Upholding ACCA Platinum Approved Learning Partner Status using a Strategic Modelling Approach: A Case Study of ZCAS

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Abstract

Purpose: *The purpose of this paper is to explore an aspect of strategic modelling in relation to the problem of* ***upholding the ACCA "Platinum Approved Learning Partner Status"*** *as an ACCA Approved Learning Partner.*

Methodology: *The paper identifies, justifies, and evaluates the strategic problem, and why strategic modelling would aid understanding the nature of the problem and development of its solution using semi-structured interviews with key staff involved in the delivery and management of ACCA programmes. Modelling methods in particular, the Systems Soft Methodology (SSM) has been used.*

Findings: *An understanding of the purpose and nature of models used as "Tools for Thinking" in the overall context of strategic thinking and strategic decision making has been developed. It provides a deeper understanding of the modalities that may be involved in finding a possible solution to upholding the ACCA "Platinum Approved Learning Partner Status", considering a number of challenges or limitations in the quality and assurance control process. A synthesis of relevant strategic modelling methods has been outlined, leading to the identification and justification of the strategic modelling method used in this article. The strategic problem "unstructured" and "expressed" has been explained and how rich pictures could lead to the structuring has been outlined. A root definition has been developed leading to the development of a conceptual model that has been used to carry out comparison between the system world and the real world. Also outlined is the effectiveness of the chosen method in improving the understanding of the business problem and possible solution. However, it is noted that strategic modelling models do not guarantee success, but they do represent a clear and practical approach to formulating, implementing and evaluating strategies.*

Research limitations: *The research uses strategic modelling in addressing the problem, among other options.*

Practical implications: *The practical implications are mainly those relating to recommendations arising from the Systems World Model compared with The Conceptual Activities in the real world in terms of the required quality control aspects not being done. For instance, there is the need to set official standards to compare practice against observed when it comes to information required for monitoring and controlling. Once done, the ACCA 'PALP' status would be easily achievable.*

Originality value: *There are numerous articles on strategic modelling as a decision making tool. Nonetheless, the author has not come across a study that speaks to how upholding the ACCA PALP could be modelled. It is hoped that much value could be gained from publications such as this.*

Key words: *ACCA, Conceptual Model, ACCA Approved Learning Partner, Platinum Approved Learning Provider, Learning Provider, Strategic Modelling, Systems Soft Methodology, Cognitive Mapping, ZCAS.*

Paper type: *Research paper.*

1.0 Introduction

Problem solving techniques such as strategic modelling have been used by strategic level managers to find solutions to problems affecting their institutional strategic direction. Nilsson (2008) and Bolanos *et al.*, (2005) used interpretive structural modelling and analogising respectively in strategic decision-making. According to Nilsson (2008), the use of analogy occurs in problem setting, problem solving, actions and sense making modes. On the other hand, Bolanos et al., (2005) notes that in order to improve group decision making, interpretive structural modelling could be used in the clarification of the perception of different individuals in a managerial group.

Similarly, Attri *et al.,* (2013) used interpretive structural modelling as a means to identifying relationships among specific items, which define a problem or an issue whereas Singh and Kant (2008) used it to demonstrate knowledge management barriers. Premised on the above understanding, interpretive structural modelling could act as a panacea for strategic modelling. It works on the basis of identifying and organising variables and it leads to the development of a model. In certain cases, partial solutions could be found and implemented based on the preferred problem-solving technique; whereas in certain cases, a total failure could arise from poor strategic choices or ineffective problem-solving techniques.

It is also true that providing timely solutions to strategic problems in turbulent environments is cardinal to gaining a competitive advantage for any organization. Mitroff (1999 cited in Keating, *et al.*, 2001, p. 772) suggests that since real problems are unstructured and arbitrarily bounded, their resolution requires systemic inquiry. Harrison and Pelletier (2001) have demonstrated that a process model of decision making is conducive to strategic decision success and also they acknowledge that decisions are highly complex and involve a host of dynamic variables. The notion of bounded rationality as proposed by Simon (1969; 1979; and 1982 cited in Harrison & Pelletier, 2001 p. 171) and alluded to by Pidd (2005), acknowledges the limitations in human rationality, especially when operating in conditions of uncertainty and risk.

