions of the codes used during the analysis.

Table 22: A summary of the codes used to analyse the operational realities

Codes	Description
Accountability and authority	Expectations of account-giving and power or right to control
Appointments	Appointment practices and criteria
Executive bonuses	Executive bonuses
Management training	Induction or training to the organisational context, policies, processes
The legacy of the merger	The 2004 merger between Unisa, TSA and Vista Vudec
Capacity	Capacity – albeit staff, systems or other resources
Uncertainty and change	Changes inside the institution; mostly changes

	initiated higher up in the organisation or elsewhere in the organisation
Role conflict	The anxiety that participants experience, which is linked to the necessity to fulfil different roles, as a middle manager representing TMT and representing the realities of the subordinates can also link back to the dual authority and the gap between academia and administration staff
Flexible sub-unit arrangements	Ways in which middle managers make their units more flexible for efficiency and organisational coping
Training opportunities	Formal acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies as a result of the teaching of vocational or practical skills and knowledge
Support staff	Support staff and positions to help middle managers to cope and to fulfil support roles

6.5.3.1 Accountability and authority

During the interviews, participants referred to instances where they felt they had no part of a particular course of action or only a limited role, even though they were still held accountable for the outcomes. Findings indicated that middle managers felt that they were often held accountable for decisions not made by them and then they needed to solve problems created by others. One academic manager explained, "... the problems are not created by my school. These problems are created by exams, by registrations, by many service departments within the university and by the end it is problems that we [academic managers] have to solve" (1:47:159:159). Another academic manager explained,

You often do not understand the reasons for some decision that were made, and those decisions are not in line with the reality and the consequences are not dealt with by those who made the decisions – it is left for the foot soldiers on lower levels to solve and then the CODs, senior lecturers and lecturers sit with the problems (2:20:95:99).

One of the non-academic managers referred to the closure of the call centre and explained how he had discussed it with the registrar and had indicated that the call centre could not be closed unless there was another system that could replace it (9:76:475:478). The call centre was closed and this manager referred to the closure

as “setting us up for failure” and explained how he now needed to write reports on how his directorate was dealing with student queries (9:77:480:480). He explained that a situation had developed where he and colleagues in other directorates needed to answer to management who was asking, “Why are you not doing your work? Why are you not answering student queries, why are the students going to the ombudsman and the Department of Education?” (9:78:484:485).

Another non-academic manager involved in the institutional diversity management, equity and transformation efforts, described a situation where a team of consultants had been given a contract to assist with the recruitment of people with disabilities. She explained that she was not consulted and was later asked to “come and meet the people... I asked them three questions. I realised they don’t know anything about disability. They were actually asking me questions” (10:47:430:432).

6.5.3.2 *Appointments*

There were also references to appointment criteria and practices, mostly in terms of new appointments. Descriptions by participants pertaining to difficulties or challenges that they were experiencing because of appointment practices and criteria were grouped under this code. One academic manager who had been acting in a position for two years, applied for that same position and explained, “I applied, I was interviewed but the equity profile of the department was against me so I would most probably not get the job” (3:7:13:13). Another academic manager provided an example from one of the departments in her directorate, “... we finally found a person who was appointable at senior lectureship level. Um, a West African. But he lives in England. His surname sounds English. So immediately he was rejected” (5:59:938:938).

6.5.3.3 *Executive bonuses*

Some of the managers interviewed also referred to the executive bonuses. All references and descriptions by participants that deal with the executive bonuses were grouped here. One manager stated, with reference to the drive towards achieving certain goals, “there is a perception among some people that the only reason people drive that kind of thing is to make sure that retain their bonuses ... they [management] can't change their minds because then they will lose their

bonuses” (6:66:1064:1064). One of the non-academic managers also referred to the bonuses that the extended management gets and stated “... your extended management will get these very, very high bonuses ... the people that ensure the operations are successful doesn’t get the recognition” (15:32:350:352).

6.5.3.4 *Management training*

Training refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills and within this code, all descriptions pertaining to the lack of management training were grouped. These included all descriptions of difficulties participants experienced when appointed or promoted to a new position and the little or no induction or training to the organisational context, policies, and processes related to that position.

When asked about formal training in management, one academic manager indicated that she had none and when she had to deal with a disciplinary hearing with one of her staff members, she “was never informed how the process worked. I was totally out of my depth in the whole process ...” (1:51:171:171). One non-academic manager who came from the public sector and was appointed two years earlier indicated, “there hasn’t been any training that-that is offered to me” (16:4:53:53).

6.5.3.5 *Legacy of the merger*

As described in Chapter 4, the new Unisa was established in 2004 after the merger between Unisa, Technikon SA and the distance element of Vista University. References were made about the merger and one non-academic manager indicated that his directorate was still busy dealing with matters dating back to the merger (13:45:246:246). Another non-academic manager confirmed this and explained that they are busy redoing everything (9:12:78:78) to accommodate the student volumes 9:25:135:136). Another non-academic manager who had come from TSA indicated that she found her position “downgrading” (15:4:88:88). She further indicated that she felt disempowered after the merger. At TSA, she had a level of authority, but after the merger she “could not sign off on anything” (15:5:92:97). This manager also explained that she was told that she “had to prove herself again” (15:89:1146:1148).

6.5.3.6 Capacity

Some of the participants referred to operation-specific issues such as problems that they were experiencing due to lack of capacity – albeit staff, systems or other resources. One academic manager explained, “the operational requirements are critical” (4:22:107:109) and “you have to work all the time” (4:89:506:509). One non-academic manager referred to the existing procurement process in the university and explained that three staff members in his directorate, who were in “fairly senior” (8:14:320:321) positions were spending “60% of their time pushing paper and I do not think that is what they’re supposed to do” (8:25:320:321). He explained that he wanted to use them as management accountants once the iProcurement system was implemented. The time used to travel from a regional office to the Muckleneuk campus was also indicated as an issue. This non-academic manager explained,

... if you have to spend two hours on the road for a one-hour meeting or a half-an-hour meeting it kills me, it kills me because I know I then have to spend my own time to catch up on that time that I had spent travelling (11:48:102:102).

6.5.3.7 Uncertainty and change

As described in Chapter 4, a new management structure was introduced in 2012 and there were some references to uncertainties that these and other changes have caused. This academic manager described:

... one vice-principal has an idea and agenda and she will lead with it and another vice-principal has another idea ... and they all make plans on exactly the same group of people and we have to dance to their music. And sometimes their claims are contradictory (3:36:73:73).

Another academic manager stated that people are in many ways tired of all the change that they see and “there’s not enough time to just catch your breath” (6:64:996:996). One non-academic manager referred to the drive towards online material and how it affected his directorate, “... I’m told now we’re going to move more rapidly towards online. The fact is, okay, that has been said 15 years ago and every single year the capacity has had to be stretched further and further” (14:3:32:35). This same manager also explained,

... there are times when you hear about certain decisions that have been taken elsewhere, that could be very strategic and nobody, because of the size of the institution ... nobody thought of the impact of it further down the line ... (14:47:714:719).

6.5.3.8 *Role conflict*

Role conflict is anxiety that participants experience, which is linked to the necessity to fulfil different roles. Specifically, middle managers represent TMT and also the realities of their subordinates. Role conflict in this context can also link back to the dual authority structure, as described in Chapter 4. One academic manager explained that she is “basically just solving problems as a middle manager” and “I want to remain with one foot in the academia” (1:46:157:157). This academic manager further stated that she wanted to do research and still wanted to be an academic “but if I want to do that I don’t have time to solve the problems” (1:46:157:157). Another academic manager indicated that he kept the articles that he was working on his daily list “of everything to do” (3:58:173:174) to remind him that “there is life outside of this report writing and meetings ...” (3:58:178:174). Another academic manager stated “I wish we had more time for more creative work” (6:17:148:148). This same manager said that she had eight master’s and doctoral students and “it can be a little tricky to get around doing the academic stuff as well” (6:30:281:282).

Although there were more descriptions of frustrations and issues that middle managers face within the operational realities, there were also some positive references.

6.5.3.9 *Flexible sub-unit arrangements*

In the context of this study, “flexible sub-unit arrangements” refers to how middle managers make their units more flexible for efficiency and organisational coping. There seems to be freedom to structure sub-units effectively in an informal way in order to meet the organisational demands. One academic manager explained the use of sub-committees within the directorate and the way this was regarded as a strength as it allowed for participative decision-making and consultation in the

school. These flexible sub-unit arrangements created support structures among middle managers, which enabled their strategy work. There also seemed to be opportunities to involve parties from other directorates, schools and departments in planning and implementation and several participants described how they created task teams or forums where input was obtained from various stakeholders. The deliberate strategies were widely communicated throughout the institution. There was widespread access to the official strategic planning documents, such as Unisa 2015 and Unisa 2015 Revisited.

6.5.3.10 *Training opportunities*

Although some participants referred to a lack of management training when appointed in management positions, many also commented positively on the high number of training opportunities available to themselves and their subordinates. There also seemed to be institution-wide support for workshops and away days.

6.5.3.11 *Support staff*

This code included all descriptions by participants of support staff and support positions to help them cope. When asked how this manager coped, he answered,

How do I cope? I think really, I think it's firstly I've got a PA that's wonderful ... [who] schedules things for me ... we call them office administrators. That's really what they do there. She really plans my day quite well ... and she tries and manages all the crises round about the meetings because the demand for meetings is endless ... her [sic] and I have a clear understanding of what, how much do I need free each day to be able to handle the other things in between the meetings ... I think she is a great help (14:69:1030:1035).

Key insights on operational realities

I made some further observations when I reviewed these rich descriptions of the operational realities by the participants. Firstly, the sense that middle managers were being disempowered was enforced. Secondly, the academic middle managers seemed frustrated with the limited time available for academic research. This

observation confirmed the view of Floyd (2012:272–284), as described in Chapter 4, who stated that academic middle managers are taking on an increasing amount of management and bureaucratic work at the expense of their teaching and research. The outcome is less involvement in the very reasons for entering academia in the first place. This may lead to frustration, which may be transferred to those reporting to them. Thirdly, the references to and descriptions of the executive bonuses led me to ask myself if these references were made by middle managers from a position of a sense of inequity. Fourthly, I had further confirmation of the command-and-control nature of the institution. Finally, I also observed the frustration with system failures and capacity problems. It seemed to me that the challenges brought on by the merger, which led to a vast increase in student numbers, remained problematic and challenging.

When considering the legacy of the merger and the descriptions of the control systems within the institution, the phases of organisation growth as identified by Greiner (1972:37–46) and described in Chapter 4, should be reconsidered. Initially, I considered the institution to fall within phase four where growth takes place through coordination. However, based on the descriptions provided by the participants, I now consider the institution to fall between Greiner's third and fourth phases. In the third phase growth takes place through delegation. These phases are followed by a crisis of control and red tape. Crisis of control is characterised by an attempt by top management to regain control through centralisation. It seemed that the merger had increased the institutional and the management complexity to the extent that the TMT had a sense that they were losing control over a complex and diversified operation. During this crisis of control, TMT sought to regain control over the entire operation through centralisation and special coordination techniques. The impact of this attempt to regain control through coordination had the potential to lead to mistrust between the TMT and the rest of the organisation. A lack of confidence could gradually build up, leading to a crisis of red tape where the proliferation of systems and programmes begin to exceed its utility (Greiner, 1972:43). During this crisis period, procedures take precedence over problem solving and innovation is dampened. The impact of the red-tape crisis could cause middle managers to resent the heavy direction from TMT. On the other hand, TMT could consider middle managers as uncooperative and uninformed.

Academic and non-academic managers have to do their strategy work within a big institution and strategy is accomplished through the day-to-day activities of organisation life. The operational realities that managers face at Unisa were described above and provided the context, on micro- and macro-level, within which managers operate. The previous section described the structure, the culture and the issues that managers within the institution faced at the time of the study.

6.6 STRATEGIC ROLES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS

This study contributes to the understanding of how middle managers put strategy into practice at a university context. The practices that middle managers engage in are interdependent of the roles that they fulfil. These roles are shaped by the unique organisational context that places demands on middle managers not only to fulfil the traditional role of implementation, but also other strategic roles to carry out strategy work.

During the first-order coding, I identified six roles, namely problem solver, supporter, change agent, implementer, informer and communicator. The second-order coding confirmed that the foundations of these roles fit the strategic roles identified by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992; 1994), as discussed in Chapter 3. The change agent, supporter and problem solver roles correspond with Floyd and Wooldridge's "facilitate adaptability" role. The informer role corresponds with Floyd and Wooldridge's "synthesise information" role. The communicator role corresponds with Floyd and Wooldridge's "champion alternatives" role. The implementer role corresponds with Floyd and Wooldridge's "implementing deliberate strategy" role. The nuances within each role may be different, but at its core, the strategic roles of the middle managers at Unisa resonate markedly with the findings by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992; 1994). Further, within these unique roles, unique organisational context and accompanying practices, certain conditions enable or constrain the practices of middle managers at Unisa.

The interview guide formed the framework for identifying and analysing the strategic roles of middle managers at Unisa. This section reports on the findings following the interviews. Each participant was asked to describe his or her role in realising the

Unisa 2015 strategic plan. Verbatim quotes are used here to support the findings. Table 23 gives a summary of the descriptions of each of the four strategic roles used in the second-order coding process.

Table 23: A summary of the strategic roles of middle managers at Unisa

Strategic role	Description
Implement strategy	The implementing strategy role refers to middle management interventions that align organisational action with the strategic intentions of top management.
Champion alternatives	The championing alternatives role gives middle managers the potential to reshape top management's strategic thinking by selling to the TMT strategic initiatives that diverge from their current conception of strategy.
Synthesise information	The synthesising information role enables middle managers to interpret and channel information upwards and downwards; the synthesised information may become the primary basis for decision-making.
Facilitate adaptability	The facilitating adaptability role refers to the downward influence of middle managers where they support activities within the areas they manage.

6.6.1 Implement strategy

During the interviews and the first-order coding process, it was clear that the most common strategic role of middle managers at Unisa was to implement strategies formulated by the TMT. This was in line with the command-and-control nature of the institution and its position in Greiners' (1972) growth phases and the culture of compliance described above. One of the non-academic managers responsible for a support function described his role as "it's mainly the implementation – that is what my role is" (16:6:65:65).

The participants provided many descriptions of their roles as implementers of deliberate strategy. Two codes were used to compile the implementing strategy role: compliance to strategic objectives and translating institutional strategy into action plans and individual objectives.

Table 24 offers a summary of the codes used during the analysis process.

Table 24: A summary of the codes used in analysing the implementing strategy role

Implementing strategy codes	Description
Compliance to strategic objectives	Adherence to the objectives set by TMT through the strategic plan
Translation of institutional strategy into action plans and individual objectives	Institutional strategy forms the foundation for all action plans and objectives

Each of these codes is described below.

6.6.1.1 Compliance to strategic objectives

The IPMS and performance agreement templates of the university were included in the participants' descriptions. Findings indicated that even when middle managers did not agree with a specific strategic objective or strategy, they still complied. One academic manager described the performance agreement requirement for academics and academic departments to engage in community engagement activities, in addition to teaching, research and academic citizenship. This manager was of the opinion that "the university should have another structure" (1:26:61:61), one that would take responsibility for community engagement and initiate projects. "... staff members are allocated specific time to community engagement so we have no other option at this stage [but] to try to adhere to the requirements of the university" (1:28:69:69).

The notion of complying with strategic objectives was also described by another academic manager who referred to the signature project, which is a strategic project and remarked that "you don't have a choice" (3:14:27:27) but to be involved. Another example was provided,

... with Unisa most of the time you have to do what you need to do, what you are asked to do. It's a top-down approach, basically, in terms of the structure and the management style. And it's decided right from the top. So we're basically the line managers that are implementing ... yes, they do consult us but after the plan has been decided upon ... then we have to indicate how we fit in and what we're going to achieve and we have to achieve that (4:51:224:224).

6.6.1.2 *Translate institutional strategy into action plans and individual objectives*

Most of the managers provided descriptions of how they translate the Unisa 2015 plan and IOP into plans and objectives for the directorate and department. There were many descriptions of workshops where the IOP was deliberated and the goals and plans were formulated at directorate and department level. One manager described how the directorate would take the college IOP and then refine it to outcomes that the school could meet (1:35:103:103). Another manager described their planning process and strategic session “where we made sure that all of the things that we were doing eventually aligned with the IOP and strategic objectives” (6:43:550:551).

One non-academic manager described the three-year planning cycle and ways of ensuring that the Unisa 2015 goals were incorporated into the directorate strategies (9:5:31:31).

Key insights on the implement strategy role

Based on my analysis of the descriptions by the participants, I concur with Mantere (2008:301) that a key enabling condition for creating continuity between top-down objectives and middle managers’ expectation to implement it, is when the TMT narrates the thought processes that have led to the formulation of the objectives to be implemented. It seemed that middle managers at Unisa are not always aware of the rationale of the strategic objectives, or that they may perceive some of the objectives as conflicting. Not understanding the rationale for the strategic objectives could be a constraint to strategy work and this is discussed later in this chapter.

6.6.2 Championing alternatives

As described in Chapter 3, the championing alternatives role gives middle managers the potential to reshape the strategic thinking of top management by selling to them strategic initiatives that diverge from their current conception of strategy. Participants were specifically asked how they brought issues to TMT attention and to provide

descriptions of their attempts to influence TMT. Table 25 gives a summary of the code used during the analysis process.

Table 25: The code used in analysing the championing alternatives role

Championing alternatives code	Description
Become champions for initiatives developed at operating level	Middle managers' potential to reshape the strategic thinking of TMT

6.6.2.1 *Become champions for alternatives developed at operating level*

There were several descriptions from the participants of how they attempt to reshape the strategic thinking of the TMT and champion issues and initiatives. It became clear that championing initiatives at an operational level was done through relationships with peers, relationships with TMT and committees. Communicating the strategic initiatives was done through a formal proposal and approval process, going over the heads of superiors and reacting to calls for comments. These communicative interactions are discussed below.

One manager described his relationships with peers in other directorates as useful infrastructure in dealing with new initiatives or sharing ideas. He further indicated that he would easily contact his peers to share information or to deliberate (2:34:153:153). Another manager described how her involvement in various committees gave her a forum to “go and plea at different levels” (6:22:187:191). This same manager also described the value of having the college’s backing when representing the wishes of the college and championing alternatives to members of the TMT (6:26:215:215).

One non-academic manager also confirmed how serving on multifunctional committees and championing alternatives on committee level countered the effect of working in silos (9:49:279:283).

It appeared that the best way to bring matters to the TMT was to prepare proposals and present it to various committees for eventual inclusion on the organisation’s agenda. One academic middle manager described how the college had responded to concerns about student plagiarism by discussing it on college committee level and then presenting it to the senate committee (6:40:434:436). Another manager described how the executive dean would personally ask for his views on certain matters (7:37:269:269). This academic manager indicated that his entry point for

bringing issues to TMT attention was always the school meetings and school management committee meetings (5:22:141:141).

There were some negative responses about the middle management influence:

... you raise concerns but they don't listen ... I think the concerns that were raised from middle management upwards are not taken seriously (3:18:51:51).

There also appeared to be a hierarchical barrier that filtered the issues that were intended for TMT attention:

I can only speak to my executive director. He then has the prerogative to either take it up with the vice-principal who can then take it to [X] or not. So I don't have access beyond my executive director (11:11:70:70).

A non-academic manager said he was only able to bring urgent matters ("red lights flashing") (8:27:449:449) to the attention of council in the absence of his direct line manager, a VP.

Another non-academic manager described the operational situation in the directorate as a space where he and his colleagues were often asked for their suggestions and then got support to take the initiatives forward (9:47:279:279).

Key insights on the champion alternatives role

The evidence suggested that middle managers were keen to champion alternatives and took initiative to do so. The formal procedures for presenting alternatives to TMT seemed to be the successful approach. Following formal procedures, the red-tape crisis and the high reliance on the hierarchical structure were confirmed. The hierarchical structure could be a barrier to championing alternatives and might be a possible reason why so few middle manager initiatives were accepted.

