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Navigating Uncertainty: Risk Management Practices and Their Influence on Project Performance in Tanzania's Higher Learning Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the roles of risk management practices on project performance in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. The study was influenced by the rise of a new global trend of higher learning institutions to engage in massive profit-oriented projects. These projects are not isolated from risks, as they are operated in competitive, free, and fair markets with little or no government interference. Thus, risk planning, assessment and management are vital for simple and complex projects towards better performance. Findings reveal significant differences in risk management practices among different higher learning institutions. Although there is a general understanding of risk and its implications in project performance, the application of risk management is relatively low.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies on risk mitigation and management techniques have been published in several articles; however, few empirical studies on risk management practices on project performance in higher education institutions are in place (Kelo 2022). This prompted a need to establish the study on risk management practices towards project performance at higher learning institutions, particularly in Tanzania. The issue of project risk management is predominantly significant in the management of both large and small projects from the ideation stage (George 2020). The project's preliminary risk analysis aims to pinpoint the sources of uncertainty and create a plan of action to reduce or eliminate the threat that could harm the project (Addo and Adusei 2021).

Concurrently, the systematic application of risk management practice provides a chance for greater possibilities of successful project execution (Sityata, Botha, and Dubihlela 2021). An institution which incorporates better risk mitigation and management is likely to achieve better results towards project performance (Marcelino-sadaba 2021). Thus, this paper provides a wakeup call to higher learning institutions on the magnitude of risk management as an extremely sensitive and responsible job that requires real expertise and inclusion of the entire organisation (Shaker and Borden 2020).

2. Literature Review

Risk management has been one of the main issues to be carefully handled by the executives and professionals involved with project implementation in today's education business world (Rahman and Adnan 2020). Studies reveal that higher learning institutions (HLIs) face a wide variety of risks that can potentially affect the achievement of their project strategic objectives, operations and implementation processes. Polak (2018) and Cameroon (2017) pointed out that insurance risk, strategic risk, financial risk, operational risk, compliance risk and reputational risk are classified as magnitude risks that higher learning institutions face across the globe.

In the cause of survival and sustainability aspect, higher learning institutions have extended from traditional niches, basically, teaching, consultancies and research, to the establishment of a new project business model for income generation, which exposes them to a risky environment (Jankensgård 2019; Deloitte 2018). Moreover, projects are not operating in a vacuum; they are implemented by people, thus risks need to be contained to avoid project failure (Muluh, Kimengsi, and Azibo 2019). However, risk management practices in higher learning institutions appear to be significantly less developed than in other corporate businesses, such as production industries, transportation, and mining sectors (Andoh 2019).

Despite numerous efforts and techniques in place, some of the projects at higher learning institutions end up with unsatisfactory performance. Underlying reasons for project failure are still debatable, and contention among practitioners and academicians is highly magnified. By reviewing pertinent literature, among the dozens of reasons for project failure, many project practitioners speak of methodology. Thus, the triple constraints of scope, time, and cost, combined with quality, have scored high that failure to administer them, sparking risk associated with poor project performance (Muluh, Kimengsi, and Azibo 2019). Nevertheless,

empirical studies demonstrate that several universities have started to implement the Integrated Risk Management approach to manage the total risks that an organisation faces (Lundquist 2015). Essentially, project risk management is not always captured as part of the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) in many of the Higher Learning Strategic Plans (Lupia 2017).

3. Methodology

The study was conducted at one of the accredited higher learning institutions based in Tanzania. The case study was anonymised for confidentiality and free access, and sharing of in-depth information from the respondents (Vainio 2013). A descriptive study design was applied to analyse a phenomenon and attitudes towards the intended cause of action (Mazanec 2022). A sample of 60 respondents was drawn from a targeted population of 120 staff. Sample size selection based on the cost-benefit analysis requires that the sample size must be manageable in consideration of time, affordability and availability of resources. Also, when the population is less than ten thousand, a smaller sample size can be used without affecting the accuracy (Vainio 2013). Fifty respondents were issued questionnaires, and ten respondents were interviewed to gather primary data, while secondary data were obtained through referencing relevant readings. Questionnaires were used to cover a sample size at a low cost and give a respondent adequate time to respond well though-out answers (Patel and Patel 2019). Concurrently, interviews helped to provide in-depth information missing in questionnaires (Lindsay-Smith et al. 2018). A pilot study was conducted for a reliability check and rehearsal of the research instrument (Lindsay-Smith et al. 2018). Data were analysed and presented in tables, graphs and figures supported with brief narration.

4. Findings

Table 1 below shows that 60 questionnaires were distributed to respondents, and 10 respondents were interviewed. Whereas 50 questionnaires were filled and returned, constituting 83% of respondents, while 10 questionnaires, equivalent to 17%, were not collected. Also, a total of 10 interviews, which is equivalent to 100%, were conducted successfully. This depicts that over 90% of the data were successfully collected as per the original plan.

