

Decision-Making Processes and Corporate Image Performance in Public Universities: A Comparative Study of the University of Zambia and Chalimbana University

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Abstract—This study examines the relationship between decision-making processes and corporate image performance in public universities, with specific focus on the University of Zambia and Chalimbana University. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 148 respondents through questionnaires and nine key informant interviews with senior administrators. The study assessed stakeholder participation, leadership influence, communication effectiveness, and governance structures in shaping institutional reputation. Findings reveal that while decision-making processes are moderately participatory, they remain influenced by hierarchical structures and bureaucratic delays. Effective leadership and transparent communication were identified as critical drivers of positive corporate image performance. Conversely, limited stakeholder engagement and poor communication negatively affect institutional credibility. The study concludes that strengthening participatory governance, enhancing leadership capacity, and improving communication systems are essential for improving corporate image performance in public universities. Policy recommendations are provided to support institutional reforms.

Keywords— Decision-making, corporate image, governance, leadership, public universities, stakeholder participation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Decision-making processes are central to organizational performance, particularly within higher education institutions where governance structures involve multiple stakeholders. Public universities operate within complex administrative systems that require coordination between management, academic staff, non-academic staff, and students. The effectiveness of these processes significantly influences institutional performance, stakeholder trust, and corporate image.

Corporate image in universities reflects how institutions are perceived by internal and external stakeholders, including students, staff, government bodies, and the general public. Transparent, inclusive, and efficient decision-making processes enhance institutional credibility, while ineffective governance structures can lead to reputational decline.

Despite the importance of governance systems, many public universities face challenges such as bureaucratic delays, limited stakeholder participation, and communication gaps. This study therefore investigates how decision-making

practices influence corporate image performance, using the University of Zambia and Chalimbana University as case studies.

II. REVIEWED LITERATURE

Different scholars from various disciplines such as management, organizational behavior, and public administration have developed diverse perspectives on decision-making processes and institutional governance. According to Mintzberg (2009), decision-making is a fundamental managerial function that determines the effectiveness and direction of an organization. Similarly, Simon (1977) argues that decision-making involves selecting the best possible alternative from a set of options, and its success largely depends on the quality of information and the level of stakeholder involvement.

Policy makers and institutional leaders employ different approaches to decision-making. For instance, Bryson (2011) identifies the top-down approach as one of the most commonly used models in public institutions, where decisions are made at higher management levels and passed down to lower levels for implementation. However, an alternative perspective is the bottom-up approach, which emphasizes participation from lower-level stakeholders such as employees and service users. This approach allows decisions to be informed by practical experiences and contextual realities at operational levels.

In the context of developing countries, decision-making processes are often centralized, with limited consultation of stakeholders. Studies conducted in Zambia indicate that many institutional decisions are made at senior management level without adequate involvement of employees and students who are directly affected by such decisions (Daka, Phiri, Chipindi, & Nachimwenda, 2021). This lack of inclusivity often leads to resistance, poor implementation, and reduced organizational effectiveness.

It is widely acknowledged that decision-making processes in organizations follow a structured cycle which includes problem identification, formulation of alternatives, implementation, and evaluation. Effective participation at each stage is critical to ensuring that decisions are accepted and

successfully implemented. In higher education institutions, governance structures are designed to involve multiple stakeholders, including academic staff, administrative personnel, and students, in decision-making processes.

Literature shows that stakeholder participation is a key requirement for effective governance. Orodho (2003) argues that when employees are involved in decision-making, they develop a sense of ownership and commitment toward organizational goals. Conversely, when decisions are communicated through formal directives such as memos and circulars without consultation, employees may feel excluded, leading to resistance and low morale. Mulenga and Daka (2022) further support this view by indicating that collaborative approaches enhance institutional effectiveness and promote accountability.

Research conducted in higher education institutions has shown that leadership plays a crucial role in shaping decision-making processes. According to Yukl (2013), effective leadership promotes transparency, participation, and communication, which are essential for good governance. However, studies have also revealed that bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures often delay decision-making processes, thereby affecting organizational efficiency and stakeholder satisfaction.

A study conducted in public institutions revealed that non-inclusive decision-making processes often result in poor implementation of policies and reduced trust in leadership (Mwansa, 2011). Employees reported that when decisions are imposed without consultation, they are less likely to support their implementation. This situation is further compounded by inadequate communication, which creates uncertainty and misunderstandings within organizations.

The concept of corporate image has also received considerable attention in organizational studies. Corporate image refers to the overall perception of an organization by its stakeholders. According to Chen (2018), corporate image is influenced by factors such as leadership effectiveness, communication, service delivery, and governance practices. Institutions that demonstrate transparency and inclusivity in decision-making are more likely to maintain a positive image.