6.6.3 Synthesise information

As explained in Chapter 3, the synthesising information role enabled middle managers to interpret and channel information upwards and downwards, and the

synthesised information might become the primary basis for decision-making. During the interviews, participants were asked to give examples of how they passed information from TMT on to their subordinates and how they decided which information was relevant for distribution. All participants were also asked to give examples of reporting to TMT and how TMT would respond to information provided by them. Section 6.7.1 describes the use of reports as part of communicative interactions and material artefacts at Unisa. This section provides descriptions, from verbatim quotes, of how participants synthesised information. Table 26 gives a summary of the codes used during the analysis process.

Table 26: A summary of the codes used in analysing the synthesising information role

Synthesise information codes	Description
Reporting and issue selling	Middle managers provide information or report back to TMT, including using their discretion to decide what should be or not be communicated to TMT
Reframing, sensemaking and removing noise	This refers to the way middle managers understand, interpret and create sense for themselves.

6.6.3.1 Reporting and issue selling

Reporting and issue selling refer to instances where middle managers provide information to TMT. Several of the participants referred to the time spent on writing reports. The nature of these reports differed, but the intention was mostly to channel information upwards. A few participants indicated that some of the reports could be avoided if the institution's management information system functioned efficiently (2:35:165:165). In many instances, the participants explained how they had to consolidate information from various subordinates' task teams before channelling it upwards in the institution (2:35:165:165; 11:57:136:136; 11:91:78:78; 2:64:165:165).

Channelling information upwards is not only done through written reports. Examples were given of verbal reporting and other presentations. One non-academic manager described his directorate's involvement in designing the new management structure for the institution. He explained how he consulted with his subordinates and peers:

... we had sessions and discussed that [the proposed new structures] and I went back to the VC with two or three options to say this is in our view the preferred and the least preferred option. And we had a discussion and I came

back and we even refined that and at the end the new structure has been approved (13:17:86:87).

One academic manager provided detailed descriptions of submissions to the senate by using the school and college structures to bring issues to the attention of TMT (1:23:57:57). In describing his presentation to TMT on OER, this academic manager indicated that the responses from the different TMT members were different – some members of the TMT would reconsider the drive for OERs based on the information given and others would forge ahead. One academic manager described that he engaged in discussions with members of TMT “whenever an opportunity arises like for instance informally after a particular formal meeting just standing there over the tea and so on I raise issues” (5:25:161:162).

Another academic manager indicated how he created platforms to share information and to maintain the discourse on a specific project:

... what I hear on the ground level when I talk to faculty or departments, I find ways in the report I write, especially in the [X] communiqués and blog ... I try to bring those narratives back into the scores in a very subversive way ... (3:64:198:198).

6.6.3.2 *Reframing, sensemaking and removing noise*

This code includes descriptions by participants where they explained how they understood, interpreted and created sense for themselves and others. When this academic manager took over a strategic project, which was in a critical stage then, he put effort in to make sense of the project. He described how he met with all the stakeholders and just sat them down and said, “Okay what went wrong? How can I prevent this from happening” (3:47:124:124). He then described how he used this information to build relationships and to understand people’s positions and dispositions. It was important, for this academic manager, to “claim a space to communicate” (3:51:128:129) and to “lift the discourse to another level” (3:51:128:129) and away from the operational issues.

Several participants explained how they dealt with information that needed to be routed through their directorates or departments. Some indicated that they would pass information on in the same form as it was received (4:65:305:305), “re-

interpreting a document ... I haven't got time for that" (7:36:259:261). An academic manager indicated that he would not merely pass on messages, he would rather "pre-empt it with my own interpretation" or "tone down" the message (5:26:170:170). A non-academic manager indicated "... if it is urgent then I will forward the email but then attach my interpretation of what needs to be done to that" (11:26:132:132).

As described in Chapter 4, the institution has many hierarchical layers. Participants referred to the silo effect and how information could get lost or be misinterpreted. As part of their role to synthesise information, several managers described how they removed noise and chaos within the institution. A non-academic manager described how "when there are challenges", he calls people to his office to "share best practices that they feel that worked in their departments where they had the same issues or more or less the same issues" (7:29:227:227). Other managers also created space where people could talk to one another to avoid confusion (11:45:84:84). This non-academic manager described how he encouraged his managers to deal with matters through a meeting and "immediately it's taken right down and if anybody at a lower level wants to input upward it's obviously talking to their managers" (14:56:776:776).

One non-academic manager explained how her background as an academic allowed her to relate to the situations that the academics faced with the academic offerings and quality assurance instruments (15:50:580:580).

Key insights on the synthesise information role

In accordance with the insider perspective, I observed that many of the participants felt that although they were asked for their inputs, they perceived that their inputs were not put to use. Mantere (2008:308), as discussed in Chapter 3, confirmed that TMT responsiveness to the synthesised information they received was important to enable strategy work. Based on the descriptions given by the participants, it appeared that there were numerous instances where the TMT expected input and feedback from the middle manager level, but did not respond to it. This could be regarded as a constraint to the strategy work of middle managers.

6.6.4 Facilitate adaptability

The facilitate adaptability role refers to the downward influence of middle managers where they support activities within the areas they manage. The interview questions that dealt with this role asked participants to give examples of how they changed activities or behaviour to deal with changing conditions. They were also asked to describe how such decisions were made and how those decisions were communicated.

Table 27 gives a summary of the codes used during the analysis process.

Table 27: A summary of the codes used in analysing the facilitate adaptability role

Facilitate adaptability codes	Description
Downward influence	Encouraging organisational actors below and around them to engage in idea generation and other experimental efforts
Flexible organisational arrangements	This code indicates how middle managers make organisations more flexible and stimulate behaviour that diverges from official expectations
Help people cope	Helping subordinates or peers to deal with stressful situations. A conscious effort to solve personal and/or interpersonal problems within the organisational context, including efforts adapted for the local circumstances to help people deal with stressful situations
Problem solving or fire fighting	Dealing with the disorder between roles, expectations of TMT and operational realities

During first-order coding, I initially considered the supporting role as a separate role as there were many descriptions of peer and subordinate support by middle managers. This also links with the findings by Huy (2001), as described in Chapter 3, who referred to the therapist role of middle managers. According to Huy (2001:72), the therapist role indicates the task of middle managers to address their employees' emotional well-being during times of radical change. Middle managers do a host of things to create a psychologically safe work environment and they are able to do this because of their position within the organisation. The therapist role was coded under the "helping people cope" code in Table 27.

6.6.4.1 *Downward influence*

As indicated in Table 27, the downward influence code refers to how middle managers encourage subordinates and peers to engage in idea generation. Clear evidence exists to support the role of downward influence. One academic manager described how she dealt with difficult staff and a negative culture in her department. She stated, “I also had to be firm” (4:43:198:199) and remarked that she had to stamp her authority in the department (4:43:198:199). According to her, this was not an easy process but “I think slowly we are getting there” (4:43:198:199). One of the non-academic managers explained how he engaged his deputy directors and the managers who report to them in his strategising (9:6:31:31). Another non-academic manager described how he exerted his downward influence by helping people “understand where they fit in” (13:6:33:33).

6.6.4.2 *Flexible organisational arrangements*

According to the descriptions provided by the participants, there was room for flexible organisational arrangements albeit to a limited extent, as was also discussed in section 6.5.3.9. “Flexible organisational arrangements” refers to how middle managers make the organisation, particularly their sub-units, more flexible. One academic manager explained the flexibility of learning from others because “sometimes they just got another approach which is much better than what we’ve followed ...” (1:61:119:119). There appeared to be a level of flexibility in sub-organisational level operations, such as forming task teams, establishing committees and conducting meetings. Another academic manager described the flexibility in her directorate’s operational planning process by attempting to be as close as possible as to what the “IOP sort of expects of us” (6:46:639:642) and that “it’s almost a way of making the IOP work for our college” (6:46:639:642).

One academic manager explained how he developed a vision for his school that was not part of the Unisa vision and how it gave his school something to work towards (7:24:193:195).

One of the non-academic managers explained how, in his directorate and function, “there are always new avenues to explore. I mean, the way in which budgets worked, say 10 years ago and the way in which it works now is almost two different disciplines. It’s not the same” (8:9:251:253).

6.6.4.3 *Helping people cope*

Helping subordinates or peers to cope in stressful situations forms part of the therapist role identified by Huy (2001) and described above. This role entails a conscious effort to solve personal and interpersonal problems within the organisational context which includes efforts adapted for the local circumstances to help people deal with stressful situations.

There were many descriptions of support amongst peers and from middle managers to subordinates to help them cope. One of the academic managers explained that although compliance to the operational needs of the university was important, it was also important for her to ensure that her staff received sufficient support (1:4:13:13). Another academic manager explained that it did sometimes feel as if he was spending 95% of his time dealing with three people in the department who were known for causing problems (2:41:195:197), but he explained that he had two important roles: a role to protect people against unnecessary demands on their time and a role to make a difference in their lives (2:41:195:197). This academic manager, whose entire school moved to an office building away from the main campus, gave several examples of doing other tasks just to help his people cope, such as sorting out the office telephone system, or the air conditioning: "... I am a director half the time and maintenance manager the other half of the time" (2:41:195:197).

The use of motivational speakers, teambuilding exercises and creating a safe space for staff "to talk about how they felt and what the issues were" (4:16:73:73) were other examples of the role that some middle managers played in helping people cope.

One academic manager described the support from staff in another department when his own secretary fell ill and had said, "let me tell you it is good to have good neighbours" (5:42:254:254). To help her subordinates cope, this academic manager described her role as:

... one of the key roles is to be that of supporter, of intermediary, of psychologist, untrained, you know, in a sort of "You magazine-style psychologist" where you just have to listen to the departments and try and-

and address the kinds of issues that they deal with on a daily basis almost (6:10:123:125).

And we use that [school management meetings] as a time to give support to one another, to talk about specific management issues for the school for example. Um ... but we have a session ... “reflections” is what we call it ... and that is to give everybody a chance to talk about either something really good that's happening in the Department or something that is very worrying (6:31:324:325) ... and we've reached an agreement, we don't minute anything about that specific item and it gives a chance for COD's just to check with the others, reality checks almost, and to support. This [is] what we are doing and this is working. This is what we're doing that fails ... (6:32:333:334).

There were many examples of peer support as well. One non-academic manager described the value of collaboration and explained, “what makes your work more manageable and [the] environment more conducive is the collaboration from your peers (15:33:364:364). The following description confirmed the value of collegiality:

One school director is right next to me. She and I, for example, when we come in, depending on who comes in the morning and you hear the other person, you knock on the wall just to make sure, say hello, you know (6:37:405:406).

6.6.4.4 *Problem solving or fire fighting*

The problem-solving role is an outcome of the conflict between roles, expectations of TMT and operational realities. One of the academic managers indicated that a lot of time is spent on problem solving and she explained that the demand for problem solving had to do with “the dramatic pace of change within Unisa” (6:16:136:136). She also indicated that she was constantly making sure that people were abreast of what was happening at school management committee meetings and in school tuition committee meetings: “You're constantly reminding people of new policies, of the implementation of new policies” (6:16:136:136). A non-academic manager indicated that when things did not go according to plan, she would attempt to “solve it before you elevate it to the higher level. Make sure that you know why you have to elevate it” (10:72:410:410).

One academic manager referred to the crisis of outstanding tutorial letters and change of systems as a “baptism of fire” (5:4:51:51). One of the non-academic managers explained how he needed to fight fires that were not created in his directorate. He described the closure of the university call centre and explained the huge demand that the decision placed on his staff and functions (9:32:149:149).

Key insights into the facilitate adaptability role

I made some further observations while coding and analysing. Although I initially considered the middle managers at Unisa to fulfil six roles, I realised that those six roles fitted within the strategic roles of middle managers within the literature. My most noteworthy finding as noted in my reflective research journal, was the manifestation of support between the middle managers themselves and between middle managers and their subordinates. I must admit that I was not surprised by this finding given my findings on the command-and-control nature of the institution, and the position of the institution within Greiner’s organisation growth stages. In keeping with Charmaz’s (1990) questions, I posed the following questions in my journal:

- Does middle managers compensate for lack of support by TMT by giving more support to their peers and subordinates?
- Is this their way of coping?
- Is this part of the sub-culture of this group of aggregate actors?
- What are the consequences?

Again, I referred back to Mantere’s work on role expectations, as discussed in Chapter 3. Middle managers were enabled when TMT trusted them. Failure to perceive such trust, as was evident at the chosen institution, develops a middle manager tendency to stick to habitual activities and not take risks. When middle managers are fearful of being punished because they initiated alternatives, which may have failed, the adaptability role is constrained.

The preceding section described the strategic roles of the academic and non-academic managers at Unisa. Middle managers at Unisa not only implement the deliberate strategies developed by the TMT, but also facilitate adaptability and help people cope. Middle managers at Unisa also play an important role in bringing issues to the attention of the TMT and champion alternatives. Middle managers also serve as valuable sources of information – not only by passing on information but also by evaluating, adapting and presenting information in new forms. The roles that the middle managers play in the strategy work are influenced by the institutional context. Given the strategic roles of middle managers, as described above, middle managers are a crucial strategic resource.

The following section reports on how materiality is used to accomplish strategy work.

6.7 MATERIALITY OF STRATEGY WORK

Many strategy-as-practice researchers and social scientists confirm that it is impossible to accomplish anything, such as strategising, without stuff [material aspects] (Hägerstrand, 1989; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008a). Strategising relies on how the material aspects of strategy are arranged. As indicated earlier, this study contributes to understanding the role of materiality and how materiality is used to accomplish strategy work. As indicated in Chapter 2, material aspects range from documents, buildings, devices, telephones, email, etc. For this study, the theme of materiality was divided into three categories: text, talk and tools. Only those material aspects that fell within these three categories were considered in this study. The material aspects were analysed in this study with the recognition that the social and material entail each other in practice and that they are inextricably fused (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008:463). As such, the social aspects of the materiality were implied in the discussion of the materiality of strategy work at Unisa, and are not discussed separately in this report as they did not individually form part of the research questions of this study.

The material aspects of strategy work generate consequences of abundance or scarcity, success or failure, pleasure or pain, benefit or cost and conditions that either enable or constrain strategy work. Section 6.7.1 reports on the textual artefacts of strategy work at Unisa. Section 6.7.2 describes the discourse of the

strategy work at Unisa through reporting on the talk and section 6.7.3 describes the tools used in strategy work as identified by the participants. The text, talk and tools of strategy work are interrelated and in some of the discussions below, the concepts could not be separated and the discussion reflects this interrelated nature.

6.7.1 Text

This section firstly reports on the textual material artefacts within the institution and secondly describes on how they are used to accomplish strategy work.

The institutional context was described in Chapter 4 and section 6.5 earlier in Chapter 6. The management structure at Unisa is hierarchical with many management layers and the institution engages in a formal strategic planning process built around an annual planning cycle. During this planning process, as described in sections 4.6.4 to 4.6.6, strategy documents are central and are regularly revised, especially the annual IOP and IPMS documents. Furthermore, additional documents are introduced as part of and in support of the strategy processes within the institution.

Table 28 reflects the textual material artefacts, as described by the participants. The first column contains the code and the second column contains the description used in the analysis.

Table 28: A summary of the codes used to analyse text

Code	Description
Communicative practices – formal	Official textual communication (such as reports, meeting minutes, official email communication), including textual communication between middle managers and subordinates
Templates, flowcharts, frameworks and models – initiated by the institution	Tools (templates, visual aids, spreadsheets, reporting forms) to support strategising, mostly used for reporting but also includes models for decision making Initiated and developed by the institution
Templates, mindmaps, flowcharts and diagrams – initiated by middle managers	Tools (templates, visual aids, spreadsheets, reporting forms) to support strategising and middle managers'

	activities. Initiated and developed by the middle managers themselves
Unisa 2015 and Unisa 2015 Revisited	The Unisa strategic plan
The institutional operational plan (IOP)	The institutional operational plan used to translate the strategic goals into operational goals
Policies	Institutional policies that guide actions, behaviour and decision-making
IPMS	The integrated performance management system used for individual performance contracting and performance management to middle-management level to achieve IOP outcomes
The 11Cs + 1	The PVC's vision and values for Unisa during the period of transformation

6.7.1.1 Communicative practices – formal text

All descriptions and references made by participants dealing with official textual communication were grouped under this code. These descriptions included submissions via committees, email communication, written reports and minutes of meetings. From the descriptions by the participants, formal written communication was one of the main forms of communication between middle managers and the TMT. This communication generally flows according to the hierarchical structures. Middle managers reported also often being asked for their comments on policies and procedures. It also appeared that middle managers actively sought input from their subordinates and then those inputs were incorporated into the text. During the interviews, the descriptions were in response to questions dealing with the flow of information between TMT, middle managers, subordinates and other operating level entities. These questions asked for descriptions of reports to TMT, how issues are brought to TMT's attention, how middle managers influence colleagues in the strategy and how ideas from lower level managers are incorporated into middle manager strategising activities.

Submissions via committees

Most of the communication between academic middle managers and TMT is tuition related and presented at college committees first. This academic manager described the process:

... if it is a tuition matter we will discuss it with [the college's academic manager] and we will follow it up with a written memorandum which will then serve at the tuition committee and it will then go to Exco [college executive committee] and from there to the college board and from there to senate (1:67:55:55).

One academic manager testified to many successful submissions via the above process. However, she explained that the success of their submissions was based on them doing their "homework" and ensuring that they have the support of the entire school:

We've had many submissions to senate over the two and a half years and every one of them has been successful ... because we do our homework and we make 100% sure that we've got the school's backing because of the systems within the School and the structures within the school. So we've had a very good relationship with top management, the school and I think it is because we do our homework first (1:68:57:57).

Another description was provided by a non-academic middle manager who explained the benefit of presenting proposals at the various committees and thereby get the agreement of the executive deans along the way, so that "by the time it is presented at senate, there will be no opposition because agreement was reached along the way" (9:103:279:281).

Email communication

Email communication is one of the most used communication channels at Unisa. When asked what middle managers do with the email messages from TMT, one academic middle manager indicated that she would "... send the actual email" to her subordinates and "If there's pertinent points then I will summarise that and highlight that" (4:110:305:305). Another academic manager indicated that how he dealt with email messages from TMT depended on the content.

Somewhere I interpret, somewhere I tone down, I don't pass on the instruction or the email as it is but I pre-empt it with my own interpretation to say "let's not read this as this, let's read it as this because everybody we are all servants of the institution so that's where I need interpretation". (5:57:170:172)

Another academic manager indicated that he did not re-interpret an email from TMT for two reasons: "I haven't got the time for that" and "I may be confusing my colleagues if I put my take on it and I may be putting them in a specific frame of mind by suggesting that this is the way that this document should be interpreted" (7:67:259:265).

In addition, another academic manager used the email communication as a tool to offer support and encouragement to his subordinates:

But some I put a smiley face and say "hey guys there it is, it's been forthcoming and now it is upon us, please let us act upon it". Sometimes it's more. I encourage but sometimes I must say some of the instructions are burdensome. I sympathise with my staff to say well I know that you'll be complaining ... but we've done this ... uh ... but let's hope at some stage there won't be any need, somebody would recognise that but also what's helpful is that some of the senior management people, middle management also recognise that we've been burdened by certain things that are really not necessary but compliance or obedience to the systems needs is required (5:57:170:172).

Other participants indicated that they would interpret the message from TMT and then rephrase it before communicating it to their subordinates. One non-academic manager indicated that the urgency of the email message determines the action that follows:

... if it is urgent then I will forward the email but then attach my interpretation of what needs to be done [with it]. If it is not that important and if it can stand over for our monthly meeting then I will raise it there. Otherwise if it relates to a specific manager I will ask him to come in [to my office] quickly and I'll talk to him about that but then after that I generally forward the original email to him as well so that he has that information as well (11:99:132:132).

Not all middle managers were particularly fond of communication via email. One non-academic manager indicated that he kept the use of email to a minimum and preferred to go across to a person's office and discuss the matter face to face (14:79:413:420).

It also seems that there is a general practice of including others in emails (carbon copy or cc). Sometimes the email system is used for information sharing and transparency, e.g., "very often the dean will send something, if it's directly tuition related she will send it to the deputy dean and cc the school directors" (6:82:383:384).

When asked what takes up most of his day, one non-academic manager indicated "reading emails" and he explained that he considered it an "absolute evil" (13:65:234:234).

