
Plans Are Useless, But Meaningful

Planning Is Indispensable

Exploring How Purpose, Trust and Emotion Shape
Managerial Sensemaking in Strategy Practice

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

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Signed: Heather Lawrence

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Abstract

This research examines how perceptions of purpose, trust, and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice, with a focus on strategic planning processes and the relationship between senior and middle management. Three institutions from the further and higher education sectors in Scotland were analysed using an empirical qualitative case study approach. This triangulated source method enabled a detailed examination of institutional practices in complex educational settings and structures.

This research synthesises concepts typically captured under the umbrella of strategy-as-practice such as purpose (Alvesson and Sveningsson's, 2024; Hamel, 2009; Mintzberg and Rose, 2003), trust (Frei and Morriss, 2020; Sillince et al., 2012; Holstein et al., 2016), and emotion (Burgelman et al., 2018; Lencioni, 2012; Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011) and sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; McKiernan and MacKay, 2017; Day et al., 2023) in strategy practice. These provided a theoretical foundation for examining how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. Greater connectivity of strategy-as-practice perspectives is needed to advance this crucial research agenda (Kohtamäki et al., 2021).

The findings offer three propositions: a clear strategic purpose that creates meaning for all stakeholders, effective relational senior management behaviour as a critical influence, and the importance of two-way sensemaking that enables constructive strategic conversations. Emotions are a significant factor shaping decisions, relationships, and interactions, with trust playing a pivotal role in fostering collaboration, autonomy and commitment to the strategic ambitions. By building on prior insights, these propositions aim to advance discussions on strategy practice, particularly within further and higher education settings.

This study proposes a framework focused on Purpose, Behaviour, and Action and offers actionable steps for enhancing strategy practice in complex organisations. The research offers many avenues for further research, particularly in applying these conditions to achieve greater strategic results in education settings.

Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.....	8
1.1 Introduction	8
1.2 Research Question.....	8
1.3 Significance of the Thesis	9
1.4 Motivations for the Research	11
1.5 Scottish Further and Higher Education Sectors	12
1.6 Challenges Facing the Scottish Further and Higher Education Sectors	13
1.7 Pilot Study	16
1.8 Terminology	20
1.9 Structure of the Thesis.....	20
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	22
2.1 Introduction to Chapter Two.....	22
2.2 Further and Higher Education Context	23
2.2.1 Sectoral Changes and the Adoption of Corporate “Managerialism”	23
2.2.2 Leadership.....	26
2.2.3 Meaning-Making and Narratives	27
2.2.4 Knowledge Workers.....	28
2.3 Overview of Strategy and the Strategy-as-Practice Research.....	28
2.3.1 Strategy as Purpose	28
2.3.2 Strategy-as-Practice.....	31
2.3.3 Philosophical Paradigms from the Strategy-as-Practice Literature.....	35
2.4 Senior and Middle Management Roles in Strategy Practice.....	40
2.4.1 Middle Manager Positioning	40
2.4.2 Middle Manager Autonomy	42
2.4.3 Middle Managers in Further and Higher Education.....	43
2.5 Senior and Middle Management Relational Dynamics in Strategy Practice	44
2.5.1 Emotionality in Strategy.....	44
2.5.2 Sensemaking	47
2.5.3 Trust	50
2.5.4 Power.....	53
2.6 Tools for Enabling Strategy Practice	58
2.7 Conceptual Framework.....	61
2.8 Summary of Opportunities for Research.....	66

2.9	From Literature Gaps to Research Questions.....	69
2.10	Chapter Conclusions	71
Chapter Three: Research Methodology.....		73
3.1	Introduction to Chapter Three	73
3.2	Research Philosophy.....	73
3.2.1	Why It Is Important.....	73
3.2.2	Researcher's Philosophy	74
3.3	Research Design	75
3.3.1	The Research Goals	78
3.3.2	The Research Question	79
3.3.3	Research Design and Approach.....	81
3.4	Enacting the Research Design	83
3.4.1	Pilot Study	83
3.4.2	Main Study.....	85
3.4.3	Content Analysis.....	92
3.4.4	Data Collection – Semi-Structured Interviews.....	92
3.4.5	Data Analysis – Semi-Structured Interviews.....	94
3.4.6	Approach to Case Analysis	96
3.4.7	Emergence of Themes	97
3.4.8	Format of Chapter Four: Findings.....	98
3.5	Data Quality.....	99
3.6	Reflexivity.....	100
3.7	Ethical Considerations.....	101
3.8	Validity of the Research	101
3.9	Chapter Conclusions	103
Chapter Four: Findings.....		104
4.1	Introduction	104
4.2	The Case Studies.....	105
4.2.1	Institution A.....	105
4.2.2	Institution B.....	115
4.2.3	Institution C.....	125
4.3	Cross-Case Analysis.....	138
4.3.1	Summary of Cross-Case Analysis	148
4.4	Chapter Conclusions	151

Chapter Five: Discussion	153
5.1 Introduction	153
5.2 Purpose	154
5.2.1 Strategic Plans for Meaning-Making	154
5.2.2 Financial Goals in an Education Setting	155
5.2.3 Organisational Values for Meaning-Making	157
5.2.4 Style and Length of Strategic Plans	158
5.3 Strategy Practice	159
5.3.1 Senior Management	159
5.3.2 The Processes	164
5.4 Managerial Sensemaking	168
5.4.1 Approach to Sensemaking	168
5.4.2 Cultivating Trust	169
5.4.3 Impact on Managerial Emotions	177
5.4.4 Knowledge Workers	179
5.5 Propositions Arising from the Discussion	180
5.6 A Theoretical Framework for Strategy Practice	184
5.6.1 Purpose: A Compelling Strategic Purpose	185
5.6.2 Behaviour: How Senior Management Behaves	186
5.6.3 Action: Simple Strategic Processes	187
5.7 Chapter Conclusions	187
Chapter Six: Conclusion	189
6.1 Introduction	189
6.2 Answering the Research Questions	189
6.3 Contributions of the Research	193
6.4 Future Research Considerations	198
6.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Study	199
6.6 Practical Implications	200
Chapter Seven: Reflections on the Thesis Journey	205
References	207
Appendix A - Pilot Study Interview Questions	217
Appendix B - Pilot Study Findings	219
Appendix C - Saunders et al. (2019) Philosophical Positions	240
Appendix D - Participant Information Sheets for Pilot and Main Studies	241

Appendix E - Main Study Interview Questions	245
Appendix F - Main Study Data Analysis Codes from NVivo	246
Appendix G - Main Study: NVivo Extracts from Coded Interviews	247
Appendix H - Emergence of Themes	248
Appendix I - Summary of the Indicators of Trust (Frei and Morriss, 2020)	250

List of Tables

Table 1 - Overview of participants interviewed for the study	91
Table 2 - Summary of findings across each case study	138
Table 3 - Frequency of people-focused words used by respondents across institutions.....	143
Table 4 - Cross case analysis: similarities and differences across the cases	148
Table 5 - Levels of trust in each case study institution	174
Table 6 - Theoretical framework for strategy practice	185

List of Figures

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework	64
Figure 2 - Saunders et al. (2018): The 'research onion'	76
Figure 3 - Research design applied to Saunders et al. (2018) research onion.....	76
Figure 4 - Research design applied to Maxwell's (2005) framework	77
Figure 5 - Dubois and Gadde's (2002) systematic combining approach	82
Figure 6 - Structure of how the findings are presented.....	105

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

How do perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice? This overarching question is explored in this thesis, informed by qualitative research conducted in the Scottish further and higher education sectors. This chapter introduces the thesis, outlining the research question and the motivations for undertaking the study. It explains the rationale and the researcher's motivations for pursuing this research, which is driven by an interest in the relationship between senior and middle management when engaging with strategic planning processes in the Scottish further and higher education sectors. The context of these sectors is explored, highlighting the range of challenges they face in the contemporary educational landscape. The rationale for focusing on this area of research stems from the pressing need for institutions to more effectively use strategic planning practices to address these challenges, whilst contributing to the strategy-as-practice body of research.

The research questions are presented with the significance of the research explained, emphasising its potential impact on understanding how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. An inductive pilot study was conducted to sharpen the focus of the research and a summary of this is presented in this introduction. An overview of the terminology used throughout the thesis is provided to ensure clarity and consistency, with the structure of the thesis outlined.

1.2 Research Question

The overall research question is: *How do perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice?*

To address that question, this thesis explored the Scottish further and higher education sectors as the specific context through which the empirical research was conducted, focusing on the annual strategic planning process and the complex interplay between senior and middle management throughout. To explore how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking, the research question was broken down into three sub-research questions:

A: From a strategy-as-practice perspective, how are purpose, trust and emotionality currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers?

To answer this question, a literature review was carried out to understand how strategy and strategy-as-practice research provide a theoretical basis for exploring how purpose, trust, emotions and sensemaking are currently understood in the context of strategic planning. In addition, the roles of senior and middle managers and relevant research available on strategy practice in further and higher education contexts.

B: How do purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?

To answer this question, an empirical study was undertaken across three Scottish institutions to understand the connections between purpose, trust, emotion and sensemaking, whilst focused on the relationship between senior and middle management when engaged in a strategy process.

C: What factors might define a "meaning-full" strategy planning practice framework?

To answer this question, the answers to research questions A and B come together to inform a framework that enables more meaningful strategic planning practice to take place in further and higher education institutions. The framework highlights the importance of embedding purpose within strategic processes and practices, ensuring they are inherently meaningful, rather than simply making a difference in a superficial way.

A conceptual framework presented in Chapter Two outlines the key subjects and theoretical areas relevant to the study, with the research methods detailed in Chapter Three, so that the approach to answering the research questions was outlined, with rigour demonstrated.

1.3 Significance of the Thesis

The potential impact of this research extends beyond educational settings to any organisation, assisting them in navigating strategic planning activities more successfully. By understanding the factors that contribute to successful relationships between senior and middle management, organisations could more effectively achieve their strategic ambitions. This research has the potential to engage and support a broader audience beyond the further and higher education sectors, guiding senior management to more intentionally design their

approach to engaging staff in strategic planning. Complex and well-established organisations can benefit from this research as it provides insights into the practical components required for successful strategic planning and practice.

Whilst there is a vast amount of research across all strands of strategy process and practice, many organisations still struggle to successfully deliver strategy (Sull et al., 2015). This thesis investigates how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. There are empirical gaps in the understanding of how to better execute strategy (Burgelman, 2018; Sull et al., 2015) with opportunities to synthesise concepts captured under the umbrella of strategy-as-practice to examine the vital relationship between senior and middle management whilst engaged in strategy practice (Burgelman et al., 2018; Raes et al., 2011). Strategy-as-practice is a research strand that focuses on the lived realities of practitioners and embedding social theory within strategy research (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Strategy practice in the context of this thesis refers to the activities and actions that practitioners engage in when they *do* strategy, typically encompassing both social and material factors (Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

This research contributes to the strategy-as-practice literature by synthesising several concepts to aid understanding of how purpose (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2024; Hamel, 2009), trust (Frei and Morriss, 2020; Holstein et al., 2016), and emotion (Burgelman et al., 2018; Lencioni, 2012; Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011) shape managerial sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; McKiernan and MacKay, 2017; Day et al., 2023) in strategy practice. Greater connectivity of strategy-as-practice perspectives is needed to advance this crucial research agenda (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). There are also knowledge gaps in the available strategy-as-practice research for the further and higher education sectors such as how to lead with values and purpose (Watermeyer et al., 2022), a need to examine collective meaning-making and the link with strategic planning processes (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017; Leader, 2004), and the style of leadership and management of institutions (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000). Overall, an opportunity exists to conduct empirical research which has not been carried out previously.

1.4 Motivations for the Research

The researcher has worked in higher education since 2009, holding various leadership and management roles both centrally and within faculties. In 2016, they completed an MBA, during which their final project examined how performance management and employee engagement influenced a strategic KPI at a higher education institution. The findings of that project highlighted gaps in available research as to how to effectively execute strategy within higher education settings. The key findings from the project showed a lack of clarity over the accountability for strategy delivery and that fragmented information flows hindered strategy planning and practice. Both of these resulted in diminished engagement from staff at the middle manager level.

Since then, the researcher has worked in leadership roles in two Scottish higher education institutions. They have observed that middle managers have felt increasingly constrained, demotivated and unheard, which has impacted their relationship with senior management. In particular, strategic annual planning in institutions was a key process that appeared to amplify these feelings. Anecdotally, views across the researcher's network in both higher education and further education were that a significant level of effort went into strategic planning and delivery processes every year, yet the outputs were rarely looked at again following the completion of the process. A few short months later, annual planning would roll around again, with staff questioning the value of the process. The findings from the MBA project, along with discussions with peers from other institutions having similar experiences, reinforced the researcher's belief that there was an issue worthy of further exploration. This issue centred on how to make strategic planning and practice effective, yet meaningful across large and complex educational settings while ensuring positive and constructive relationships between senior and middle management.

With the researcher working full-time in higher education and undertaking this research part-time, a practitioner-researcher (Saunders et al., 2019) lens was unavoidable. This offered numerous advantages in terms of a greater depth of understanding of the context, access to study participants, and appreciation of the potential practical impact. It provided a greater understanding of organisational structures, decision-making processes, and cultural dynamics, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of relational interactions within strategy practice. Working in higher education helped in understanding the sectoral language and aided them

in the ability to connect and build trust with participants. This encouraged candid exchanges, strengthening the authenticity of findings. This embedded approach encouraged constant reflexivity, ensuring any biases were critically assessed while refining interpretations dynamically (Saunders et al., 2019).

1.5 Scottish Further and Higher Education Sectors

The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 defines further education as post-secondary education that is not at degree level. This includes vocational training, apprenticeships, and qualifications. Further education is primarily delivered by colleges for school leavers, adult learners, and those seeking professional development. Higher education encompasses degree-level study and research, predominantly delivered by universities. It includes undergraduate degrees, postgraduate qualifications and professional courses. Higher education institutions focus on academic learning, research, and innovation, contributing to Scotland's broader knowledge economy (Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act, 2005). There are 19 higher education institutions and 24 further education institutions in Scotland (Audit Scotland, 2023). Many of these institutions are located across central Scotland with some geographically located to service the Highlands, islands and other remote parts of Scotland.

The Scottish Government funds a significant proportion of the sectors through the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The SFC is the national strategic body that allocates £1.9 billion annually to tertiary education, research, and knowledge exchange through colleges and universities (SFC, 2024a). The SFC works with institutions to determine priorities and course provisions and allocates funding to institutions. These are then held accountable for their delivery via Outcome Agreements, which outline their commitments in return for funding. All SFC-funded institutions are required to report on their Outcomes Agreement annually.

Universities Scotland (2024) reported that in the 2021-22 financial year, the combined teaching, research, and innovation activities across higher education institutions generated an economic impact of £17.1 billion in Scotland. Investment in university research and innovation delivers £11 to the economy for every £1 invested. In 23/24, over 55,000 staff were employed in the HE sector in Scotland (HESA, 2025a), with 292,400 student enrolments in the HE sector in Scotland (HESA, 2025b). Overall, higher education institutions in Scotland play a crucial role

in driving economic growth, supporting employment, and significantly contributing to the nation's productivity (Universities Scotland, 2024).

The further education sector in Scotland also contributes significantly to the economy. For the 2021/22 graduates, it is estimated that the Scottish economy will see a cumulative increase of £8 billion in gross domestic product (GDP) over the long term, equivalent to a £73,000 productivity boost per graduate (Fraser of Allander, 2023). In 23/24, nearly 11,000 staff were employed in the further education sector in Scotland (SFC, 2025), with 124,654 funded student places delivered by Scotland's colleges (SFC, 2024a). This demonstrates the significant economic and social impact the sector has alongside the crucial role it plays in innovation, skills development and advancing knowledge.