In the context of universities, corporate image is particularly important as it affects student enrollment, staff retention, and stakeholder confidence. Research indicates that institutions with effective governance systems and participatory decision-making processes tend to have stronger reputations and improved performance outcomes. On the other hand, poor decision-making practices characterized by delays, lack of transparency, and limited stakeholder involvement negatively affect institutional credibility.

Research carried out at African universities indicates that institutional performance is still impacted by governance issues like excessive centralization of decision-making, poor communication, and subpar leadership arrangements (Nsalamba & Simpane, 2019). While some administrators view existing governance systems as effective, others argue that they require significant improvement to meet the evolving needs of stakeholders.

Despite the existing literature, there is limited empirical evidence specifically examining the relationship between decision-making processes and corporate image performance in public universities in Zambia. Most studies focus on policy implementation and governance challenges without clearly linking them to institutional reputation and performance outcomes.

Therefore, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how decision-making practices influence corporate image performance in public universities, and to identify strategies that can enhance governance effectiveness and institutional credibility.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research used a mixed-methods research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches because the study sought to capture both measurable trends and in-depth views, opinions, and experiences of participants regarding decision-making processes and corporate image performance in public universities. The use of this approach was appropriate as it enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by integrating statistical analysis with detailed qualitative explanations. The quantitative method provided numerical data on patterns of participation, leadership effectiveness, and communication, while the qualitative method offered deeper insights into the reasons, perceptions, and experiences underlying those patterns.

In this study, the targeted population comprised stakeholders from two public universities, namely the University of Zambia and Chalimbana University. These institutions were selected because they represent public higher education institutions operating under similar government policies but differing in institutional history, size, and governance structures. The population included university management (such as deans, directors, and heads of departments), academic staff, non-academic staff, and students. These groups were considered appropriate because they are directly involved in or affected by institutional decision-making processes and corporate image performance.

The total sample size for the study was 161 participants, which was scientifically determined from an estimated population of 270 using a standard sample size determination formula. Out of the targeted sample, 148 respondents successfully participated by completing the questionnaires, representing a high response rate. In addition, nine key informants were purposively selected for interviews based on their roles in institutional governance and decision-making. These included senior administrators with extensive experience and knowledge of university operations.

The researcher employed stratified random sampling for the quantitative component to ensure that all stakeholder groups were adequately represented. The population was divided into categories such as management, academic staff, non-academic staff, and students, and participants were randomly selected from each category proportionally. This approach ensured fairness and minimized sampling bias. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to

identify individuals with relevant expertise and experience in decision-making processes, thereby ensuring the collection of rich and meaningful data.

In this study, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university authorities, and permission to conduct the research was sought from the management of both institutions. The researcher ensured that all ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that no personal identifiers were included in the data or final report. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.

Data were collected using multiple instruments to enhance reliability and validity. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary tool for collecting quantitative data. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions designed to capture respondents' perceptions of decision-making processes, leadership effectiveness, communication, and corporate image performance. The questionnaire was self-administered and distributed both physically and electronically to increase accessibility and response rates.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants. The interviews allowed the researcher to explore participants' experiences, opinions, and insights in greater depth. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. Each interview lasted approximately 7 to 10 minutes and was conducted with the consent of the participants. Where permitted, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis.

The researcher also reviewed relevant institutional documents such as policy guidelines, strategic plans, and reports to supplement the primary data. This document analysis helped to provide context and verify information obtained from questionnaires and interviews. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation, which strengthened the credibility and validity of the findings.

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of 10 participants at the University of Zambia. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the clarity, reliability, and effectiveness of the research instruments. Feedback obtained from the pilot study was used to revise and improve the questionnaire and interview guide, ensuring that the questions were clear, relevant, and easy to understand.

The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were coded, cleaned, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis involved grouping responses into categories and generating descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarize the data. In addition, regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between decision-making processes and corporate image

performance, as well as the influence of factors such as leadership, communication, and stakeholder participation.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The preliminary stage involved organizing and familiarizing with the data, followed by coding responses into meaningful categories. These categories were then compared and grouped into broader themes based on similarities and patterns. The researcher further analyzed the relationships between themes to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation. This process allowed the researcher to identify key themes related to leadership, participation, communication, and institutional image.

To ensure reliability and validity, the researcher employed several strategies. The use of standardized questionnaires enhanced consistency in data collection, while pilot testing helped to improve the reliability of the instruments. Triangulation of data sources, including questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis, ensured that findings were cross-verified. Additionally, careful data coding and analysis procedures were followed to minimize errors and bias.