There appears to also be a practice, seemingly borne out of necessity, for middle managers to check emails whilst on holiday and over weekends:

You have to, if not you're going to fall behind. You have to work all the time. As I'm fortunate because I was abroad last year and ... uh ... I took some leave, for a week. And I keep on, you know, I had to look at my emails at least three times a day and I had to also respond to different issues and crises ... (4:89:506:509).

This was supported by a non-academic manager who stated, "It was said to me one time; I do expect an email once a weekend from my director to show that you work at home" (15:62:717:717).

Apart from the large numbers of emails on a daily basis, one academic manager indicated that he could not use the Unisa email system and found it limiting due to the limited mailbox and message size (2:62:143:145). This academic manager has created an alternative email communication system within the bigger institution in order to increase his mailbox and message size.

Written reports

When looking at the textual communication between both academic and non-academic managers and the TMT, it seemed that formal reporting is often a daily

request. When asked how middle managers spend most of their time, several participants indicated report writing.

And let me tell you here you've got to deal with mostly reports that are needed as of yesterday. (Laughs). Reports from that committee, reports from that ... you know establishment ... reports and so on ... it is hectic; it is not your writing a one-page report. I remember right now, two days ago I had to submit a 90-page report and it is not just, you know, a report of saying what I had done, it's also strategic report looking backward, presently, forward in planning so to say (5:46:75:76).

One non-academic middle manager indicated that a "reporting mania" exists within Unisa and that "at the end of the day it is just about throwing figures on the table to keep someone happy" (13:42:230:230). One academic manager explained that, if the university's management information system (MIS) worked properly, then many of these reports could be retrieved from that system (2:64:165:165).

One non-academic manager indicated that he submits a report to management once a week and it typically covers three aspects: "what went wrong, what worked well and what do we propose to do to rectify the situation" (9:99:193:193).

There were also instances described where no format for a report was specified and the manager had to improvise:

We would normally join our ED for executive meetings to present our verbal reports. Over time, we realised what information they really want and then we compiled our own report format (9:42:237:237).

Another non-academic manager described the practice where reporting and minute taking is combined, "the ED will specifically say, I want to hear about HR issues ... I want to hear about tenders ... he will outline basically what. And all of us actually would then give him a verbal report around those issues which will then get minuted" (14:35:578:582).

Report writing at middle management level often requires consolidation from many other reports from other departments (2:64:165:165). One academic manager explained that report writing takes up to 80% of his time and "there are requests from different managers for different reports and they usually want us to collate reports on

behalf of the school or college” (7:70:366:367). Reports sometimes have a negative connotation as one manager put it, “I don’t want my name to go up on that, you know, ‘not-done’ list” (4:113:395:395).

The descriptions provided by one of the non-academic managers indicated that he did not spend so much time on reporting: “So there’s a lot of reporting but, ... uh, ... if I may say, maybe 30% is reporting ...” (10:103:392:392). This non-academic manager then explained the process of consultation that takes place to prepare the report. Another non-academic middle manager described the process of reporting in her directorate:

I have to submit a monthly report, which is 35 pages at least. So that takes only a day and remember I base that on the information that I get from the managers that report to me. So it takes them quite a bit of time to put that information together as well. So that is the biggest report I need to do, obviously there are ad hoc things. So all in all I would say about a day a week, the time eight hours a week is dedicated to report writing (11:91:78:78).

One non-academic manager also commented on the high number of reports for which he was responsible. He voiced his concern that there were so many matters that were reported on, but that those matters were reported on individually, and the link between those matters became lost (13:64:200:200).

Another reporting practice that constrained middle managers’ strategising practices was described by one middle manager who referred to progress reports:

... it’s a lot of hassle to get information across the University because if you’re responsible for doing the [name of report removed] progress report, for instance, you have to report on progress made. And it’s expected from you to know all the things that’s going on at the University but the information that filters down is very limited (15:96:316:319).

Reporting is also used to champion issues or initiatives developed at operating level. One academic middle manager described how he found space inside the reports to bring narratives from what he had heard at ground level in departments to the attention of the recipients of those reports. However, this academic manager explained that this practice is to table the operating level issues, but “whether they

read it or take cognisance of it I don't know and that is not within my power" (3:64:198:198).

Written comments on documents, policies and initiatives

It also appeared that there were many requests from higher levels in the institution, for input and comments on documents, policies and initiatives. Not all sentiments about the request for comments were positive, as described by one of the academic managers:

But there are times when one is totally bombarded with requests to make inputs into any and everything, nothing happens with those inputs ... our deputy dean did a count, in a two-week period, 10-workday period. (Sighs) ... It was something like 27 requests for response, give us your input on this policy, give us input on this give us input on this and give us input on that ... and people are so fed up with all the "give inputs" but there is nothing happening to the inputs. And that's when people start withdrawing because they say we really worked hard ... we gave you our really well considered input based on our own experiences. But nothing has happened (6:57:856:859).

Minutes of meetings

Minutes of meetings also form part of the textual artefacts used to accomplish strategy work. Middle managers taking part in the study generally referred to minutes from TMT meetings, such as senate and senate committees, minutes from meetings at executive level and then minutes from meetings with their operating departments or schools.

There appeared to be a delay in the compilation and distribution of meeting minutes, but one academic manager described a practice in their school where they overcome this challenge:

We've also started sending out the minutes to the chairs of department because very often they don't really know what we discuss in CMC [college management committee], we give individual feedback. For example, if somebody applies, for example, for a research grant, after the meeting we'll write an informal message to say, this informally, this was discussed, you will get a formal letter. But then people

know and they can start relaxing a little bit or they can start paperwork and planning (6:73:275:281).

6.7.1.2 *Templates, flowcharts, diagrams, frameworks, models and budgets – initiated by the institution*

This section reports on the textual tools, such as templates, flowcharts, frameworks and budgets initiated by the institution to accomplish strategy work. The descriptions provided by the participants were in response to the interview questions dealing with the institutional tools used in doing strategy.

Several instances of frustrations were expressed by participants:

... I think most of my time is meetings, reporting and filling in bloody templates. For a number of constituencies, sometimes I'm sent the same template by four different VPs to complete (3:62:182:182).

And

What for me sometimes is a problem is that things change overnight. Templates, templates, templates, templates and you think, why do you have to fill in so many templates? (15:108:792:794).

Another frustration that was mentioned by more than one academic manager dealt specifically with the templates for tutorial letters: "And then when you thought you are done then they say no, send back, new templates and so on. So we had to redo everything. And that has been problematic" (5:63:249:249). This experience was echoed by a non-academic middle manager who referred to templates as "form filling" (15:67:798:801):

That form filling for me just takes so much time and the thing is then you decide on, this is how you're going to give feedback and then tomorrow it's going to change. Or you sit in the meeting and then suddenly now you've done, you've spent a lot of time on doing a report and then you've submitted it two weeks ago, and you have a meeting and then suddenly it [the format] has just changed (15:67:798:801).

A non-academic manager indicated, "I don't like templates" (10:104:394:394) because "you are not able to express yourself nicely but you have to do it"

(10:104:394:394). This view was confirmed by another non-academic manager who stated, “Just complete the template, that’s how you shall ... do it”(14:28:448:449).

Findings also indicated a question of authority for some managers when it comes to dealing with staff issues. One academic manager indicated, “I sign their leave forms but that is the only thing I do” (3:90:110:112).

Flowcharts are used at operating level to see the “flow, the outstanding jobs, where they are stuck ...” (14:34:514:514). These flowcharts described mostly pertain to reporting frameworks which are normally coupled with templates. One non-academic manager described one framework in her directorate that indicates the terms of references and what it is that they have to report on to the different committees, “In other words each committee has its own agenda items and also its terms of reference” (10:40:169:169).

Two of the non-academic managers referred to the work allocation models and indicated the success of the academic HR allocation model and described it as “a well-defined scientific model which allocates human resources to academic departments ... according to certain principles. And it works good” (8:18:391:394). This same non-academic manager referred to the “stumbling block that there is no HR allocation model for the support departments” (8:37:562:562).

6.7.1.3 *Templates, mindmaps, flowcharts and diagrams – initiated by middle managers*

This section reports on the textual tools initiated by the middle managers taking part in the study themselves to accomplish strategy work.

One academic manager described the frustration of his staff with the numerous requests for information, specifically dealing with research outputs. He described how he had created a template, which enabled researchers to update the information immediately and when someone asks for the information, it can simply be passed on to that person (5:14:84:85). He also offered a detailed description of how he used a flowchart:

Firstly, apart from the university calendar, I drew myself a flowchart. In the flowchart I make parallel lines of how assignments and on the other hand how

exams move together and fit to each other ... the flow chart has five stages: the initial, the planning, the tutorial letters, what informs all those things and then the policies and then the next thing has to deal with the date, the timing ... the schedules and then operations, who has to do this, who has to do that and how do we control [so] that there is compliance (5:37:208:210).

The use of flowcharts was also popular among the non-academic managers taking part in the study, especially to support project management principles. One non-academic manager explained how the overall process was divided into chunks to ensure that the dates were achievable (9:17:92:92). Key to the successful use of flowcharts is regular conversation, feedback and adaption (9:18:102:102). This same manager also indicated that he often used mindmaps in his directorate.

Another non-academic manager described an initiative with which he was busy in order to build a three-dimensional mindmap to show the many linkages between the operational aspects and how they impacted on the delivery of strategy. His rationale for building this model was that end users could translate the strategy into operational aspects (13:8:37:37).

One of the non-academic managers also described the use of “activity list templates”, which have to indicate what needs to be done, who is responsible for it, the date when required and progress (9:59:325:325).

Another non-academic manager described the use of diagrams to show the business process in his directorate and explained that if

... you draw pictures and so forth the penny drops straight away. And we know this, when I send my team of analysts out it is very difficult for them to extract from the user exactly what they require so they do pictures and screen dumps and so forth and mock-ups and it works like a dream (12:14:68:68).

On the whole, findings indicated that these textual tools were developed to make the work of the middle managers who participated in this study easier.

6.7.1.4 *Unisa 2015 and Unisa 2015 Revisited*

As explained in Chapter 4, the strategic plan is captured within Unisa 2015 and Unisa 2015 Revisited documents. These two documents are prominent material

artefacts that shape and impact on the strategy work of middle managers. As such, every interview started with the researcher's reference to the Unisa strategic plan and it was explained that the strategic plan formed the context of the interview. Specific interview questions asked how middle managers used the Unisa strategic plan, how it influenced their actions and what their roles were in achieving it. Many rich descriptions were given by the participants, some positive and some negative.

One academic manager stated at the beginning of the interview, "the 2015 strategic direction is wrong" (2:52:7:7) and that he regularly questioned it. He also mentioned that, although the strategic plan refers to agility and flexibility, the strategic plan is not possible in practice (2:13:37:37). He acknowledged that the strategic plan is a complex process and there are people who resist and even sabotage some of the initiatives, and he expressed his sympathy with TMT. He described his view of the Unisa 2015 plan further:

The structure of the document is ideologically driven and gives certain people the opportunity to look good and the egotistical component of certain individuals is apparent ... it makes egotistical factors institutional factors and that causes the goals to become irrelevant. Those components do not belong in such a document (2:58:107:109).

A key message that was identified in the majority of the interviews was that middle managers feel that they did not participate in formulating the Unisa 2015 plan. One academic manager explained that:

I had no input in 2015, okay, so I know what 2015 stands for, I contracted that I would do A, B and C to achieve 2015, so on the one hand it is very top down and I'm measured against outcomes that I had no input in deciding (3:78:23:23).

And

... it's decided right from the top. So we're basically the line managers that are implementing. ... yes, they do consult us but after the plan has been decided upon ... then we have to indicate how we fit in and what we're going to achieve and we have to achieve that (4:104:224:224).

A further topic addressed in the interviews was how the participating middle managers used the Unisa 2015 plan and other planning documents. One non-

academic manager identified a possible flaw in the planning process and stated, “people can’t read themselves into the strategy and I think that is where implementation often lacks” (13:7:33:33).

One of the non-academic managers explained, “we tend to really battle to translate the document itself” (14:36:614:618). He further explained that he was responsible for an operational function within the institution and

... on a daily basis I have to deal with the operational stuff, the, you know, things that happen and you need to attend to them now. Now even that top strategy document, you sit with it there and it says, Goal No. 1, revitalise the PQM. And you sit here and say, right, what part of revitalising the PQM is me? (14:36:614:618).

One non-academic manager stated vehemently, “the document is used as a tool to confuse people” (48:4:59:59). This was echoed by another manager who explained, “people don’t always understand where they fit in. People should understand that although they are not always directly responsible for certain deliverables, they should realise that they are also adding value to that” (13:51:33:33).

A further comment was that the Unisa 2015 plan had lost touch with reality:

... there should be more opportunities where you can really listen to what the people say on ground level, on the problem areas that they experience at this stage. Because if you can find out the things that are really problem then you can resolve those and maybe it can ensure that you reach your goals ... I think it’s a dream world for the people that strategise the whole time and I think they have to move down to the lower level, to ask them, is it really working ... or what can we do more to ensure that we reach our goals (15:113:878:881).

When asked for descriptions of how the participants actually use the Unisa 2015 plan, the following descriptions emerged:

We looked at the plan and we linked it up to all our KPAs and what we do in terms of research: how many research outputs we need to focus on, etcetera, etcetera and what do we need to actually do to get to that point. We sit and discuss it. And, the issue of academic citizenship apart from, you know,

academic citizenship internally, on the outside how do we actually make an impact as a department (4:106:258:258).

And

What I did is I actually drew up a strategy for the department and I aligned it to the UNISA 2015 goals and then I also aligned it to IOP. To the University, to the college, to the school. This is what they want, this is where we are, this is what we've done. These are the gaps, this is what we need to do (4:107:270:271).

One non-academic manager explained how he used the Unisa 2015 plan and strategic documents. He explained that he reads through it and highlighted the buzz words and then made sure that he incorporated those buzz words into his own documents "... and in two years' when they give a new document, I will do the same again" (48:3:53:53).

6.7.1.5 *The institutional operational plan (IOP)*

As explained in Chapter 4, the IOP is used to translate the Unisa 2015 plan into operational plans.

One non-academic manager, who was transferred from one directorate to another directorate explained her involvement in the formulation of the directorate's operational plan:

I had played no part in that. I know as much as the other average person at Unisa knows about how that came about so unfortunately I can't [comment on how it was developed] ...I must now see the successful implementation thereof and I now come in at the tail end (11:6:47:47).

One academic manager indicated that his departmental plan fitted into the format of the IOP and he developed "blueprints that would speak specifically to our needs and challenges and prospects. So I further divided it into small adjustable components that-that can make it easy for us to comply" (5:49:107:109).

This academic manager described the alignment to the IOP:

... it's part of the IOP so let's see if there's a way in which we can come closer to what the IOP sort of expects of us ... if you look at our college operational plan and you look at the dean's performance agreement, we tend to align things pretty much to it. But it's not (sighs) it's almost a way of making the IOP work for our college rather than our college saying, this is the IOP and we've got to be there. We are saying, this is where we want to be. Oh, good, there are linkages with the IOP. (laughs) You know, so it's almost turning it the other way around (6:90:639:642).

One of the non-academic managers confirmed the notion of alignment and stated, "we have to ensure that all projects [as indicated earlier] are aligned with the 2015 and have been identified through the IOP which then cascades down to our DOP" (12:28:90:92). Another non-academic manager indicated that when it comes to the IOP, "we do not have a choice about the number of modules or the time frame" (15:114:893:898) and "go to the lower levels and find out ... is it possible (15:78:914:914).

One of the academic managers described how the IOP is used in her school:

So we have an IOP, that IOP is approved by the manco [management committee] of the school and during the half ... the half of the year as Director I have to report back to on, to the dean on the progress that I've made. And obviously the IOP is my guideline whether I reach the outcomes or not. And in that I will obviously then identify areas, where we are not going to meet the specific requirements and then we will [adjust]. An IOP should never be a document cast in stone, it's a revolving document so but this is just one of the examples, then I will identify where we are not on track with the reasons why we are not on track (1:78:105:107).

Although several participants indicated that some of the IOP goals were not realistic within their departmental/directorate level realities, one manager indicated, "you read them [the IOP goals] and you think, yes, I agree with this ... these are very good ideals, they're very lofty ideals, they're very noble ones (6:101:1023:1025). This manager further explained that the "possible negative things that might come along" (6:101:1052:1052) were not considered in the IOP:

I think we, we're seeing too many champions who only show the positive. And who will forge ahead despite [what] people [are] saying, you know what,

you've got fallout here and fallout there. They will just say, we've got to reach this goal (6:65:1064:1064).

The previous section provided verbatim quotes where middle managers referred to the planning process as “top-down”. One academic manager indicated that he could not criticise TMT for following a top-down approach and then do the same in his directorate (7:65:207:208). He then described how he went about regarding the development of the DOP:

... by first discussing it with my CODs at the school management committee meeting, then [with] the staff members and then at a bosberaad. I think we will have what we call informed decision-making from the bottom up (7:65:207:208).

6.7.1.6 Policies

Policies were defined as standard operating procedures that guide actions, behaviour and decision-making within the institution. One academic manager indicated the need to “constantly remind people of new policies” and “of the implementation of new policies” (6:68:136:136).

A non-academic manager described the delay in policy reformulation and adjustment after the merger. According to him, many of the existing policies were approved six years previously, but new systems had been introduced since then and the policies had not been adjusted (9:98:157:161).

6.7.1.7 Integrated performance management system (IPMS)

The integrated performance management system is a mechanism used to translate the institutional objectives and measures into performance expectations of individual employees (University of South Africa, 2008). With reference to the IPMS, one non-academic manager complained that the “KPAAs [that] were dumped on me” (48:12:303:305). Comments about the IPMS were not only made at middle- and staff-management level, but some participants also referred to the IPMS for TMT. When asked about a session organised and presented by the office of the principal, one manager stated:

... somehow I think top management is also assessed according to the IPMSs. There are certain deliverables that they must also meet. And having such a summit I think was part of their IPMS. I'm not saying that's not a good thing, I'm just saying that, what I would have are some sessions, some workshops which are clearly part of my-my IPMS ... and sometimes I get the impression, and that is what some of my colleagues also said, that they don't know whether management is walking the talk ... when they actually put themselves into what they expect others to [do] ... (7:74:440:443).

One non-academic manager acknowledged that the IPMS templates have been designed to give effect to the strategic plan, but indicated that when looking at the number of deliverables on the template,

I am more involved than many directors and there are a number of those things that I won't be able to do. So it is completely unrealistic; on the one hand you are giving people this template of performance, on the other hand you are told constantly listen you must remember you are only middle management you can't do all of these things" (11:83:221:223).

6.7.1.8 *The 11Cs + 1*

The principal introduced the institutional charter on transformation in June 2011. Before the official launch, he communicated the "11Cs + 1" – his vision and values for Unisa during the period of transformation. Several of the participants interviewed referred to it, and one academic manager expressed mixed feelings:

Um, but there's one C that is not there and that's the overriding C and that's Compliance. So it doesn't ... it doesn't matter what you do as long as you comply. And that is unfortunately, even though people talk consultation ... the consultation is, we tell you what we are planning and ... um ... you then tell us this is where it needs to be tweaked or this is where you disagree. And we say, oh, fine, thank you, you've given us your comments (6:50:724:725).

The notion of compliance was also confirmed by another manager who stated, "you don't have an option, you contract for some bizarre aspects of 11Cs +1" and "would be evaluated mid-year and end of the year on how I contributed to be compassionate, communication, all the 11Cs, things that I don't believe in"

(3:79:27:27). This academic manager also stated that he did not trust management and that he did not “think they care despite their 11Cs + 1” (3:105:244:244).

The quote below calls for accountability of TMT for adhering to the values as defined in the 11Cs + 1.

They don't apply the 11Cs but we have to apply the 11Cs. And that frustrates me a lot because it's not only towards me, it's towards other people. Um, management is very high and mighty. And they think it gives them the opportunity to do whatever they [the TMT] want to do (15:71:844:847).

Another quote from a non-academic manager with reference to the TMT and the 11Cs + 1: “I believe in a very open communication approach and I know it is a cliché thing you know, the 11Cs + 1, but I just wish they would practise what they write down there” (12:43:160:160).