1.6 Challenges Facing the Scottish Further and Higher Education Sectors

Whilst further and higher education institutions offer different provisions, they serve a broadly similar purpose with similar governance and funding arrangements in place with the SFC. They are also experiencing similar external and internal challenges. The sectors in Scotland, and the UK, has faced a number of significant political, economic and global challenges over the last decade which have made strategic planning and delivery difficult to navigate (SFC, 2024b; SFC, 2024c).

Global Context

Increased competition in the global education sector has meant that UK institutions have had to work harder to establish, maintain and grow their international presence and opportunities for income generation. The UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union (EU), known as Brexit, significantly impacted institutions. Membership of the EU brought benefits for the sectors such as greater opportunities for partnerships with institutions, access to EU funding, and the freedom of movement for EU residents who wished to study in the UK. EU residents benefited from a lower fee rate and the ability to live and work in the UK without the requirement of a visa. Since Brexit, the number of EU students studying in the UK has dropped by 21% since 2021/2022 (HESA, 2025c). The international student recruitment market has experienced significant volatility in recent years, often driven by geopolitical changes.

Financial Sustainability

All institutions have experienced fluctuating financial performance over the last ten years. The SFC published two reports in 2024 (SFC, 2024b; SFC, 2024c) detailing the financial health of Scotland's colleges and universities. The reports highlighted that both colleges and universities faced difficult economic conditions. Although these sectors are not identical, they share similar financial health risks, including uncertainty in national and global economic outlooks, increasing staff costs, reductions to public spending, rising operational costs and the need to invest in strategic change. The threat of cuts to funding has been ever present for several years, with each institution anxiously awaiting confirmation of its allocated funding on a year-by-year basis.

In the college sector, 92% of institutions were forecast to have an operating deficit due to increased costs not matched by income due to flat SFC grants. Colleges have a greater dependence on SFC funding, which was forecast to remain at an average of 78% of total income. Across the sector, staff costs made up nearly 70% of total expenditure. A reduction in staff expenditure is necessary for long-term financial sustainability (SFC, 2024b; SFC 2024c).

In the higher education sector, the report highlighted greater levels of variation in financial performance across institutions and forecast a reducing surplus for many institutions, with 53% likely to report underlying deficits in forthcoming financial years. The results across the sector are heavily influenced by the financial performance of the two largest and most successful institutions. The HE sector faces rising costs due to often large and ageing campuses and reduced income from sources like European funds and capital grants. The reliance on SFC funding was expected to drop from 31% to 23%, with international fee income expected to soon surpass SFC grants for the first time as a sector average. The financial performance of institutions in England is no different from Scotland, with 43% of institutions forecast to have a financial deficit for 2024-25 (Office for Students, 2025).

The need to diversify income streams and reduce reliance on government income is a key priority for all institutions. For many, this means increasing their international student population, which is currently uncapped. A growing international student population in the UK caused controversy, resulting in tighter policies on international student visas and restrictions on bringing dependents (Simons, 2024). The reports (SFC, 2024b; SFC, 2024c)

highlighted a trend of underperformance in international recruitment, which presents an increased risk of financial dependency on the international market.

The report urged institutions to proactively focus on a range of mitigating actions to protect the financial sustainability of the sector, such as diversifying international markets, identifying new income streams, staff restructuring, reducing costs, reviewing programme portfolios, delaying large capital expenditures, optimising the estate and focusing on greater collaboration across institutions.

Industrial Action and Covid-19

The sectors have experienced strike action over the last ten years, predominantly due to pension, pay and conditions which has resulted in considerable disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed numerous challenges in the sector such as the funding model, regulation, governance, and purpose (Watermeyer et al., 2022). These are complex challenges that are not easily resolved, especially when each stakeholder group has different priorities. Some institutions have thrived, with substantial increases in international students, whereas others have struggled to adapt and compete (SFC, 2024b; SFC 2024c).

Students

The retention of students has been a challenging area for institutions to understand and manage due to the rising costs of living (NUS, 2022), increased fee rates, and the ability to find employment after graduating. In recent years, there has also been a growing epidemic of mental health challenges for young people (Hall, 2022), which has put institutions under increasing pressure to provide enhanced levels of health and wellbeing support. Consequently, more school leavers are entering the workforce instead of pursuing full-time study, thus resulting in lower numbers of home-based students opting to engage with further and higher education (SFC, 2024a).

Strategic Planning in Disruptive Times

All of this has created a plethora of challenges for the sectors. The ability to strategically plan for the future whilst anticipating and delivering successfully for the present requires institutions to adapt. The need for institutions to do this more effectively, and meaningfully, has never been greater.

The Scottish Government commissioned the SFC in 2021 to conduct a review of how the sectors can best achieve coherent, high-quality, and sustainable tertiary education and research during disruptive times. The report highlighted the need to protect research, promote mission-oriented activities, and maintain Scotland's international education standing. The report acknowledged the need to build capacity for better strategic planning of tertiary education to ensure the sectors meets the needs of students, employers, and economic drivers. It placed emphasis on reviewing funding models, enhancing equality, promoting digital learning, and fostering collaboration among educational leaders to drive system changes. The report acknowledged the challenges of the current one-year funding allocation model and highlighted the need to develop a long-term vision for Scotland's education sector, including multi-year funding and a framework better to measure its impact (SFC, 2021).

Staff Wellbeing

A recent study on staff wellbeing in UK higher education institutions (Douglas et al., 2024) found that the sector faces significant challenges related to mental ill-health, stress, and burnout, which adversely affect staff productivity and retention (Douglas et al. 2024). The reasons for this connect to the many challenges faced across the sector. However, the most significant issues impacting wellbeing were found to be financial challenges, dealing with an increasing student population and heavier workloads. The study found that many staff experienced a lack of belonging, feeling like outsiders. It highlighted the need for organisations in times of challenge to focus on creating a sense of belonging as “staff wellbeing is shaped by a sense of community, the ability to make a difference...” (Douglas et al., 2024).

1.7 Pilot Study

To narrow the focus of the research and more clearly define the research questions, the researcher undertook a pilot study which looked at a strategic annual planning process in one institution which shall be referred to as Pilot X. The annual plans were the formal approach to strategic planning and used by planning units to identify priorities and contributions to delivering against the strategy. The annual plans were one of the key tools in cascading and delivering strategy throughout the institution and were identified as a credible subject for undertaking an initial study on strategic planning. An inductive approach was taken with the assumption that the findings would lead to a more specific research focus and clearer

theoretical position at the end of the pilot and that this would be used for the main research study.

Two types of qualitative research methods were used: content analysis and semi-structured interviews. Content analysis was first carried out on six of Pilot X's annual plans created for the academic year 2019 to 2020. Semi-structured individual interviews were held with six staff members who had direct involvement with the annual planning process for 2019 to 2020. The interviews took place in late 2020, with the interview questions (Appendix A) designed based on the themes that emerged from the content analysis. Follow-up interviews were held in late 2021 to explore the themes that emerged following analysis of the first round of interview data. More details on the research methodology are given in Chapter Three, with the comprehensive findings available in Appendix B.

Pilot Findings

The annual planning process at Pilot X was intended to align strategic planning across the institution. However, the study revealed a disconnect between its intended purpose and actual implementation, with plans often developed in isolation. Although the process was designed to reflect a devolved structure, allowing for managerial judgment and flexibility, the institutional culture surrounding the planning process did not foster the trust and autonomy necessary for strategic action.

The respondents viewed annual planning as a necessary but standalone exercise, disconnected from other key planning functions such as budgeting and resource allocation. Respondents valued the localised development of plans, appreciating the engaging discussions and staff participation within their own units, but the process was time-consuming, requiring their attention for four to six months each year.

The challenges posed by COVID-19 further exasperated these issues, with reactive responses to the pandemic making long-term planning difficult. Minimal or no adjustments were made to developed plans during the pandemic, which made respondents feel accountable for unrealistic goals that failed to reflect shifting priorities and uncertainty.

There was also uncertainty as to whether senior management reviewed the plans, which contributed to a sense of disengagement and diminished the perceived value of the exercise. Respondents sought feedback, support, recognition and permission to plan more coherently across the institution, but this was not happening. While respondents demonstrated a strong commitment to their plans, the absence of meaningful conversations and feedback was discouraging. Respondents highlighted that they were not fully honest in their plans, as they thought senior management was either unwilling to receive candid accounts of progress or that differing perspectives may carry negative consequences. Some would only present a positive position so as not to risk attracting attention from senior management. The annual planning process did not appear to provide a safe space for transparent conversations about strategic challenges and constructive conversations on their possible mitigations.

The plans were designed to reinforce a devolved structure, allowing managerial discretion to respond to emerging opportunities. However, feedback suggested that this intent was at odds with the institutional structures and culture, which limited control over resources and the ability to enact change. Instead of fostering trust and autonomy, the reality of the planning process created barriers to effective decision-making. Targets and budgets were set by senior management without middle management input, leading to perceptions that stretch targets were unrealistic, particularly as planning units may only receive additional resources after achieving them, rather than receiving support in advance.

Analysis of interview feedback revealed a range of tensions between senior and middle management. Feedback from respondents implied that the planning process lacked empathy from senior management. The focus on growth targets combined with limited decision-making authority left middle managers feeling angry, demotivated, hopeless, reckless, and frustrated - exacerbating tensions. The imposition of unrealistic targets beyond middle managers' control, and without additional resources or investment, created frustration and contributed to deteriorating relationships between senior and middle managers. While senior management may have believed that existing resources were sufficient, unrealistic targets and uninformed decisions risked breakdowns in trust between these two groups of critical strategic actors.

Pilot Study – Implications for Main Study

The findings from the pilot study were valuable for narrowing the focus of the research and designing the conceptual framework. The study confirmed that the annual planning process provided a valuable lens for focusing the research which was broadly replicable across multiple institutions in Scotland.

Whilst the content analysis of annual plans was a useful starting point for the inductive study and provided helpful insight, the interviews proved to be more valuable, leading to richer data that explained the nuances of strategic planning in a complex organisational setting.

The study found that the relational dynamics between senior and middle managers were an important factor influencing strategy planning and revealed underlying tensions between middle management and senior management. Another key finding was the absence of an overarching strategic purpose guiding the annual planning process, which seemed more like a mandatory exercise focused on completing the template rather than a meaningful strategic purpose.

The findings shaped the initial conceptual framework for the main study, focusing on strategic purpose and the relational dynamics between senior and middle management, an area warranting further exploration in both literature and empirical research. The pilot study significantly influenced the focus and design of this thesis. Initially, the researcher was interested in executing strategy through a more structural and potentially limited lens. However, the pilot study revealed a deeper and more complex organisational interplay between middle and senior management engaged in strategy planning. It uncovered nuances in those relational dynamics that required a deeper level of research and analysis to determine how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion were shaping managerial sensemaking in strategy practice.

The pilot study initiated the researcher's transition to the practitioner-researcher role, rather than a practitioner. The pilot also marked the beginning of the researcher's own journey of sensemaking in more deeply understanding the research problem and the literature available.

1.8 Terminology

There is a wide variety of terminology used to describe the structures, roles and processes in Scottish further and higher education settings. To support the anonymity of the institutions that took part in the research and ensure consistency in the terminology throughout the thesis, the following terms will be used:

- Strategy-as-practice refers to the research strand that focuses on the *doing* of strategy.
- Strategy practice refers to the activities and actions that practitioners engage in when they *do* strategy, reflecting the focus of the empirical research.
- Further or higher education settings taking part in the research will be referred to as “institutions”.
- Colleges and faculties are typically sub-units within an institution that focus on a particular area of study or structural groupings of academic disciplines. “Faculty” will be used throughout this thesis to avoid confusion with further education Colleges.
- “Planning units” will be used to refer to an academic school, professional service or directorate, which are typically the types of distinctive units within further and higher education settings.
- The annual processes for strategic planning will be referred to as “annual planning”.
- “Senior manager” or “senior management” will be used to refer to the executive team of an institution, typically consisting of a Principal, Vice Principals and other Senior Officers.
- “Middle manager” or “middle management” will be used to refer to those who hold a leadership position, at least one level below the senior management level, and have responsibility for leading a department or planning unit.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows:

- Chapter Two provides a review of the literature and relevant research, establishing the foundation for the study and outlining the conceptual framework.
- Chapter Three summarises the research methodology employed, detailing the underlying philosophical assumptions, the research design and the approach taken to collect and analyse data.

- Chapter Four presents the findings of the research, highlighting key insights and results.
- Chapter Five offers a discussion of these findings, interpreting the results and exploring their implications.
- Chapter Six concludes the research, summarising the key points and discussing the implications for future research and practice.
- Chapter Seven offers the researcher's reflections on the thesis journey.
- References and appendices are provided at the end of the thesis to support the information presented and offer additional resources for further exploration.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Chapter Two

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for the research by outlining key concepts that frame the opportunities for the study, and answers the first sub-research question:

From a strategy-as-practice perspective, how are purpose, trust and emotionality currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers?

This chapter begins with the contextual studies on the further and higher education sectors, which were essential for understanding the factors that have shaped strategy practice, while also assessing existing research on the concepts explored throughout this chapter.

An overview of strategy and strategy-as-practice provides essential definitions and foundational insights. The inclusion of strategy-as-practice is crucial, as it moves beyond conventional strategy theories to examine how strategy is enacted in everyday organisational contexts, directly informing the study of strategic planning. This section focuses on the ‘purpose’ aspect of the research question.

The chapter then considers the last part of the question by exploring the literature to better understand the roles of senior and middle management when they are engaged in strategic planning. Middle managers often serve as the bridge between strategic vision and operational delivery, making their role particularly important for strategic planning activities.

A critical area of investigation is the relational dynamics between senior and middle managers, and this forms the middle of the sub-research question. The findings from the pilot study indicate that these relationships significantly influence strategic planning. Relational factors such as sensemaking, emotionality, trust, and power shape the interplay between these two groups of strategic actors. By examining these concepts in depth, the literature review leads to a greater understanding of how purpose, trust and emotionality impact the sensemaking of managers engaged in strategic planning.

The chapter also explores strategy tools and processes, providing insights into the mechanisms through which strategy is enacted. Strategy tools, such as planning documents and meetings,

serve as critical enablers that facilitate and shape strategic interactions. Understanding their function is essential to assessing whether they support or constrain strategic planning efforts. Whilst strategy tools are not a primary focus of this research, the role they play in facilitating the dynamics and interactions between senior and middle management is crucial.

Finally, the chapter introduces the conceptual framework, which synthesises the theoretical perspectives discussed and provides the structural foundation for the study, and offering a cohesive approach for exploring how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice.

2.2 Further and Higher Education Context

Conducting a literature review on strategy research in further and higher education settings was crucial for gaining insights into the contextual factors influencing this process, and for reviewing the relevant research carried out to date relating to the concepts explored in this chapter. It helped to build knowledge and understanding of the broader context, identify key themes, avoid duplication of previous research, and inform the theoretical framework for the study. Additionally, it enhanced the credibility and validity of the research by acknowledging the challenges and diversity of strategic planning in further and higher education, ensuring that the research was relevant, practical, and adaptable to educational settings. This section explores contextual research conducted within the further and higher education sectors, providing a foundation for the concepts examined in subsequent sections of the literature review.

Further Education

2.2.1 Sectoral Changes and the Adoption of Corporate “Managerialism”

The management of further education colleges has faced criticism in recent decades for adopting a more 'managerialist' approach (Simkins, 2000; Lowe and Gayle, 2010; Elliott and Hall, 1994; Dearlove, 1997). This has led to a perceived gap between lecturers and senior managers, with concerns that educational values are being replaced by a focus on maximising income and performance. One study explored the views of eight principals from further education institutions in Northern England. They discussed their management styles, decision making, and consideration of the curriculum. It found evidence both to support and contradict the “managerialist” perception and challenged the idea that there had been a change in senior

managers' values. The study argued that senior managers' actions do not necessarily conflict with educational values, while emphasising the need for more research to better understand the complexities associated with further educational leadership (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000). A review by Lowe and Gayle (2010) as to how college management in Scotland has evolved also examined "managerialism" and the emergence of a different type of professional leadership in college management. The review highlighted the fact that structural and political changes have transformed college leaders' roles, presenting challenges and opportunities. This new type of leadership requires a deeper understanding of professional values and the ability to build strong relationships with stakeholders. It also requires college leaders to have a greater level of competence in finance, public relations, transformational leadership, as well as the ability to influence and implement policy and engender a collaborative institutional culture focused on the students' needs.