This paper provides a deeper understanding of the modalities that may be involved in finding a possible solution to upholding the "Platinum Approved Learning Partner" of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), considering a number of quality issues to be adhered to. It develops an understanding of the purpose and nature of models as "tools for thinking" in the overall context of strategic thinking and strategic decision making. As part of problem structuring, the strategic problem in question has been justified. Pidd (2005) writes that it carries with it the idea that problems are malleable and can be modelled into a variety of shapes and forms and that we need methods to increase our success (Smith, 1968 & 1989 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 66). According to John Dewey, a problem well put is half-solved.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Identification and evaluation of the business problem

In a bid to ensure quality control and assurance in the delivery of ACCA courses, ACCA has levels of accreditation namely, the "Platinum Status", "Gold Status" and Silver Status of which the "Platinum Status" award is the highest (ACCAGLOBAL, 2014). The achievement of "Platinum Status" is not an end in itself by holding on to this prestigious accreditation but

a beginning to a rigorous and continuous process of ensuring a firm adherence to the demands that go with the award. ACCA Approved Learning Partners such as ZCAS are required to demonstrate that they can go an extra mile in managing their institution and delivering ACCA courses that really give students the tuition access and support they need to become ACCA members (ACCAGLOBAL, 2014).

Platinum performance targets cut across a number of aspects ranging from acceptable premises and facilities, monitoring of students, quality delivery by lecturers and ultimately culminating into accepted pass rates. According to ACCAGLOBAL (2014), the performance targets for premises and facilities aim to ensure that the standards of a Platinum ALP exceed the Gold approval targets.

The premises should be designed to support students' learning experience and actively encourage a learning environment, meaning that premises and facilities should be modern and well-maintained and designed to meet the needs of students. The need to know the students, monitoring their academic performance and discipline, and ensuring that lecturers are able to deliver the lectures, bearing in mind the expected quality requirements are cardinal to ensuring acceptable pass rates that are normally above ACCA worldwide average pass rates.

In the recent past, ZCAS underwent massive expansion of its premises and learning facilities, culminating in the increase in hostel accommodation, lecture theatres, classrooms, e-library, video conferencing facility, and expanded car park and computer laboratories among others (ZCAS 2011). While the premises and facilities meet the required standards by and large, the expansion has led to increased students' enrolment numbers and also added operational costs. The need to further adhere to quality control and assurance standard has even become more challenging than before thereby threatening the other parameters such as: monitoring students' performance and academic discipline; possible deterioration of pupil to lecturer ratio, library space per student, computer laboratory space per student, and lecturer contact time per student.

With a slight laxity in the monitoring of these parameters, pass rates are likely to deteriorate and lecturers demotivated due to work overload. Oakland (2007) writes that when people are treated like machines, work becomes uninteresting and unsatisfying thus it is not possible to expect quality service and reliable products. However, increased enrolment is a positive development that will increase ZCAS revenue base aimed at covering its operational expenses. Nonetheless, the challenge for ZCAS is to consistently *uphold the ACCA "Platinum Status"* awarded for providing quality tuition and producing results that exceed the world–average pass rates (ACCA GLOBAL, 2014). The strategic problem is therefore stated:

How to uphold the "Platinum ALP Status" given the stringent monitoring of student academic performance and discipline and the quality delivery of lectures but also to capitalize on high levels of enrolment as a result of improved premises and learning facilities for an increased revenue base intended to cover high operational costs.

2.2 Why a strategic problem for ZCAS?

While the "Platinum ALP Status" of accreditation has given ZCAS a strategic advantage, much more needs to be done to ensure its sustainability. For ZCAS, the "Platinum ALP

Status" is a distinctive achievement that confers a competitive superior internal strength (Thompson *et al.,* 2014). ZCAS is among six (6) institutions in Africa holding this level of accreditation other than Ghana, Mauritius, Kenya (2), Botswana and Uganda. Nonetheless, ZCAS is not a grant-aided institution and therefore it should work towards raising sufficient funds to cover its operational costs.

At the moment, management has no intention to initiate a substantial cost reduction strategy, considering that the current cost structure is inevitable. Similarly, tuition fees can only be increased up to a certain level in order to remain competitive. Quality control is a continuous process that requires continuous monitoring in order to adhere to the required quality standards (Oakland 2007). The problem at hand if not addressed, can render the required quality standards to deteriorate to unacceptable levels, and the "Platinum ALP Status" can be withdrawn, which can lead to the loss of students to other competitors. This is likely to impact on future revenues, cash flow and ultimately the bottom line. It may also pose a change management problem that may need to be resolved.