Although several managers referred to bullying, one non-academic manager related it to the 11Cs + 1:

I sometimes feel so powerless or disempowered and whatever. Because recognition of what you are doing you know, there is just, it offends, there's a lot of um, I must be so careful in what I say. Um ... because you will sit there, in the meeting, and they will take you just out you know ... um ... and I feel that certain managers are really still bullying. They don't apply the 11Cs but we have to ... apply the 11Cs. And that frustrates me a lot (15:111:844:847).

Key insights on text

While analysing the data, a few issues came to mind. Firstly, there seemed to be many requests for input from middle managers, but given the context described in section 6.4 above, it seemed that middle managers did not feel that their comments and inputs were used. Again, this confirmed the command-and-control nature of the institution. Within this environment, the rationale for providing input could be more towards the demand for compliance than for making real contributions as participating managers felt that their inputs were in anyway not used. Further, it seemed that a practice of naming and blaming existed when someone did not comply. This strengthened my earlier positioning of the institution in Greiner's (1972)

third and fourth phases. Secondly, it appeared that a tyranny of emails exists in the institution. When reflecting on my own experiences, I could confirm the vast numbers of emails that are circulated on a daily basis and I too feel obliged to check and respond to emails after hours and during leave periods. Furthermore, as an academic staff member, my experiences confirm the practice of receiving email communication from the school director and COD after hours and during their personal leave periods. Thirdly, I could observe several instances where materiality was counter-productive, such as people withdrawing because they had given their inputs but never saw evidence of where it was used. Fourthly, the view of Mantere (2008:308) on the enabling or constraining effect of TMT response to middle manager input was confirmed. Based on the descriptions given by the participants it appeared that there were several instances where the TMT did not respond to the input provided by the middle managers.

Evidence also suggested that middle managers felt excluded from developing the strategic plan. The result of this perceived exclusion could hamper the acceptance of the plan. Also, middle managers were familiar with the contents – to me, this indicated an acknowledgement of the importance of the document. However, this familiarity could also be because the strategic plan forms the foundation for the IPMS and IOP and all middle managers and employees need to comply with these, which testified to the value of these material artefacts. I did not sense a wide buy-in into the strategic plan. A remark by one participant that the strategic plan was developed to make certain members of the TMT look good confirmed the research findings by Mantere and Vaara (2008) on middle manager participation in strategy, as described in Chapter 3. According to these authors, top managers are seen as the key strategists and this involves heroification (Mantere & Vaara, 2008:354) of some. Further, if middle managers do not form part of the strategy discourse, their level of commitment to the deliberate strategies may be limited.

An overwhelming observation is the notion of “us versus them”. It seemed to me that there is a strong tendency among middle managers not to see themselves as part of “them”, i.e. the senior management of the institution. I could not help but wonder whether, if the middle managers were to see themselves as part of the management of the institution, their perceptions of the operational realities would change. Looking at the academic managers, I was reminded of the claims by Smith (2005) as discussed in Chapter 4. According to Smith (2005), academics who become

managers are passionate about being seen as representative academics who ensure that the views of their colleagues are heard at TMT level. Further, Wolverton *et al.* (2005) found that academic middle managers need to deal with the tension to be administrators, while at the same time they need to remain faculty members and continue to do research. As academic middle management positions are seconded positions, these academic managers return to faculty status after serving in their management capacity. I could not help but wonder about the link between the limited period secondment and the middle manager identity not aligned to the TMT. What complicated this further was that the non-academic managers were in permanent positions, i.e. they were not secondments for limited periods and, in line with the views of Wolverton *et al.* (2005), did not have to worry about retaining skills crucial to performing well in previously held jobs or positions. In my personal experience at the institution, I was aware of a further “us and them” distinction: academic versus administrative staff. Although I did not identify a specific division between academic and non-academic managers, I wondered if the differences between the job specifications of academic and non-academic managers strengthen this divide. In keeping with the “us versus them” notion, I concur with Mantere (2008) who found that respect is based on an acknowledged interdependence between the TMT and middle managers. Such an atmosphere of respect appears to be reached through an exchange where the TMT shows respect for the competencies of middle managers and their teams and middle managers respond by showing respect for the strategy work of TMT (Mantere, 2008:306). The apparent lack of trust between middle management and TMT at Unisa could be indicative of a lack of respect for each other’s competencies. Another important observation I made was that there seemed to be a disconnect between the TMT and the operational realities at Unisa. It seemed that the objectives of TMT were perceived as good, but that they were not realistic or do-able.

6.7.2 Talk

This section reports on the material artefacts associated with talking within the institution and secondly describes how talk is used to accomplish strategy work. The social aspects of the materiality are prominent here as talk forms part of social and interpersonal interactions. Examples of “talk” are discussed during formal and

informal discussions, social gatherings, support sessions and ad hoc discussions. For the analysis, talk was considered as orally expressed discourse that occurs in a current, immediate context-bound situation (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011).

Table 29 contains descriptions of talk, as material artefacts. The first column contains the code and the second column contains the description used in the analysis.

Table 29: A summary of the codes used to analyse talk

Code	Description
Talk – formal Includes: meetings, committee meetings, staff meetings, scheduled one-on-one meetings and career conversations	Communication using formal channels and official lines of authority, recorded for future reference through minutes, formal reports and other official text
Talk – informal Includes ad hoc conversations, social gatherings, grapevine and oral communication outside the formal structures	Informal, unscheduled and ad hoc conversations

6.7.2.1 Formal

This code incorporates all formal verbal communication such as meetings. This communication takes place through the formal communication channels and official lines of authority and includes committee meetings, staff meetings, one-on-one meetings and career conversations. There are also unscheduled, ad hoc meetings that take place within the formal structures.

Meetings

Findings indicate that the most common form of formal talk is through meetings at various levels – within sub-departments, within task teams, on committees and special forums. Formal meetings cover a variety of topics – from planning to performance review to feedback.

There were also instances where representatives from various departments and directorates were invited to talk or present at other forums. One non-academic manager explained how she was often invited to various “school exco meetings to

talk to the CODs [about her portfolio] and the development of new instruments” (15:49:578:581).

One of the academic managers testified to the value of meeting with fellow directors to discuss how they would deal with certain matters and that “we will learn from one another and I can learn a lot from them [those attending the meeting]” (1:60:119:119). Several participants indicated that meetings can “become very often a bitching session” (3:29:85:85). One non-academic manager indicated that the meetings with fellow directors created an open space to “share their frustration with their superiors and the challenges they have” (12:46:182:182) but also stated that these meetings were not a “skinder sessie” [gossip session] but that it enabled him to understand the situation better so that he could conceptualise the solution.

Some of the participants indicated that they made an effort to have productive meetings:

I must say I think we can set an example for the whole university because our committee meetings are ... it’s only an hour meeting but we work in those committee meetings. Nobody sits with iPads and composes emails and stuff ... we ... because it is only an hour our people give their absolute attention to the meetings and we work ... (1:66:39:39).

When asked about what managers spend most of their time on, this academic manager stated, “meetings, and reporting on the meetings” (3:56:171:174).

A non-academic manager explained that his biggest frustration was the meetings – not the departmental meetings where he would meet with his staff members to deal with departmental issues, but rather all the management meetings, formal meetings and feedback meetings (9:63:365:365). This specific manager stated, “I think I can use my time better for Unisa than to attend 15 meetings per week” (9:64:367:367). This view was echoed by another non-academic manager who stated, “the demand for meetings is endless” (14:70:1031:1031). “Most of my time goes to meetings” (14:41:677:677).

Although most of the managers indicated that they spend most of their time in meetings, the value of sharing through meetings is acknowledged, as described by this manager:

... at each one of my school management committee meetings I have to give every COD, for instance, the opportunity to share, one COD at a time, opportunities to share in new developments in the subject field as well as challenges faced by that uh, uh, department or uh, that field. And it has been quite successful. I thought the colleagues would be resistant in the beginning ... but they relished the opportunity to share with other colleagues (7:28:215:215).

Committee meetings

Coupled with meetings is serving on committees. One non-academic manager indicated that he served on 28 committees (9:66:371:371) and although he sometimes requests his deputy director to attend it on his behalf, many of the meeting stakeholders demand his attendance.

One academic manager indicated that the committees and sub-structures in the school contributed to its success.

We've got a management committee which meets on a weekly basis, every Monday between eight and nine (1:64:35:35) ... [we also have] other committees that feed up to the management committee. For instance we've got a school tuition committee and school student's support committee and we've got a school research committee and a community engagement committee and we've got a school transformation forum (1:65:37:37).

The management committees are instrument to formulating the IOP for the directorate or school, as explained below:

[The] management committee of the School every year set our IOP for the School. We have our own IOP that is for the School but how it usually happens is after the strategic session of the College where they have got their IOP based on the university strategy plan. We will then take College's IOP and we will then refine it to outcomes that the School can meet (1:77:103:105).

The decision-making at management committee level influences on the entire school and one academic manager explained how the committee would consider the goals

set in the college IOP and apply it to the operational realities within the school. The involvement of the management committee in such decisions seems to be to ensure acceptance through the school, but ultimately the director is held accountable:

For instance in research, [the college] IOP will say you know we work on outcome of let's say 0.60 [research outputs] per staff member. We will even refine it further and say no, we will get to 0.10 for my school because we are still busy building capacity. So we have an IOP, that IOP is approved by the manco of the school and during mid-year evaluations I have to report back to the dean on the progress that I've made (1:77:103:105).

Another academic manager attested how serving on different committees offered exposure to many other forums and initiatives within the institution, "suddenly you have access to areas that you wouldn't normally have had access to and where you can go and plea at different levels" (6:22:187:191).

The committees also provide a platform to invite TMT representatives to share information. One academic manager described the success of this practice:

I asked the academic planner to come and present a session there. And that took him out of his very structured and formal context. And that kind of thing where you use something else to talk, and to push the agenda a little bit of the colleges, I think that helps a great deal (6:71:223:226).

This same academic manager explained further that they had decided to meet once every two weeks instead of weekly because they were "[so] bogged down in meetings that we had no space for ourselves" (6:74:281:282).

It appeared that some participants preferred to meet more often. One manager responsible for an operational service within the institution explained that they "start the day with a meeting where the two deputies sit in and all the managers" (14:15:285:290). It also seemed that the purpose of these daily meetings was to "look at the previous day" and then to "strategise for the day" (14:15:285:290).

Findings indicated that some management committee and operating level meetings serve as opportunities to "give support to one another" (6:78:324:325).

... we've got it just "Reflections" as the standing item on the agenda. And we talk. And we've reached an agreement, we don't minute anything about that

specific item and it gives a chance for CODs just to check with the others, reality checks almost, and to support. This what we are doing and this is working. This is what we're doing that fails, you know (6:32:333:334).

There is also a tendency in some directorates to prevent the management committee meetings from becoming too formal: “[we] decided against having one of the secretaries present at the meeting because then ... then the meeting will be too formal ... for our liking because then it becomes one of the many meetings” (7:66:244:247).

And we meet just for an hour. We rotate offices. The person whose office it's in determines the agenda and we use it just as a time to catch up with one another and to find out, you know, what's going on in your school and what are the issues that you've been raising in your school management committee so that we're more or less attuned to one another. And I think ... um ... the nice thing is that we work very, very well together ... (6:85:406:407).

Another academic manager described weekly “tea-break briefings” which have become the weekly management committee meetings and included “simple personnel announcements, somebody's birthday this week and then so on ... but then I will also go into issues ...” (5:51:121:123).

One non-academic manager indicated that the IOP was used to set the agenda for management committee meetings, “we try by all means to follow our operational plan” (10:96:292:292).

The range of topics discussed at peer meetings where directors in the same directorate or school get together were described as “IPMS issues”, “outside work issues”, “absenteeism issues” (1:81:119:119) which are prevalent across the schools, and the nature of the discussion is mostly to share and “to get input from other directors” (1:82:121:121):

How are we, how do you deal with this, how do you go forward with this and then we will learn from one another and I can learn a lot from them. I mean sometimes they just got another approach which is much better than what we've followed and then we will learn from them (1:81:119:119).

One-on-one meetings

In addition to the regular management committee meetings, there was also a tendency to have scheduled “one-on-one” meetings, e.g. “I have monthly one on ones with each one of the managers reporting to me” (11:92:82:84). She specifically indicated the importance of people to speak cross-functionally to one another and she also invited the project managers to the management meetings (11:92:82:84).

There seemed to be regular one-on-one meetings between the directors and their executive directors, especially in the non-academic directorates.

Every single week we look each other in the eye and say, how are things in our operation? And we actually make notes. So we talk on each of the points and then we follow up at the next meeting until we say, that issue ... was resolved this way and we take it off the agenda. But we have that ongoing meeting (14:81:451:454).

Staff meetings

Some of the managers described the meetings they had with the staff in their directorate. One academic manager provided a good description of how matters were cascaded down the levels in the school:

... if it is not a decision to be taken by manco and we need further deliberation from our staff side then we go to the structures. We've got our school tuition committee ... or the departments got each and every one's got a manco for lower-level discussion in the departments or it will [even] go to the staff you know The findings indicated that the participants emphasised the importance of consultation with staff. One manager described an instance where the school had to make an important decision, which could potentially have caused conflict in the departments. She then described how they did a survey among all the staff and then used that information to make a decision: “it was a consultative process right from the bottom up where each and every staff member could give his or her suggestion of how it should be” (1:86:139:143). One non-academic manager explained that he had a staff assembly once a year where “I as the director stand in front of 255 of my staff members and take them through the strategy for the year” (14:89:737:740).

Ad hoc meetings

Participants also described meetings that were not planned or scheduled and which took place on an ad hoc basis when the need arose. One non-academic manager also indicated preference for one-on-one meetings. “I have regular meetings, one on one with them, which makes it a lot easier in certain circumstances and then we get together on a regular basis as a group to discuss issues” (12:29:98:100). He also explained that it was very difficult to get all his people together at the same time because of the “number of meetings and initiatives that they are busy with” (12:29:98:100).

6.7.2.2 *Informal*

Unlike the textual material artefacts where informal communication was not common, there were many instances and descriptions of informal talking to accomplish strategy work.

In the smaller directorates, informal communication is used more regularly:

... because we are so few in the office. We are together, most of the [time] communication is very informal. Um, ... you know when something comes [up] I just call a person in and we sit. If there's a need for us to meet, we meet and say okay, for instance when we come up with strategic plans we sit ... you know ... book a day and sit down and do that. But because we are always out of office ... you know ... I always make use of any opportunity to sit with them and have a discussion. If I've come from a meeting and there's a need for me to give a report back, I will call them in quickly and say let's be aware of this (10:97:296:296).

Meeting over coffee to build relationships was reported as another form of informal communication. One manager described how, when he was appointed to take over a specific project, he took “three, four months” to build relationships and he “went to see people, I took people for coffee” (3:46:120:120). One non-academic manager described the practice going to the butchery to “buy a big bag of sliced biltong and we sit around the table and eat the biltong. And then we talk about family, and work,

and you know, anything. It probably has got nothing to do with strategy ...” (8:45:731:732).

A newly appointed academic manager described how he would phone the former manager “just to establish continuity but also to verify certain things” (5:61:206:206). Descriptions were also provided of informal meetings between middle managers and members of the TMT. One academic manager described how at the principal’s summit, one of the CODs had said, “it was to them such a wonderful opportunity to engage with one another and with top management and to have a chance to stand and drink a cup of coffee with the registrar” (6:95:773:776). Another academic manager described that he engaged in discussions with members of TMT “whenever an opportunity arises like for instance informally after a particular formal meeting just standing there over the tea and so on I raise issues” (5:25:161:162).

A non-academic manager described how the VP would often call in some people from the directorate to discuss a specific issue (13:35:169:169). Although this manager admitted that this could cause problems because of communication and authority lines, he’d rather have this type of access to the VP than no direct access at all.

In one college where all the directors’ offices are in the same building, on the same floor and in the same corridor, one director described the “passage discussions” (7:63:147:149).

Buzz words

Some of the managers referred to words or concepts that formed part of the institutional vocabulary, but which may have lost their meaning due to overuse. Part of the institutional talk is the appearance of buzz words. One academic manager referred to these buzz words as “weasel words”. This same manager explained that weasel words were those words were “[so] sucked so dry by over-use or their use in service of one or other ideology that they lose their meaning and their usefulness” (2:15:61:61). This academic manager indicated that these words were used “at liberty to play the game ... whether in drafting performance agreements or institutional policies” (2:15:61:61). Several managers stated the success of including certain buzz words in their discussions.

Another academic manager indicated confusion about the institutional rhetoric and said that the previous year the rhetoric was all about servant leadership and “this year [2011] servant leadership disappeared from the agenda; this year it is high-performance organisation” (3:84:61:61). It was also stated, by a non-academic manager, that “issues of diversity at the moment is a buzz word” (10:100:360:360). Another non-academic manager indicated that project management was also a buzz word at some stage and that this has “become bastardised where anything and everything is now called a project” (11:93:88:92). Another non-academic manager indicated, “people become brainwashed to use the correct buzz word” (48:21:99:99). Findings indicate that certain buzz words, such as project, diversity, agility and the 11Cs, were perceived to be part of the talking to accomplish strategy work.

Key insights on talk

My observations and personal reflection about meetings were very much aligned with the descriptions given by the participants. I also observed the high number of meetings, some scheduled in advance; others on short notice. The meetings described by the participants had organisational purpose, and these meetings could have been more or less formal in their approach to the structure and tasks of the meeting. However, meetings were not always perceived as valuable. People often attended meetings – especially those formal meetings that formed part of the hierarchical decision-making processes – half-heartedly and used that time to read and respond to emails. Again, in my personal experience, most meeting attendees had their emails open while attending meetings and others would even sit and mark assessments during the meetings. There is a general perception within the institution that meetings are non-productive and time to catch up on real work. The nature of the formal meetings change as the composition and purpose of the meetings go down the hierarchy – from information and telling at senate level, to support and reflection at department level.

I was initially surprised with the references to weasel words and buzz words, especially because most of the descriptions had a negative connotation. The question was whether these words had really lost their meaning due to overuse, as indicated by Interviewees 2 and 3. However, there were also descriptions of the practical benefits of using these weasel words. In my personal experience at school

management planning sessions and in the IPMS processes, by including certain words, more prominence is given to certain initiatives and more support is gathered. The ‘talk’ is therefore very much part of the daily lives of the institutional members.

6.7.3 Tools

For this research and in the analysis process, tools were described as numerous techniques, methods, models, frameworks, approaches and methodologies to support strategic decision-making. The following section describes the tools used by middle managers in doing strategy. The tools described here were identified by the participants themselves and in response to the interview question “Can you describe or give examples of some of the tools that you use in doing strategy?”

Table 30 gives a summary of the codes used to analyse this theme.

Table 30: A summary of the codes used to analyse this theme

Code	Description
Committees	Using committees to conduct strategy work and operationalise policy
The director’s forum	Using the forum to do strategy work and engage in strategy discourse
Emails	Using electronic mail to do strategy work
The principal’s summit	Using the summit to engage in strategy discourse and strategy work
Project management	Applying project management principles to do strategy work
Research in organisation	Applying research to influence strategy work and decision-making
Routine tasks and operations	Using routine tasks to do strategy work
Technology-enabled tools	Using technology to do strategy work
Analytical tools	Using analytics tools in strategy work and decision making
Workshops	Making use of workshops to do strategy work and engage in strategic discourse

It is necessary here to state that the tools described here are interrelated with the text and talk already described above. The purpose is not to repeat, but rather to add

to what has already been discussed. The tools described here are considered socio-material artefacts that allow for the structuring of information and providing grounds for interaction and textual recording. As such, the actual interactions (talk) and textual recordings (text) do not form part of this discussion on tools.

The following section describes the tools used by middle managers to accomplish strategy work.

6.7.3.1 *Committees*

Committees are used as a tool to accomplish strategy work. The actual discussions and the work that happens through committees were discussed above under talk and text. Committees are used extensively to accomplish strategy work, and one academic manager described that serving on various committees offered a complete overview of what is happening in the entire college (6:21:186:189). Committees are also used for reporting on “standard things that we do in terms of reporting through our line manager to the management committee, finance committee and council” (8:8:243:243). Some of the committees referred to by the managers were manco, finco, the ICT steering committee, transformation committee, management remuneration committee, tuition committee, student support committee, research committee, community engagement committee, senate teaching and learning committee, college quality committee and the higher degrees committee.