Simkins (2000) looked at the effects of policy changes in public education in England and Wales following the introduction of the Education Reform Act (1988) to explore if a "managerialist" approach had replaced a bureaucratic approach. The Education Reform Act (1988) led to the shift from a state education system to a market education system through the establishment of league tables and formula funding. Simkins (2000) reviewed policy changes, the roles of senior and middle managers, and the shifts in managerial and organisational culture. The study did identify a trend towards "managerialism", although it was more plausibly linked to the changes in policy for the sector. While emphasising that the sector has experienced complex and dynamic adjustments over the years, the study showed that the leadership must ensure a student-focused approach and establish ambitious targets that can better measure performance and progress. Simkins (2000) observed that it was "dangerous" to conclude that the traditional bureaucratic form of organisational leadership had been replaced by "managerialism" and that it would be more helpful to consider the management of institutions as an evolving approach that required further research.

Higher Education

The increased use of a corporate style of leadership and management of institutions has led to tensions both within institutions and across the sector. It has faced criticism and resistance due to the traditional expectations of collaborative decision making and professional academic autonomy (Bleiklie et al., 2015; Brès et al., 2018). Karran and Mallinson (2019) conducted a

study to understand the correlation between academic freedom within the governance of higher education institutions and high rankings. The study found that in the UK, staff at older universities (pre-1992) with high rankings have more academic freedom and participation in governance than those at newer universities (post-1992), suggesting that changing the governance approach in newer institutions could be beneficial. There was a positive link between increased levels of academic freedom and participative governance. However, the study criticised the increased adoption of corporate management approaches, replacing academic governance with leaders who make decisions through a business lens rather than valuing education.

Gudissa et al. (2024) explored how changes in policies related to governance and funding have affected strategy making practices. The study found that, while education and research remain a central focus in strategy making, there has been an increasing emphasis on growing commercial activities in recent decades. The study highlighted a global shift in higher education towards hybrid strategic practices that focus on finding ways to balance educational values with economic priorities. This includes adapting strategies to external pressures like internationalisation, new technologies, growing student expectations, and global economic and political challenges. This study highlighted the need for a strong strategic framework to help institutions stay agile and responsive while staying true to their core mission and values. The challenge of diminishing government funding has meant that institutions have needed to diversify their income streams through activities such as increasing international student recruitment, commercialising research, and partnerships with the private sector (Lynch and Baines, 2004; Siegel and Leih, 2018). Shattock (2000) highlights that, with reduced state funding, institutions must actively compete for resources, enhance their reputation, and integrate academic, financial, and physical planning to remain viable. He identified key success factors such as competitiveness, opportunism, income generation, and excellence, arguing that universities must adopt a market-oriented approach to sustain their strategic direction.

Traditionally, institutions have prioritised academic goals and focused resources on core learning, teaching, and research (Howes et al., 2018; Sutphen et al., 2019). However, the “managerialism” tension exists when staff perceive that corporate and entrepreneurial activities are prioritised over traditional education and research, thus making strategic planning in institutions challenging (Sutphen et al., 2019; Dearlove, 1997). Deem and Brehony

(2005) described “new managerialism” as an ideology which had been embraced by academic management in order to exert their right to manage both academic and professional service staff, suggesting a dynamic of power and dominance. This dynamic is further reinforced by external requirements to demonstrate the quality of provision and research (Deem and Brehony, 2005).

The literature review revealed a growing body of research on higher education that was closely linked to strategy literature.

2.2.2 *Leadership*

In the UK, higher education institutions are considered complex, pluralistic organisations with diverse and often conflicting interests among stakeholders (Day et al., 2023; Brès et al., 2018; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). Some recent studies indicate that effective leadership is critical in driving strategy, with a strong emphasis on shared vision, collaboration, and decision making processes. One study on UK leadership in higher education by Watermeyer et al. (2022) focused on three key themes: context, values and purpose, and leadership qualities. The theme of context acknowledged that, to constructively tackle the challenges experienced in the sector in recent years, leaders must adapt and develop their collaborative skills to drive transformative change within their institutions and across the broader sector. The theme of values and purpose highlighted the importance of traditional values such as public good, inclusivity, social justice, social mobility, and freedom of speech in higher education. These values were thought to be threatened by the competitive pursuit of funding, prestige, and a more instrumental approach to evaluating higher education's impact on the economy and society. The research emphasised a desire from participants for a values-based approach to higher education leadership. This desire was for leaders to “*act as custodians of core values of HE*” (Watermeyer et al., 2022, p55) and to uphold these while driving positive transformation and change. The ability to balance values with change was seen as vital for leaders' credibility, and social influence within their institutions and across the sector. The final theme focused on leadership competencies and behaviours essential for effective and ethical leadership in higher education. Being adaptable, analytical, authentic, collaborative, compassionate, creative, credible, decisive, digitally engaged, inclusive, and self-reflective was found to be vital across all levels of leadership. The study resulted in several recommendations which emphasised the need to take a contextualised approach that is cognisant of varying leadership

skills, competencies, and behaviours, and understanding what would work best with different audiences. The emphasis on values and purpose highlighted a knowledge gap that required further exploration.

2.2.3 Meaning-Making and Narratives

A study by Spee and Jarzabkowski (2017) acknowledged that higher education institutions consist of multiple groups with diverse and often competing interests and that this creates challenges when implementing new strategies. These interests are based on different meaning systems about the institution's purpose. This makes introducing a new strategy challenging due to the varying interpretations and perceptions of meaning. They conducted a study that examined two approaches to meaning-making as part of a strategy making process. One approach focused on gaining agreement on shared meaning among all stakeholders, and another focused on agreement without specifying a shared meaning. The findings led to the proposal of a "joint account", where varying stakeholders can agree on a broad concept that accommodates their interests while allowing them space for interpretation and alignment with the proposed goal. The study highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for broad stakeholder groups to acknowledge their differences whilst achieving a level of agreement on strategic direction. This study called for future research to explore how meaning-making is linked to strategic planning processes (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017).

Holstein et al. (2016) examined the evolution of two universities within the UK policy context to offer conceptual insights into strategic narrative development. They suggest that narratives evolve through the continuous reworking of past, present, and future, shaped by a landscape of fear and hope. The authors argue that hope is essential for sustaining strategic direction, while societal values serve as a bridge, maintaining connections to historical, future, and multiple overlapping narratives.

Sillince et al. (2012) explored how ambiguity was strategically constructed and exploited in organisational decision-making within a business school's internationalisation strategy. They reported that ambiguity was necessary for influencing strategic outcomes and found that rhetorical ambiguity enabled strategic actors to navigate strategic complexity, whether by protecting interests, inviting participation, or adapting narratives to evolving contexts. The ability to construct and exploit ambiguity becomes a central mechanism in strategic action,

allowing practitioners to mediate tensions and sustain momentum across stakeholders (Sillince et al. 2011).

2.2.4 Knowledge Workers

It is worth acknowledging that further and higher education settings are predominantly in the business of creating knowledge, yet there is much to understand as to how organisations harness this knowledge collectively in order to thrive (Donate and Canales, 2012). Kim and Mauborgne's (1998) work on procedural justice in strategic decision-making argues that knowledge workers, whose contributions are often intangible, require fair and transparent decision-making processes to foster voluntary cooperation. When managers perceive there to be a clear organisational purpose and fairness in strategic decision-making, they are more likely to engage actively in knowledge-sharing and collaboration. Mládková et al. (2015) argue that trust, autonomy, and meaningful work are key drivers of motivation for knowledge workers, as these factors enhance knowledge-sharing and innovation. This seems especially relevant to further and higher education settings.

2.3 Overview of Strategy and the Strategy-as-Practice Research

2.3.1 *Strategy as Purpose*

Strategy is a key focus of this research, featuring prominently in the research questions. It is helpful, therefore, as a starting point, to outline what a strategy is to an organisation and why it is important, providing essential definitions and foundational insights. As an organisation grows and becomes increasingly complex, it can be challenging for both leaders and staff to know every aspect of the business. Therefore, a strategy can provide a guiding set of principles for how people within an organisation allocate resources and make decisions that contribute towards the achievement of articulated company ambitions (Watkins, 2007). Strategy is the glue that unites an organisation, providing an overarching purpose (Vilà and Canales, 2008).

Traditionally, the creation of strategy involves the most senior managers in an organisation considering their strengths, competencies, markets and competitors to create a clear plan that provides focus and purpose for the entire organisation (Mintzberg, 1987; Porter 1996). The basics of a strategy formulation process are about thought and action; "*First we think, then we act. We formulate, then we implement*" (Mintzberg, 1985, p68). There are critiques of this traditional structured view of strategy creation, such as that it has outlived its usefulness

(Powell, 2017) and that it is unrealistic, since "*goals are often static while the business environment rarely is*" (Isenberg, 1987, p92). Strategy formulation and execution can vary significantly depending on the organisational context, how established the company is, and the leadership style (Johnson et al., 2003; Sull et al., 2015). Using the metaphor of a single craftsman, Mintzberg (1987) compares strategy to pottery creation. He views strategy as a creative craft that requires the same level of mastery, skill, attention to detail, reflection, and awareness of strengths and limitations.

Porter (1996) demonstrates that strategy is the creation and articulation of valuable and opportunistic positioning that is closely connected with a company's activities. It is this close fit with operational activities that can drive both competitive advantage and ongoing sustainability. This view is supported by Johnson et al. (2003) who in addition incorporate an activity-based view "*that focuses on the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organisational life and which relate to strategic outcomes*" (Johnson et al., 2003, p3).

Powell (2017) observes that strategy creation and execution are social processes. They are created by people and operate in a world that is all about people. Drawing on extra-disciplinary theories such as psychology and the study of human behaviour, he supports the adoption of a more considered people-focused perspective as "*thoughtful doing of activities is fundamental to success*" (Powell, 2017, p179). A strategy can create meaning and sense of purpose for those working in an organisation.

Mintzberg and Waters (1985), Isenberg (1987), and Mintzberg (1987) all propose that successful strategies must be formulated with both deliberate and emergent strategic elements. A shared overarching strategic vision must be explicit with the flexibility to adapt and innovate as necessary to achieve that vision (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). The traditional view of a rigid plan with goals that must be pursued directly with no deviation is outdated, unrealistic and impractical (Porter, 1996; Powell, 2017). Where strategies are planned over a long period, it is unrealistic for organisations to operate under the assumption that the environment, customers, economy, and technology will remain unchanged throughout that time.

The need for a clear vision and long-term strategy to have the flexibility to adjust and adapt to the changing needs of the market, environment or customer is essential. It is unrealistic for a strategy to remain as it was originally intended and it can "*become a straitjacket if followed too rigidly*" (Isenberg, 1987, p92). Therefore, it is crucial that management plan for, and anticipate, change. Isenberg (1987) outlines how this can be achieved if organisations adopt a strategic opportunism approach. This incorporates both deliberate and emergent strategy formulation, but an emergent strategy can only be successful if managers have the necessary skills to act in response to changing circumstances. Having both deliberate and emergent strategies provides a purpose and a level of control, whilst creating the flexibility to adapt if necessary (Vilà and Canales, 2008).

Emergent planning processes should positively impact the delivery of strategic ambitions whilst further shaping the strategic direction of the organisation. Successful strategic change should arise through rich, continuous conversation at a strategic level that triggers a change both in perspective and action (Ackermann and Eden, 2011, p10). This acknowledges the affective states of the strategic actors involved, and who are tasked with engaging with and delivering the outcome of the emergent strategy process. However, many organisations that undergo annual strategic planning find that these processes do not quite hit the mark:

"a common experience for many managers is that the strategic planning process takes on the form of an 'annual rain dance'...often the reality is that the activity will simply result in 'the usual annual budgeting battle' which is focused on short term issues and the retention of the status quo." (Ackermann and Eden, 2011, p7)

Mintzberg and Rose (2003) challenged conventional strategic management perspectives by conducting a longitudinal study on how strategy evolved in a Canadian university, acknowledging that knowledge workers in a higher education context operate differently from corporate environments. They argued that strategic management in such settings is more emergent and adaptive than deliberately planned. The study indicated that the Canadian university navigated strategic decisions through decentralised processes, informal influence, and evolving institutional priorities (Mintzberg and Rose, 2003).

While perspectives on the effectiveness of strategic planning vary (Glaister and Falshaw, 1999; Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg et al., 1998), much of the literature agrees that communication is a necessary component for effective strategic planning (Grant, 2003; Ketokivi and Castañer, 2004; Mintzberg, 1994). However, few studies examine strategic planning in practice, the communicative dynamics, the ‘micro activities’ within strategic planning processes (Johnson et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Whittington and Cailluet, 2008), and how these can better be applied so that strategic outcomes are more fully achieved.

2.3.2 *Strategy-as-Practice*

In research, strategy-as-practice (SAP) is a broad umbrella term under which activities and phenomena associated with the ‘doing’ of strategy can be known and are distinguished from strategy creation. This is the main body of research that this study directly contributes to. Strategy-as-practice moves beyond conventional strategy theories to examine how strategy is enacted in everyday organisational contexts, directly informing the study of strategic planning. Strategy-as-practice acknowledges that strategy is not straightforward and there is no magic formula for how to *do* strategy well across all businesses. It is complex and can be difficult to understand or navigate:

“The SAP research agenda is concerned with strategy as a situated, socially accomplished activity constructed through the actions and interactions of multiple actors” (Jarzabkowski, 2005, p7).

“Strategy-as-practice may thus be seen as part of a broader concern to humanize management and organization research” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p6).

Strategy-as-practice considers both the actions and behaviours of human beings at a micro level, as well as the broader, socially defined practices at a macro level that individuals rely on and incorporate into their actions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

This perspective was originally described as an activity-based view (ABV) (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Johnson et al. (2003) considered an activity-based view to be one *“that focuses on the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organisational life and which relate to strategic outcomes”* (Johnson et al., 2003, p3). ABV explores how the

focus of decision-makers within an organisation influences strategic outcomes. Introduced by Ocasio (1997), ABV suggests that attention is a limited and essential resource, and its allocation can significantly affect organisational behaviour and performance. It considers the roles and practices of practitioners in directing attention and the importance of this focus on shaping decision making and delivering strategy within organisations. By examining the patterns and determinants of attention, ABV aims to provide a lens through which to better understand the actions of organisations, the complexities of strategy, and the factors driving successful strategic practice (Ocasio, 1997; Nicolini and Mengis, 2004).

The dynamic and multifaceted nature of attention could make ABV complex to apply and understand, potentially limiting its accessibility for practitioners. Quantifying and measuring attention within an organisation may be difficult, posing challenges for empirical research.

Nicolini and Mengis (2004) examined how a practice-theoretical perspective can enhance the attention-based view (ABV) by emphasising the importance of context, intersecting practices, and dynamic attention. They argued that attention is shaped by the historical and contextual placement of practices, often operating outside of conscious awareness. Attention in organisations emerges from the interaction of multiple practices, each within its framework, leading to tensions and contradictions. The paper also distinguishes between inattention, distraction, and productive shifts in attention. A practice-theoretical perspective establishes a link between caring and paying attention, which acknowledges the need to understand emotions in the analysis. More research to better understand how attention is situated in everyday interactions is necessary (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Ocasio et al., 2018). Further exploration of how attention shifts over time and its impact on strategic outcomes can provide deeper insights into organisational behaviour. Investigating how ABV interacts with other strategic management theories, such as institutional theory or resource-based view, can enhance its explanatory power. These areas present opportunities for advancing both the theoretical and practical applications of the Attention-Based View in strategy-as-practice.