Table 1: Sample Size Distribution

Interview planned		Interview conducted		Questionnaires distributed		Questionnaires filled		Questionnaires not filled out	
Counts	%	Counts	%	Counts	%	Counts	%	Counts	**%**
10	100%	10	100%	60	100%	50	83%	10	17%

Source: Research Data, 2022

4.1. Education Level of Respondents

As illustrated in Table 2, the study cohort comprised highly educated professionals. The most prevalent educational qualification was a Master's degree (40%), followed by Bachelor's degrees (35%) and Doctoral degrees (20%). Conversely, only 5% of the sample held an ordinary diploma. Given this high level of academic attainment, the participants demonstrated a robust foundational understanding of research activities.

Table 2: Respondents by Education Level

Education Level	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Doctorate	20.0	20.0
Master's	40.0	60.0
Bachelor	35.0	95.0
Diploma	5.0	100.0
Other	-	-
	100.0	

Source: Research Data, 2022

4.2. Experience of Respondent to the Institute

This study assessed the duration of respondents' tenure within the institution to gauge their familiarity with internal processes. As detailed in Table 3, a significant majority (65%) of participants had been affiliated with the institute for over four years, with 15% exceeding twelve years of service. Conversely, only 20% of the sample had a tenure of three years or less. These findings suggest that the cohort possesses extensive institutional memory, particularly regarding project management practices

Table 3: Respondents by Working Experience

Duration	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0 - 3 years	20.0	20.0
4 - 7 years	35.0	55.0
8 - 11 years	30.0	85.0
Above 12 years	15.0	100.0
Total	100.0	

Source: Research Data, 2022

4.3. Employment Contracts of Respondents

According to Table 4, a substantial majority of the respondents (95%) held permanent employment status, while only 5% were engaged under temporary contracts. This distribution indicates high organisational stability and employee retention. Furthermore,

the predominance of permanent civil service status enhances the long-term reliability of the data, as this cohort is less susceptible to sudden turnover or retrenchment, allowing for potential longitudinal follow-up or validation.

Table 4: Employment Contracts

Contracts	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Permanent	95.0	95.0
Temporary	5.0	100.0
Total	100.0	

Source: Research Data 2022

4.4. Cadre of Respondents

The respondent profile (Table 5) demonstrates a balanced representation of key institutional roles. Academic and administrative personnel accounted for 80% of the sample (40% each), while technical staff comprised 20%. Such diversification of the respondent base served to triangulate findings across different functional areas, enhancing the depth and validity of the information collected.

Table 5: Respondents by Cadre

Cadre	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Administration	40.0	40.0
Academic	40.0	80.0
Technical	20.0	100.0
Total	100.0	

Source: Research Data 2022

4.5. Taxonomy and Impact of Institutional Project Risks

The empirical results demonstrate that Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) are subject to a multi-dimensional risk landscape, with threats varying in both nature and intensity. The study identifies a broad spectrum of vulnerabilities, specifically categorising them into strategic, financial, operational, compliance, and reputational risks. Among these, financial risk emerged as the most pervasive threat, with over 60% of respondents indicating that fiscal volatility consistently undermines project planning and performance metrics.

The findings further clarify that the financial pressures facing HLIs are not solely a function of revenue shortfalls or low collection rates. Instead, the data highlights a systemic deficiency in financial discipline and strategic prioritization. Key contributors to this instability include: Portfolio Overextension: A propensity for institutions to initiate a high volume of concurrent projects, which dilutes available resources and complicates oversight; Resource Misalignment: Inadequate prioritization frameworks that lead to the suboptimal allocation of capital; Unmitigated Consequences: The study reveals that the downstream impacts of these financial risks remain largely unaddressed, leaving institutions vulnerable to compounding fiscal shocks during project execution.

A total of 40% was scored by strategic risk, while compliance risks reached 35%. This is an alarming sign that universities and colleges must treat risks more professionally to reduce uncertainty in project implementation. However, the majority of respondents were relaxed about the existence of operational risk, as almost 80% disagreed with its existence. From the interview, reputation risks are among the highly cited risks, and it was cemented that educational institutions host many staff and students from different backgrounds and cultures. If these people are not well managed might tarnish the image of the institution suddenly. Moreover, respondents were asked if the institution had in place risk management documents, including organisation structure in relation to risk management, risk management policy, risk register and risk management plan. The aim was to assess the awareness of members on the availability and applicability of risk management documents. Findings explore that the majority of respondents were not aware of the status of existence risk documents at the institution. More than 40% were in dilemma whether the institution had a risk management policy, risk register, risk management plan and organisation structure respectively. Nevertheless, the existence of organisational structure received exceptional responses. About 75% agreed on its existence, though they were uncertain if it can accommodate tense risk once it happens. Respondents were hesitating on the level of institutional readiness for risk planning and mitigation measures in place. It was established that, whatever the risk documents are in place, there is a need to train and create awareness among the staff members since risk management is an inclusive matter.

Findings reveal that while Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) in Tanzania employ diverse risk mitigation strategies, their application is often superficial or inconsistent. This lack of a rigorous risk framework has directly contributed to high rates of project attrition and suboptimal performance. A fundamental paradox was observed: although universities function as the nation's primary "think tanks" and repositories of theoretical knowledge, their practical expertise in Project Risk Management (PRM) is disproportionately inadequate relative to their institutional mission.

