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Suitability-Acceptability-Feasibility Assessment and Product/Market Evaluation of Strategic Business Options for Managing Higher Education in Nigeria

Amadi Alolote Ibim[1], Amieye Dapiriteye[2,*]

Abstract

In the management of higher education in Nigeria, strategic assessment is vital to the long term growth of universities as organizations of higher education. It is therefore necessary for universities as business entities to identify and evaluate strategic options for their future growth and diversification of their business portfolio. For this study, the SAF (Suitability-Acceptability-Feasibility) criteria were used to evaluate two options for the strategic management of higher education, using the case of Rivers State University (RSU). This was in view of RSU's strategic position, whereby several short/long-term growth opportunities present themselves for further consideration. The identification of options was based on a TOWS Matrix, a derivative from a SWOT analysis, which arraigned several strategic options. The TOWS Matrix combined external/internal factors in turns, to generate two potential options that capitalize on strengths to exploit opportunities/minimize vulnerability to threats s in the external environment and minimize internal weaknesses to avoid threats/take advantage of opportunities. Option 1 was to expand the available academic programs into the distance learning market, while Option 2 was to consolidate and expand market the share of post graduate programs via economics of scope. The selection of a final option was further underpinned by the application of Ansoff's product/market matrix, which prioritized option 1, based on market benefits. Beyond market benefits, the selection of option 1 was informed by its secondary effect for boosting other elements of the portfolio/functions of the University, including option 2. From the perspective of Porter's generic competitive strategies, for option-1, RSU can potentially achieve cost-leadership and acquire a sizable share of Nigeria's Higher Education online market, which is currently in more active demand. Online market expansion fills a major strategic gap/ blue ocean unfolding in Nigeria's Public Higher Education sector.

Keywords: Business Portfolio, Higher Education; Market Evaluation, Strategic Options

INTRODUCTION

An organization's strategic position defines its competitive stance relative to its micro/macro-external environment [1]. There are apparent layers of industry competitiveness, which frames an organization's ability to expand and grow its business portfolio [2]. Internally, there is room for improvement/reconfiguration to promote organic growth, in sync with external environmental changes [3].

***Author for Correspondence**
Amadi Alolote Ibim
E-mail: amadialolote@yahoo.com

[1]Lecturer, Department of Quantity Surveying, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria
[2]Ph.D Researcher, Department of Educational Management, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Rivers state University (RSU) is used as a case study to showcase and practically demonstrate how a systematic evaluation of strategic options can be carried out within the context of higher education in Nigeria. Given RSU's current strategic position, organic growth via synergistic diversification and expansion/restructuring is necessary to retain/fully capitalize on business opportunities. This requires forbearance relative to immediate competitors, and financial strength to cross-subsidize weaker areas of program portfolio.

It is a requirement of the prescriptive view that in assessing strategic business options, the final selection is underpinned by a cogent fact-based evaluation [4]. For this study, the SAF (Suitability-Acceptability-Feasibility) criteria were used to assess two options for the strategic management of higher education, using the case of Rivers State University. The identification of options was based on a TOWS (Threats-Opportunities- Weakness-Strength) Matrix, a derivative from a SWOT analysis, which arraigned several strategic options. This was in view of RSU's strategic position, whereby several short/long-term growth opportunities present themselves for further consideration.

IDENTIFICATION OF STRATEGIC OPTIONS- TOWS MATRIX

The TOWS Matrix combines external/internal factors in turns, to generate potential options that capitalize on strengths to exploit opportunities/minimize vulnerability to threats s in the external environment or minimize internal weaknesses to avoid threats/take advantage of opportunities [5]. In view of RSU's strategic position, several short/long-term growth opportunities present themselves for further consideration.

The TOWS Matrix (Table 1), a derivative of a SWOT analysis, arraigns several strategic options.

Table 1. TOWS Matrix.

S-O Options	**W-O Options**
❖ **Review and Diversify Portfolio of UG programs** Opportunities • High demand for Non-ST UG programs • Potential viability of EM Programme due to recurring environmental issues in the region Strength • Extensive land coverage • Political Links and leverage –Currently high political interest -The current governor of Rivers State is an alumnus of RSU. ❖ **Expand ST programs into distance learning market** Opportunity • The coronavirus pandemic along with IT evolution creates a stronger market for distancing learning within and beyond Nigeria. Strengths • IT Competence-the level of ITC reconfiguration/capacity is currently beyond other public universities in Nigeria. • Ability to proactively exploit external linkages	❖ **Improve international outlook**. -Adapt academic content at par with international standards and build international alliances. Weaknesses • Limited physical subscription for foreign books and journals. • highly regimented and localized curricula/mode of instruction limitsthe potential toexploit the international distance learning market • Localised admission policy Opportunities • Rapidly evolving IT and technological frontiers expand access to educational resources • A stronger market for distancing learning within and beyond Nigeria. ❖ **Divest and rationalize portfolio towards optimal performance** Financial/Human resources can be redeployed to shore up staffing deficiencies in departments experiencing a shortage. Weaknesses • Some ST programs are under-subscribed/unviable • Duplicated/redundant centres/institutes • Staffing Shortages.