6.7.3.2 *The director’s forum*

The director’s forum meets on a regular basis where directors can share experiences. One non-academic manager described it as “just an information session but not proper training ...” (10:15:71:71). One academic manager indicated that the VPs and EDs should play a more important role in the director’s forum and that the forum should be handled on a more interactive manner instead of “listening to one person trying to be more clever than another” (2:48:268:268).

6.7.3.3 *Emails*

Many descriptions of using the email system to accomplish strategy work were provided, especially because “there are certain things that need to be documented” (10:59:312:312). Email communication is often used in addition to face-to-face communication: “I might give feedback on an email to say ... you know ... it relates.” (10:60:296:296). Another non-academic manager indicated, “it is difficult really to have an interaction when you use emails so I prefer then [to] call a person in and then go sit with the person and discuss the matter” (13:25:125:127). One manager indicated, “your telephone and your email system is a wonderful system to use” (15:42:419:422).

6.7.3.4 *The principal’s summit*

The annual summit involving all levels of management from COD and HOD upwards was considered a tool because of the platform that the summit created for strategic discourse and interactions of various stakeholders. The annual summit arranged by the principal took place shortly before the interviews were conducted. As such, the summit and some of the pertinent matters discussed there were brought into the interview discussions. One non-academic manager described it:

Yes, we had the principals’ break away on the 21st and the 22nd but once again, it was two days where you sit and you were told things. I’m not saying the information is not relevant but my feeling is after that we need then to sit down as directors and then chew on these things (11:78:199:199).

Another non-academic manager indicated that she was very impressed with the principal because “the issues that he raised were issues that ... some of the issues [bullying] that landed on my desk” (10:106:456:460).

Not all participants gave positive feedback about the summit, and one non-academic manager indicated that the presentations made there had no impact on his daily activities (9:73:431:431). He further suggested that the summit should be an opportunity for each portfolio to provide feedback and to get input from all attendees on where they are in implementing the university strategies (9:73:431:431). However, “it was management who came to tell us what they want and that does not work for me” (9:73:431:431).

6.7.3.5 Project management

When asked about the tools to strategise, 59% of the managers described project management and principles of project management as tools in their strategising activities. One academic manager indicated that he “used a project management table in which I kept track of my deliverables” (3:54:153:155). Another academic manager described the stages in his personal planning process where he linked the deliverables with timing schedules and control measures. He described the stages as planning, timing, operations and compliance (5:37:208:210). A similar process was also described by a non-academic manager (9:10:67:68) but he added that he appointed project managers to run the projects and then allocated tasks and responsibilities for that project (9:11:72:74).

Although many managers referred to project management and their uses thereof, some of the managers were of the opinion that the project management practiced at Unisa “... leaves much to be desired” (8:56:999:999). This same non-academic manager claimed that:

[Project management has] been running for six, seven years but still people do not seem to grasp the concept of project management. I mean [the ED] and them have endless battles with people just to report on their projects (8:57:1011:1011).

One non-academic manager described possible reasons for the negative perception of project management at Unisa:

There has been so much project management training but it is not easy to work according to projects. It requires a lot of discipline and I think people, when they realise the discipline, it requires they shrink away from it. So they want something to be called a project because it gives them access to money as far as special funds are concerned and so on but when they realise that there is certain discipline involved in that and that is also why ... they have all of these problems with executing strategic projects successfully. That's why they can't get them to be executed because they are not run as projects; they are run as operational initiatives (11:21:98:98).

6.7.3.6 *Research in the organisation*

The findings indicated that some participants conducted informal research to collect information that informed their decisions. Some of the managers described how they, or others in the university, conducted informal research to guide their strategising activities. One non-academic manager explained, “You go into other institutions, you go see what is the best, looking at best practises in industry, bringing it to higher education” (13:18:95:97). Another non-academic manager described how his directorate “... constantly engage with the Bureau of Market Research” (8:502:502).

6.7.3.7 *Routine tasks and operations*

Routines are patterns of behaviour that are repeated on a regular basis in an organisation (Becker, 2004). One non-academic manager described reporting through the line manager as “those things [that] come and go in the course of a normal month” (8:8:243:243). One of the academic managers described his daily routine

[every morning] I open this door [at] five o'clock. That is my schedule and most days I go home after five ... Every morning I draft a list of everything to do ... And tomorrow I will rewrite the list and add. And that is my only way of keeping track of what needs to be done, what must be sent (3:56:171:174).

Routine was also described as “to tick a box” (10:77:440:440). One of the non-academic managers described the planning process in his directorate as a “... almost kind of a routine, you know that, okay, this time of the year I must do these ... but what is interesting with it, you don't do it exactly the same as the previous year” (14:14:268:269).

6.7.3.8 *Technology-enabled tools*

Some of the descriptions by the participants referred to how they used technology as tools in their strategy work. Many of the managers described the use of the Microsoft Outlook calendar “to assist in managing my meetings, my appointments, my everything ...” (5:10:71:71). The use of electronic diaries were mentioned by most managers, and one manager indicated that the secretaries in the directorate would schedule the meetings in electronic diaries for the whole year (7:78:241:241). The

use of spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations were also described. One manager provided a detailed description of how he used PowerPoint in his planning process:

... we come up with a PowerPoint presentation that says this is what we want to do for this year. So we do that strategy for ourselves. And once we've done that and the managers are comfortable, every manager has inputted and at that meeting everybody you know, we take that 2015 thing, we pull it apart, the 10 goals and how really it fills in with and then we come up with a PowerPoint (14:50:740:740).

6.7.3.9 Analytical tools

Only three of the managers described the use of the SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis was mostly described as an analysis tool [that formed] part of the planning process.

6.7.3.10 Workshops

From all the tools described by the participants, workshops were the one most frequently mentioned. During the coding process and for the purpose of this research, workshops were described as taking time out from the day-to-day routines to deliberate on a specific topic, normally related to the longer-term direction of the organisation (Whittington *et al.*, 2006). Workshops are also referred to as “bosberaad” or “breakaway sessions”. Workshops are used for planning, for training and for deliberations. One academic manager described how she has exposed “people to different workshops” (4:15:73:73) in order to address the staff issues in the department.

In many instances, workshops were described as an activity in itself: “... gave input to this plan... and then we took it to the ... college EXCO ... where it was workshopped ...” (7:20:128:131). And, “... the one document that we're going to workshop with ...” (7:23:189:189). He also described how he developed a vision for his directorate “and the way I decided to communicate it is to workshop it at one my school management committee meetings” (7:24:193:195).

It appeared that workshops were regular occurrences and one non-academic manager explained, “once in every three months we have workshops which are aimed at training and developing ...” (14:33:480:482).

Key insights on tools

Some of my observations about the tools concerned the motives of the manager and the agenda, which could determine the tools that are used. Findings also confirmed the views of Orlikowski and Scott (2008) who state that technology is an integral aspect of business operations. When considering the performativity of technology, I observed that the use of emails eventually shapes the behaviour of individuals in the institution. It also appeared that many strategic conversations took place informally outside formal committee meetings. My findings confirm those of Hoon (2007:291) that committee-based interactions between middle and senior management are pushed forward in important informally scheduled strategic conversations. Routine tasks and operations were based on the experiences of the participants. Although some participants referred to their personal routines, others referred to the annual routine activities that form part of each academic year, I could not find any specific descriptions of actual everyday routines of strategy formation. Rather, the routines described by the participants were part of recurrent daily, monthly and annual cycles of formal administrative procedures that shape the actions of the managers. It seemed that the use of workshops is common. The purpose of the workshops as described by the participants differed and a clear distinction was made between workshops for strategic planning (i.e. drafting the IOP) and training workshops. In line with Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006), discussed in Chapter 3, the workshops at Unisa appear to be forums in which the existing experience of managers is brought to bear on issues, rather than new research and analysis and relies on discursive rather than analytical approaches to strategy-making. My findings also confirmed the findings by Hendry and Seidl (2003), as discussed in Chapter 3, in terms of the use of PowerPoint slides.

Shared understandings of strategy are facilitated through various communicative interactions. The current section used the lens of socio-materiality to classify and report on the middle managers’ communicative interactions in accomplishing strategy work. The section offered a description of the text or material artefacts used

in strategy work at Unisa. This discussion included verbatim quotes from the participants where they described the various texts that formed part of the strategy work. The section also described talk which included both formal and informal discussions. All participants were asked to describe the tools used in their strategising, and these were reported on in the previous section. Text, talk and tools are interdependent and they may link directly with one another.

6.8 THE STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS

This section reports on the strategising practices of middle managers at Unisa. The previous sections reported on the institutional culture and structure as described by the middle managers. In addition the strategic roles of middle managers were described and were followed by the communicative interactions to make strategy work. It is necessary to state here that the strategising practices reported on here were informed by the institutional operations, the roles and the socio-material artefacts that enable strategy work, as described in the previous three sections. The purpose here is not to repeat, but rather to report on the strategising practices in the context of the previous three themes.

Table 31 gives a summary of the codes used to describe the strategising practices of middle managers.

Table 31: Codes used to describe strategising practices

Code	Description
Training	The practice of acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies as a result of teaching of vocational or practical skills and knowledge
Collaboration with outside parties or experts	The practice of engaging with colleagues in other directorates or outside experts to influence strategy work
Systems within systems	The practice of creating alternative systems within the formal systems
Unique practices by academic managers	Practices unique to the academic managers
Unique practices by non-academic managers	Practices unique to the non-academic managers

6.8.1 Training

The practice of training entails the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies. Findings indicated that training is used as a practice to accomplish, amongst others, strategy work. Several examples were given of project management training and the way this influenced the way some managers strategised (9:11:72:74). One academic manager indicated that the staff in his directorate had been exposed to many training interventions and he indicated that he actively sought out training opportunities that helped him to adapt to his environment and showed him how to work with people (9:61:337:339). Another non-academic manager referred to “awareness training” (10:28:113:113) to sensitise people on issues of diversity.

The practice of training was extended to all levels, as one non-academic manager explained: “... once in every three months we have workshops which are aimed at training and developing – not only managers and supervisors, they [the training workshops] are also facilitated at my boss’ level” (14:33:480:482).

Not all descriptions of these training practices were positive as this academic manager described how he was asked to give input into what training middle managers need to be more effective. His response was:

... I don’t need more training. No training will prepare me for the systemic inefficiencies (3:30:85:85) ... And what is bad they [TMT] think providing middle managers with more training will make us more effective and most probably then the training will be compulsory (3:35:89:89).

6.8.2 Collaboration with outside parties or experts

This code entailed the practice of collaborating with peers in other directorates, or with experts outside the institution. One non-academic manager described how his directorate used an outside consultant whom they met eight years before when the consultant presented a course. “So we never lost contact with him. So that is the kind of people with whom we engage to broaden our vision you know. We cannot only get stuck and do things the way in which you think” (8:12:265:265). This same

manager also described how representatives from his directorate visited universities in Canada to learn more about how they operate.

Another academic manager offered a different view on the practice to engage with consultants and described how they [middle managers] would make recommendations only to be shot down by TMT, but then later, an external consulting team would be called in and when they made the same recommendations, it was accepted by the TMT (9:83:575:575).

6.8.3 Systems within systems

Descriptions by participants indicated the creation of alternative systems within the existing systems in order to cope operationally. These systems came in various forms. One academic manager described how her directorate designed a workload model so that “lecturers will be able to work more effectively” and “manage their time better” (1:87:147:147). The rationale for designing this workload model was to ensure a fair distribution of work and “to then to apply that in the IPMS agreement” (1:87:147:147). Practices to allocate work in another directorate were also described by a manager who explained how they gave staff who did not have a doctorate or master’s degree a smaller workload to help them develop (7:14:67:67). This practice was introduced because “junior lecturers and lecturers are usually the ones who are vulnerable and at the mercy of senior staff members” (7:16:83:88) and “the voices of junior staff members are not heard or taken seriously in the daily running of departments” (7:16:83:88). One academic manager described the planning processes in his department and said that in order to fit into the institutional format, he created “blueprints that would speak specifically to our needs and challenges and prospects” and he also divided the deliverables into small adjustable components to make it easier for his staff to comply (5:18:107:109).

Another academic manager described the inefficiencies of the institution’s internal communication system: the intranet, website and email system. This manager created a separate website that was redirected from the main Unisa website where more directorate-specific information could be published such as “news happenings, announcements, seminars and the details thereof” (2:25:117:117). He described this system as a parallel system to the Unisa system but when ICT could not provide the

support, he moved the directorate system to a separate server (2:27:127:127). He also created a separate email system that allowed for larger mailbox sizes and which marked the messages with different labels to indicate discussion points with his departmental heads. He then used this to create the directorate meeting agenda and to filter information (2:31:143:145). This manager also designed a system to manage the documents within the directorate with version control and it serves as a central collection point (2:65:175:175). This practice of creating and using a separate system was also described by a non-academic manager. At the time of the interview, his directorate was using Microsoft Office SharePoint for document distribution, workflow and internal communication. He explained that because of this practice they had been applying for the previous three years, “we are seen as mavericks” and “now we are not really popular with ICT” (8:48:760:761). He described some of the benefits: “we have version control on the documents, one person starts working on a document, publishes the thing, informs the people, gives them the link, they give their inputs ...” (8:48:760:761).

Another academic manager explained that, in terms of the Unisa systems, “not everything works” (4:79:367:370). She described how they “capture all our marks here because if it gets there [DSAA] it’s chaos” (4:79:367:370). This was confirmed by another academic manager who also described how he had to establish systems in his department to deal with the exams, tutorial letters and assignments (5:36:208:208).

Another academic manager explained his personal initiative to help him in his daily functioning: “Even as we are humans we forget, so I bought myself an E-7 Nokia which is more of a business phone to load appointments” (5:9:59:59).

The following code incorporates the descriptions of practices unique to academic managers and non-academic managers. These practices may be unique due to the different contexts within which the academic and non-academic managers operate. It is also possible that the both groups of middle managers engage in similar practices but they did not mention this during the interview as they did not consider it part of their strategy work.

6.8.4 Unique practices by academic managers

One academic manager described a decision-making practice in the school:

... we put a position paper with all the ideas of the school out and then we get some feedback and then eventually we get a school proposition ... (1:43:145:145).

Another academic manager described some of his work practices as “evangelical work” (2:2:5:5) where he approaches anyone and everyone to bring issues to their attention.

This academic manager described how they use the African concept of “stokvel” in their research meetings. He describes how this gives the opportunity where staff members, especially “junior lecturers and lecturers who do not have doctorates of master’s degrees” (7:40:301:305) to

... come together and share with one another and freely discuss the challenges that they are faced with. Others call it “brown bag research meetings”. I decided to go with stokvel because it's an African thing. And that has worked. That has definitely worked (7:40:301:305).

6.8.5 Unique practices by non-academic managers

One non-academic manager described the practice of celebrating small successes:

I have started at the end of last year [and] I gave each of the managers an award. Uhm ... small things like the one supervisor, for example there was a bee problem at [one of the campuses]. I get this frantic email from him saying he has been looking for someone to remove the bees and can someone please give him the name of the beekeeper to come and remove the bees. And then I thought to myself, okay, I don't know how I am going to give him God's telephone number

...So he was, for example, given the beekeeper award because it was just such a classic ... So I was able to identify an incident like that for each one of them and I gave them an award. I asked [X] to make a nice certificate and I

gave them a full colour award and they seem to have appreciated that very, very much (11:68:165:166).

Key insights on strategising practices of middle managers

In line with the command-and-control nature of the institution, I found it interesting, but not surprising, that the participants created their own systems in order to cope. I observed the demand for compliance throughout and observed how middle managers made a plan in order to comply and cope, despite system inefficiencies and institutional challenges. During first-order coding, I specifically looked for differences and similarities between academic and non-academic managers. Although their operational context and job specifications are different, both groups of managers needed to cope and comply in a command-and-control environment hindered by red tape and other bureaucratic processes. In line with Greiner (1972:43), both groups criticised the bureaucratic system where procedures take precedence over problem solving.

The practices described above were carried out within and because of the unique organisational context. The participants did not act in isolation but drew upon regular, socially defined modes of acting that made their actions and interactions meaningful. Although some of the practices were only described by academic managers and other only by non-academic managers, it does not mean that those practices are exclusive. The descriptions provided by the managers and reported on above, form part of middle managers' daily practices, but may not be, on their own, enough for successful strategising.

6.9 ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS OF MIDDLE MANAGERS' STRATEGY WORK

During the analysis process, enablers were defined as factors or conditions that contribute to success. Furthermore, when the participants indicated contentment with the conditions of their work or being able to make a difference in an issue regarded by them as important to organisational interests, those conditions and factors were coded as enablers. Conversely, when the participants described doubt, uncertainty,

limitations or defective factors that limited their work, such factors were coded as constraints. Middle managers described situations where they were not able to make a difference in an issue regarded by them as important to organisational interests.

The following sections will firstly describe the enablers of strategy work and secondly, the constraints of strategy work. The purpose of these sections is to report on the enablers and constraints as described by the middle managers. The intention is not to interpret or conclude, but rather to offer rich descriptions, supported by verbatim quotes, of the enablers and constraints that middle managers at Unisa face.

6.9.1 Enablers of strategy work

It is important to note that what one middle manager considers enabling, might have been considered constraining by another. Verbatim quotes are used to provide context for these divergent views.

Table 32 gives a summary of the codes used to describe the enablers of strategy work.

Table 32: Codes used to describe the enablers of strategy work

Code	Description
Participative decision-making	Conditions where middle managers, subordinates and peers participate in decision-making
Regular communication	Communicative interactions within institution
Productive meetings	Meetings that are considered efficient and linked to a time limitation
Sharing ideas and practices	Conditions where middle managers learn from each other
Informal communication channels	Conditions where communication takes place outside the formal structure
Preparedness	A pro-active approach to strategy work
Physical proximity and number of staff in directorate	Conditions pertaining to physical proximity of staff (i.e. on the same office floor or in the same building) and the span of management

Enabling mindsets	Personal attribute of a middle manager
Empowerment and trust	Increasing the capacity, authority and exposure of the subordinate and a willing reliance on another and a belief in the honesty and fairness of others

6.9.1.1 Participative decision-making

Several participants testified to the value of participative decision-making and described the success of discussing matters with subordinates. The strength of discussions is that even unpopular decisions may be accepted because they were widely discussed. One academic manager commented, “even though we’ve got a Manco that makes the final decisions it is still a consultative process that we follow” (1:86:139:143). Participation in decision-making was further described by an example of a strategic decision within the school which led to many changes in the offering and tuition model structured over two years instead of one year and the manager concluded, “When we changed that, it was a consultative process right from the bottom up where each and every staff member could give his or her suggestion of how it should be” (1:86:139:143). Another academic manager described how he consulted with the colleges to get their input into a strategic project plan and “Now I am back at the colleges and now I must drive the strategy ... I was there when we drafted it [the plan] and now I bring it back for implementation and I think that makes a huge difference” (3:102:208:208).

Having discussions between different functional areas was described as an enabler because one function impacts on another. One of the non-academic managers described how his directorate calls for meetings with the stakeholders to get their inputs and suggestions before he signs the proposal or decision off. He explained that this is an inclusive and participative practice (9:51:297:297). “We bring academics in just to see if we are on the right track, if they agree on how things work and how it is progressing” (9:93:78:78). This same non-academic manager also explained that by involving the academics, the support staff gets an understanding of the experiences of the academics and how the processes impact on them (9:49:279:283). This practice was confirmed as an enabler by another non-academic manager who explained how she involves the project managers in the management meetings (11:92:82:84).

6.9.1.2 *Regular communication*

When asked what it is that a middle manager should do to realise the Unisa goals and strategies, one academic manager described the importance and value of communication:

... one should not underemphasise the importance of communication. And the involvement of all staff and to keep them informed, keep communicating with them. Higher up ... keep [your] my line manager informed ... as well to the lower level (1:91:167:167).

Another academic manager explained, “there’s a lot of communication within our college” (6:83:400:401) and said, “it makes a huge difference because we’re constantly in touch with one another” (6:83:400:401). One non-academic manager described that she knew most of the regional directors and would “freely communicate with them on any relevant aspect that I think we share issues on, both formally and informally” (11:98:119:120).