Data analysis reveals a high reliance on risk acceptance (absorption). According to the survey, 40% of respondents indicated that their institutions frequently opt to internalise calculated risks. However, qualitative feedback suggests that the "residual shock" of these risks often exceeds the institutions' financial and operational capacities, leading to significant project instability. The qualitative interviews identified risk transfer as the most effective strategy for safeguarding institutional assets, as it reallocates liability to external third parties. Despite its recognized utility, the adoption of transfer mechanisms is remarkably low. Risk transfer is almost exclusively restricted to projects with stringent, externally mandated contractual terms. Insurance underutilization was observed. Only 2% were found to be covered by insurance, suggesting a significant gap in formal risk hedging within the sector.

From the participants' perspective, there is a systemic disconnect between the low maturity of current risk management practices and the increasing complexity of project demands. This misalignment exacerbates performance tensions and leaves HLIs vulnerable to predictable threats. The primary categories of these vulnerabilities are illustrated in Figure 1, which provides a comprehensive taxonomy of predictable risks currently facing Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania.

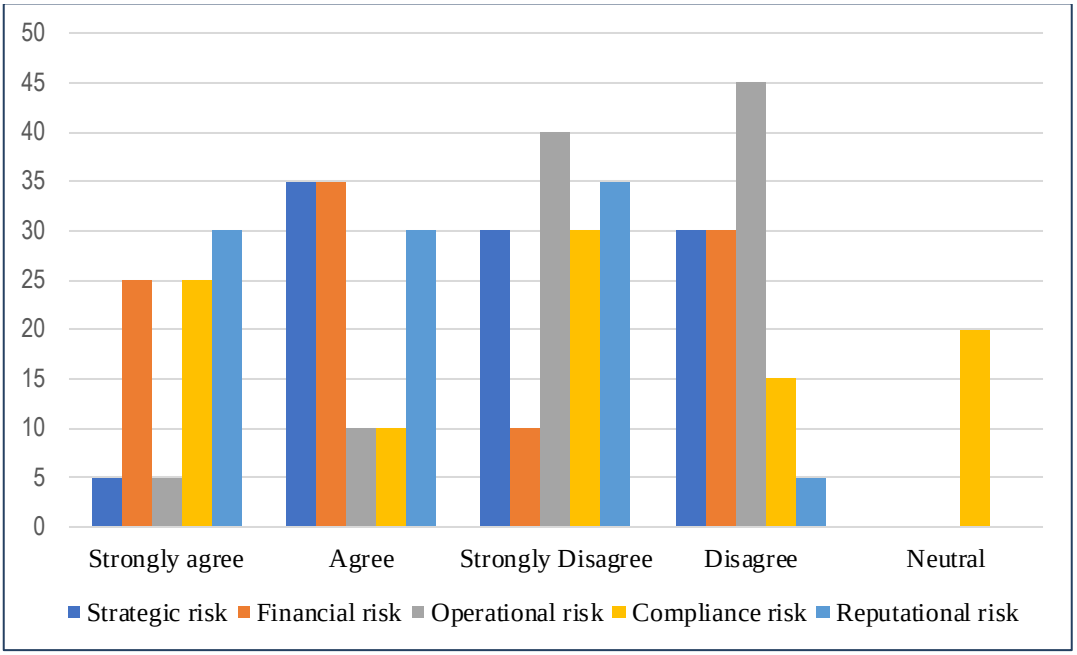

Figure 1: Summarised Categories of Predictable Risks in HLIs Source: Research Data, 2022

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is obvious that risk management practices affect the performance of the projects. The majority of respondents were aware of the consequences of risks in project management. The issue was how to integrate risk management practices into the institutional culture. Risk management was found to be omitted in the institutional plan, likely due to the intention of avoiding costs, based on the assumption that projects can be implemented at relatively lower costs. Such a notion might trample the whole project, and failure to achieve value for money, since operating a project without a risk plan is always risky.

5.1 Conclusion

Although risk management practices have a high impact on project performance, higher learning institutions are putting in much effort into searching for project funding rather than managing risks. The essence of the matter is too historical as universities were more likely operating in a comfort zone. Public higher learning institutions were enjoying government support and working in a protected environment. It is high time for universities and colleges to realise how they are encircled with risk and apply alternative mitigation plans and sustainable solutions for better project performance.

5.2 Recommendations

There had been experiences of regular changes in regulations and policies towards the implementation and management of project funds. Since changes affect implementers, including higher learning institutions, the government must conduct a thorough analysis and involve stakeholders before changes are implemented. Also, there must be a reasonable time to allow implementors to manage changes and circulate information to the sponsors and other stakeholders. Furthermore, higher learning institutions should extend the involvement of internal staff in monitoring and evaluation of projects in order to build their capacity to initiate and manage projects. This knowledge will help them to know whether the projects are achieving their goals while combating risk.

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