	Opportunities • High demand for admission into several other ST programs • Excellence in ST creates opportunities to expand the existing no. of PG programs for more viable ST departments
S-T Options ❖ **Consolidate and Expand market share of PG programs** via economics of scope– Threat • Increasing rivalry for PG programs from immediate competitors Strengths • Highly qualified staff strength as a result of robust staff-facing activities. • A reputation for excellence in ST • Central location and easy accessibility within the main town confer an added unique advantage, relative to its immediate competitors- Uniport, and UOE which are located at the city periphery. This is particularly valuable for attracting students at the postgraduate level, who mostly reside off-campus and commute from their places of work.	**W-T Options** ❖ **Diversify funding base** via the increased entrepreneurial drive and more strategic industry alliances. Threats • Potential reduction in government funding and scholarships. Weakness • Low financial strength -insufficient operational funds/ Lack of substantial cash reserves ❖ **Expand investment in ST Resources**: via more proactive exploitation of strategic partnerships Weakness • Inadequate ST infrastructure, facilities, and equipment • ST Staffing shortages Threat *The potential loss of internal revenue and brand status from non-accredited programs* ❖ **Promote academic stabilityand change public perception:** bysustaining good political relations Weakness • Poor public perception of academic stability in RSU Threat • Potential change in government relations from political change. ❖ **Prioritize investment in security and community relations** Weakness • Inadequate security personnel, installation, and equipment Threat • Security threats from local community and cult activities
The TOWS Matrix combines external/internal factors in turns, to generate potential options that capitalize on strengths to exploit opportunities/minimize vulnerability to threats s in the external environment or minimize internal weaknesses to avoid threats/take advantage of opportunities (6, 7).	

Strength-Opportunities Options
Review and Diversify Portfolio of UG programs
Opportunities
- High demand for Non-ST UG programs
- Potential viability of EM Programme due to recurring environmental issues in the region

Strength
- Extensive land coverage
- Political Links and leverage –Currently high political interest -The current governor of Rivers State is an alumnus of RSU.

Expand ST programs into distance learning market
Opportunity
- The corona virus pandemic along with IT evolution creates a stronger market for distancing learning within and beyond Nigeria.

Strengths
- IT Competence-the level of ITC reconfiguration/capacity is currently beyond other public universities in Nigeria.
- Ability to proactively exploit external linkages

Strength-Threats Options
Consolidate and Expand market share of PG programs via economics of scope–
Threat
- Increasing rivalry for PG programs from immediate competitors

Strengths
- Highly qualified staff strength as a result of robust staff-facing activities.
- A reputation for excellence in ST
- Central location and easy accessibility within the main town confer an added unique advantage, relative to its immediate competitors-Uniport, and UOE which are located at the city periphery.[6] This is particularly valuable for attracting students at the postgraduate level, who mostly reside off-campus and commute from their places of work.

Weakness-Opportunities Options
Improve international outlook.
Adapt academic content at par with international standards and build international alliances.

Weaknesses
- Limited physical subscription for foreign books and journals.
- highly regimented and localized curricula/mode of instructionn limits the potential to exploit the international distance learning market.
- Localised admission policy

Opportunities
- Rapidly evolving IT and technological frontiers expand access to educational resources.
- A stronger market for distancing learning within and beyond Nigeria.

Divest and rationalize portfolio towards optimal performance.
Financial/Human Resources can be redeployed to shore up staffing deficiencies in departments experiencing a shortage.

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Weaknesses
- Some ST programs are under-subscribed/unviable.
- Duplicated/redundant centres/institutes.
- Staffing Shortages.

Opportunities
- High demand for admission into several other ST programs

Excellence in ST creates opportunities to expand the existing no. of PG programs for more viable ST departments.

Weakness-Threat Options

Diversify funding base via the increased entrepreneurial drive and more strategic industry alliances.

Threats
- Potential reduction in government funding and scholarships.

Weakness
- Low financial strength -insufficient operational funds/ Lack of substantial cash reserves

Expand investment in ST Resources: via more proactive exploitation of strategic partnerships.