Counsel *et al.,* (2005) write that change management has by necessity, become a core competence in its own right, as an organization's means of improving what it does best. Change is no longer an option; it needs to be managed otherwise it will manage you (Counsel *et al*., 2005). The need to be proactive by knowing where we are and where we need to be therefore arises. Abraham Lincoln said, *"if we know where we are and something about how we get there, we might see where we are trending – and if the outcomes which lie naturally in our course are unacceptable, to make timely change".* The problem is more to do with the direction of the Centre in as far as upholding the prestigious award of "Platinum Status" is concerned and it requires top management's commitment and resolve.

2.3 Strategic modelling aiding problem understanding and solution

Strategic Modelling can assist strategic formulation and evaluation. As a Management Science, it deals with human activity systems that could be soft or hard. Lehaney & Vinten (1994) did analyse and provide the meaning and use of methodology. Fisher & Delbridge (2007), Wang & Ahmed (2003) and Kirk (1995) further distinguish "soft and hard" systems in detail. Strategic modelling methods may tackle problems from different perspectives though some may have both quantitative and qualitative characteristics such as systems dynamics that acts as a bridge between interpretive and mathematical and logical modelling and through their use, risks and uncertainty could be managed.

Strategic models are "tools for thinking" and can be used to leverage human thought and analysis. Similarly, strategic problems are long-term and unstructured, thus modelling could assist us to discover the long-term solution to the problems of the business. Pidd (2005) writes that models are convenient worlds and simplified abstraction of reality, thus modelling attempts to make sense of strategic vision. It is said that "if you do not know where you are going, then any road will lead you there" (Leavitt). Boothroyd (1978 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 1) writes that models are part of a process of "reflection before action".

Strategic modelling can therefore aid in coping with change and turbulence (Pidd, 2005), especially that the teaching and learning environment is continuously changing. Currently, ACCA has proposed a change in the delivery of lectures and writing of examinations. The pendulum is swinging towards computer-based examinations (ACCA GLOBA, 2014). In this increasingly complex and interconnected world, strategic modelling can be used to explore

the possible consequences of decisions and plans before taking any action. Pidd (2005) writes that when we model, we put reality into context as a model represents reality and it is intended for some definite purpose.

According to Pidd (2005), we can use critical questioning such as "what and why? When and how? Where and who?" to structure and frame the problem. Spray diagrams suggested by Fortune & Peter (1995 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 76); Rich picture and root definitions defined in Checkland's seven-stage Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) and as alluded to by other scholars could also be used (Patel 1995; Platt & Warwick 1995; Sculli & Ho, 1994; Fisher & Delbridge, 2007). According to Patel (1995) SSM provides a structured and systematic approach for analysing human activity systems such as the problem being addressed. Organization charts and linear programming of optimization, cognitive maps in form of influence diagrams can be drawn after carrying out interviews. This can assist people to think through the options that they face.

Pidd (2005) considers brainstorming as an important principle of successful problem-solving if over-simplification and over-elaboration are to be avoided. According to Gilhooly (1988 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 78), brainstorming allows more ideas to be produced before their evaluation, thus a greater chance of finding a solution. Where the human brain cannot cope with the modelling, computer software could be used such as XPress-MP, LINDO, CPLEX, Excel solver, among others.

Simulations can also be carried out using VIMS to model problems of uncertain nature and their solutions cannot be optimized. If the problem has to be optimized, linear programming could be used. The strategic problem at hand could be solved within the above given scope. However, David (2005, p. 13) writes and indicates that Strategic Management Models do not guarantee success, but they do represent a clear and practical approach to formulating, implementing, and evaluating strategies.

2.4 Critical evaluation and justification of modelling methods

Pidd (2005) categorised modelling into two parts: Interpretive modelling in relation to soft management science and mathematical and logical modelling. The former includes SSM, Cognitive mapping, Strategic Options Development and Analysis (SODA) and Journey Making and System dynamics. The later includes optimization modelling; visual interactive modelling, and heuristic research. Most of the models, if not all, have some relevance to the problem at hand depending on the approach. In order to identify and justify the type of strategic modelling, a synthesis of two relevant modelling methods to the problem at hand has been done bearing in mind that other models could also be applicable, depending on the direction for decision making.