Carter et al. (2008) critiqued early strategy-as-practice progress, noting that, despite its intentions, it had not made sufficient gains in understanding how strategies are formed and implemented. They argued for researchers to take a more reflexive research perspective that

built upon performative, symbolic, processual and critical theory that was more sociologically and philosophically robust.

Vaara and Whittington (2012) articulated that strategy-as-practice represents an alternative research strand away from the more common ‘strategy’ and ‘strategic management’ areas, and focuses on advancing the lived realities of practitioners and the social theories in strategic management. This has allowed the research agenda to reveal “*a variety of practices that have significant enabling and constraining effects on strategy-making, many of which have been overlooked in mainstream research.*” (Vaara and Whittington, 2012, p40). They argue that there is a need for the strategy-as-practice agenda to go further in understanding social practices in order to help reach its full potential. However, there are challenges in progressing this agenda, as it is “demanding to study the micro-level while aiming at understanding the macro” (2012, p. 41).

Burgelman et al. (2018) carried out an extensive literature review on strategy-as-practice and strategy process research published since 1992 to summarise the findings and redefine future research implications. They concluded that the strategy process includes strategic decision making processes, actors involved in strategy, the behavioural dynamics and emotions of strategy, the evolution of strategic competencies and capabilities, strategic planning formal processes, and strategic issue management. Burgelman et al. (2018) also noted that the practice research emerged from sociological theories and considered social and organisational practices in strategy, roles and identities of the practitioners, sense-making, strategy tools, and power and criticality in strategy work. This review resulted in the creation of a combinatory view: Strategy as Process and Practice (SAPP) as both process and practice activities “*are essential aspects of the same phenomena... [that have] explanatory power and value for managers*” (Burgelman et al., 2018, p539).

Strategy Research in Further and Higher Education

A study by McTavish (2006) exploring the interface of strategy, policy, and service delivery in the further education sector in Scotland found that colleges demonstrated a strategic approach while balancing various managerial and professional interests. However, externally, a disconnect existed between college strategic planning and funding which hindered

comprehensive strategy formulation. The local focus on further education made strategic thinking challenging, creating a 'strategic capacity gap' not addressed by support bodies.

In higher education, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2024) conducted a study at a European university to explore the effectiveness of strategic planning. The authors argued that strategic plans in such environments often failed due to strong professional norms and cultures resisting formalised strategy work. The study found that the strategic plan was often used for branding, identity construction, or projecting an image of rational management, with senior management involved in the process expressing scepticism, distancing themselves from both the strategy and its outcomes.

Egorov and Platonova (2022) explored how strategic planning affects university operations and performance, focusing on the views of middle managers. They examined the role of strategy in change management within the Russian higher education system and used survey data from middle managers, comparing it with performance indicators. The findings showed that middle managers' views on strategic planning correlated with changes in university performance. However, middle managers saw no real changes after strategic plans were developed. This is because institutions often created strategies to appear effective and attract public resources, rather than to bring about actual changes. As a result, the strategies were more about appearing to say the right thing externally than doing what they said.

There are still significant opportunities for further research into strategy processes and practice. Jarzabkowski et al. (2021) wrote a "call to arms" to reinvigorate strategy-as-practice future research through more active fieldwork to identify and explain strategic practices. While they acknowledge that significant progress has been made across the strategy-as-practice agenda, there is often a focus on formal strategies rather than exploring a deeper understanding of strategy as "consequential," meaning what is important to various actors and the effects of their actions. Kohtamäki et al. (2021) called for greater connectivity across the various strategy-as-practice perspectives to advance this crucial research agenda. Burgelman et al. (2018) called for future research in (a) temporality, (b) actors and agency, (c) cognition and emotionality, (d) materiality and tools, (e) structures and systems, and (f) language and meaning. Burgelman et al. (2018) highlight that the emotional responses of managers engaging with the strategy process continue to be under-explored, with the need

to better understand how to communicate strategy and its supporting processes. In addition, there is an opportunity to better understand the agency of middle management to make decisions and the tensions between senior management and middle management. At the same time, the emotions, moods and fears that may exist in the strategy process have remained largely unexplored. With the increasing prominence of information technology tools, information technology can also be expected to play an increasingly important role in the strategy processes, enabling transparency, participation, and inclusion.

Despite its critical role in shaping managerial understanding and decision-making, strategy communication also remains an under-explored topic within strategy process research. Laamanen et al. (2015) highlighted the need for more longitudinal studies that track strategy processes and practices over time. Within a strategy-as-practice perspective, such investigations are essential for unpacking how purpose, trust, and emotionality inform the sensemaking of strategic planning by managers, offering deeper insights into the dynamic interplay between communicative practices and strategic outcomes. Synthesising these concepts rather than considering them in isolation could offer a greater level of insight into the complexities of strategy practice.

2.3.3 Philosophical Paradigms from the Strategy-as-Practice Literature

The purpose of the research was to better understand and improve strategy practice which firmly sits within the strategy-as-practice movement. It was useful to explore the dominant philosophical paradigm from the key thinkers whose ideas have been influential to this body of research and how this aligns with the researcher's view of this research. The literature was evaluated against Saunders et al.'s (2019) five research philosophical positions: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, post-modernism and pragmatism (Appendix C). The table below summarises the key philosophical positions outlined by Saunders et al. (2019) and extends the summary to briefly outline the suitability for this study.

Table 1 - Summary of Saunders et al.'s (2018) philosophical positions

Philosophical Position	Ontology (Nature of reality)	Epistemology (Knowledge)	Axiology (Values)	Methodological Approach
Positivism	One true reality exists independently of researcher.	Knowledge is discovered through observable facts	A researcher is objective and independent of	Highly structured. Typically, quantitative methods such as

		and scientific methods.	what is being researched.	experiments, surveys, and statistical analysis.
	Suitability for this study: This philosophy was considered unsuitable, as this research assumes no objective reality exists in the socially constructed environments explored in this study. This approach could have marginalised individual experiences.			
Critical Realism	A real world exists independently, but our understanding is filtered by perceptions and contexts.	Knowledge is historically situated and transient. Facts are social constructions.	Value-laden research. Researcher aims to be objective but acknowledges bias.	Often mixed methods, integrating both quantitative tools and qualitative insight, to reveal deeper causal structures.
	Suitability for this study: The deterministic aspect can conflict with the strategy-as-practice emphasis on socially constructed meanings, which evolve dynamically rather than being shaped by deeper mechanisms.			
Interpretivism	Reality is socially constructed and dynamic, dependent on human interaction and context.	Focuses on narratives, stories, and perceptions. Theories and concepts are considered simplistic.	Value-bound. Researcher is part of what is being researched. Subjective and reflexive.	Typically, qualitative techniques such as interviews, case studies, and ethnography to capture rich, context-specific insights.
	Suitability for this study: Many aspects align with this study given the socially constructed reality in a knowledge environment. However, it can be context-specific and may limit the applicability of findings beyond the context studied.			
Post Modernism	Reality is not fixed, but rather socially constructed, varying across different contexts and perspectives	Fluid and contingent, rejecting universal truths in favour of multiple interpretations.	Value-constituted. Researcher is radically reflexive and embedded in power relations.	A range of methods, typically qualitative, such as discourse analysis and in-depth analysis of anomalies.
	Suitability for this study: This position would have acknowledged the socially constructed reality of the study context and the human exploration of the relationship. However, this position questions the existence of absolute truths. It lacked the practical consequences and usefulness of ideas.			
Pragmatism	Reality is fluid and evolving, defined by practical outcomes. Socially constructed.	Knowledge is judged by its practical utility and ability to solve real-world problems.	Value-driven research sustained by the researcher's beliefs. Reflexive approach.	Flexible and method-driven. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used. Emphasis on practical outcomes.
	Suitability for this study: The practice-oriented approach suited the research, which acknowledges that the reality is the practical consequence of ideas and experiences, and practices align with this research. The identification of effective methods to			

	understand experiences and integrating these with theoretical insights and strategy practices also aligns.
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To characterise the dominant philosophical paradigm within the field, a sample of leading scholars and literature that have contributed to the emergence of strategy-as-practice over the last forty years was explored and is summarised below.

Mintzberg and Waters (1985, 1990)

One of the leading authors in the field of strategy is Mintzberg and Waters (1985, 1990). They viewed organisations as “*a collection of people joined together to pursue some mission in common*” (1985, p258). They challenged the traditional perception of strategy as a fixed tool and contributed much to the field of intentional and emergent strategy. They wanted to “*gain insight into intention, choice and pattern formation in organisations*” (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985, p258) and break away from the traditional strategy mindset. They recognised that self-awareness was crucial for managers so that patterns could be identified and more effectively considered and planned for within the strategy process. Their goal was to better understand and build new perspectives, and they often used small samples with intensive longitudinal studies. One example studied every decision and action within an organisation from 1917 to 1974 (Mintzberg and Waters, 1990), an approach which aligns with critical realism or interpretivism. However, their focus on emergent strategy and understanding pattern formation suggests both interpretivism and pragmatism. Given the scale of disruption and challenge further and higher education settings have faced in recent years, as outlined in Chapter One, the contributions offered by Mintzberg and Waters resonate strongly with the need for both deliberate and emergent strategies.

Weick (1995)

Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking is about processing events or stimuli into a cognitive framework to “make sense” of the situation. He draws strongly on dissonance theory which combines sensemaking by justification, by retrospect, by social construction, by action, by choice and by discrepancy. Weick (1995) describes organisations as social structures and asserts that sensemaking can help to identify recurring events to stabilise the environment. This could lead to a sense of control, offering reassurance and accountability. He acknowledges that those who experience the same event within an organisation may label it

differently. Weick suggests that sensemaking could be helpful for researchers and practitioners by heightening self-awareness of their actions and their observations. He believes that the ability to do this well could lead to more credible implications for practice. Recognising the socially constructed nature of further and higher education settings and the diversity of experiences within strategy practice, Weick's perspective is integral to this study. His work highlights the nuance, complexity, and variety in the lived experiences of those engaged in strategic planning, providing a valuable lens for understanding how individuals make sense of and navigate strategic processes. The practical and non-prescriptive nature of sensemaking seems more suited to a pragmatist mindset.

Johnson et al. (2003)

Johnson et al. (2003) called for the focus of strategy research to shift from macro to micro activities and introduced an activity-based view of strategy that draws attention to the processes and practices that are akin to organisational realities. The ontology throughout focuses on social construction and describes organisations and process research as "*a complex and ambiguous reality*" (Johnson et al., 2003, p11). He calls for a bridge between institutional theory that analyses the social phenomena and behaviours of organisations as a whole and offers Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory as a way to better understand micro-level activities. Johnson et al. (2003) called for the joint production of knowledge that brings the academic study of practice and real-world practitioners together. This is more aligned with pragmatism which typically focuses on informing future practice, solving problems and developing practical knowledge in specific organisational contexts (Saunders et al., 2019). Johnson's et al. (2003) ambition was to inspire more reflexive practitioners advocating that managers are key in managing organisational activity. He also wanted to move away from case studies which are "*largely left to the reader [to undertake] the hard work of interpreting these into practice*" (2003, p10) and called for more empirical investigations. Although some of Johnson's et al. (2003) outlook sits within the interpretivism lens, the emphasis on creating practical outputs that focus on micro activities also suggests a pragmatist paradigm. Although the researcher disagrees with Johnson et al.'s (2003) perspective on the effectiveness of case studies, an approach justified in Chapter Three, the broader argument aligns with this research. Specifically, the need for deeper insights into real-world strategy practice being essential for advancing understanding and improving strategic processes within complex and ambiguous social realities.

Jarzabkowski (2005)

The strategy-as-practice framework first emerged in Jarzabkowski's (2005) book *Strategy-as-Practice: An Activity-Based Approach* and aims to address the "*problem of doing strategy research that is closer to strategy practice*" (2005, p1). The strategy-as-practice movement emerged out of frustration with the dominant philosophical paradigm in previous scientific strategic management research, which Jarzabkowski (2005) did not think reflected the human and social complexities within organisations. strategy-as-practice builds on Mintzberg's and Waters (1985, 1990) work on intended and emergent strategy and Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory and strives for a more meaningful partnership between theory and practice. Johnson's et al. (2003) activity-based view is also important as strategy-as-practice advocates for study participants to define what strategic activity is and how it should be investigated.

Jarzabkowski's (2005) ontological perspective focuses on strategy as a socially constructed activity and aims to understand the lived experiences of strategy in organisations. Jarzabkowski (2005) perceives reality as a situated activity over time. The methodology evolved through an abductive approach and the development of "*a set of empirically and theoretically grounded concepts that describe and explain how strategy is shaped over time*" (Jarzabkowski, 2005, p153). The framework is aimed at reflexive practitioners and researchers who are willing to challenge their assumptions and beliefs. Overall, the dominant paradigm within this framework suggests a strongly pragmatist mindset. Building on Johnson et al.'s (2003) work, Jarzabkowski (2005) offers a more precise articulation of the need to advance the understanding of strategy-as-practice, a perspective that is highly relevant and has significantly shaped the development of this research. The emphasis on human and social complexities, particularly in relation to Weick's (1995) sensemaking theories, remains crucial in capturing the nuanced realities of strategic practice in organisations.

Burgelman et al. (2018)

Burgelman et al. (2018) reviewed key developments in strategy research over last 25 years to demonstrate that both research in strategy process and strategy practice are "*closely intertwined aspects of the same phenomena*" (2018, p539). They present a combinatory framework called Strategy Processes and Practices (SAPP). This brings together two

ontological perspectives: the traditional strategy practice ontology considers firms as "*fixed entities*" (2018, p533) and the strategy process ontology that views firms in a constant state of becoming. Burgelman et al. (2018) surmise that the separation has created unhelpful boundaries with SAPP attempting to create a more comprehensive body of research: "*By adopting such a strong process ontology, strategy process and strategy practice perspectives can be combined without violence to either's fundamental assumptions*" (Burgelman et al., 2018, p540). Burgelman et al. (2018) aimed to move beyond the current knowledge position and called for more innovative research approaches and data sources, including the potential to use more quantitative methods.

The SAPP framework is grounded in pragmatism however, perhaps Burgelman et al. (2018) wanted to leave philosophical assumptions at the door. The paper does not criticise the fundamental beliefs or assumptions of any body of work and accepts that each agenda has "*different primary concerns..., explanatory power and value for managers*" (Burgelman et al., 2018, p539). This transcendent approach suggests that the philosophy is grounded in pragmatism. This research does not seek to critique any body of work but rather acknowledges that the lived experiences of those engaged in strategy practice may necessitate the integration of multiple perspectives to fully capture their complexity and meaning.

2.4 Senior and Middle Management Roles in Strategy Practice

This aspect of the literature review considers the roles of senior and middle management in strategy practice, as these strategic actors are instrumental in enacting and shaping strategy practice within organisations.

Burgelman's et al. (2018) review of the strategy-as-practice literature explored progress made in understanding the 'actors of strategy processes' and noted that middle managers involvement in strategy has been proven to improve the quality of strategies and strategy implementation (Ahearne et al., 2014; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Raes et al., 2011; Wooldridge, and Floyd, 1990 cited by Burgelman et al., 2018).

2.4.1 Middle Manager Positioning

In considering where the middle manager sits within an organisation, Floyd and Lane (2000) propose three levels of strategic managers: top management, middle management, and

operating management and that the middle managers are the mediators between the two levels. Floyd and Lane (2000) outline that middle managers act as champions for the strategy by synthesising, facilitating, and implementing. To successfully undertake their role, a middle manager must possess strong technical competence and in-depth knowledge of the organisation's capabilities to collaborate effectively with operational management. To work effectively with top management, they must understand the organisation's strategy and internal dynamics. Middle managers play a crucial role, as they are uniquely positioned to assess the flow of information between top and operational management and evaluate its impact on the organisation.