Weakness
- Inadequate ST infrastructure, facilities, and equipment
- ST Staffing shortages

Threat

The potential loss of internal revenue and brand status from non-accredited programs

Promote academic stability and change public perception: by sustaining good political relations.

Weakness
- Poor public perception of academic stability in RSU

Threat
- Potential change in government relations from political change.

Prioritize investment in security and community relations.

Weakness
- Inadequate security personnel, installation, and equipment

Threat
- Security threats from local community and cult activities

SUITABILITY-ACCEPTABILITY-FEASIBILITY EVALUATION OF OPTIONS

Upon identification of strategic options, it is a requirement of the prescriptive view that the final selection is underpinned by a cogent fact-based evaluation [7, 8]. For this report, the SAF (Suitability-Acceptability-Feasibility) criteria is used to further assess two options (Table 2).

Option 1- Expand St Programs into the Distance Learning Market

Key Metrics
- *Consistency:* Expansion of existing ST programs at the UG and PG levels into the distance learning market is consistent with RSU's Mission 'to expand the frontiers of knowledge in the area of science

and technology' and vision of 'an uncommon university built on the core values of excellence and creativity'

- Exploitation of opportunities? Yes, capitalizes on increased access to educational resources from rapidly evolving IT/technological frontiers, and the stronger market for distancing learning in Nigeria.
- Avoidance of threats? *Yes, there is a potential to reduce the leaning of Nigerians towards foreign online degrees.*
- Capitalizing on strengths? Yes, RSU already has a local reputation for excellence in ST and a high level of qualified staff with international exposure.
- Remedies weaknesses? Yes, it will improve the international outlook of RSU, which will give it a stronger competitive advantage.

Table 2. SAF Evaluation.

	Option 1- Expand ST programs into Distance learning market	**Option 2**- Consolidate and Expand market share of PG programs via economics of scope
Suitability	• Consistency: Expansion of existing ST programs at the UG and PG levels into the distance learning market is consistent with RSU's Mission 'to expand the frontiers of knowledge in the area of science and technology' and vision of 'an uncommon university built on the core values of excellence and creativity' • Exploitation of opportunities? Yes, capitalizes on increased access to educational resources from rapidly evolving IT/technological frontiers, and the stronger market for distancing learning in Nigeria. • Avoidance of threats? *Yes, there is a potential to reduce the leaning of Nigerians towards foreign online degrees.* • Capitalizing on strengths? Yes, RSU already has a local reputation for excellence in ST and a high level of qualified staff with international exposure. • Remedies weaknesses? Yes, it will improve the international outlook of RSU, which will give it a stronger competitive advantage.	• Consistency: Consolidation of quality and capacity of services for available PG programs and Expansion to create more programs is relevant to retain and upgrade market share. This is also consistent with the Mission, vision, and core values of RSU. • Exploitation of opportunities: Yes, there is High demand for admission into several ST programs • Avoidance of threats? Yes, minimizes threat from Increasing rivalry for PG programs from immediate competitors. • Capitalizes on strengths: Yes, the available ST programs can be maximally explored by setting up more PG equivalents. • Remedies weaknesses: Yes, available infrastructure and highly qualified staff strength from redundant research institutes/centers can be utilized.
Acceptability	**Risks** • There are inherent risks in terms of the immediacy of buyer response, adequacy in the level of demand academic staff commitment/capacity for developing delivering online content. • Target local markets face challenges of low levels of information literacy and access to ICT. Furthermore, there is a strong competitive online presence from foreign universities. • Risks of disruptions from cyberattacks/operational failure **Stakeholders** • Staff: There may be resistance to change, particularly from older staff, who have lower IT competence. • Government: High acceptability from the government. distance education is one of the primary pivots, on which government seeks to actively improve the quantity and quality of instruction in Nigerian HE. • NUC: Adequacy of available IT infrastructure will facilitate approval from NUC, which in recent times, is pushing for the internationalization of Nigerian tertiary education curricula and improvement in the international rating of Nigerian universities.	**Risks** • Due to reliance on geographically aligned economies of scope, and higher certainty of demand, the financial risk is minimal, while likely profitability is maximal. **Stakeholders** • Students: Demand-driven PG programs will attract high acceptance, due to a wider array of available PG programs in the region. Lead to improvement in effective manpower production and increase the employability potential/ opportunities of locals. • Community/Industry: Will imply a significant increase in the number of students' admissions and graduates to meet the developmental manpower needs of Industries in the Niger Delta and wider society • Government: will lead to a Proportionate increase in Government Subventions to the University. • Management/ Governing council: High acceptability due to an increase in internally generated Revenue • Staff: There may be reduced commitment from already overworked academic staff