2.4.1 Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)

The SSM that was developed by Checkland (1981 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 113) uses systems ideas within human organizations to help human beings make changes and understand their effects. According to Patel (1995), SSM provides a structured and systematic approach for analysing human activity systems organised to pursue a given purpose. It is used in soft problems where they cannot be formulated and stated precisely. Patel (1995) further writes that the SSM is a unique methodology because it enables the analyst to embark on a process

of learning about the real world situation being investigated, while simultaneously seeking to improve it by analysing the situation within the paradigm of soft systems thinking and suggesting recommendations for further action to improve the problem situation.

The SSM also incorporates the concepts of wholeness (holistic approach) of the system and hierarchy. The conceptual model includes a controlling activity for taking monitoring and control action. The use of rich picture and root definition approaches to modelling enables the problem to be structured. SSM has some links to cultural analysis and the problem at hand has some cultural implications. Thus, according to Platt & Warwick (1995), SSM deals with problem formulation at the strategic level.

SSM allows the development of a conceptual model that ensures that peoples' perception are captured in terms that fit the notions of open system in the belief that this is an effective way to design human activities systems in the real world. A comparison of this conceptual model, with its real world equivalent, identifies a number of things which could be done to bring the real world closer to the conceptual model.

According to Fisher & Delbridge (2007), the use of SSM assists people in the situation to gain holistic understanding, and learning can be shared and innovation can be explored. One of the key features of SSM is that it reduces the chances of incorrect identification of the problem. However, SSM focuses much less on the problem and more about defining what the system should do, how it should behave, and so on.

The process of consultation and involvement also introduces an element of iteration, where changes evolve in a number of steps and with the consensus of all those involved. SSM is also criticized for providing little guidance about how such conflict or disagreement might be handled. However, it can still be used with other modelling interpretive models such as Cognitive or SODA and systems dynamics.

2. 4.2 Cognitive mapping/ Strategic Options Development and Analysis (SODA) methodology

This method helps to construct the maps and to guide the group towards joint understanding and agreement. The root of cognitive mapping lies in Cognitive psychology, the discipline that tries to understand how humans think and make sense of their experiences. Eden's approach is to use a cognitive map as a way of capturing people's views so as to develop an explicit model of them. The idea is that the analyst must interview people in a semi-directed way and try to sketch out a map of their thinking that represents the concept that they use and how they are linked together.

Eden works on the notion equation of Outcome = Process x Content and says concentration must be on both (Pidd 2005). SODA and cognitive mapping view is that of individualistic approach. Each of the individuals is assumed to hold views on what is happening to them and about what they would like to see happen. The idea of cognitive mapping is to model those perceptions and desires (Pidd 2005).

The analyst works with the "sense making system" which people use rather than with the world as the analyst sees it. Hence the stress is upon linked constructs, which are psychologically based rather than logically based. However, its use of arrows is similar to the arrows in a conceptual model that show the inter-dependence of activities. A cognitive mapping uses a software support for mapping due to the map consisting of a large number of

constructs that cannot be handled by hand. Tyler (2001) considered cognitive mapping as a tool to support strategic management and concludes that it provides a valuable tool in assisting managers to think through issues of strategy. Through mapping sessions conducted, a variety of 'what if' questions could be explored and cognitive maps are a good foundation on which to build.

2.5 Criticism of management science

One criticism of management science is that though valuable at a tactical level, many of the methods and techniques turn out to be of limited value at the strategic level in most organizations. The problem at hand cuts across both tactical and strategic levels of management and this has been taken into account in arriving at the proposed solution. As such, the SSM seems much more probable and has been employed to dissect the identified problem and used to develop a conceptual model for the process of upholding the "Platinum ALP Status" of accreditation. Although the other methodologies could be appropriate for this strategic problem, the SSM is preferred.

3.0 Research question and methodology

Arising from the need for strategic modelling and the justification of the strategic problem, the following research question has been adopted:

"How can the "Platinum ALP Status" be upheld given the stringent monitoring of student academic performance and discipline and the quality delivery of lectures; and also how can we capitalize on high levels of enrolment resulting from improved premises and learning facilities for an increased revenue base in order to cover high operational costs?"

In terms of methodology, a qualitative inductive approach was used based on the available ACCA guidelines on upholding the "Platinum ALP Status" and interview of managers managing ACCA programmes at ZCAS. A purposive sample was used based on key managers managing ACCA programmes at ZCAS. These have adequate insight into the ACCA requirements leading upholding the Platinum ALP Status. The interviews were qualitatively analysed and results incorporated in the conceptual model. The fact that ZCAS already enjoys the Platinum ALP Status and availability of ACCA guidelines eliminated any biasness in the reported results. Arising from the literature review, particularly the analysis of some available problem solving models, the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) has been used to model the strategic problem and a conceptual model developed to illustrate how ZCAS may be able to achieve greater efficiencies in terms of problem-solving and ultimately achieving the "Platinum ALP Status".