6.9.1.3 *Productive meetings*

Some of the managers indicated the time limitation, and accompanied focus, of meetings. Several indicated that they try to conclude a meeting within an hour. Other working committees and task team reports are used for input at these meetings. Descriptions from participants indicated that focused meetings, of no more than one hour, contribute positively to their strategy work:

I must say I think we can set an example for the whole university because our committee meetings are only an hour meeting but we work in those committee meetings. Nobody sits with IPads and composes emails and stuff ... because it is only an hour [and] our people give their absolute attention to the meetings ... (1:66:39:39).

Another academic manager explained that they “make all of our meetings very participatory” (6:79:346:346) and it is not just a case where “somebody presents and the dean says okay and it’s on to the next thing” (6:75:317:317). One of the non-academic managers indicated that she had a standing rule: “... we meet when we have something to say to one another. We don’t meet for the sake of meeting” (11:23:106:106).

6.9.1.4 *Sharing ideas and practices*

The sharing of ideas and practices to deal with issues that other middle managers may come across were also described as practices that enable strategy work. One academic manager described a strategic project in the institution and how this was approached. She provided a description of what she considered successful communicative practice:

She [the project leader] is going about it the right way. Because she's saying, here is this wonderful world out there. It's something that we can engage with. These are the problems associated with that. But weigh them up. And you and anybody can see that the advantages far outweigh [the risks] ... (6:102:1040:1040).

Another academic manager described how he gives each COD the opportunity to share and had explained that this practice has been quite successful and that they [the CODs] "relished the opportunity to share with other colleagues" (7:28:215:215). These reflective sessions were also described by another academic manager who referred to it as "reality checks" (6:32:333:334) where CODs get a chance to check with the others and to say, "this is what we are doing and this is working, this is what we are doing that fails ..." (6:32:333:334).

6.9.1.5 *Informal communication channels*

Several managers described how they have formed their own communicative channels, such as informal meetings, ad hoc sessions, alternative communication media such as directorate/departmental intranet or communiqués. One academic manager said that if there is a concern, they [the directors in the college] will "quickly meet" and "have just an informal discussion" (1:83:127:127) to pin one specific matter down and discuss how they will resolve it. Another academic manager described the success of "taking people for coffee" (3:91:120:120) and building relationships through it.

6.9.1.6 *Preparedness*

Several managers described the success of doing one's homework and providing detailed documentation to justify or support a particular course of action or a

decision. One academic manager described the success of their schools' submissions to senate and said, "because we do our homework" and explained that their documentation not only describes the requests or problems, but proposes solutions as well (1:68:57:57). Furthermore, this manager indicated that discussions are followed "up with a written memorandum" (1:21:55:55).

Another academic manager created a separate communication channel (as described above), and the enabling feature is that all relevant information is available in one place, updated and within the control of the director's office that enables regular updates and changes: "... all the things that one wants to tell the people and everyone knows about it" (2:25:117:117). Another academic manager described how he finds ways in the reports that he writes to bring what he heard at ground level into formal discussions (3:64:198:198).

Compiling process maps was described as enablers of strategy work (9:95:92:92). He also described how he uses pictures and diagrams with four colours to indicate how the process map has been adapted and that "people say it works well" (9:96:96:98).

6.9.1.7 *Physical proximity and number of staff in directorate*

Several descriptions of enabling conditions were provided by middle managers. The enabling conditions related to the size of the directorate and the physical proximity of the staff within the directorate. This non-academic manager had only four staff members who reported to her and she explained,

... because we are so few in the office ... We are together [and] most of the communication is very informal. When something comes [up] I just call a person in and we sit ... If I've come from a meeting and there's a need for me to give a report back, I will call them in quickly and say let's be aware of this (10:97:296:296).

Another non-academic manager explained that the interaction with his team is important and said, "I have a very small team so it is easy, I don't have like 250 people, I have a small team so it is easy" (13:55:82:82).

Findings also indicated that the managers who were in close proximity to peers and subordinates were enabled in their strategy work. One academic manager described that her fellow school director's office is right next to hers and this enables support: "when we come in ... the morning and you hear the other person, you knock on the wall just to make sure, say hello ..." (6:37:405:406).

6.9.1.8 *Enabling mindsets*

Descriptions also included enabling mindsets. One of the academic managers indicated passion and excitement as distinguishing factors for success:

... [There are] two distinguishing factors and that is the passion with which you lead your school, with which your managers head the school ... I think that these are the distinguishing factors, the passion and the excitement with which things are happening (1:54:175:175).

Some of the managers described how they regularly remind themselves to consider the bigger context of their activities and practices. This "bigger picture" orientation is a mindset that guides actions. One academic manager indicated that he interprets the 2015 goals and then how his department "fits into the bigger picture ... to make the whole system work effectively" (5:43:266:267). One manager described how she "sensitises people to what the bigger vision of the university is" (10:27:109:109). One non-academic manager provided a detailed description of how he uses colour coding to visualise the bigger picture and communicate it to others:

So that a person with a perceived small deliverable also sees that if I don't perform it impacts on the higher level. So it is all about visualisation, it is all about conceptualisation but you need to have detail in that (13:9:45:45).

This same manager also described that his role is to ensure that everyone in his directorate knows his or her role:

... for them to see how they contribute to the bigger cause even if it's in the [directorate] cause because at the end [this directorate] contributes to the bigger strategies. For them to see where they fit in. They are not just employees here earning a salary, they are contributing to our successes (13:29:141:141).

One non-academic manager described his involvement in a forum that falls outside his formal position, but indicated, “to be asked to do that [serve on bargaining forum], I just feel that it’s actually helping the whole cause” (14:11:252:253).

6.9.1.9 *Empowerment and trust*

Empowerment and trust were also described as enablers of strategy work. One academic manager described how his executive director trusts him with the finances: “I drafted the budget, it was approved, I am spending it” (3:38:109:109). This same manager also explained how he first checked with his superiors whether he could circulate a new form of communication and had believed that the success of the communiqué was because he was trusted (3:52:137:137).

One non-academic manager explained how things work in their directorate: “We come with suggestions and we discuss it, make changes and then they support us to take it further” (9:47:279:279).

Key insights on enablers of middle managers’ strategy work

One of my observations was that there was an almost unanimous perception that the decision-making processes by the TMT are not participatory. However, the middle managers taking part in this study considered their own decision-making processes in their directorates and schools as participative. I cannot help to wonder if the middle managers’ subordinates also consider the decision-making process on directorate and school level as participatory. Again, findings from this study confirm the findings by Mantere (2008) that trust is an enabling condition for strategy work. My findings confirm the view of Mantere (2008:308), as discussed in section 3.4.2, that top management responsiveness is a key enabling condition.

6.9.2 Constraints on strategy work

The theme of constraints was defined as a lack of something or a defective practice (Mantere, 2005) within the institution. During the interviews, participants indicated discontent or doubt about the conditions of their strategy agency. This theme also

includes descriptions of middle managers' inability to make a difference in the case of issues regarded by them as important to the organisational interests.

Table 33 summarises the codes used to describe the constraints of middle managers' strategy work.

Table 33: Codes used to describe the constraints on strategy work

Code	Description
Acting	Constraints related to temporary appointments in higher or similar positions
Merger	Constraints related to the legacy of the merger
Capacity	Constraints related to lack of capacity, albeit staff, systems or other resources
System constraints	Constraints related to the Unisa systems
Centralisation	Constraints related to the centralised systems and functions in the institution
Organisational culture	Constraints related to the organisational culture
Institutional communicative practices	Constraints related to the communicative practices within the institution
Disempowerment	Constraints related to lack of authority or power
Lack of support, skills and trust	Constraints related to lack of support and skills, and general mistrust
Closure of the call centre	Constraints related to the operational impact of the closure of the call centre

6.9.2.1 Acting

Findings from the current research indicated that many of the participants interviewed acted in certain positions before either being appointed in those positions or being redeployed. Acting was discussed within the section on the institutional operations, but this section will describe the constraints of acting. One non-academic manager explained that the situation within which she found herself in was difficult as she was in an acting position, and acting in her executive director's position while he himself was acting in another position (11:69:170:170). Another non-academic manager explained the constraint of acting:

... you can't put in someone acting and expect that person to bring amongst the changes that has been promised by previous EDs and so forth, because they are only there for a limited period of time (12:13:50:50).

6.9.2.2 Merger

The merger of the three institutions, Unisa, Technikon SA and the distance component of Vista University, was described above. Although the merger led to the pooling of resources, skills and students, it also led to many complications that necessitated the restructuring and redesign of the new Unisa. The effects of the merger were described as constraints by some of the managers participating in this study. There were descriptions of the merger and the integration of different systems after the merger, which caused implementation problems (9:25:135:136). One non-academic manager explained that what complicated the situation after the merger was that business operations had to continue while they were trying to design new systems and cope with the large volumes of students (9:27:138:139). This manager indicated that they were (at the time of this research) still struggling with systems to support the university strategies (9:27:138:139). One non-academic manager who came from the old TSA explained that “as soon as there is a hiccup” there is a notion of “us and them” (15:9:113:114).

6.9.2.3 Capacity

There were many reports of capacity constraints, some of which were directly linked to the merger. Several middle managers described their daily schedules and actual working hours to extend beyond contractual terms – even during leave periods “... just to get through the day” (3:58:173:174). An academic manager explained that they “are so overwhelmed” and “so busy” (4:37:181:181) that they cannot do any research. Another academic manager described the situation in one of the academic departments where there are many cost units, but “with that comes numerous problems such as masses of postgraduate students. Their posts aren’t filled, there are vacancies ... they have 33 members of staff and they’ve got 27 vacancies ...” (6:8:118:118). One of the non-academic managers confirmed, “the academic core is struggling” as it takes nearly four months to fill a position (13:23:115:117). Another non-academic manager explained that in his directorate, “every single year the capacity has had to be stretched further and further ...” (14:5:35:35). One non-academic manager explained that his directorate is facing the challenge that they made promises to their stakeholders and council, such as “smart card technologies

and replacing the student system”, which “are massive projects” and that they were “now stretched to the limit” (12:11:42:44). A non-academic manager described that she sits in the evenings to finish her work and explained:

... even my (laughs) my daughter said to me the one day, “Ma, why didn’t you work this weekend? Because you’re not going to finish your work and then you’re going to be in trouble” (15:63:717:718).

One of the academic middle managers described the capacity constraints in terms of office space and the sharing of offices (4:2:31:31). Other managers described the limitations of the institutions’ management information system (7:41:339:341) and the lack of ICT infrastructure (9:20:114:114).

6.9.2.4 System constraints

There were many reports about the system constraints. One academic manager explained,

90% of the reports we write should be generated by a system. One should press a button and get the report instead of walking around with a clip board under the arm to find out the highest qualifications of staff members” (2:36:169:169).

Another academic manager stated bluntly, “No training will prepare me for the systemic inefficiencies” (3:32:85:85). Another academic manager referred to the assignment and examination system and the uploading of marks and stated, “systems don’t talk” [i.e. are not linked with each other] (4:79:367:370). This was confirmed by another academic manager who described the examination system and the outstanding assignments where the “systems did not respond to whatever we submitted” (5:6:57:57). One of the non-academic managers described a project that involved one of the academic departments where they developed a system to allow for the electronic submission of examination papers. “When we ran the pilot; everything went haywire” and “the ICT infrastructure could not handle it” (9:20:114:114). This same manager also referred to a situation the previous year where the assignment system crashed due to the volumes and said that the system was down for almost a week (9:21:116:116). With reference to the online offering of

courses, this non-academic manager confirmed, “the IT system is not ready for all of this” (15:83:1064:1064).

6.9.2.5 *Centralisation*

Within Unisa, several of the support functions are centralised, such as purchasing, ICT, HR and marketing. One manager explained the constraints of the centralised purchasing system:

... every time I want to spend [the budget] on something, my ED must sign, my VP must sign ... the frustration comes when you have to buy something [urgently, for example] the press is broken. Then I’m waiting for all these signatures to happen ... every time I’m buying something I have to get 20 other signatures (14:65:816:819).

6.9.2.6 *Organisational culture*

The organisational culture was described in section 6.5.2 as a culture of compliance, with incidents of bullying and the use of politics. During the interviews the organisational culture was also described as a constraint. One academic manager explained that even if there is acceptance of new initiatives at the highest level, it is not so easy to change the institution’s culture (2:18:67:67).

6.9.2.7 *Institutional communicative practices*

Communicative practices were also described as constraints by some of the participants. One academic manager explained the constraint of window dressing in terms of strategic conversations and decision-making as “the appearance of transparency” while decisions were not made democratically or participatory (2:55:29:29). One non-academic manager also referred to democratic decision-making and specifically referred to the voting buttons in the senate hall, “Those things have never been used in my 15 years at Unisa” (48:27:361:363). He further stated, “Democracy is to vote – everyone votes yes or no but to ask for everyone’s input and then decide to still do it your way is not democracy” (48:27:361:363). Another academic manager explained times when “one is totally bombarded with

requests to make inputs into any and everything [but] nothing happens with those inputs” (6:57:856:859). This manager also explained that this is when people “start withdrawing” because they worked really hard to give input based on their own experiences, “but nothing has happened” (6:57:856:859). One non-academic manager referred to the one-sided nature of the strategic document that contains adjustments to the 2015 plan, “I provided input, but my comments are not in that document” (9:111:399:401). One non-academic manager stated: “... that’s the frustration ... because they [management] don’t listen” (15:79:926:927).

With reference to the discussions at the principal’s summit, one academic manager described it as follows:

... last year we signed into servant leadership. Okay, this year servant leadership disappeared from the agenda; this year it is high performance organisation. You should all work harder, you should all work more efficiently, effectively. And I don’t know of any middle manager that can work harder. It is as if we are worked into a frenzy: just more reports, more templates to fill in, work harder, work harder, we should be high performance. And they don’t address the dysfunctionalities in the system that keeps us from achieving what we want (3:26:61:61).

Another academic manager referred to weasel words – ““words that are so sucked dry by over-use in the use of service or ideology that they lose their meaning and their usefulness” (2:15:61:61) and explained that these words were used in drafting performance agreements or institutional policies. One non-academic manager also described fear as a constraint. He referred to a steering committee meeting and stated, “I’ve learned when to open my mouth and I’ve learned when to keep it very shut” (12:35:132:132). He also explained, “People are too scared to open their mouths ... and I am talking about VP level even” (12:37:142:142).

6.9.2.8 *Disempowerment*

Findings of this current study also indicated the constraining effects of disempowerment. One academic manager explained that they [TMT] “hand out responsibilities but no empowerment” (2:46:230:230). One academic manager explained, “the concerns that were raised from middle management upwards are not

taken seriously” (3:18:51:51). This same manager described how his staff is contacted by VPs without acknowledging that he exists: “I sign their leave forms but that is the only thing I do” (3:39:109:110). Another middle manager stated that CODs need to be empowered, that “they feel very disempowered” (4:87:478:478). A non-academic manager explained that at Unisa, the title of director means absolutely nothing at times (14:63:814:814). He also stated, “I just feel that the power to discipline is taken away from the middle managers (14:64:797:797).

6.9.2.9 *Lack of support, skills and trust*

Some of the managers described lack of support as constraining their strategy work. This lack of support may be real or perceived, but it nevertheless influences middle managers. One academic manager described how she needed assistance to discipline a staff member and approached HR:

And for two years they didn’t do anything and then we had another incident a few months ago and I insisted on HR’s intervention and then they came through after I wrote to the director of HR (4:74:337:337).

Another academic manager described a disciplinary hearing with a staff member and explained that managers should “get more support and be more informed” because there are “certain specific processes and certain specific things that you should know about” and “I only encountered that when I was knee deep in it already which I think was unfair” (1:51:171:171).

Another constraint deals with the lack of skills in terms of expertise. One academic manager referred to his view that a newly appointed executive director was not experienced and tried to implement strategies that failed at other universities and which were documented in reports and articles (2:39:181:183). Another academic manager expressed her concern about young academic staff members who lacked postgraduate supervision experience and skills and explained that it can take up to 12 years to build that expertise, but the university admits more and more postgraduate students based on the personnel points (6:62:983:988).

Lack of trust was also described as a constraint. One middle manager commented that there seems to be very little trust. He then referred to the minute detail of the various templates [like the IPMS performance agreements]. He stated that the TMT

should give middle managers direction, and then “trust us with the process” (3:70:228:228).

6.9.2.10 Closure of the call centre

During 2010, the TMT announced the closure of the call centre. The call centre was the telephonic system used by existing and potential students to communicate with the university. The closure of the call centre was also indicated as a constraint. A non-academic manager explained how he communicated with a member of the TMT and advised that the call centre should not be closed “because there is nothing in place to handle the student queries” (9:76:475”478). This same non-academic middle manager described that he now has to explain to management why his directorate cannot handle all the queries, but that he did not have the people or the infrastructure to do so (9:80:507:509).

Key insights on constraints of middle managers’ strategy work

My observation was that there are many constraining aspects that middle managers have to deal with on a daily basis. They operate in a complex environment and they can follow one of two approaches: accept the conditions and constraints and deal with it, or know about it and use it as an excuse not to do certain things. Evidence from the research suggests that at the time of writing, middle managers were overworked and they worked hard despite system inefficiencies. I could not help but wonder whether this motivation to work hard and do more has more to do with the need for social cohesion and less with “business as usual”. Even though the environment had changed, middle managers seemed to adjust their actions to suit the systems. Another possible explanation to consider can be found in the work by Kauffman (1993), a theoretical biologist and complex systems researcher, who found that the process of self-organisation creates order out of the local interactions between the components of disordered systems. According to Kauffman (1993), this process of self-organisation is spontaneous and not directed by any agent of subsystem inside the system. Given Kauffman’s findings, I could not help but wonder to which extent middle managers self-organised themselves to cope in a complex environment.

Linking back to the command-and-control nature of the institution, I classify the nature of strategy work within Mantere and Vaara's (2008:354) mystification and disciplining discourses. According to these authors, the concept of strategy in disciplining organisations is linked to the command structures in the organisation, and strategising is seen exclusively as a TMT activity. These strategies are normally not to be questioned or criticised and strategies are often crafted in closed workshops (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Findings of this study indicated that the TMT were seen as the key strategists and the role of others was to follow the guidelines and orders coming from the top. Disobedience is punished, in the case of this research, through being labelled as a maverick, having his or her name on the 'not-done' list or through the IPMS scoring system. Further, access to information is restricted and organisational members can only participate in ways defined by their superiors and participation is mostly to implement. While considering these constraints, I recalled the findings by Mantere and Vaara (2008), discussed in section 3.4.1, that middle managers are enabled when resource allocation is coherent with top-down objectives. It seems that middle managers who participated in this study, did not perceive the TMT as walking the talk.

There are many enablers and constraints that influence the strategy work of middle managers. The enablers and constraints described above are specific to the institutional context within which the middle managers who took part in the research put the strategies into practice. The argument put forward here is that the enablers contribute to the perceived success of the strategies. The constraints do not, on their own, cause the strategies to fail. Rather, the constraints present further challenges and difficulties that middle managers need to deal with and overcome in order to put the strategies into practice.

6.10 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter reported on the research findings and used verbatim quotes to support the findings. In line with the strategy-as-practice perspective, this chapter reported the messy realities of the strategy work of middle managers and confirmed that the strategising in the institution is not only limited to the TMT. The chapter further presented the actual micro-processes of middle managers' strategy work. The

chosen institution is a mega university and the biggest higher education provider on the African continent. The institution, like other universities, face challenges of a dual authority structure, and the academic managers and the non-academic managers have an influence on the academic and administrative systems as well as the decision-making processes. A total of 17 participants were interviewed during the current research and this chapter presented their descriptions of the institutional reality within which they operate and their practices, activities, roles and the ways engage with the material artefacts of the institution's strategies.

By describing the strategising practices of middle managers at a South African university, this study makes four contributions to the extant body of knowledge on the practices of middle managers: First, unlike previous studies that mainly focused on the top management teams at universities, this study provided a description of how middle managers put strategy into practice at a university. Second, this study showed what the unique characteristics of the university organisational context were in relation to the strategising practices of middle managers. Third, this study developed theory that links the strategic roles of the middle managers with the practices enacted within those roles and the materiality to accomplish strategy work. Four, new theory on the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work were developed. Because of the micro-level detail, the descriptions above allow the accumulation of practical knowledge. A wide range of issues were covered in this chapter due to the comprehensive and holistic approach of this study.