	• Students: This will lead to a substantial increase in the number of foreign students admitted per annum and an increase in the number of student linkages within and outside Nigeria. • Management/ Governing council: Will enjoy high acceptability due to an increase in internally generated revenue and congenial impact on other growth options. Furthermore, it will lead to a marked enhancement in the international outlook of the University	unless measures are put in place for additional staff recruitment. • NUC: will improve NUC overall rating of the university
Feasibility	**Constraints Internal to RSU** • Finance: Upstart financial constraints are minimal, due to available infrastructure. However adequate funds will be required for wider marketing and advertising. • People and skills: The Virtual learning platform is new, and the staff is yet to fully adapt to its use. May place additional work burden on academic staff. Additional staffing requirements are needed. • Required physical resources: An advanced Learning Management System has already been put in place. • Culture – Culture may not be supportive. **Constraints External to RSU** • There are no anticipated political, governance, or legislative constraints. NUC accreditation/approval for open/distance learning degrees will however be required.	**Constraints Internal to RSU** • Finance/ physical resources: PG programs are internally setup based on resources and competencies already established and financed at the UG level by the state government. • People and skills: May place an additional work burden on senior academic staff. Additional staffing requirements are needed. • Culture: Culture is supportive of expanding postgraduate programs, as it promotes staff growth during appraisals. • Procedure: Will require program design, CrimeView, and Senate Approval **Constraints External to RSU** • There are no political, governance, or legislative constraints anticipated. NUC accreditation/approval for Post Graduate degrees will however be required.
At face value, the three options in the strength-related quadrants offered the greatest potential for long-term growth. However, the option of diversifying the portfolio of UG programs was not prioritized because it is a corporate-level strategy, which minimally capitalizes on available resources/competences and is inconsistent with the mission/vision and core values of RSU. Rather there is an immense external dependence on the currently high political goodwill, to provide the enabling physical, human and financial resources, which may easily be eroded if political interest shifts in the next 2 years.		

Risks

- There are inherent risks in terms of the immediacy of buyer response, adequacy in the level of demand academic staff commitment/capacity for developing delivering online content.
- Target local markets face challenges of low levels of information literacy and access to ICT. Furthermore, there is a strong competitive online presence from foreign universities.
- Risks of disruptions from cyber-attacks/operational failure

Stakeholders

- Staff: There may be resistance to change, particularly from older staff, who have lower IT competence.
- Government: High acceptability from the government. distance education is one of the primary pivots, on which government seeks to actively improve the quantity and quality of instruction in Nigerian HE.
- NUC: Adequacy of available IT infrastructure will facilitate approval from NUC, which in recent times, is pushing for the internationalization of Nigerian tertiary education curricula and improvement in the international rating of Nigerian universities.
- Students: This will lead to a substantial increase in the number of foreign students admitted per annum and an increase in the number of student linkages within and outside Nigeria.
- Management/ Governing council: Will enjoy high acceptability due to an increase in internally generated revenue and congenial impact on other growth options. Furthermore, it will lead to a marked enhancement in the international outlook of the University.

Constraints Internal to RSU

- Finance: Upstart financial constraints are minimal, due to available infrastructure. However adequate funds will be required for wider marketing and advertising.
- People and skills: The Virtual learning platform is new, and the staff is yet to fully adapt to its use. May place additional work burden on academic staff. Additional staffing requirements are needed.
- Required physical resources: An advanced Learning Management System has already been put in place.
- Culture – Culture may not be supportive.

Constraints External to RSU

There is no anticipated political, governance, or legislative constraints. NUC accreditation/approval for open/distance learning degrees will however be required.

Option 2- Consolidate and Expand market share of PG programs via economics of scope.
Key Metrics

- Consistency: Consolidation of quality and capacity of services for available PG programs and Expansion to create more programs is relevant to retain and upgrade market share. This is also consistent with the Mission, vision, and core values of RSU.
- Exploitation of opportunities: Yes, there is High demand for admission into several ST programs.
- Avoidance of threats? Yes, minimizes threat from increasing rivalry for PG programs from immediate competitors.
- Capitalizes on strengths: Yes, the available ST programs can be maximally explored by setting up more PG equivalents.
- Remedies weaknesses: Yes, available infrastructure and highly qualified staff strength from redundant research institutes/centers can be utilized.

Risks

- Due to reliance on geographically aligned economies of scope, and higher certainty of demand, the financial risk is minimal, while likely profitability is maximal.