4.0 Analysis and results

Based on the ACCA guidelines, the interviews and chosen model, the strategic problem has been analysed using the Seven Stages of Checkland's methodology (Fisher & Delbridge, 2007; Pidd, 2005; Platt & Warwick, 1995 and Sculli & Ho, 1994). It depicts both systems thinking and the real word. Forthwith, a Conceptual Model has been developed.

SSM Stages 1 & 2

These stages deal with an unstructured situation and they express it by providing a means to structuring it. It looks at different perceptions of why the intervention is needed and what it is that appears to be going on. To do this, more information is needed. In our strategic problem, we need information from students, administrative staff, lecturers and top management, ACCA and outsourced persons. Nonetheless, getting a complete picture from all these sources may pose some difficulties. To overcome these difficulties, a rich picture, spray diagrams or brainstorming sessions could be used.

According to Patel (1995), rich picture contains both appropriate symbols for real world activities and words, and it is an attempt to express the area of concern. This allows different people to see the strategic problem in various perspectives and ultimately arrive at some defined point. Checkland argues that in aspects of the situation such as the one being studied, it is crucial to consider the *structure* of the situation, the *process* aspects of the situation and the *climate* of the situation.

Furthermore, Checkland & Scholes (1990 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 124) suggested three analyses to be performed during the finding out stage of people occupying various roles (would-be problem-solver, client, and problem owner), social system, and political system. However, Patel (1995) writes that its development may not be necessary to formulate the root definition.

SSM Stage 3: Root definition:

This structures the rich picture to enable further systematic analysis. It adds structure to the area of concern. The following root definition is thus formulated:

A *quality control and assurance requirement system with stringent monitoring of both academic performance and discipline and the delivery of quality lectures, maximum contact between lecturers and students while enjoying the "Platinum ALP Status" subject to the availability of modern and well-maintained premises and facilities meeting both ZCAS and ACCA required quality standards taking into account cultural changes in staff members.*

The acronym CATWOE stands for Customer, Actor, Transformation, Weltanshauug (world view), Owner and the Environment is used to determine its suitability (Fisher & Delbridge 2007; Pidd 2005; Patel 1995; Platt & Warwick 1995). Difficulties may arise in justifying the CATWOE, but the transformation process and worldview are critical. However, through proper identification of CATWOE as an input-output system, they may be overcome.

From our strategic problem the customers are ZCAS and ACCA; the actors are lecturers, students, administrative staff and outsourced persons; the system is owned by ZCAS and it operates under lecturing conditions and environment; the transformation is to deliver quality control and assurance requirements to an acceptable level and the world view being the need to adhere to quality control and assurance requirement and uphold the "Platinum ALP Status". However, different people may have different perspectives of the system and would want to approach the problem in a different way thus making things complicated.

Stage 4: Conceptual model:

This is developed from a root definition and represented diagrammatically as interconnections of the activities that must be present for the root definition to make sense. In our strategic problem, it entails including in the quality control and assurance system undertakings within the realm of systems thinking and not in the real world domain. It includes activities within the bounds of the defined system.