Harding et al. (2014) described middle managers as occupying a central position in a company where they are responsible for executing top management strategies and ensuring more junior staff deliver in their roles. They posited "*that middle managers are both controlled and controllers, and resisted and resisters*" (2014, p1213).

Raes et al. (2011) outline that the relationship between senior management and middle management is crucial for effective strategy formulation and implementation and describe top management "*as the inner circle of executives who collectively formulate, articulate, and execute the strategic and tactical moves of the organisation*" (Eisenhardt et al., 1997 cited by Raes, 2011, p102). Raes et al. (2011) describe middle managers as the organisation's "linking pins" and state that they have "*the power to initiate new strategic initiatives, to support and accelerate strategy implementation, or to reduce the quality of implementation, delay it, or even sabotage it completely*" (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Guth and MacMillan, 1986, cited by Raes et al., 2011, p102).

Ahearne et al. (2014) states that middle managers are more involved and aware of operations than senior managers but retain a bigger-picture perspective. They generally "*have their fingers on the pulse of operations, they can also conceive, suggest, and set in motion new ideas that top managers may not have thought of*" (Kanter, 1982, p96 cited by Ahearne et al., 2014, p68). They are best placed to manage uncertainty as they hold 'positional power' which allows them to facilitate and encourage adaptability (Ahearne et al., 2014).

Using Floyd and Lane's (2000) three levels of strategic management definitions (top management, middle management, and operating management), the middle managers in the context of this thesis align with Floyd and Lane's "middle manager" definition, with senior management aligning to the "top management" definition. The middle managers are the mediators between senior management and operational management.

The principal or chief executive officer (CEO) has overarching decision-making authority, ensuring that no major actions occur without their approval. However, delegation may occur, granting chief officers (e.g. Finance, Operations or Information Services) the ability to make independent decisions within their respective domains.

Middle managers typically lead units or teams and require authorisation for activities such as new investments, major project initiation, and structural changes. Despite this dependency, they may exercise limited autonomy, particularly in areas such as process optimisations, system modifications, and minor strategic investments, where approval may not be necessary. The degree of autonomy can vary depending on the organisational control structures and management culture. It is important to acknowledge that power is not equally distributed between senior and middle managers, which can result in varying levels of autonomy across roles and seniority.

2.4.2 Middle Manager Autonomy

There has been a significant amount of research on middle management autonomy which asserts that middle management must be given the autonomy, authority, and flexibility to respond to customer needs in order to successfully execute strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Bhide, 1986; Isenberg, 1987; Mintzberg, 1987; Johnson et al., 2003; Burgelman et al., 2018). Middle management requires the agency to make decisions, and a lack of agency creates tensions between the senior management and middle management (Burgelman et al., 2018). Porter (1996), however, disagrees and states that strategy needs to be led from the top and that managers at lower levels lack the perspective and confidence to maintain a strategy. The ability to stay close to the customer and operate with hustle and energy was viewed by Bhide (1986) as essential for organisations to remain responsive to changes, and perfecting the operational processes can help to achieve this. This opportunistic resourcefulness supports Isenberg's (1987) model of strategic opportunism. Johnson et al. (2003) warn that

senior management is too detached from what is happening in reality and that it is the middle managers who are well-positioned to best identify any market changes. Several factors must be in place to support and encourage autonomy and activities; a supportive culture that encourages and enables autonomy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Johnson et al., 2003; Burgelman et al., 2018), trust in staff to deliver (Mintzberg, 1987), and effective processes and systems that connect across the business (Bhide, 1986; Porter 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Sull et al., 2015).

Balogun and Johnson's (2004) study of organisational restructuring from the middle manager's perspective as 'change agents' examined the challenging role that middle managers have in implementing change when they have not been involved in strategic discussions. The study found that senior management must embrace the role of social interaction in the design of strategic change and the importance of middle managers being involved in the social negotiation of change. These aspects impact middle managers' perceived levels of autonomy and their affective state in responding to and engaging with strategy.

2.4.3 Middle Managers in Further and Higher Education

Leader (2004) examined the role of academic middle managers in further education institutions and their involvement in strategic decision making. Organisational changes that occurred as colleges shifted from public to private sector organisations in the early nineties meant that a clearer understanding of the role of middle management in strategy was needed. The study reported that middle managers are crucial and need to feel empowered by having clearly defined roles and a clear understanding of their strategic contributions, as they often balance commercial and academic responsibilities while striving to maintain educational values. The review highlighted the need for strategic planning approaches to be developed that create collective meaning and reduce bureaucracy.

Briggs (2007) researched how the educational reforms to the further education sector in England had impacted the professional identities of middle managers. Analysing case study data from four English FE colleges to understand the professional identities of middle managers, they proposed three elements of professional identity: professional values, professional location (the profession to which they belonged), and professional role (the role

within the institution). This framework of professional identity could be used to explore commonalities and differences among middle managers.

In higher education, Clegg and McAuley (2005) explored why the concept of middle management was not well understood, as they found the literature only described the management aspects of a middle manager and the challenging dynamic of working between senior management and the rest of the staff. Middle management is often “*depicted as the buffer between essentially transient senior management and the essentially instrumental orientation of the employee...*” (Clegg and McAuley, 2005, p22) and this level adds “*a layer of noise between the vision and strategies of senior management, and the to-be-empowered employee*” (2005, p22).

The literature confirms that the role of middle managers in strategy processes is critically important, with the relationship between senior management and middle management essential for strategic planning and change. More studies that develop a multifaceted and dynamic view of this relationship and its tensions would be beneficial (Burgelman et al., 2018).

2.5 Senior and Middle Management Relational Dynamics in Strategy Practice

This research focuses on the significance of the relationship between senior and middle management, recognising its pivotal role in strategy practice. While various approaches could have been taken to explore relational dynamics, the concepts examined here - emotionality, sensemaking, trust, and power - were selected based on their relevance to strategy-as-practice literature and insights from the initial pilot study. Through an in-depth analysis of these dimensions, this study demonstrates how interpersonal dynamics can either facilitate or hinder strategy practice.

2.5.1 *Emotionality in Strategy*

Emotions are inherent in organisational processes that involve people. Whether an individual’s emotions are interpreted negatively or positively, they play a vital role in strategic negotiations and conversations (Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Brundin and Nordqvist, 2008; Edmondson and Smith, 2006; Kisfalvi and Pitcher, 2003; Mangham, 1998; Samra-Fredericks, 2004). Strategy design and delivery are processes that are socially constructed and involve “psychological negotiation” (Ackermann and Eden, 2011). Top managers and middle

managers who manage organisations “*are governed by thoughts and feelings: always boundedly rational, but manifestly driven by emotion*” (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2010, p1512). The affective states that actors involved in strategy bring to the process will impact how they engage with the process and the consequences of that (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p21), with negative emotional dynamics shown to impede critical strategic issues and change (Edmondson and Smith, 2006; Mangham, 1998). Therefore, emotionality in strategy practice is an inherent aspect in any organisation, typically influencing behaviours, decisions, relationships, and interactions.

Baumeister et al. (2007) wanted to challenge the traditional position in psychology research that behaviour is the direct cause of emotion, which the authors described as “untenable”. They proposed a theory whereby emotion is used as a feedback system that influences behaviour. They theorised that conscious emotional states could trigger learning and guide behavioural outcomes, with past experiences helping to anticipate future emotional responses. This can benefit decision making and ultimately determine what action is taken. One study by Liu and Maitlis (2014) focused on the positive and negative responses displayed at executive team meetings and observed that emotional responses can be both varied and dynamic and shape relational dynamics which can affect the conversational processes and outcomes. Emotions can impact decision making and group dynamics among those involved with strategy (Liu and Maitlis, 2014).

Vuori and Huy (2016) conducted a study of Nokia to understand why it did not innovate quickly enough to retain its position as a world-leading technology company. The study found that top and middle managers experienced shared emotions that resulted in behaviours that negatively affected the innovation process and its outcome. For example, both stakeholders shared the emotion of fear. Top management was afraid of external competitors, while middle managers were afraid of the top managers and their reaction to negative information. This study highlighted the importance of shared emotions and how they can significantly affect innovation and an organisation’s ability to remain competitive.

In recent years, the entrepreneurial strand of research has explored the impact of emotions. One study by Foo et al. (2009) explored how feelings influenced the effort of entrepreneurs. Data was captured over 24 days, twice a day via entrepreneurs’ mobile phones, to identify

how feelings influenced future temporal focus and venture effort. The study found that negative affect resulted in more effort, sometimes before what was immediately required. Positive affect motivated entrepreneurs to go above and beyond what was immediately required. Affect was found to be a source of information that, when positive, supports future temporal focus to predict venture effort for next-day outcomes.

In Burgelman's et al. (2018) review of strategy process and practice research, one area highlighted for further research was the importance of emotions. Research in emotionality has so far explored middle management sensemaking during times of organisational restructure (Balogun and Johnson, 2004), the development of dynamic capabilities to encourage reflexion and reflection in strategic management (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011), emotional dynamics in top management team strategic conversations (Liu and Maitlis, 2014), and distributed attention and shared emotions in the innovation process (Vuori and Huy, 2016). Whilst there has been much activity in the emotionality strand of research in recent years, more studies are required to broaden the theory to include interpersonal processes so that the focus is not solely on the individual (Baumeister et al., 2007).

It is also useful to consider the concept of employee engagement when exploring the emotional and relational dynamics between senior and middle management. Engagement is described as a positive, fulfilling, and affective-motivational state of work-related well-being, marked by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008). This state is widely recognised as important for eliciting discretionary effort from staff (Towers Watson, 2012). Positive engagement can typically be identified through higher levels of staff satisfaction, enhanced performance, and greater levels of trust which contribute to organisational effectiveness (Albrecht and Travaglione, 2003). This concept is important as the level of positive discretionary effort demonstrated by middle management may be deeply consequential to successful strategy practice. When employees feel a strong connection to their work, their motivation and happiness increase, which in turn can boost the overall performance of the organisation (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006).

A workplace that promotes open communication, fairness, and equality in organisational policies and procedures, along with perceived support and job satisfaction, is a key factor in fostering trust and engagement among employees (Albrecht and Travaglione, 2003). Senior

management applying direct, yet conversational communication methods can create an atmosphere where employees are more likely to engage and positively connect with their work. A deliberate approach to fostering open dialogue makes employees feel valued and heard, which in turn increases their likelihood of engaging with the organisation (Reissner and Pagan, 2013).

Managers must be skilled communicators in fostering employee engagement. Employees, in turn, need to actively participate in engagement initiatives introduced by managers, making it a reciprocal social interaction. Failure to communicate effectively by managers can result in decreased cooperation and engagement from staff (Saks, 2006).

Despite the benefits of having an engaged workforce, in many cases, employees feel dissatisfied with their work and exhausted by constant demands for change and flexibility in response to organisational needs. It is crucial for employers to recognise the emotional aspects of work and work towards creating a more engaged organisation (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006).

Fostering engagement should be considered a cultural strategy that involves all levels of the organisation (Frank et al., 2004, cited by Saks, 2006) and requires behaviours and actions valued by employees, such as clear and transparent communication and visible leadership (Towers Watson, 2012). This seems especially relevant and necessary to further and higher education institutions.

2.5.2 *Sensemaking*

Effective and constructive two-way communication and sensemaking emerged throughout the development of this thesis as an area strongly connected to staff emotionality and the perceived effectiveness and value of the strategy practice.

The cognitive activity that takes place before an emotional response involves an individual making sense of a situation or information. This is often referred to as sensemaking. Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking is about processing events or stimuli into a cognitive framework to devise the meaning of a situation. Sensegiving is the act whereby individuals provide information to persuade stakeholders' points of view or shape their ones, with sensereceiving

defined as the receptiveness of an individual or group to the sensegiving messages of others (McKiernan and MacKay, 2017). All of these are important for each actor involved in the strategy process to receive or process information to create meaning. Sharing of meaning can happen in micro everyday organisational situations or macro strategic discussions (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Kezar, 2013).

This theoretical lens complements Baumeister's et al. (2007) theory that emotional states can trigger learning and guide behavioural outcomes. Where there is no opportunity to share meaning constructively, this may result in ineffective sensemaking efforts that could be "*damaging critically to strategy enactment and success*" (McKiernan and MacKay, 2017, p4). All of these are important for each actor involved in strategy processes to receive or process information and create meaning.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) studied the connection between sensemaking and organisational change and proposed a four-stage process of sensemaking and sensegiving: envisioning (sensemaking), signalling (sensegiving), revisioning (sensemaking), and energising (sensegiving). Kezar (2013) conducted a study and applied the four-stage model offered by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991). The study confirmed that sensemaking and sensegiving processes are typically a continuous process that happens over time, often simultaneously and not necessarily in a linear sequence. In bottom-up changes, sensegiving focuses more on persuasion, gaining support, and overcoming barriers, rather than 'signalling' and 'energising'. While the Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) model can work well for top-down changes, it may be less effective for bottom-up changes. Understanding sensemaking and sensegiving as ongoing processes, rather than isolated events, is essential. These processes are crucial for effective change in and can help institutions better serve students and staff, and fulfil their purpose (Kezar, 2013).

Sensemaking research has typically focused on organisations as single actors rather than varied interpretive communities. However, middle management plays a key role when making sense of strategic change and their involvement should be encouraged and harnessed (Balogun et al., 2015). Day et al. (2023) conducted a study to explore the challenges of implementing strategic change in pluralistic organisations, specifically within a UK higher education setting. The study reported that leaders play a crucial role in creating opportunities

for sensegiving and sensemaking, which helps others to understand and engage with strategy and change processes.

Maitlis (2005) reports that too much control from leaders and too little involvement from stakeholders can harm sensegiving practices. The effectiveness of sensemaking depends on how much opportunity people have to explore issues, as well as the level of trust within the group or organisation. Studies have demonstrated that the quality of sensemaking and sensegiving varies and that, if not done in a genuine and engaging way, sensemaking is unlikely to support strategic ambitions. Bartunek et al. (1999) studied what made sensegiving successful and found that the importance of having a logical message, offering rewards or punishments, appealing to the receiver's values, and the credibility of the sensegiver were all important factors.

Hodgkinson and Healey (2010) discovered that organisations can enhance their performance by encouraging management to reflect on their actions by blending logical and emotional thinking to facilitate "*sensing, seizing, and transforming*" (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2010, P1512). They proposed modifying cognitive mapping techniques to capture feelings and reactions to strategic issues, integrating various thought processes. These practices could assist management in understanding their own, and others', responses to organisational problems, which helps in identifying opportunities, taking action, and adapting to changes. A study by Vilà and Canales (2008) highlighted that strategic planning can serve as a sensemaking process for middle managers with senior management. By having middle managers actively participate in purpose-driven planning discussions, they develop a shared understanding which supports alignment to the strategy.

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) assert that self-awareness is a crucial skill for managers in the strategy process. In a blog article by Mintzberg (2016), he observes that "*managing without soul has become an epidemic in society*". The need for senior management to be connected to the mood of the organisation, have the willingness to listen to the views of others, and the ability to genuinely self-reflect is essential, given the body of literature on the importance of sensemaking.

Schildt and Cornelissen (2025) explored the role of sensemaking in strategy-as-practice and argued that while it is frequently referenced in strategy research, sensemaking remains underdeveloped as a theoretical framework. They advocate for a more structured integration of sensemaking, highlighting the way managers and organisational members interpret, communicate, and enact strategy.

Sensemaking emerged during the pilot study as an important concept explaining what respondents were desperately seeking: the ability to engage in sensegiving and sensereceiving opportunities in order to make sense of complex strategic planning processes and their related social interactions. There is an opportunity to develop a more nuanced understanding of the cognitive and interpersonal processes underpinning sensemaking in strategy practice. By integrating emotionality with managerial sensemaking, there is also an opportunity to better understand how feelings and interpersonal connections shape strategic planning.