Stakeholders

- Students: Demand-driven PG programs will attract high acceptance, due to a wider array of available PG programs in the region. Lead to improvement in effective manpower production and increase the employability potential/ opportunities of locals.
- Community/Industry: Will imply a significant increase in the number of students' admissions and graduates to meet the developmental manpower needs of Industries in the Niger Delta and wider society.
- Government: will lead to a Proportionate increase in Government Subventions to the University.
- Management/ Governing council: High acceptability due to an increase in internally generated Revenue
- Staff: There may be reduced commitment from already overworked academic staff unless measures are put in place for additional staff recruitment.
- NUC: will improve NUC overall rating of the university.

Constraints Internal to RSU

- Finance/ physical resources: PG programs are internally setup based on resources and competencies already established and financed at the UG level by the state government.
- People and skills: May place an additional work burden on senior academic staff. Additional staffing requirements are needed.
- Culture: Culture is supportive of expanding postgraduate programs, as it promotes staff growth, during appraisals.

- Procedure: Will require program design, C&I review, and Senate Approval

Constraints External to RSU

There is no political, governance, or legislative constraints anticipated. NUC accreditation/approval for Post Graduate degrees will however be required. At face value, the three options in the strength-related quadrants offered the greatest potential for long-term growth.

However, the option of diversifying the portfolio of UG programs was not prioritized because it is a corporate-level strategy, which minimally capitalizes on available resources/competences and is inconsistent with the mission/vision and core values of RSU. Rather there is an immense external dependence on the currently high political goodwill, to provide the enabling physical, human and financial resources, which may easily be eroded if political interest shifts in the next 2 years.

OPTION SELECTION- ANSOFF'S PRODUCT/MARKET MATRIX

The selection of a final option is further underpinned by the application of Ansoff's product/market matrix (Table 3).

Option 1- Expanding Academic Programs into Distance Learning Market

- Will Increase product subscription by taking existing ST programs to a new market.
- Increases the geographic reach of customers beyond the region
- Requires minimal product modifications/but significant process redesign
- Requires more extensive and innovative marketing.
- Requires additional primary research.
- Switching costs lowered due to already established LMS
- Market is growing and not saturated
- Requires the establishment of brand presence

Option 2- Consolidate and Expand market share of PG programs via economics of scope

- Will Increase market share via existing UG products within existing PG markets.
- Will reinforce patronage from existing customers, interest immediate competitors' customers, and non-subscribers in the geographic region.
- Requires minimal process redesign but significant product development.
- Requires less extensive and innovative marketing.
- Switching costs minimal due to economies of scope
- Market is mostly saturated.
- Relies on established brand presence

Ansoff's product/market growth framework outlines considerations for making strategic choices in terms of the requirements for entering new markets with existing/new products as well as increasing market penetration for existing markets with new/existing products [9, 10].

Table 3. Product/Market Evaluation.

Option 1- Expand ST programs into Distance learning market	**Option 2**- Consolidate and Expand market share of PG programs via economics of scope
• Will Increase product subscription by taking existing ST programs to a new market. • Increases the geographic reach of customers beyond the region • Requires minimal product modifications/but significant process redesign • Requires more extensive and innovative marketing. • Requires additional primary research.	• Will Increase market share via existing UG products within existing PG markets. • Will reinforce patronage from existing customers, interest immediate competitors' customers, and non-subscribers in the geographic region. • Requires minimal process redesign but significant product development. • Requires less extensive and innovative marketing. • Switching costs minimal due to economies of scope

• Switching costs lowered due to already established LMS • Market is growing and not saturated • Requires the establishment of brand presence.	• Market is mostly saturated. • Relies on established brand presence.
NB: Ansoff product/market growth framework outlines considerations for making strategic choices in terms of the requirements for entering new markets with existing/new products as well as increasing market penetration for existing markets with new/existing products.	

CONCLUSION

Both strategic options offer organic growth via expansion, are business-level strategies, and are resource-focused alternatives that seek more market penetration/development of RSU's core product base in ST. However, option-2 is more targeted at the existing immediate local market, while option-1 primarily seeks a new market with wider geographic reach- which if successfully implemented will likely give greater returns on investment. This is despite the greater risks/likely resistance inferred from the SAF evaluation. On this basis, option-1 is selected. From the perspective of Porter's generic competitive strategies, for option-1, RSU can potentially achieve cost-leadership and acquire a sizable share of Nigeria's HE online market, which is currently in more active demand due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online market expansion fills a major strategic gap/ blue ocean unfolding in Nigeria's Public HE-sector. RSU is strategically placed to use the head-start conferred by its presently superior level of IT competence/configuration relative to other public universities. Beyond market benefits, the selection of option 1 is informed by its secondary effect for boosting other elements of the portfolio/functions of the University, including option 2.

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