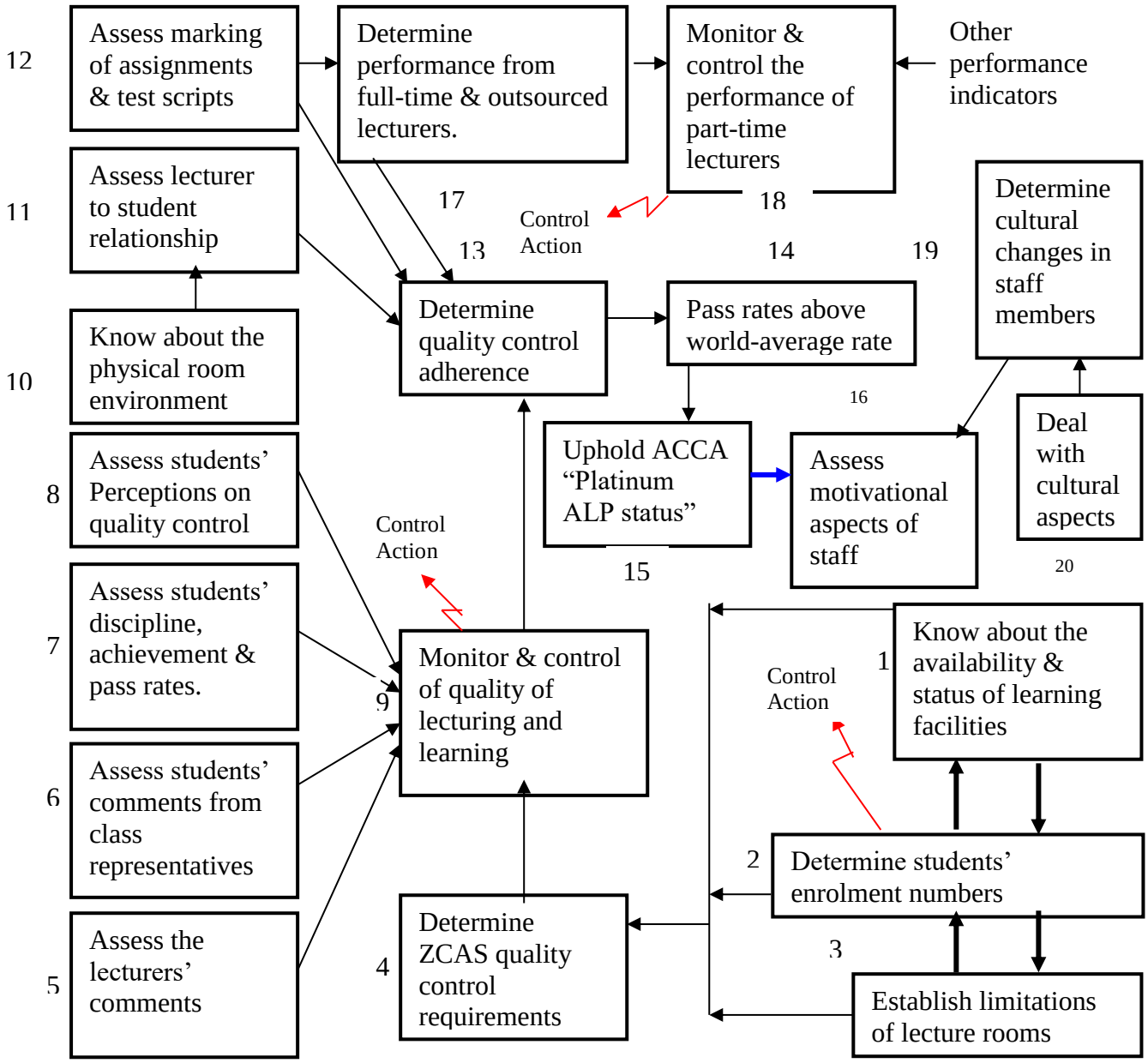
This is represented in **Figure 4.1 below** and contains 20 activities to assist the system achieve its purpose. More activities have been used contrary to Checkland and Scholes (1990 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 130). However, Pidd (2005) has justified it due to inclusion of monitoring and control activities. The arrows depict the logical dependence between two activities.

Activities are being continually performed as quality control and assurance requirement is a continuous process. Controlling and monitoring activities are included in three places to facilitate the meeting of quality control and assurance standards. For instance, in a sub-system numbered 1, 2, and 3, activities depend on each other but the control action may apply to any of the activities and ensure that quality information is obtained to assist in determining ZCAS quality control and assurance requirements.

The difficulty may arise due to the feedback control loop that may delay the information flow. Enhanced effective communication could overcome this. The monitoring and controlling activity relating to activities 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 ensures that quality control and assurance is adhered to and where not, control action needs to be taken. The last one is concerned with the measure of performance of part-time lecturers and the bold arrow depicts information flow.

Most difficulties concern information flow that may be overcome by providing specific and precise guidelines. Activity 20 may bring difficulties as any proposed change impacts cultural issues and may also impact on motivation. A change management activity is built in the conceptual model. Additional difficulties may be encountered in the model as quality control and assurance is a continuous process and therefore it needs continuous efforts. However, Pidd (2005) writes that the conceptual model can be evaluated using Checkland's "three Es", efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Figure 4.1: Conceptual Model of the process of upholding the "Platinum ALP Status" of Accreditation



Stage 5: Comparison with real world

The conceptual model has been completed and the real world of quality control requirements is compared with the system world. Patel (1995) writes that the comparison is between the real world, where the area of concern exists and, the systems world where the root definitions and conceptual models have been built. Checkland (1981 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 132) suggested four ways of doing this and the model overlays approach that attempts to compare the detail of the conceptual model with the detail of what it is, has been used here and is depicted in **Table 4.1 below**.