The findings reported in this chapter provide rich descriptions of the academic and non-academic manager as strategy practitioners, their practices and the praxis (the workers, the work and their tools). These rich descriptions form the foundation for new theories on micro-strategising and link the strategic roles of middle managers with the practices enacted within those roles and the materiality to accomplish strategy work.

CHAPTER 7

INTERPRETATION, RESEARCH CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

While the literature on middle managers and strategy has shown an increase over the last two decades, no academic work was found that focused on middle managers' strategising practices within a university context. Also, the majority of strategy research had been conducted in the for-profit sector and very little academic work was found that focused on strategising at universities in developing economies such as South Africa. Further, the strategy research agenda has moved towards the micro-level strategising, but there is little empirical work that engages with truly micro-level strategising. As such, the current research explored the strategising practices of middle managers at a mega university in South Africa. The strategy-as-practice perspective and the middle management perspective provided the theoretical lenses that were used to interrogate the research topic. The current research set out to expand the body of knowledge in terms of middle manager practices in strategising and makes a contribution at the frontiers of middle manager activity within a university context in South Africa.

Chapter 1 provided a brief overview of the background to the study, the problem statement and the central research question and sub-questions. This chapter also included the definitions of the terms used in the study.

Chapters 2 and 3 formed the literature review for this study. Chapter 2 reviewed the strategy-as-practice perspective literature and provided an overview of the development of strategy and the emergence of the practice perspective. The chapter offered a review of previous research conducted within the strategy-as-practice perspective and described the research agenda.

Chapter 3 offered a review of the growing body of knowledge on middle managers and strategy. This chapter offered an integrated review of all strategy research involving middle managers and confirmed the importance of middle managers. This

chapter also reviewed the existing knowledge of the strategising practices of middle managers.

Chapter 4 provided the research context. It offered a description of the higher education environment and reviewed previous research conducted within the university management environment. This chapter also described the University of South Africa (Unisa) – the case chosen for the current research.

In Chapter 5 the research design and methodology employed in this study were explained. The content of this chapter revolved around the research strategy adopted, the selection of the participants, the data production method, data analysis process and the limitations and strengths of the research design.

Chapter 6 reported on the findings of the current research. This chapter provided rich descriptions, which were substantiated with verbatim quotes and it described the institutional operations, the strategising practices of middle managers, strategic roles of the middle managers in the chosen institution, the way middle managers engage with the material aspects of strategy work and the enablers and constraints that affect their strategising.

The purpose of this chapter (Chapter 7) is to interpret the findings and to link it to the theory. The new theoretical contributions are described as well as the conclusions drawn from the inductive approach. This chapter also outlines the limitations of the study and makes recommendations for future research.

The structure of Chapter 7 is depicted in Figure 18.

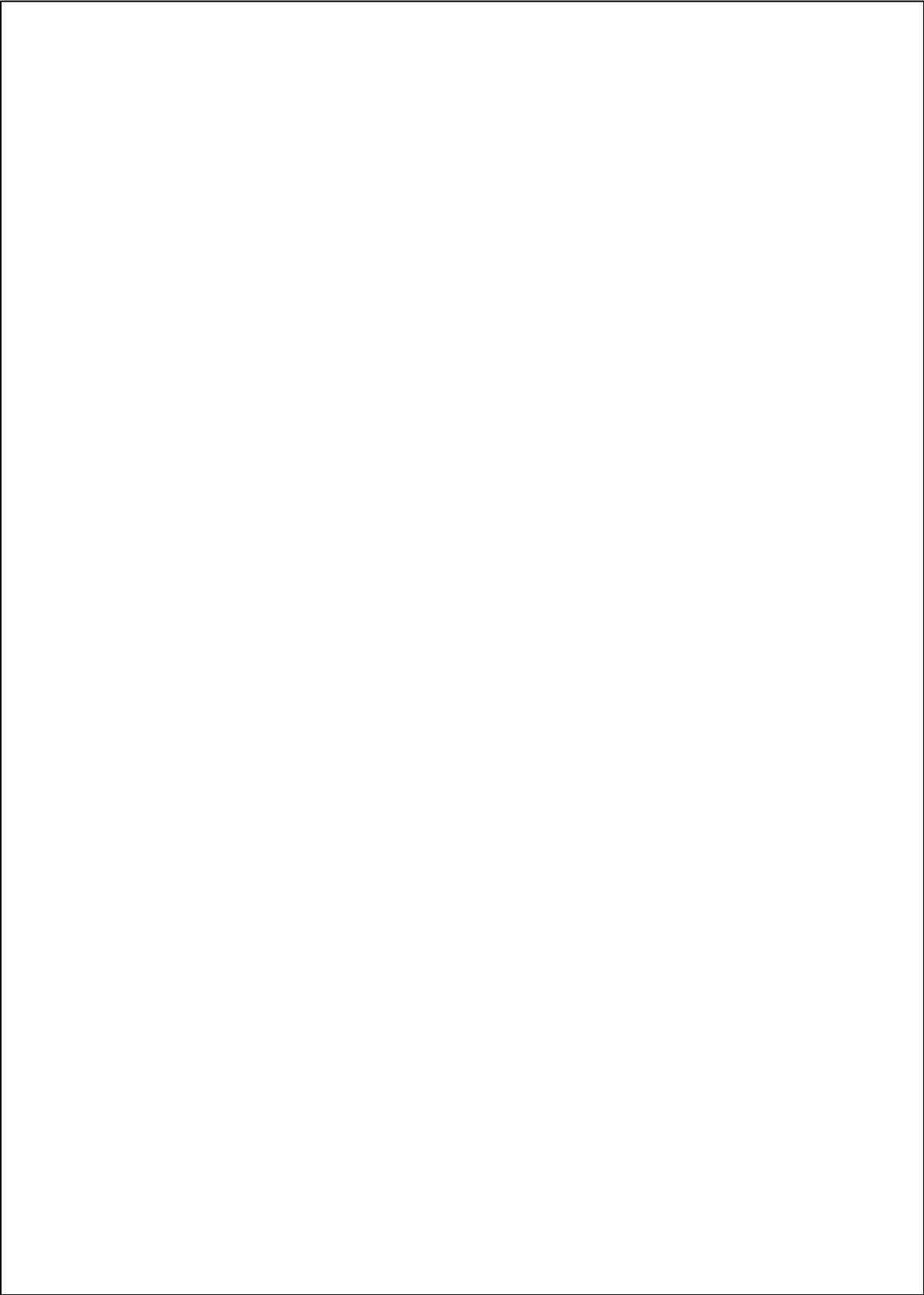


Figure 18: The structure of Chapter 7

Source: Own compilation

7.2 FINDINGS

The purpose of the current research was to explore the micro-strategising practices of middle managers at a university thereby providing rich data to develop theory. Specifically, the current research explored how academic and non-academic managers put strategy into practice at a South African university. The current research identified and described the strategising practices that have arisen from the interaction between middle managers and the institutional context and thereby contributes to the existing body of knowledge. The current research was conducted on the stream of activity in which strategy is accomplished and considered the micro and meso level strategy work, with the main focus on micro level, that shapes everyday practice. Findings from the current study describe the strategising practices of middle managers that have arisen from the interaction between the middle managers and the university's organisational context, the strategic roles of the academic and non-academic managers and the ways they engage with the materiality of strategy work. Finally, the current research identified and described the enablers and constraints of the strategy work of the middle managers at the university.

The study was conducted within the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm. An inductive process was followed to develop new theory on the micro-practices of middle managers, the materiality of strategising and the enablers and constraints of strategy work. A deductive process was followed to confirm the strategic roles of middle managers.

In order to obtain rich descriptions a qualitative research design was deemed appropriate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic and non-academic managers and explored the strategising practices of middle managers at a university. The participants selected for this study comprised of seven academic managers and ten non-academic managers. The demographic data of the participants were not discussed in detail because it did not form part of the research questions of this study. Through the reporting and reflexivity, cross-checking and retrospective accounts, the researcher provided evidence that these practices were in real form, as practiced in reality.

An inductive coding process was used to develop themes and the Atlas.ti software program assisted the researcher in managing the data efficiently. Chapter 6 reported on the findings. The remainder of this chapter provides a synthesis of the literature review and the findings as well as descriptions of new theoretical contributions.

7.2.1 Research questions

The central research question of this study was what the strategising practices of middle managers are that have arisen from the interaction between the middle managers and the university organisational context. A comprehensive literature review on strategising practices and middle managers was conducted and presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 4 provided the background to the university organisational context. Section 6.5 reported on the university organisational context, as described by the participants. Section 6.8 described the strategising practices of middle managers.

The first sub-question of this study asked what the strategic roles of academic and non-academic middle managers are in the university context. Section 6.6 reported on the findings, and the strategic roles of the middle managers were deduced from the typology of middle management roles in strategy, developed by Floyd and Wooldridge (1994), as discussed in section 3.4. The second sub-question asked how middle managers engage with the materiality of strategy work, and section 6.7 reported on the findings of the text, talk and tools of the strategy work. The last sub-question asked what the enablers and constraints are of the strategy work of middle managers in the university institutional context. Section 6.9 reported on the findings of the enablers and constraints of strategy work.

In line with Jarzabkowski and Spee's (2009) call for further research on what strategists do, this research uncovered what strategists do by investigating individuals at a micro-level in a unique context and specifically considered what practitioners do within their immediate locales as they engage in strategy work. In addition, Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) recommended more research on how organisational action is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices. This research therefore identified the enabling and constraining

conditions within the unique context that impact on the strategising practices of middle managers.

The current research not only provided insight into the strategising practices of university middle managers, but also contributes to theory development on the conditions that enable and constrain the strategising practices of middle managers.

7.3 STRATEGISING PRACTICES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS IN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

7.3.1 The university organisational context

The descriptions of the university structure and planning processes, as provided in Chapter 4, are aligned with the descriptions of a machine bureaucracy, as described by Mintzberg (1990). Organisations with tight controls, high reliance on formalised procedures and a passion for consistency may lose the ability to experiment and innovate. This can impede change because as a strategy becomes imbedded in the routines of an organisation, it also may become imbedded in the minds of the strategists (Mintzberg, 1990). Mintzberg (1990:192) explains that machine bureaucracies are bureaucracies dedicated to the pursuit of efficiency in very specific domains. The whole array of mechanisms, such as performance measures, incentive systems, various other control procedures and the articulation of the strategy itself act not to promote change in strategy, but to resist it. For the chosen university, control and incentive systems were described that are used to promote the implementation of the deliberate strategies were described. A culture of compliance exists with indications of TMTs coercive power. In line with Mintzberg (1990), findings from the current research suggested that formal implementation impedes reformulation of strategies.

A fallacy of the strategic planning process at Unisa is best described in terms of the domain assumptions of Cartesian philosophy where mind controls matter (Clegg *et al.*, 2005:21) in the same way that the TMT seeks to control the organisation, i.e. the Unisa 2015 and Unisa 2015 Revisited plans determine the reality.

Mostly, the middle managers taking part in the research felt disempowered. Given the command-and-control nature of the institution, this study confirmed the view of Hayes (1985:117) who stated that, within a command-and-control organisation, major decisions are allocated to top management who then imposes those decisions on the organisation and monitors such decisions through elaborate planning, budgeting and control systems.

The current research also considered the participants as aggregate actors, i.e. a group of academic managers and a group of non-academic managers. Similarities between the practices of these two groups outweighed the differences. Although the daily agendas may deal with different matters, the practices remain mostly similar, such as training (discussed in section 6.8.1) and creating systems within systems (discussed in section 6.8.3). An interesting occurrence was the “us versus them” theme: the aggregate group of participating middle managers saw themselves as “us” while the TMT was seen as “them”. This divide may be indicative of a sub-culture that could affect the strategy work of middle managers.

In addition, the exploration of this university’s context confirmed the view of Jarzabkowski (2005), as discussed in section 4.3.1, that the university is an extreme form of a distributed activity system in which actors are fragmented in their objectives with limited attention to strategy as a collective organisational activity. Findings from the current research indicated that the non-academic managers struggle to see their role in achieving the academic goals of the institution. Furthermore, academic managers reported that they have to juggle tuition, research and community engagement responsibilities whilst adhering to the bureaucratic administrative processes and policies. Findings from the current research, discussed in section 6.9.2, also indicated the notion to fill executive, non-academic positions with candidates who have risen through the academic structure and who do not necessarily understand the intricacies of the university’s administrative systems. Additionally, the view of Weinberg and Graham-Smith (2012), discussed in section 4.3.3, was confirmed by the current findings, namely that the academic managers and other practicing academics have been relegated to the role of mere functionaries who simply carry out the decisions made by the administrators, council, the unions and the students. Chapter 6 described how this the middle managers experience a sense of disempowerment and how this constrains their strategy work. This is an

interesting finding and at odds with the traditional view that universities are seats of liberal views and academic freedom.

Findings of this study also confirm the findings by Smith (2002), discussed in section 4.4.4.2, that the academic head of department's role is becoming more managerial. Also, in line with Rowley and Sherman (2003), this study found that academic managers find themselves in roles they did not necessarily aspire to. Sections 6.5.3 and 6.6.3.2 described the conflicting role expectations of academic managers: being a manager of a unit versus having time to do research and creative work. Findings from the current research confirmed the findings of a study by Floyd (2012) reported on in section 4.4.2.2: academic managers are taking on an increasing amount of management and bureaucratic work at the expense of their teaching and research, the outcome of which, for some, is their reduced involvement in the very reasons for entering academia in the first place. This yearning for creative work and research by academic managers may lead to frustration, which could be transferred to those reporting to them.

7.3.2 The strategising practices

While reviewing the literature on strategising practices, no theory could be located to confirm training as a strategising practice. However, findings from the current study indicated that training is used as a strategising practice. Section 6.8.1 reported on the practice of training. The findings indicated that there is a perception that training can fix everything, for example; if there is little or no trust in the organisation, people are sent to a trust workshop, as described by Interviewee 3. This practice of training could be encouraged based on the requirements in the personal development plans that form part of the IPMS. It seems that the practice of providing training is common and training opportunities are abundant, yet many middle managers feel that they are not trained or equipped to handle certain issues in their departments/directorates. Four of the interviewees explained how they were not trained or informed of the procedures for dealing with staff disciplinary actions. Although a directorate exists to deal with disciplinary matters, the middle manager remains responsible for collecting evidence, dealing with the staff member at operational level and managing the work and performance of the staff member. The

questions arising from this issue are whether middle managers are exposed to practically relevant training or whether these disciplinary and other operational matters come down to a lack of middle management authority or whether these challenges are a consequence of the centralised system in the institution.

The participants further described how they created alternative systems. There appears to have been organisation-wide system failures after the merger and the effects thereof still had an effect on the participating middle managers' strategy work. Given the demand for compliance, amidst apparent and capacity problems, these middle managers created their own systems in order to cope. Section 6.8.3 reported on these systems within systems. These alternative systems come in various forms. Although many of the participants testified to the success of these alternative systems, the value such alternative systems have for their subordinates has not been tested.

7.4 ROLES OF UNIVERSITY MIDDLE MANAGERS IN STRATEGISING

The organisational context and planning processes were described in Chapter 4, Chapter 6 and in section 7.3.1 above. The institution engages in a formal strategic planning process built around an annual planning cycle. As such, the formal planning process ascribes different strategy roles to organisational members (Mantere, 2008). It was within this context that the roles of the middle managers were explored. Due to the level of detail provided by the participants, the researcher was able to consider middle manager behaviour within different roles.

As indicated in Chapter 6, the researcher originally identified six roles of university middle managers. During second-order coding, the researcher compared those six roles with the existing body of knowledge, specifically the theoretical typology of middle management roles in strategy as identified by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992; 1994). Findings from the current research confirmed that university middle managers fulfil the same strategic roles as those identified in the Floyd and Wooldridge typology. Although the foundations of these roles are the same, the nuances within each role are slightly different, which can be attributed to the unique organisational context.

Findings from the current research indicated that middle managers play an active role within the context where they operate, in helping others cope. Not only do the participants support their peers, but they appear to provide more support towards their subordinates as well. The support is provided informally through discussions and cohesive activities, as well as formally through training and workshops. Of interest was that participating middle managers at Unisa did not report the same level of support from their superiors. These findings were expected, given the command-and-control nature of the institution.

Within the strategic roles of the Unisa middle managers, findings indicated that a great deal of problem-solving takes place, which also forms part of the facilitate adaptability role. The description provided by Interviewee 7, as reported in section 6.6.1.1, confirmed the view of Huy (2001; 2002) who stated that middle managers facilitate smooth implementation by attending to subordinates' negative emotions regarding operational realities (discussed in section 3.4.4).

Findings also indicated that middle managers play an active role in interpreting and evaluating information. Mostly, the findings dealt with reporting upwards to the TMT and supported the views of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992:155) that not all ideas brought to TMTs' attention are strategic proposals. The synthesising of information was in many cases the precursor to championing a strategic alternative. As can be expected from a command-and-control type organisation, there appears to be very little responsiveness from TMT to the synthesised information they receive from middle managers.

Further, findings indicated that the middle managers are actively championing initiatives developed at operating level. The findings indicated many concerted efforts from middle managers to champion issues and communicate information about potentially important issues for inclusion on the TMT agenda. Interviewees 2, 3, 6 and 9 could be classified as strategic champions, as described by Mantere (2005) and discussed in section 3.4.3. These participants described how they try to influence strategic issues in a way that extends beyond their immediate and primary operational responsibilities as well as the expectations of others, such as informal discussions with peers (referred to by Interviewee 2 as "evangelical work"), creating alternative spaces for communication and involvement in high-level committees. Furthermore, some of the participants interviewed reported that they were expected

to challenge their superiors with new strategic ideas, in other words, championing alternatives as described by Interviewee 9 in section 6.7.1.1.

Although the middle managers perceived their voices not to be heard by TMT or incorporated in the strategic textual artefacts, the findings indicated that they make use of various tools to communicate and bring issues to the attention of the TMT. These tools include formal channelling through various committees and forums, informal discussions at opportune moments, social media such as internet blogs, intranet and middle management-initiated communiqués. There were limited comments on how effective these tools were. The fact that participating middle managers felt that their voices were not being heard could suggest that the effectiveness and value of these tools may be questionable.

Within this university context, which was identified as a machine bureaucracy in Chapter 4, there is a clear institutional separation between strategy formulation and strategy implementation. This is also in line with the position of the institution in Greiner's (1972) growth phases. Findings indicated that the dominant role of middle managers in Unisa seem to be to implement deliberate strategy. In line with the characteristics of the machine bureaucracy, findings confirmed that top-down objectives and compliance to strategic objectives are part of the realities that middle managers face in Unisa. As such, findings confirmed that the role of both academic and non-academic managers at Unisa is related to compliance to strategic objectives and TMT coercive power than to a buy-in.

As can be expected in a machine bureaucracy, findings indicated an abundance of reports and requests for reports. This forms part of the synthesising information role. Within this information role, managers either tend to pass information on as it is or rephrase it through a process of sensemaking and sensegiving. While some interviewees indicated that they merely pass information on, others explained how they reinterpret the information, which could reshape the original objective. Through sensemaking, as described by participants and reported on in section 6.3.3.2, middle managers create order and construct and reconstruct information. This sensemaking and sensegiving may lead to either a different objective or message, or a more clearly defined objective or message within the operational realities on sub-organisational level. This sensemaking and sensegiving, combined with the middle managers' tacit knowledge create meaningful messages within the unique

organisational context. Specifically, this study reported on the micro-level actions that the participants engaged in to get a sense of direction and to articulate descriptions that energise. Interviewees 3, 5, and 11, as reported in section 6.6.3.2, provided descriptions of their sensemaking that confirmed the views of Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) reflected in section 3.7, which imply that sensemaking is an ongoing, instrumental subtle and swift process that is often taken for granted. Additionally, findings in this study also confirmed the findings of Balogun and Johnson (2004) and Balogun *et al.* (2005), as described in section 3.7, namely that middle managers develop informal, lateral, peer support networks and experiment as they continually make sense of the strategic information they encounter.

Findings in the current research also confirmed middle managers' need to be politically able, in other words, to be able to influence others. Like Rouleau and Balogun (2011), this study also found that the institutional context played a role in the political abilities of managers. Some middle manager voices had more impact than others because of their contextual knowledge, such as reported by Interviewees 9 and 13.