Overall, the methodology adopted in this study was appropriate for addressing the research objectives, as it provided both quantitative evidence and qualitative insights into how decision-making processes influence corporate image performance in public universities.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that decision-making processes in public universities are moderately participatory, although they remain constrained by hierarchical and bureaucratic structures. While stakeholders such as academic staff, management, non-academic staff, and students are involved to some extent, the level of participation is not uniform across all groups. Academic staff and management tend to have greater influence in decision-making processes, while students and non-academic staff are less involved. This finding is consistent with existing literature which suggests that traditional governance systems in higher education institutions often operate through centralized structures that limit inclusive participation (Bryson, 2011).

The persistence of hierarchical decision-making structures may be attributed to the administrative nature of public universities, where authority is concentrated at higher levels of management. Although such structures may enhance coordination and control, they often reduce opportunities for broader stakeholder engagement. As highlighted by Orodho (2003), limited participation can lead to reduced ownership of decisions, which in turn affects implementation and organizational commitment. Therefore, the findings suggest a need for universities to strengthen participatory governance mechanisms in order to enhance inclusivity and institutional effectiveness.

Leadership emerged as a critical determinant of governance effectiveness and decision-making quality. The study found that institutions characterized by transparent, consultative, and responsive leadership practices tend to experience higher levels of stakeholder trust and improved

corporate image performance. This supports the argument by Yukl (2013) that effective leadership fosters collaboration, builds trust, and enhances organizational outcomes. Respondents indicated that when leaders involve stakeholders in decision-making and communicate clearly, there is greater acceptance of decisions and stronger institutional cohesion.

However, the findings also revealed that bureaucratic procedures and multi-layered approval systems often delay decision-making processes. Such delays negatively affect operational efficiency and reduce employee morale. This observation aligns with previous studies which indicate that excessive bureaucracy in public institutions can hinder timely decision-making and weaken institutional performance (Mwansa, 2011). Therefore, while leadership plays a significant role in promoting effective governance, it must also address structural inefficiencies that limit responsiveness.

Communication was identified as another key factor influencing decision-making processes and corporate image performance. The study found that effective communication enhances transparency, ensures clarity of institutional policies, and promotes stakeholder understanding. When communication channels are clear and consistent, stakeholders are more likely to trust leadership and support institutional decisions. On the other hand, poor communication leads to misunderstandings, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction among employees and students.

These findings support the view by Chen (2018) that communication is central to organizational effectiveness and reputation management. Inadequate communication not only affects internal operations but also shapes external perceptions of the institution. Universities that fail to communicate effectively risk damaging their credibility and weakening stakeholder confidence. Therefore, strengthening communication systems is essential for improving both governance and corporate image.

The study further confirms that corporate image is closely linked to governance practices, particularly decision-making processes. Institutions that adopt inclusive, transparent, and efficient decision-making practices are more likely to be perceived positively by stakeholders. Positive corporate image is associated with improved trust, better service delivery, and enhanced institutional reputation. Conversely, ineffective decision-making characterized by limited participation, delays, and poor communication negatively impacts stakeholder perceptions and institutional credibility.

These findings are consistent with research on organizational reputation, which emphasizes that governance quality is a key determinant of corporate image. In the context of higher education, corporate image influences important outcomes such as student enrollment, staff retention, and public trust. As such, improving decision-making processes is not only a governance issue but also a strategic priority for institutional sustainability and competitiveness.

Overall, the discussion highlights that while public universities have established governance structures, there is still a need to enhance participation, improve leadership effectiveness, and strengthen communication systems. Addressing these challenges will contribute to more effective

decision-making processes and improved corporate image performance.

V. CONCLUSION

The study examined the relationship between decision-making practices and corporate image performance in public universities, focusing on the University of Zambia and Chalimbana University. The findings indicate that effective decision-making characterized by transparency, inclusiveness, timeliness, and clear communication is a critical determinant of institutional reputation and stakeholder trust.

Participatory governance was identified as a key factor in shaping perceptions of institutional credibility. Stakeholder involvement in decision-making, particularly among academic staff, students, and administrative personnel, enhances ownership, accountability, and trust. Leadership practices that emphasize consultation, strategic direction, and responsiveness were also found to positively influence governance effectiveness and corporate image, while bureaucratic delays and hierarchical bottlenecks were observed to undermine institutional efficiency and stakeholder confidence.

The study further highlighted that decision-making priorities differ according to institutional context. At the University of Zambia, academic and research-related decisions ranked highest in influencing corporate image, reflecting the institution's role as a knowledge-producing university. At Chalimbana University, community engagement and teacher education programs were prioritized, reflecting its specialized mandate in educational training and local capacity development. Across both institutions, stakeholder participation, institutional branding, and administrative efficiency were also important determinants of corporate image, though their impact was moderated by resource constraints and technological limitations.

Challenges affecting governance implementation such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited stakeholder engagement, resource shortages, accountability gaps, and inadequate communication were identified as factors that can weaken the positive influence of decision-making practices on corporate image. Addressing these challenges is therefore essential for enhancing institutional performance, reputation, and competitiveness within the higher education sector.

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