This has been done activity by activity as a way of thinking through what action and changes may be needed. Pidd (2005) alludes to the difficulty that may arise as a result of crossing the

boundary from systems thinking to the real world, i.e. re-entering a world in which considerations other than just the cerebral and logical apply. This difficulty, according to Checkland and Scholes (1990 cited in Pidd 2005, p. 133) can be overcome by maintaining both the logic–driven and the cultural enquiry streams. If the conceptual model is not developed well, its implementation may not overcome the desirable demands of commitment and agreement. Pidd (2005) therefore stresses the maintenance of the enquiry levels with a special vigilance.

Table 4.1: Activities in Systems World Model Compared With The Conceptual Activities in the Real World.

Activity	**Exist or not**	**Present mechanism**	**Measure of performance**	**Recommendation**	**Comments**
1. Know about the availability of learning facilities.	Yes	Availability of data on classrooms and other facilities in place.	Are ratio calculations done? Lecturer to student, space per student, pass rate	Continued analysis of ratios	This is done to some extent but calls for more proactivity.
2. Determine students' enrolment numbers.	Yes	Existing registers but requires constant flow of information from accounts & lecturers to update them.	Are enrolments determined? How are they determined?	Continued reporting on progress on student numbers	This is done at the moment though some level of accuracy is required.
3. Establish limitations of lecture rooms.	Partially	Done by Directors in conjunction with Estate manager	Space availability	Establish mechanism for additional space for students.	This is done at present
4. Determine ZCAS quality control requirement.	Yes	Quality control systems in place but experience lapses	Are quality control requirements being delivered?	Set standards for quality control requirements.	This is done at present
5. Assess the lecturers' comments.	Yes	Done by Executive & Directors	Peer review	Continue monitoring.	This is done
6. Assess students' comments from class representatives.	Yes	Done by HoPs & Coordinators through class representatives	Review comments	Enhance students' interactions with lecturers.	This is done through class representatives/lecturers meetings.
7. Assess students' discipline, achievement & pass rates.	Yes	Done formally by lecturers, HoPs and Directors	Lecturers' feedback	Assess overall results in line with world – pass rates and discipline levels	This is done at end of semester and release of results.
8. Assess students; perceptions on quality control.	Yes	Done both informally & formally through appraisals	Students' comments	A procedure for getting feedback to be established possibly through a	This is being done but not effective.

				whistle blowing & suggestion boxes	
9. Monitor & control of quality of lecturing and learning.	Yes	Informally through students' representative, formally through appraisals of pass rates for each course taught	Students' comments and peer review	Determine what information would be required for monitoring and controlling.	This is done but needs to be enhanced
10. Know about the physical room environment.	Yes	Through class representatives, Care Taker & lecturers	Look at number of complaints & actions taken	Obtain updates from lecturers, students', suggestion boxes and Care Taker	This is done informally and through meetings in SMG

Activity	**Exist/Not Exist**	**Present mechanism**	**Measure of Performance**	**Recommendations**	**Comments**
11. Assess lecturer to student relationship.	Partially	Informally by individual lecturer	Are ratio calculations done? Lecturer to student, space per student, pass rate, etc.	Establish assessment criteria that befits quality control requirements	This is done at present but overlooked in certain cases
12. Assess marking of assignments & test scripts.	Yes	Individual lecturer initiative	Lecturers feedback	Establish assessment criteria for marking	This has been done but needs to be reviewed
13. Determine quality control adherence.	Yes	Formal assessments done	Are Adherence standards determined?	Continuous Assessment efforts	This has been done and continues to be done
14. Pass rates above world-average rate.	Yes	Analysed & computed from published results.	Are average world-pass rate determined	Continued assessment efforts	This has been done
15. Uphold ACCA "Platinum status"	Yes	Uphold quality standards	Means of upholding quality standards	Continued updates on requirements to follow.	This is being done and continued to be done in line with guidelines
16. Assess motivational aspects of staff.	Partially	Formally through meetings	Determine behaviour exhibited by staff	Create an avenue for grievances resolution.	Done on an individual basis but may need to be extended to groups
17. Determine performance from outsourced lectures.	Subjective	None	Examine work done in line with set standards.	Set standards for outsourced work	This is done but needs enhancement