7.5 MIDDLE MANAGER'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MATERIALITY OF STRATEGY WORK

In a sub-question, the current research also asked what the role of materiality is in strategy work. Although material aspects range from documents, buildings, systems, devices, telephones and emails, among others, this current study only considered those material aspects that fall within text, talk and tools, as discussed in section 6.7. There were insufficient data to comment in a meaningful way on the performative effects of these material aspects.

As indicated above, within the machine bureaucracy, the TMT is responsible for formulating the strategies while middle managers and subordinates are responsible for implementing those strategies. Findings indicated the use of text, such as the IPMS and performance agreement templates as well as the annual IOP, to reinforce this (see section 6.7.1).

Findings also confirmed the views of Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011), discussed in section 3.8.5, that strategy text created shared understandings of strategy. The participants provided descriptions of how the IOP was used to develop the DOP, as discussed in section 6.6.1. Such texts are mostly used to translate the institutional strategies into action plans and individual objectives. During the interviews, a question was specifically asked about how managers engage with the strategy texts, such as the Unisa 2015, Unisa 2015 Revisited and IOP. Some of the interviewees praised the process while others were highly critical of it. Notwithstanding these contrasting opinions about the institutional strategy texts, participating middle managers said that they comply with the requirements of TMT to use these texts in their directorates. Although there are so many text that support and promote the Unisa strategies, findings indicated that this has little value – managers are simply doing what needs to be done in order to survive and meet the operational objectives. Findings also indicate that managers perceive there to be a reporting mania within the institution. The requests for reports seem continuous and this reporting mania is consistent with organisations that find themselves in Greiner's phase 4 where a crisis of red tape follows a crisis of control. Technology, such as the email system, eases the requests for reports and increases the reporting mania. It may be argued that coupling technology with command-and-control management styles can lead to inefficiency and a frustrated middle- and lower-management group.

Talk, as a communicative interaction to accomplish strategy work was discussed in section 6.7.2. Findings in this study confirmed the view of Hendry (2000) (discussed in section 3.8.6), that the "talk" in the institution is not only the medium through which decisions are discussed and recorded, but also the medium through which interpretations are developed and expressed and strategic actions initiated, authorised and acknowledged. Findings indicated many opportunities for strategic conversations, both formal and informal. Most of the formal discussions take place at meetings where the informal discussions are mostly unscheduled, ad hoc and initiated at middle management level. What was most noteworthy was the reference to and use of buzz words and weasel words. Although several interviewees testified to the way inclusion of these words in their conversations leads to positive outcomes, others felt that those words have lost their meaning.

Findings of this study confirmed the view of Hoon (2007) discussed in section 3.8.2, that committee-based interactions are pushed forward in informal strategic

conversations. Furthermore, committees are structured and pre-determined means of conducting strategy work. Findings showed that participating academic and non-academic managers organised such discussions on strategic issues in informal interactions around committees, as described in sections 6.7.1.1 and 6.7.3.

Project management was confirmed as a strategy tool, and the findings were discussed in section 6.7.3. In accordance with Söderlund (2004), findings from the current research indicated that, although many of the participants reported using project management, the opinion that inadequate project management leads to failure was also expressed (as discussed in 6.7.3).

The use of workshops and away-days was confirmed as tools to accomplish strategy work, and this was discussed in section 6.7.3. Findings indicated that the majority of workshops address planning and implementation and this confirms the findings of Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006), discussed in section 3.8.4. In line with the findings by Hodgkinson *et al.* (2006), the workshops at Unisa appear to be forums in which the existing experience of managers is brought to bear on issues, rather than new research and analysis and workshop attendants rely on discursive rather than analytical approaches to strategy-making.

Within Unisa, the demand for and use of meetings seem to be endless. Section 6.9.1 describes meetings as enablers to strategy work, but findings also indicated the negative connotation to meetings, as described in section 6.7.2.1. Findings were perceived by some of the managers in this study as unnecessary and robbing middle managers from time that could be used more efficiently elsewhere. Although Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) found that specific meeting practices, such as working groups and rescheduling, create opportunities about strategic decision-making, findings in this study indicated that meetings that are conducted within an hour and less formal meetings enable strategy work (as described in sections 6.7.2 and 6.9.1).

7.6 ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS ON UNIVERSITY MANAGERS STRATEGY WORK

As discussed in section 3.4.4, Mantere (2008) stated that trust by TMT, real or perceived, is an enabling condition. Findings from this study indicated that some managers do trust the TMT, as described in section 6.9.1, which enables middle management's strategic agency. However, for some managers, failure to perceive such trust was also found to be a constraint for other managers, as reported on in section 6.9.2.

Findings confirmed the view of Mantere (2008:308), discussed in section 3.4.2, that top management's responsiveness is a key enabling condition. Participants proclaimed that they did not feel that their input was used and that the TMT mostly did not respond to information provided by middle management. Many instances were described where the TMT expected feedback but did not respond to it, which led to multiple expressions of frustration by middle managers in the interview data.

Descriptions by Interviewees 1, 3, 10, 11 and 15, reflected in sections 6.5.3, 6.9.2, confirmed Westley's (1990) findings (discussed in section 3.5), which showed that middle managers' exclusion from strategy-related conversations led to alienation, lack of motivation to implement strategies and intra-organisational conflict. Furthermore, in accordance with Laine and Vaara (2007) (section 3.5), findings of this study confirmed that non-participative approaches rarely led to the enthusiasm and commitment called for in the implementation of strategies. Furthermore, findings of the current study confirmed findings by Guth and MacMillan (1986), discussed in 3.4.5, that middle managers' perception of their inability to execute a proposed strategy and their perception of the probability that the strategy would work, hinder strategising.

7.7 LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted with due consideration of the requirements for quality, rigour, the research design and methodologies. However, as is the case with much

social science research, this research brought with it inevitable limitations that needed to be considered along with the findings.

The aim of this research was to gather deep data rooted in the organisational realities. As such, one of the limitations of this research is that there can be no claims for generalisation. This research only considered the strategising practices and experiences of a sample of 17 middle managers at Unisa; no other management level was included in the study. Furthermore, the research only offers a description of the text, talk, tools, practices and institutional operations of middle managers and not an evaluation of these constructs to determine their value or efficiency as well. The research findings are positioned within the lived experiences of the selected middle managers and may or may not represent the experiences or views of the entire cadre of middle managers at Unisa, despite the observation of data saturation.

Data saturation was reached during the final stages of the second-order coding. The labour intensity of the data production and analysis, as well as the peer collaboration during the process, translated this research study into a lengthy study and required a disciplined and methodological approach to complete the research in 2012.

Finally, this study is also limited as it presents snapshot-like descriptions representing experiences, practices, views, perceptions and interpretations at one point in time. It may be that at another point in time, the interpretation of the practices would be different.

7.8 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

7.8.1 Research contribution

This study contributes to contemporary organisation theory and social theory and identified the strategic activities reiterated in time by the diverse actors interacting in an organisation context. This study provided micro-level explanations on institutional theory by doing an empirical study, and the findings could help managers to do their work differently. As indicated in Chapter 1, this study contributes to the practical knowledge about middle manager strategising at universities. Findings from this

study described the activities inside the processes and delved deeper into what was actually going on. This study described what individual university middle managers do in the university context.

This study used two fairly young theoretical perspectives to interrogate the middle manager's strategising at a university. The strategy-as-practice perspective and the middle management perspectives may be young compared to strategy process, strategy policy and the top management perspectives, but it nevertheless provides lenses to explore the micro-practices in organisational context.

It was found that the organisational context is comparable to those types of organisations that Mintzberg described in the 1980s. At that stage, Mintzberg claimed that those types of organisations would not exist in the future. Now, three decades after Mintzberg's design school findings, the strategy-as-practice and middle manager perspective not only offers new lenses with which to study the strategising in machine bureaucracies, but also allows for contributions within these two perspectives.

The findings of the current research provided an analysis of how individual middle managers put strategy into practice at a university. The strategising practices of university middle managers were classified as (a) training, (b) collaborating with outside experts and (c) creating systems within systems. The practices of training and creating systems within systems have not been identified in the literature as strategising practices previously. The practice of training may be related to the nature of the institution: a university is responsible for teaching and research. Creating alternative systems to cope could be the direct outcome of the limitations of the tyranny of bureaucracy and its intolerable culture where compliance takes precedence.

This current research illustrated the unique characteristics of the university organisational context in relation to the strategising practices of the middle managers employed in this context. In a command-and-control type of organisation, middle managers are mostly responsible for implementing deliberate strategies. Furthermore, within the constraints inherent to such a command-and-control environment, middle managers create alternative systems to cope. These systems fall outside the official systems of the institution. The support role of middle

managers is also more prominent in such an environment in the form of peer support as well as support to their subordinates.

New theories on middle manager practices and the materiality of strategy work within the university context were developed and described in section 7.4. At the institution used in this case study, which falls within Greiner's (1972) third and fourth phases of organisational growth, the textual artefacts of the overall strategy are abundant. Not only are these textual artefacts circulated throughout the institution, they are also used in budgeting systems, control processes and performance management criteria. Within such a strategy-abundant or strategy-full environment, the actual strategy texts lose meaning and compliance takes precedence over buy-in. Although an abundance of text, talk and tools that reinforces the deliberate strategies and formal planning processes exist within the institution, the demand to carry on with "business as usual" is strong. Furthermore, the fact that so much reinforcement of the deliberate strategies exists does not necessarily mean that the strategies are perceived as good.

New theory on the enablers and constraints of middle managers' strategy work was developed and described in section 7.5. The enablers and constraints identified through this study are grounded within the organisational context of the institution and the operational realities that middle managers face. In a command-and-control environment, which can also be considered a professional bureaucracy, participative decision-making, regular communication (mostly informal), productive meetings concluded within an hour, physical proximity, the mindsets of the individual middle managers, empowerment and trust enable the middle managers' strategising work. The middle managers' strategy work is constrained by the practice of acting in positions for extended periods of time due to limited authority to execute decisions. Another constraint is the organisational culture inherent to this command-and-control environment. Coupled with the organisational culture is the perceived lack of trust and the disempowerment of the middle management layer – the centralised systems within the institution limit the execution of certain tasks because of time-consuming bureaucratic processes and red tape. Finally, this research contributed to the body of knowledge on practically relevant strategising practices. Middle managers provided rich descriptions of their strategising practices, their roles, how they use material aspects in their strategy work and what enables or constrains their strategising work. These descriptions are grounded within the organisational realities. Findings of the

current study were based on rich descriptions of the messy realities of doing strategy in practice and contributed to the understanding of how the work of strategising is organised from a middle-management perspective within a university context.

7.8.2 Recommendations for future research

In answering the research questions of this study, potential research areas for future research were identified.

Universities offer testing grounds for knowledge, and the academic community creates, tests and shares knowledge. By its nature, the academic community questions the status quo of the institution and the world in general, instead of merely accepting it. However, findings in this research pointed towards a widespread acceptance of the status quo of command-and-control and compliance. A potential research area is to investigate if and why such acceptance exists and why the academic community does not stand up against the tyranny of bureaucracy. A possible hypothesis to investigate may originate from the words of Weinberg and Graham-Smith (2012:77):

Evidently the university has lost its mission as the testing-ground of knowledge, historically pursued in specialised areas of study. Academics are opting out of their calling and ... are content to abandon their creativity, to carry on regardless and without due recognition for their efforts, resigned to await the next salary payment.

The chosen institution where the current research was conducted was identified as a machine bureaucracy and its culture is typical that of a command-and-control organisation. This research could be repeated at other institutions of higher learning or professional bureaucracies. Another potential research topic is to investigate how middle managers in similar machine bureaucracies cope. It would be of interest to find out if middle managers in other organisations also create systems within systems in order to cope with operational demands. It would also be interesting to see if the practice of training is common in other organisations.

Another possible research area deals with the materiality of strategy work. Within this study, the abundance of strategy text and talk was established. However, the

counter-productivity of the abundant text and talk was not investigated and this may prove to be an interesting research area. Further, as the use of email communication was described as abundant, another future area of research could be the use of email as a strategy text and the way using emails impacts on strategy. Furthermore, research on the performative effects of the materiality (such as emails, technology and strategy text) of the strategy work at the university context could be done.

In terms of the tools of strategy work, future research within the university context could be done on the interactions between members of the TMT and middle managers at strategic workshops and the way such interaction shapes the outcomes of those workshops.

The enablers and constraints identified in this research could be developed into testable hypotheses with the intent of finding consistencies in the presence of different enablers and constraints in different organisations and environments.

Finally, in line with Geiger (2009), discussed in Chapter 2, a future research study could investigate why and how practices continue to be practices in the institution, the institutionalising power those practices unfold and how those practices are changed. Thus, a future research study could explore how practices are sustained and how they continue to be practiced and also how practitioners speak and reflect upon practices thereby reaching a new and revised understanding of what good practice, in a university context, is.

7.8.3 Recommendations for management

There are good reasons for all involved in strategising to attempt to go beyond the traditional top-down approaches and to search actively for ways to encourage participation – even in situations where the interests of particular actors may seem contradictory.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that managers' involvement in various facets of the strategy process enhances their knowledge, understanding and support of strategy. As such, professional bureaucracies cannot rely on the conventional prescriptive approaches to strategy-making, whether design, planning or positioning school-oriented, but must instead tilt toward the learning end of the continuum,

developing strategies that are more emergent in nature through processes that have a grass-roots orientation (Hardy, Langley, Mintzberg & Rose, 1984; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985).

The practice of appointing managers in acting positions for extended periods has been identified as a constraint in section 7.5 and this practice may need to be reconsidered. Although there are inherent benefits of acting in certain positions, such as skills development and job enrichment, the researcher is of the opinion that the complications, as described in Chapter 6, associated with acting outweigh the benefits.

The organisational culture at the institution depicted in the case study is not an enabling culture. Literature cautions that changing the organisational culture is an extremely difficult and lengthy process. Middle managers could play an important role in efforts to adapt the organisational culture. However, Beer, Eisenstat and Spector (1993) argue that, to bring about cultural change, the organisational context (people's roles, responsibilities and the relationships between them) needs to change first, which will result in changed behaviour and associated attitudes. This view of cultural change rests on the assumption that changing organisational structures, systems and role relationships, which comprise the formal aspects of organisational life, will bring about desired cultural changes. Chapter 4 described the development of a high-level discussion document on an organisational architecture for Unisa for a digital future. In this document, Baijnath (2012:1–26) admits that the current organisational architecture is not adequate to take advantage of the new possibilities that have emerged. The recommendations to management, based on the findings of this study, support the call by Baijnath (2012:26) for a great deal of support and communication to deal with the strategic changes. The perceived lack of trust between TMT and middle managers warrants further attention.

7.9 RESEARCH CONCLUSION

The rationale for choosing the current research topic was two-fold: firstly, to develop theory on how middle managers do strategy within a university context and secondly, to contribute to practically relevant research through deep data gathering from micro-level activities that lead to strategic outcomes. This research set out to expand the body of knowledge in terms of middle manager practices in the strategising process in general, and made a contribution at the frontiers of middle manager activity at a university context in South Africa. This research fell within the not-for-profit sector and used a qualitative research approach to investigate the strategising practices of middle managers as strategy practitioners. This research confirmed that strategy and strategising are human actions and confirmed that knowledge of what people do in relation to the strategies of organisations is required.

Figure 19 depicts the research conducted from Chapters 1 to 7.

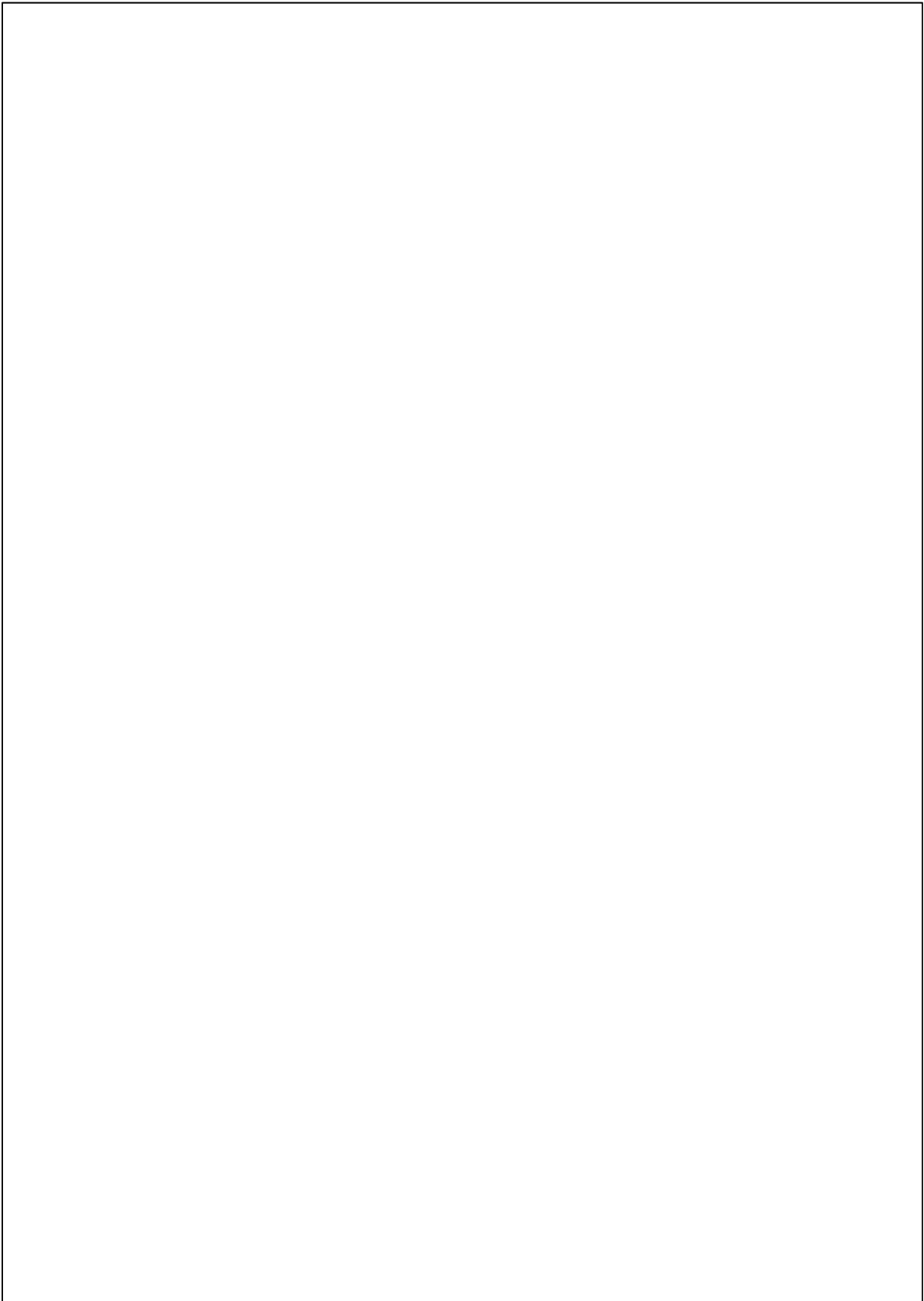


Figure 19: The research conducted in this study

Source: Own compilation

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APPENDIX A

Informed consent for participation in an academic research study

DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Research conducted by:

Mrs A Davis (33824231)

Cell: 082 871 9767

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in an academic research study conducted by Annemarie Davis, a Doctoral student from the Department of Business Management at Unisa. The purpose of the study is to examine the strategising practices of middle managers, within a university context.

Please note the following:

- This study involves anonymous in-depth interviews. Your name will not appear in the interview guide and the answers you give will be treated as strictly confidential. You cannot be identified in person based on the answers you give.
- Your participation in this study is very important to us. You may, however, choose not to participate and you may also stop participating at any time without any negative consequences.
- Please answer the questions during the interview as completely and honestly as possible. This should not take more than 1.5 hours of your time.
- The results of the study will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in an academic journal. We will provide you with a summary of our findings on request.
- Please contact my supervisor, Prof. Mari Jansen van Rensburg on 012 429 8357 or jvrenm@unisa.ac.za, if you have any questions or comments regarding the study.

Please sign the form to indicate that:

- You have read and understand the information provided above.
- You give your consent to participate in the study on a voluntary basis.

Respondent's signature

Date