2.5.3 *Trust*

Trust emerged throughout the development of this thesis as being crucial in the relationship between senior and middle management. Frei and Morriss (2020) observe that trust is "*one of the most essential forms of capital a leader has*" (2020, p115). For an organisational strategy to be successfully delivered, senior leaders must empower middle managers and create the conditions for staff to feel empowered (Frei and Morriss, 2020). Otherwise, staff may not trust the leadership or the strategy they have created.

Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was a German sociologist and philosopher who made significant contributions to early philosophies on the concept of trust. In the view of Möllering (2001), Simmel's work at the start of the 1900s presented vital insights that have informed much of the current-day literature on trust. Simmel's contribution identified a traditional and rational cognitive dimension of trust that relates to both an emotional dimension and a behavioural dimension (Lewis and Weigert, 2012). Simmel asserted that "trust" could be considered a form of 'faith' or a 'belief', a type of assurance that lacks resistance. Simmel's proposition is that trust performs a crucial function in modern societies, even though the basis for trust can be difficult to articulate or may not be perceived as having a strong rationale. He suggests trust has an element that could be considered transcendental, similar to religious beliefs in nature. In simple terms, Simmel posits that trust combines good reasons alongside having faith in

someone or something (Simmel, 1900 and 1908, cited by Möllering, 2001). Good reasons refer to the rational and interpretative foundations of trust—namely, the justifications individuals rely on to determine whether trusting someone or something is warranted.

Möllering (2001) aimed to theoretically reorient trust, emphasising the need to revisit Simmel's earlier work and conceptualise this faith element, combining it with other key elements emerging from the trust research literature. He argues that the existing body of research is overly concerned with the 'weak' inductive element of trust and neglects the key element of 'faith'. Möllering (2001) presents a theoretical model of trust comprising three key components: expectation, which refers to the anticipated outcome, either positive or negative, at the end of the process; interpretation, which involves making sense of reality based on "good reasons" that justify trust; and suspension, which recognises the presence of uncertainties but allows individuals to momentarily treat their knowledge as certain, enabling them to set aside doubts and take a leap of faith. As a result, Möllering (2001) encourages future research to move away from a positivist stance towards one of hermeneutics to help better interpret and understand how people make sense of trust.

Frei and Morriss (2020) propose that empowerment leadership is necessary to build trust with staff. Empowerment leadership "*is about... creating the conditions for [staff] to fully realise their own capacity and power*" (2020, p114). Gaining trust in the leadership is at the very core of empowerment leadership, but it also requires the leader to trust themselves. This means being reflective and honest about oneself, "*If you don't trust yourself, why should anybody else trust you?*" (2020, p120). Frei and Morriss state that trust is built on three drivers: authenticity, logic, and empathy:

"People tend to trust you when they believe they are interacting with the real you (authenticity), when they have faith in your judgment and competence (logic), and when they feel that you care about them (empathy). When trust is lost, it can almost always be traced back to a breakdown in one of these three drivers."

(Frei and Morriss, 2020, p115-16)

They argue that genuine authenticity is achieved when staff feel they are being led by the leader's true self. That is not to say that every aspect of a leader's thoughts and personality

must be openly available, but there should not be a huge disparity between who the leader is at work and who they are outside. Often, people can sense whether someone is being genuine or not. Frei and Morriss (2020) urge leaders to have the courage to be authentic and share who they are so that they do not “*end up concealing the very thing the world needs most from [them] – [their] differences*” (2020, p119). Frei and Morriss (2020) stress that being authentic is “*an urgent, achievable goal*” (2020, p120) and can be achieved by permitting people to be different. Promoting greater diversity of knowledge and experience can enable a leader to unearth unique perspectives that provide an advantage through enriched insight.

In addition to welcoming diverse forms of knowledge, leaders can benefit from openly acknowledging gaps in their understanding. Demonstrating good logic does not mean that a leader must have all the answers. It can be healthier to acknowledge one does not have all the answers rather than make poorly judged decisions which can negatively impact trust. Frei and Morriss (2020) recommend taking a grounded approach to decision making and proposals, using evidence and data to back up the rationale. Being open to learning from others and engaging staff is a sign of strong empowerment leadership. Having the ability to communicate your ideas is also essential. Ineffective communication or failure to engage staff can lead to misunderstandings and uncertainty. Frei and Morriss highlight that the ability of a leader to clearly convey complex information is crucial and demonstrates a leader’s clear understanding of the facts, which in turn contributes to staff perceptions of the leadership’s credibility.

Frei and Morriss (2020) highlight empathy as the leadership trait that most struggle with, often diminished by everyday inattentiveness toward staff in the workplace. Staff need to feel like the leadership cares about them to gain their trust. Digital tools in the workplace such as virtual communication and data dashboards, while useful, can sometimes dilute authentic human connection by shifting focus away from interpersonal engagement and can create distractions for leaders, which impacts their ability to fully listen and engage with their staff. These acts of distraction do not go unnoticed and can signal that a leader is uninterested in what their staff have to say. The authors urge leaders to pay close attention to how they behave in meetings and recommend putting phones away, not reading emails, and fully listening to what staff are saying so that there are more opportunities for genuine displays of empathy.

Further research is needed to characterise better the link between trust and hope (Holstein et al., 2016) and their role in strategy practice. Exploring the dynamics of trust in this context can provide deeper insights into how strategy processes unfold and are influenced by trust elements.

2.5.4 Power

Strategy can be considered an instrument of power (Ackermann and Eden, 2011), and it can play a crucial role in shaping managerial sensemaking within strategy practice, particularly when considering purpose, trust, and emotion. Power within an organisation can shape how purpose is defined and communicated by those in positions of authority, influencing the dominant narratives around strategic goals (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015). Trust in senior management can also be influenced by, and deeply intertwined with, the power dynamics within an organisation. Managers with perceived legitimacy and credibility can foster trust in their strategic decisions. However, trust can be eroded if stakeholders feel excluded from decision-making processes (Kieran et al., 2020). Emotion also plays a significant role in managerial sensemaking with power dynamics influencing how emotions are expressed and managed within organisations, particularly for middle managers (Kroon and Reif, 2021).

Whilst power is not the primary focus of this research, in strategy there are individuals and roles within an organisation that have the power or ability to make decisions that can shape how a strategy is designed and delivered. The development of this thesis highlighted the fact that power dynamics are inherent within the senior and middle management relationships and impact strategy practice.

French and Raven's (1959) model of power identifies five distinct types of power used in social and organisational contexts: legitimate power, derived from an individual's position or role; reward power, stemming from the ability to provide rewards; coercive power, based on the ability to impose punishments; expert power, coming from an individual's expertise or knowledge; and referent power, based on the charisma and likability of the power holder. These types of power can be used individually or in combination to influence others and to analyse social dynamics and leadership strategies. The authors theorised that the range of each type of power may vary, but that referent power has the broadest range. Raven (1965) later added a further type of power: informational power. Informational power differs from

other types of power as it is not dependent on the holder's role or personal traits. Instead, it comes from the perceived importance and accuracy of the information they possess. This form of power may be beneficial when knowledge and information are essential for making decisions and achieving success.

While French and Raven's (1956) model of power has been instrumental in understanding social and organisational dynamics, Podsakoff and Schriesheim (1985) argue that the model oversimplifies the complexities of power and ignores the nuanced and overlapping nature of power sources. The model's effectiveness is also context-dependent, varying significantly based on culture and individual relationships. Additionally, it does not consider the ethical implications of power and the challenges in measuring power when carrying out research. The model focuses on mostly individual interactions, rather than considering power at an organisational level (Podsakoff and Schriesheim, 1985).

Kanter (1979) argues that productive power comes from the position an individual holds in an organisation, and not from the individual. Although power can be associated with "*dominance, control and oppression*" (1979, p66), when applied successfully, it can result in effectiveness and capacity. Kanter (1979) describes power as having access to resources and information, and the ability to act quickly, providing resources and information to subordinates. On the other hand, powerlessness creates "*ineffective, desultory management and petty, dictatorial, rules-minded managerial styles*" (1979, p65). Kanter outlines the negative aspect of delegating accountability without the means to achieve it and how this creates frustration and failure (1979).

Kanter (1979) identifies three key "lines" of power within an organisation, each serving as a crucial source of managerial influence. The line of supply refers to the ability to secure essential resources, whether financial, material, or reputational, to meet the organisation's needs. The line of information grants individuals' access to both formal and informal knowledge networks, positioning them as insiders who are well-informed about organisational dynamics. The line of support provides managers with the autonomy to exercise judgment and make decisions without being hindered by bureaucratic constraints. The ability to gain support from subordinates is connected to the perception that the manager will work in their favour, or as Kanter describes it, having "*manager's clout*", which is the ability to influence

upward and outward within an organisation. Kanter observes that having a level of discretion generally results in power being accumulated and that having a strong organisational and political network can make someone with power more productive.

Powerless organisations lack all three power lines (supply, information and support). In such environments, authority figures often perceive innovation as disruptive and view talented subordinates as threats, rather than assets. Operating in a powerless culture can result in ineffective managers and a culture of blame. If a first-line supervisor has ambitious goals or targets to meet without the required resources or ability to innovate then this creates frustrated subordinates as they observe their manager to have no clout. When these managers don't achieve the necessary outcomes, they are considered ineffective by senior managers. They may only receive attention when they fail to achieve their targets or are identified as doing something wrong.

When leaders surround themselves with people who think and act like them, this can result in them only receiving information that fits with their view of the world, diminishing their own power sources. Senior management can experience powerlessness and can often respond by decreasing power to others. In large organisations, powerlessness can become an even bigger problem. Sharing power can help transform a powerless organisation, but this requires a leader who feels secure in their power and their power sources. Someone who empowers subordinates and involves them in decision making, rather than treating them as a threat, can make a positive impact on organisational effectiveness. One of the reasons cited by Kanter for empowerment not being the default approach is that "*giving up control is threatening to people who have fought for every shred of it; that people do not want to share power with those they look down on; that managers fear losing their place and special privileges in the system*" (1979, p74).

Comstock (1982) argued that Kanter's thinking placed too much emphasis on organisational structures and formal power, potentially overlooking the informal and dynamic aspects of power within organisations. They viewed Kanter's models as static, failing to account for the evolving nature of power dynamics and the real-time navigation and negotiation of power by individuals and groups. Additionally, individual agency and personal attributes were not

considered, ignoring any political processes, historical events and conflicts that influence power dynamics (Comstock, 1982).

Pfeffer (1993) describes managing with power as having the ability to get things done, and states that it can be a “*tool that allows organisations to function productively and effectively*” (1993, p12). An individual’s ability to succeed in an organisation is usually down to how well they can work with and through others. Having power is about being in a position or place that provides you with control over resources, control or access to information, and formal authority. Pfeffer (1993) acknowledges that there can be a negative side to power, depending on the individual’s character or effectiveness. Pfeffer (1993) advocated for a more participative management approach rather than a traditional top-down decision making hierarchy.

Pfeffer (1993) acknowledges that the need for a leader to skilfully navigate the politics of an organisation requires the use of power. Ultimately, most individuals in an organisation will have varying interests and power can facilitate individual interests into productive outcomes. Different perspectives should not be silenced or unwelcome. Pfeffer (1993) offers six personal traits as sources of power: energy and physical stamina, focus, sensitivity to others, flexibility, ability to tolerate conflict, and submerging one’s ego and getting along. “*People who are able to develop great power often seem to have the knack for changing their behaviour according to the needs of the occasion*” (Pfeffer, 1993, p182). Pfeffer (1993) emphasises the importance of developing a shared vision that establishes a common perspective on objectives and the means to achieve them. He argues that when individuals within an organisation share a unified vocabulary, enabling them to coordinate their actions effectively, the reliance on formal command structures and hierarchical authority diminishes in significance.

Pfeffer (1993) has observed that the biggest challenge facing many organisations is the inability to get things done and that this is a widespread problem that is crippling organisations. Pfeffer also highlights the serious issue of an organisation’s power being allocated to one ineffective individual and states that an organisation can face difficulties if its logic and orders are incorrect.

Pfeffer agrees with Kanter's observation that both individuals and organisations need power to succeed. Encouraging innovation and bringing about change requires "*the skill to develop power, and the willingness to employ it to get things accomplished*" (1993, p345). Kanter (1979), Pfeffer (1993), and French and Raven (1956) agree on the critical importance of power and influence within organisations. Each model is situated within organisational behaviour and management theory, identifying various sources or bases of power that individuals can leverage to influence others. They collectively acknowledge that power dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping strategic outcomes and the way people behave in organisations.

Kanter (1979) focuses on the structural and situational aspects of power, highlighting the significance of access to resources, visibility, and centrality within an organisation. Pfeffer (1993) adopts a more pragmatic approach, concentrating on the practical utilisation of power and discussing various power sources, including formal authority and personal attributes. In contrast, French and Raven (1956) categorise power into five distinct bases: coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent, emphasising the different ways individuals can exert influence based on their position or personal attributes. Arguably, Kanter's model may oversimplify power dynamics and overlook individual agency, whereas Pfeffer's model may overemphasise individual qualities while ignoring the broader organisational culture and context. Additionally, French and Raven's model does not explore the complexity of power dynamics. Each model has its strengths and weaknesses, and its applicability varies depending on the specific organisational context and the nature of the power dynamics being studied. Each perspective offers value in understanding and potentially explaining the relational dynamics between senior and middle management engaged in strategy practice.

Many of the power dynamics described by French and Raven (1956), Kanter (1979), and Pfeffer (1993) manifest in the education sector. Kanter's (1979) findings focusing on senior and middle-level managers (including first-line supervisors) suggest that, affording these managers some level of discretion, could revolutionise innovation. However, this is dependent on the individuals who wield power and their decisions on how to use it.

Kanter and Pfeffer agree that empowering participative management is crucial for success. Kanter (1979) notes that powerlessness is a significant issue in large organisations. The

literature concurs that ineffective or absent power usage is due to the personal traits and confidence of the individuals who hold power.

A study by Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) of strategic planning as a communicative process in a higher education setting highlighted how power and social order are embedded in communication processes within a university setting, where different stakeholders bring various interests to the table. Those who write or finalise strategic planning or delivery documents have the authority to make choices about what to include, demonstrating that power and politics are present in higher education strategic communication processes. Exploring the literature around power revealed a great deal of variety of useful insights, yet there was little to no research that considered the role of power and the relational dynamics, specifically between senior and middle management when engaged with strategy practice in further or higher education sectors. Further research on power, social order, and the agency of those participating in strategic planning activities is needed (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). Power is significantly intertwined with strategy practice, playing an important role in shaping purpose (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015), trust (Kieran et al., 2020), emotions and sensemaking (Kroon and Reif, 2021).

2.6 Tools for Enabling Strategy Practice

Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) emphasise the significance of strategy tools and processes in shaping managerial sensemaking in strategy practice, offering insights into the mechanisms by which strategy is enacted. Whilst strategy tools are not a primary focus of this research, tools such as planning documents and meetings serve as critical enablers that facilitate and shape strategic interactions. Understanding their function is essential to assessing whether they support or constrain strategy practice.

There is a wealth of research available that contributes to the strategy-as-practice research agenda, which seeks to address *“the problem of doing strategy research that is closer to strategy practice”* (Jarzabkowski, 2015). Researchers have noted that managers typically use strategy tools as *“technologies of rationality”* (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015) to understand the strategy process.

Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) undertook a study in a higher education setting to explore the role of meetings as a forum for shaping strategic outcomes. The findings emphasised that combining practices across multiple meetings is likely to shape whether a proposed change will stabilise or destabilise strategic orientations. In a university setting, they found that participants often set aside local interests to focus on university-wide goals during meetings. These meetings helped to manage and align interests, providing a platform for top managers to shape strategic directions. The study showed that meetings were essential in coordinating varying stakeholder interests and focusing attention on the broader university goals. They concluded that meetings play a crucial role in strategy making by structuring discussions, setting agendas, and providing authority to certain participants. The study highlights the importance of meetings in strategy making and encourages further research on strategy practice in different contexts to understand their insights better.