18. Monitor & control the performance of part-time lecturers.	Partially	Informally, based on students' appraisal, register signing	Adherence to work requirements	Determine what information would be required for monitoring and controlling.	No official standard has been set yet to compare practice against observed
19. Determine cultural changes in staff members.	No	Informally	Able to work satisfactorily in line with set ethics and beliefs	An avenue to be created for lecturers and students'.	Meetings are conducted in which lecturers air their views. Students' meetings also done
20. Deal with cultural changes.	No	None	Efforts to change behaviour, attitude & character	Initiate change models aimed at overcoming cultural changes	Done partially through communications to staff but needs much more than this.

Stages 6 & 7: Implementing visible and desirable changes

This is a point of pay–off to ZCAS and may not be straightforward. These stages are considered to be part of the real world cyclical activity. One expected outcome should be the learning that accrues as a result of the study. Changes may be recommended either on a large scale or on a smaller scale. It is more to do with investigations of the structure, processes, and business climate. Effectively, this culminates in high quality control and more pass rates.

4.4.2 Effectiveness of chosen methods

The construction of rich picture makes it easier to estimate and retain information and provide an overview of the area of concern. The method deals with various root definitions to examine various perspectives that people have. Various conceptual models can also be built and compared with the real world area of concern.

Thus, a deeper understanding of the quality control and assurance requirement system is gained and appropriate action can be taken to improve that process. Conceptual modelling is used as an intellectual activity and it acts as a tool for self-analysis for the effective practitioner in an education environment like ZCAS. It enables clarifications to take place of what needs to be done to achieve certain objectives. This is not always possible in other forms of problem resolution.

In addition to identifying the activities, they are also sequenced in logical order. It provides recommendations aimed at improving the existing system as could be observed from Table 4.2 where 20 recommendations have been arrived at. Though SSM solves problems concerned with efficiency and effectiveness involving the use of highly complex modern technologies in human organizations, it is not limited as it emphasizes on human activity systems.

It focuses on problems that cannot be formulated and stated precisely (soft problem). In addition, it is unique because it enables the analyst to embark on a process of learning about the real world situation being investigated, while simultaneously seeking to improve it by analysing the situation within the paradigm of soft systems thinking and suggesting recommendations for further action to improve the problem situation.

SSM incorporates a fundamental concept of wholeness of a system. It views the defined human activity systems under investigation as more than just the sum of its parts, and requires the analyst to take a holistic approach. It also incorporates a concept of hierarchy, meaning that a given soft problem, or real world area of concern can be viewed at different levels of resolution, with each level being defined by the emergent property of the system at that particular level. This improves understanding and possible solution of the problem.

SSM defines a system as a set of entities related to each other and pursuing given purposeful activity or activities (Gasson, 1994). Consequently, communication between the related entities is important in order to ensure they are all working towards the stated purpose. The achievement of the stated purpose or purposes is further regulated explicitly by the inclusion of a controlling activity in the conceptual model. The aim of this activity is to monitor relevant activities and compare them with predetermined performance criteria, and to take appropriate control action such as ensure the achievement of the stated purpose or purposes. SSM is action-oriented and it is used to understand better and possibly, to improve things.

5.0 Conclusion and recommendations

Paton (1985 cited in Sculli & Ho 1994, p. 56) suggests that the essence of managing is the ability to deal effectively with problems. And so, problems themselves are social constructs, meaning that effective problem-solving and management can only be conducted after the problem context embodying the individual problems has been well understood. Based on SSM, a model has been developed and the problem structured through a root definition and a conceptual framework that facilitates the comparison of the systems world and the real world activities. This acts as a strategic solution for the strategic problem that ZCAS has.

Recommendations have been framed and included as part of the Conceptual Model in Figure 4.2. However, it should be noted that the quality control requirements and attaining above world-average pass rates in order to uphold the Platinum ALP Status can as well be achieved using many other models such as Cognitive mapping, SODA , among others. It is recommended that these options be explored as well in future write-ups.

The paper signifies that the SSM is a relevant technique that can be used to in finding a possible solution to a strategic problem such as the one for ZCAS of upholding the Platinum ALP Status.

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