A study by Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) on strategic planning in a higher education setting emphasised that strategic planning documents should no longer be seen as static or inflexible. Instead, they can be a tool for facilitating social order and communication during planning processes. The study also highlighted that the interplay of discussion and written text leads to the creation of a dynamic strategic plan. This interplay provides a platform for participants to make meaning by revealing their interpretations of the plan's content while it is being created. It highlights the importance of participation, though it notes that only a few individuals, due to their position in the institution, have the power, influence and agency to shape the plan's content. The process represents a level of agreement and understanding amongst participants, giving a plan legitimacy. The authority of the plan's text comes from the assumption that it has been widely discussed and agreed upon. This highlights the importance of communication alongside any strategy documents and tools as a key enabler to making and delivering strategy within organisations. This study emphasised the importance of meetings as a key strategic tool and offers important two-way communicative opportunities for strategy making and implementing change. Future research on the connection between talk and text in strategic planning processes would be valuable (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011).

There was a gap in available research between the theory of how a tool was designed to be used and the reality of how a tool had been used. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) applied a sociological lens to the use of strategy tools and developed a framework for examining the

affordances of why tools were selected, how they were applied, and the outcomes achieved from using them. The framework was split into selection, application, and outcome, and these informed and shaped each part of the process. It considered the agency of those who were selecting the tools, deciding how to use them, what they did with them, and what they did with the results of using the tools. The framework also explored the affordances of the tools. “Affordance” referred to the many ways in which something was used, including those in addition to its originally intended purpose. Affordance was what the tool had to offer the user, whether that was a perceived positive or negative use. This framework offered the opportunity to understand that strategy tools could have both tangible and intangible affordances which could define or alter their use. The framework also inferred “*that tools have affordances that shape the way that actors frame problems but can also enable actors to advance their own interests in that problem*” (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015, p539). The framework peeled away the surface-level judgment as to whether a tool was good or bad and helped to better understand the constraints and enablers associated with the actors and/or the tools throughout the strategy process. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) observed that “*tools do not cause managers to make right or wrong decisions but rather enable them to engage in strategy making*” (2015, p551). Their study emphasised that, while the use of strategy tools is important, the way a tool is endorsed, embedded, monitored, and engaged with is just as important. The framework was informed by emerging research on strategy tools-in-use and attempted to unveil the ‘hidden’ human side to engaging with strategy tools. A study of the framework highlighted the need to be better informed before starting the strategy process.

Traditionally, while strategy tool research has focused on senior management, there are many different strategy actors in organisations. Application of the framework to middle managers or other stakeholders involved in strategic planning processes could present another lens through which to apply the framework. Future research that applied the framework to strategy tools in a higher education context could contribute to the body of research and further explain the affordances, dynamics, and challenges that exist with strategy tools-in-use (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015).

2.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework outlines the key subjects and theoretical areas relevant to the study and the potential relationships that exist within them. Grounding a study in a conceptual framework helps focus the research questions and more clearly structures and articulates the connection and contribution to existing bodies of work (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Maxwell, 2005). A conceptual framework outlines and explains the rationale for the key elements or theories that are being explored and any assumptions made about their relationship (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These relationships are then studied to draw out possible explanations of the social reality (Jabareen, 2009).

The framework presented below brings together relevant theoretical concepts from the strategy and strategy-as-practice areas of research to understand and enhance strategic planning and practice in the context of further and higher education settings. It focuses on the roles of senior and middle managers as strategic actors, highlighting the intertwined relational dynamics that shape their engagement in strategic planning. Additionally, it explores the use of strategy tools as critical enablers, assessing how they support or hinder strategic planning through facilitating the relationships between senior and middle management.

Based on the findings in this chapter, a summary of each concept is provided below to briefly outline why these have been included and are important to the study, before the conceptual framework is presented and explained.

Strategy as Purpose

It was important to establish an understanding of what strategy means in an organisational environment and the thinking that has emerged on strategy and the different ways this can be approached. Strategy provides purpose and can be considered a position; something that “*a firm and multiple actors do*” (Jarzabkowski, 2005, p1). A strategy can provide a guiding set of principles for how people within an organisation allocate resources and make decisions that contribute towards the achievement of articulated company ambitions (Watkins, 2007).

Strategy-as-Practice

Strategy-as-practice is a broad umbrella term under which activities and phenomena associated with the “doing” of strategy can be known and are different from strategy creation.

Strategy-as-practice acknowledges that strategy is not straightforward and there is no straightforward way to *do* strategy well. The strategy-as-practice research agenda acknowledges that strategy is complex and is interested in how it is socially constructed through the interactions and actions of many strategic actors (Jarzabkowski, 2005). The strategy-as-practice body of research aims to humanise management and organisation research (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). This is the significant body of work to which this research directly contributes. It was important to anchor the conceptual framework to this lens, acknowledging the research that has already been carried out and how this thesis contributes to new understandings in this field.

Further and Higher Education Context

The further and higher education context is the basis for the study. An understanding of the contextual factors that may influence strategy practice in these setting was important as well as acknowledging the research that has been carried out previously. It helped to build knowledge and understanding of the broader context, identify key themes, avoid duplication of previous research, and inform the theoretical framework for the study.

Senior and Middle Management Cognitive and Relational Dynamics

The relationship between senior management and middle management is crucial for effective strategy formulation and implementation (Raes et al., 2011). Middle managers occupy a central position where they are responsible for executing senior management strategies and ensuring that more junior staff deliver in their roles (Harding et al., 2014). They act as champions for the strategy by synthesising, facilitating, and implementing it (Floyd and Lane, 2000). More studies that develop a multifaceted and dynamic view of this relationship and its tensions are necessary (Burgelman et al., 2018). Clegg and MacAulay (2005) highlighted the challenging management aspects of a middle manager having to work between senior management and the rest of the staff in further education. The tensions between senior and middle management whilst engaged with strategic planning emerged as a key finding from the pilot study. Exploring this was fundamental to answering the research question. The relational dynamics that were highlighted from the pilot study were: emotionality, sensemaking, trust and power, which are outlined below.

Emotionality

Whether a strategic actor's emotions are interpreted negatively or positively, they play a vital role in strategic negotiations and conversations (Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Brundin and Nordqvist, 2008; Edmondson and Smith, 2006; Kisfalvi and Pitcher, 2003; Mangham, 1998; Samra-Fredericks, 2004). Top managers and middle managers who manage organisations are influenced by thoughts and feelings and driven by emotion (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2010). The emotions of senior and middle management involved in strategic planning emerged as a key finding from the pilot study. Through the literature review, it was identified as an under researched area of strategy-as-practice research and aligned strongly with understanding the relationship between senior and middle management in the research, and how they feel when engaged with strategy planning.

Sensemaking

The cognitive activity that takes place before an emotional response is an individual making sense of a situation or information. This is often referred to as sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Effective and constructive two-way communication emerged from the pilot study as practices strongly connected to staff emotionality and the perceived effectiveness and value of the strategy planning processes. This finding strongly agrees with sensemaking theory. Existing bodies of work were helpful for exploring the relevance of sensemaking and the mechanisms associated with it when engaged in strategic planning processes.

Trust

Trust may be one of the most essential forms of capital a leader has (Frei and Morriss, 2020). Having "trust" is described as having faith or a belief, a type of assurance that lacks resistance (Simmel, 1900 and 1908, cited by Möllering, 2001). Trust emerged as an important concept for this research due to the strong connections to the other concepts identified and the relationship between senior and middle management.

Power

Power and influence play a critical role in organisations and their ability to get things done (Kanter, 1979; Pfeffer, 1993; French and Raven, 1956). Strategy can be considered an instrument of power (Ackermann and Eden, 2011). The pilot study showed that power dynamics were present in strategy practice between senior and middle management. Whilst the role of power is not a primary focus of the research, it emerged as a concept worth

including in the conceptual framework due to the relationship dynamics between senior and middle managers engaged in strategy practice.

Tools for Enabling Strategy Practice

Strategy tools can be described as technologies of rationality for understanding the strategy process (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). They can be a tool for facilitating social order, communication and participation by providing mechanisms to make meaning (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). Whilst tools of strategy were not a primary focus of the research, they are recognised as an important mechanism for enabling and facilitating strategy practice.

Integrated Model

The conceptual framework is presented below:

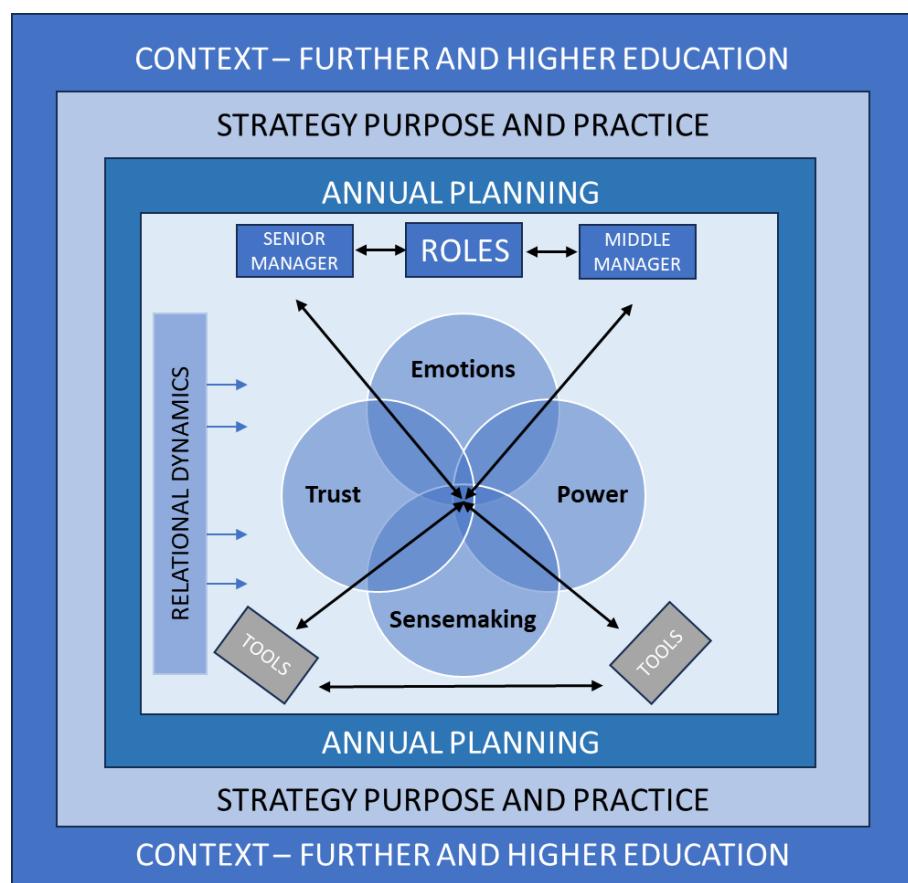


Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is rooted in strategy research which provides a grounding of definitions and connection to strategy-as-practice concepts. These theoretical foundations

influence and help to explain each layer of the conceptual model. This is not depicted in the diagram.

This conceptual framework is central to understanding the lived experiences of those engaged in strategic planning, specifically annual planning processes, within the Scottish further and higher education sector. It integrates multiple interconnected concepts, ensuring a structured approach to examining how strategy processes function in practice. By synthesising insights on purpose, trust, and emotionality, the framework establishes critical links that shape managerial sensemaking whilst engaged in strategy practice.

The framework is situated within the context of further and higher education settings, highlighting annual planning as a key strategic planning process within institutions. Within this process, the framework specifically examines the strategic roles held by senior and middle managers and how they enact strategic planning. The framework provides a lens to explore how participants experience and engage with planning tools, processes and interactions with senior management. By focusing on senior and middle managers as key participants, the study captures their perspectives on strategy planning, leadership dynamics, and relational processes, deepening understanding of their roles in shaping institutional strategic planning and practice.

At the core of the diagram, four interconnected concepts illustrate the complex and critical cognitive relational dynamics between middle and senior managers as they engage in strategic planning. These concepts are emotions, trust, power and sensemaking. It is presumed that they do not exist in isolation but are interlinked and relevant to both senior and middle management and prevalent across strategic planning and practice. This facilitates the analysis of the cognitive and relational dynamics between senior and middle management and enables the study to infer how do perceptions of purpose and trust influence managerial sensemaking, directly addressing the research question.

The framework acknowledges the necessity of strategy tools as key enablers of strategic planning, depicted twice to represent the possibility of multiple tools employed throughout the process, such as meetings and documents. Arrows connecting these tools signify their interdependence, one may inform or facilitate another but also highlight their role as potential

enablers or inhibitors for the cognitive relational dynamics between senior and middle management.

This conceptual framework also establishes a foundation for defining a more effective strategy planning practice framework, grounded in empirical evidence. Through its design, this conceptual framework bridges theory with empirical findings, ensuring a rigorous and structured approach to analysis. The conceptual framework was used to shape the empirical research to understand how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. This section explained and justified the design of a conceptual framework, enabling the theoretical constructs to be correlated to the empirical study.

2.8 Summary of Opportunities for Research

The literature review and conceptual model frame several avenues for further research. Key areas include the influence of strategy purpose, trust, and emotionality on managerial sensemaking. Opportunities extend to deepening research on emotionality within strategy processes, refining perspectives on sensemaking and relational dynamics, and examining power relations between senior and middle management. These insights can contribute to enhancing strategic practice within the further and higher education sectors.

Strategy as Purpose and Practice

Despite extensive research across various strands of strategy process and practice, many organisations continue to struggle to effectively deliver strategy (Sull et al., 2015). Within the strategy-as-practice literature, scholars have sought to bridge the gap between academic research and practical strategic activities (Jarzabkowski, 2005). However, the practice-oriented dimension of strategy-as-practice remains less developed (Carter et al., 2008).

This research contributes to the strategy-as-practice literature by providing a deeper understanding of how purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice, particularly within the further and higher education contexts. An opportunity exists to provide empirical research that helps to understand strategy practice in further and higher education settings in Scotland.

This study contributes to strategy-as-practice scholarship by examining how these three elements - purpose, trust, and emotionality - shape managerial sensemaking in strategic planning. Focusing on further and higher education settings in Scotland. An opportunity also exists to bring together a synthesis of existing concepts which have generally been looked at in isolation, captured under the umbrella of 'strategy-as-practice' since they collectively provide a basis for examining strategy practice when focusing on the relationship between senior and middle management.

Further and Higher Education Context

The governance of further education colleges has faced criticism in recent decades for adopting managerialist approaches (Simkins, 2000; Lowe and Gayle, 2010; Elliott and Hall, 1994; Dearlove, 1997), raising concerns about the erosion of educational values in favour of performance-driven strategies. Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) highlight the complexities of further education leadership, while Leader (2004) emphasises the need for strategic planning frameworks that foster collective meaning and reduce bureaucracy.

Similarly, higher education institutions are characterised by pluralism and competing stakeholder interests (Day et al., 2023; Brès et al., 2018; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011), which complicate strategic planning efforts. The adoption of corporate-style leadership has exacerbated tensions within institutions, particularly concerning collaborative decision-making and professional autonomy (Bleiklie et al., 2015; Brès et al., 2018). Watermeyer et al. (2022) identify purpose, values, and leadership qualities as crucial factors in HE governance, demonstrating the need for a contextualised approach that considers varying leadership competencies.

This demonstrates an opportunity for more empirical research that explores strategy practice in both further and higher education settings with a focus on how institutions can effectively navigate strategy in an increasingly complex and competitive environment. While research typically examines further education and higher education institutions separately, this research recognises their shared challenges and aims to contribute insights that can enhance strategic practice across both sectors.

Sensemaking in Strategy Practice

Organisations often struggle with strategy execution despite extensive theoretical advancements (Sull et al., 2015). The strategy-as-practice literature highlights the role of meaning-making in shaping strategic action (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017), yet empirical studies on the cognitive and relational aspects of managerial sensemaking remain underdeveloped.

Micro-level activities within strategic planning warrant further examination (Johnson et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Whittington and Cailluet, 2008), particularly regarding how managers interpret strategic tools within higher education settings (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). By integrating insights on purpose, trust, and emotionality, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the cognitive and interpersonal processes underpinning sensemaking in strategy practice.

Relational Dynamics and Trust

Middle managers play a pivotal role in strategy processes, serving as conduits between senior management and operational teams (Ahearne et al., 2014; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Raes et al., 2011; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990, cited by Burgelman et al., 2018). However, tensions arise when middle managers lack agency in decision-making, highlighting the need for a multifaceted analysis of senior and middle management interactions whilst engaged in strategy practice (Burgelman, 1983a, 2002; Burgelman et al., 2018; Floyd and Lane, 2000). There are opportunities to better understand communicative dynamics in strategy practice (Laamanen et al., 2015), with a need to study micro-activities within strategic planning (Johnson et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Whittington and Cailluet, 2008). Further research on the interplay between talk and text in strategic planning as well as power, social order, and the agency of those participating in strategic planning activities is also needed (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011).

This research examines trust as a critical factor in these relationships, drawing on Frei and Morriss's (2020) model of logic, authenticity, and empathy as key leadership attributes. While this framework has not been empirically explored within any organisational contexts, it may offer valuable insights into understanding how trust shapes managerial sensemaking in strategy practice.

Emotionality in Strategy Practice

The literature confirms that emotions influence strategic processes (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011; Vuori and Huy, 2016), yet much of the research focuses on individual emotional responses rather than interpersonal dynamics (Baumeister et al., 2007). Expanding emotionality research to include relational interactions within strategy practice is essential for understanding the importance of emotions in strategy practice (Burgelman et al., 2018). By integrating emotionality with managerial sensemaking, this study seeks to illuminate how feelings and interpersonal connections shape strategic planning, particularly in pluralistic organisational contexts.

There was little available research that considered the role of power and the relational dynamics, specifically between senior and middle management when engaged with strategy practice. Whilst this is not a primary focus for the research, it is an important aspect that influences behaviour and action and is relevant to strategy practice. This also presents a research opportunity.

Practical Implications

This research highlights key opportunities to refine strategy practice in further and higher educational institutions by fostering trust, purpose-driven leadership, and emotional awareness. Insights from this study may help organisations adopt more people-centric strategic frameworks, ultimately enhancing engagement and reinforcing trust across all management levels. While the primary focus is further and higher education in Scotland, the findings hold relevance for strategic practice in other complex organisational settings.

2.9 From Literature Gaps to Research Questions

This section outlines the research gaps and opportunities identified from the literature review and demonstrates how they inform the research questions.

Overarching Research Question: ***How do perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice?***

The literature review revealed several important gaps in the existing scholarship on strategy-as-practice, particularly in relation to purpose, trust, and emotionality in managerial

sensemaking. While strategy-as-practice research has advanced understanding of the micro-level activities through which strategy is enacted, empirical studies remain limited in their exploration of how these dimensions play out in organisational contexts, especially in pluralistic sectors such as further and higher education. This thesis responds directly to these gaps through the above overarching research question. The three sub-questions (A, B, and C) are designed to address the theoretical, empirical, and practical opportunities identified from the literature.

A: From a strategy-as-practice perspective, how are purpose, trust and emotionality currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers?

The literature review highlighted the need for deeper theoretical engagement with the role of purpose, trust, and emotionality in strategic planning. Existing studies often treat these elements in isolation, with purpose framed as a rational driver of strategy, trust considered primarily in terms of hierarchical relationships, and emotion largely reduced to individual affective responses. This fragmentation limits understanding of how these dimensions collectively shape managerial sensemaking. The sub-research question addresses this gap by synthesising insights from strategy-as-practice and research focused on the further and higher education sectors, developing a conceptual framework for examining these elements together.

B: How do purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?

The literature revealed a lack of empirical research examining strategy practice in further and higher education contexts, particularly in Scotland. While strategy research has often focused on corporate or public-sector organisations, educational institutions face distinctive challenges of pluralism, financial constraints, and complex governance structures. Moreover, the relational dynamics between senior and middle managers in these settings remain underexplored, despite much theorisation of middle managers' strategic roles. By examining case studies from three Scottish institutions, this thesis investigates how managers interpret and enact strategy within the annual planning cycle, paying close attention to the perceptions of purpose and the relational interplay of trust and emotions. This empirical focus contributes to strategy-as-practice research by extending its application to a sector which is currently under-researched.

C: What factors might define a "meaning-full" strategy planning practice framework?

The literature review highlighted opportunities for developing practical frameworks that make strategic planning more cohesive, effective and purposeful. Existing models often emphasise procedural rationality or managerialist assumptions, overlooking the importance of embedding purpose, trust, and emotional awareness into strategy processes. By drawing together the theoretical insights from the first two sub-research questions, a framework is offered that highlights how strategic planning can be recalibrated to foster purpose-driven, trust-based, and emotionally aware practices.

2.10 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter established the theoretical foundation for the research by outlining key concepts that frame the opportunities for inquiry, addressing the first sub-research question:

A: From a strategy-as-practice perspective, how are purpose, trust, and emotionality currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers?

Existing research in strategy-as-practice has increasingly recognised the interpretive nature of strategic activity. However, there is still much opportunity to focus on the nuanced interplay of emotional, relational, and purposeful factors, particularly in pluralistic educational contexts, which is currently underexplored across the research.

This research contributes to the strategy-as-practice body of research by integrating concepts that have largely been explored in isolation. The concepts of purpose, trust, and emotionality are integrated into a unified conceptual model that reflects the complex lived realities of strategic actors. These elements are positioned not as peripheral influences but as central lenses through which managerial sensemaking unfolds.

By applying this synthesis to further and higher education settings in Scotland, the study challenges managerialist assumptions and calls for a recalibration of strategic frameworks to accommodate emotional awareness and relational trust. In doing so, it responds to scholarly calls for more practice-oriented strategy research (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Carter et al., 2008) and offers an empirically grounded opportunity to connect theory and institutional strategy work.

The literature revealed limited empirical engagement with power dynamics between senior and middle management in education settings, despite extensive theorisation of middle managers' strategic roles. This study offers a relational perspective on how agency, trust, and emotions influence strategic interpretation and action, as well as how the interplay of talk, text, and behaviour influences planning processes. In particular, Frei and Morriss's (2020) framework of logic, authenticity, and empathy is applied to illustrate leadership competencies that could enhance trust-building. While not previously tested in organisational contexts, its inclusion provides an opportunity for empirical validation and further theoretical development.

The findings suggest that purpose-driven leadership, emotional understanding, and trust-building are vital for strategic coherence in tertiary education. This requires strategy practices that are not only structurally sound but emotionally and relationally attuned. This literature review highlighted future opportunities for research to explore how emotions influence strategic consensus across managerial levels, the role of empathy in mediating tensions amongst hierarchical strategic actors, and how trust manifests through communicative micro-practices.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction to Chapter Three

This chapter outlines the research methodology that underpinned the development of this thesis. Following the literature review and the identification of knowledge gaps, the research aims to understand how do perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. With Chapter Two addressing the first sub-research question, this chapter will focus on the second sub-research question:

How do purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?

This chapter explains the design of the research that will study each component of the question and the connections between them, allowing the second sub-research question to be answered in the remainder of this thesis. It includes an overview of the researcher's philosophy, the unit of analysis within the study, the research approach and design, the approach to research analysis and validation and the ethical considerations.

3.2 Research Philosophy

3.2.1 *Why It Is Important*

Establishing the philosophical standpoint at the start of the research ensured the purpose and desired outcome of the research were clear from the beginning. Research that includes the exploration of human behaviour usually requires the acceptance of a research philosophy paradigm to improve the credibility of the study (Kankam, 2019). In most social science and business disciplines, a researcher's philosophy reflects their beliefs and values, with their ontological and epistemological position being considered their way of looking at the world (Saunders et al., 2019). Ontology is the assumptions made about the nature of reality. Epistemology considers the best way to enquire about the nature of reality, how knowledge is created and the nature of the knowledge. Axiology considers which things are valuable, why they are valuable, and how their value is determined (Saunders et al., 2019). All of these come together to form a paradigm. A paradigm is "*a set of basic and taken-for-granted assumptions which underwrite the frame of reference, mode of theorising and ways of working*" (Saunders, 2019, p140). Metaphorically, a paradigm is a window through which to look at the world.

Neither view can be judged to be any better or truer than the other; each incommensurable paradigm is reckoned equally legitimate; any choice is a matter of subjective taste.

(Tsoukas and Chia, 2011, p38).

Overall, a researcher's philosophy reflects their values, as is their choice of data collection techniques (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.2.2 Researcher's Philosophy

The researcher reflected on their personal ontology, epistemology, axiology, and preferred research methods before exploring the literature on research philosophies and methodologies. Ontologically, the researcher believes organisations are socially constructed, constantly evolving with multiple situations and interpretations thereof all happening at once. Each member of the organisation brings their knowledge, experience and opinion to every activity. Therefore, it is unlikely there is one definitive truth or reality with respect to organisational activity. This resonates with the relativist perspective, which asserts that reality is not singular or objective but rather constructed through human interactions and interpretations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013).

Epistemologically, the researcher believes that, in research related to strategy, knowledge is gained through experience, human interaction, understanding lived experiences, observing practice, and the written word. It is unlikely that "true" theories can be identified, but through new understandings, innovative practice can emerge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013).

The researcher is values-driven with a desire to make organisations work better. They believe they are reflexive and open-minded. The researcher does not advocate for the status quo, but they believe that, in a large institution, structure and process are necessary to maintain governance, focus and coordination. The researcher acknowledges that this is perhaps a safe, traditional view and one that is continually reflected upon. However, further and higher education institutions provide stable employment for many and are relied upon to make positive and significant contributions to the economy and society. Therefore, these types of organisations require a level of regulation, risk mitigation and stability, but not to a level that inhibits innovation and progress. The researcher believes there are talented staff at all levels

of an organisation who need the right conditions to thrive so that they can make meaningful contributions in their careers. The researcher believes strongly in the equality and inclusion of others and that every human being should be treated with respect. Not everyone will hold the same views on the research area. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and listen to multiple viewpoints and to challenge perceptions of the world. There is unlikely to be a perfect solution to all problems, but those who are closest to the work might just have the best ideas on how to fix them.

In considering the Saunders et al. (2019) philosophy positions (Appendix C), the researcher's philosophy aligns with a pragmatist lens, which is a good fit for the research problem and aligns closely with the philosophy of much of the strategy-as-practice literature. The appealing nature of pragmatism is that it encourages the researcher to "*transcend the conventional separation between individual and organisational levels of analysis*" (Elkjaer and Simpson, 2011, p63), which can be deeply integrated. This offers the most valuable lens for better understanding strategy practice in further and higher education settings, with the potential to contribute new understandings that improve practice and experiences for anyone involved in strategy.

Exploring the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives was essential in clarifying the methods used in this research. Aligning the research methods with the researcher's standpoint enhanced the study's integrity and coherence by acknowledging and incorporating their views on reality and knowledge from the outset. Acknowledging the researcher's foundational beliefs at the beginning was invaluable, as these beliefs may have influenced and guided the study throughout, despite every effort to approach the study as objectively as possible.

3.3 Research Design

In designing the research for this thesis, the research onion developed by Saunders et al. (2018) provided a helpful approach for considering and designing the study. The layers of the onion represent the stages involved, with the researcher starting at the outer layer - the research philosophy - and then moving through each successive layer to the middle: data collection and analysis. The progression through each layer reveals a more detailed part of the research design.

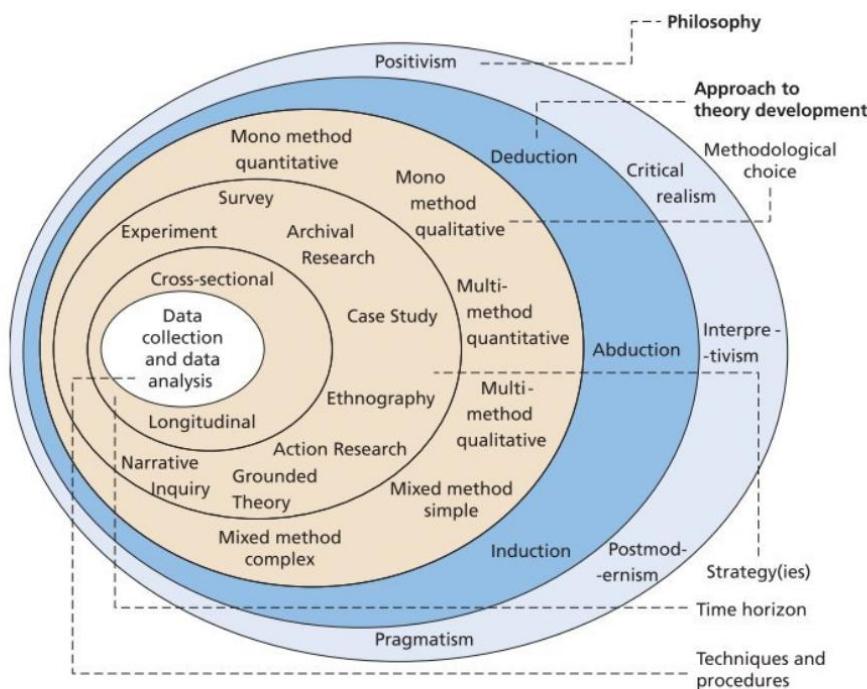


Figure 4.1 The 'research onion'

Source: ©2018 Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill

Figure 2 - Saunders et al. (2018): The 'research onion'

At a high level, the approach taken in this research is outlined below using Saunders' et al. (2018) research onion:

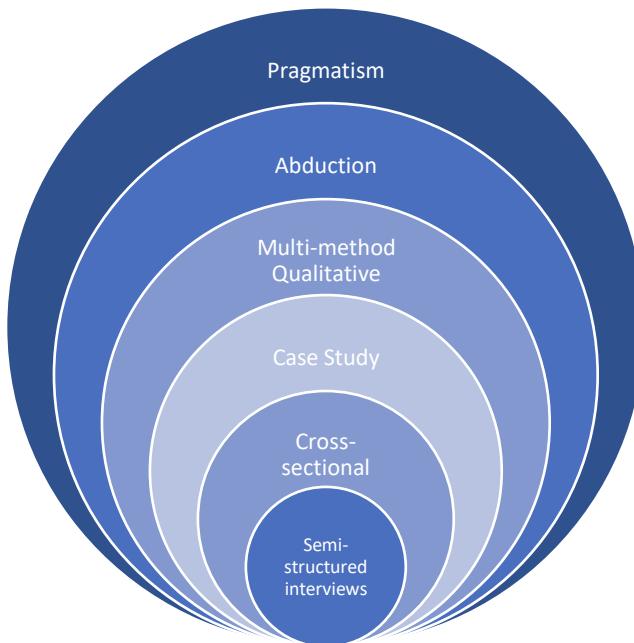


Figure 3 - Research design applied to Saunders et al. (2018) research onion

Maxwell's (2005) research design framework also provided a valuable guide for structuring and developing the qualitative research for this study. Maxwell encourages critical reflection and coherence between the components outlined in the framework so that robust and credible research is conducted. This allowed the researcher to specify the validity of the research to ensure the accuracy and credibility of findings:

- The research question that formed the basis of the study.
- The conceptual framework, which outlined the main subject being studied and relationships to other concepts.
- The philosophical paradigm that outlined the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the author and the study.
- The specific research methods and techniques used for data collection and analysis.
- The ethical and responsible considerations in conducting the research.

Maxwell (2005)

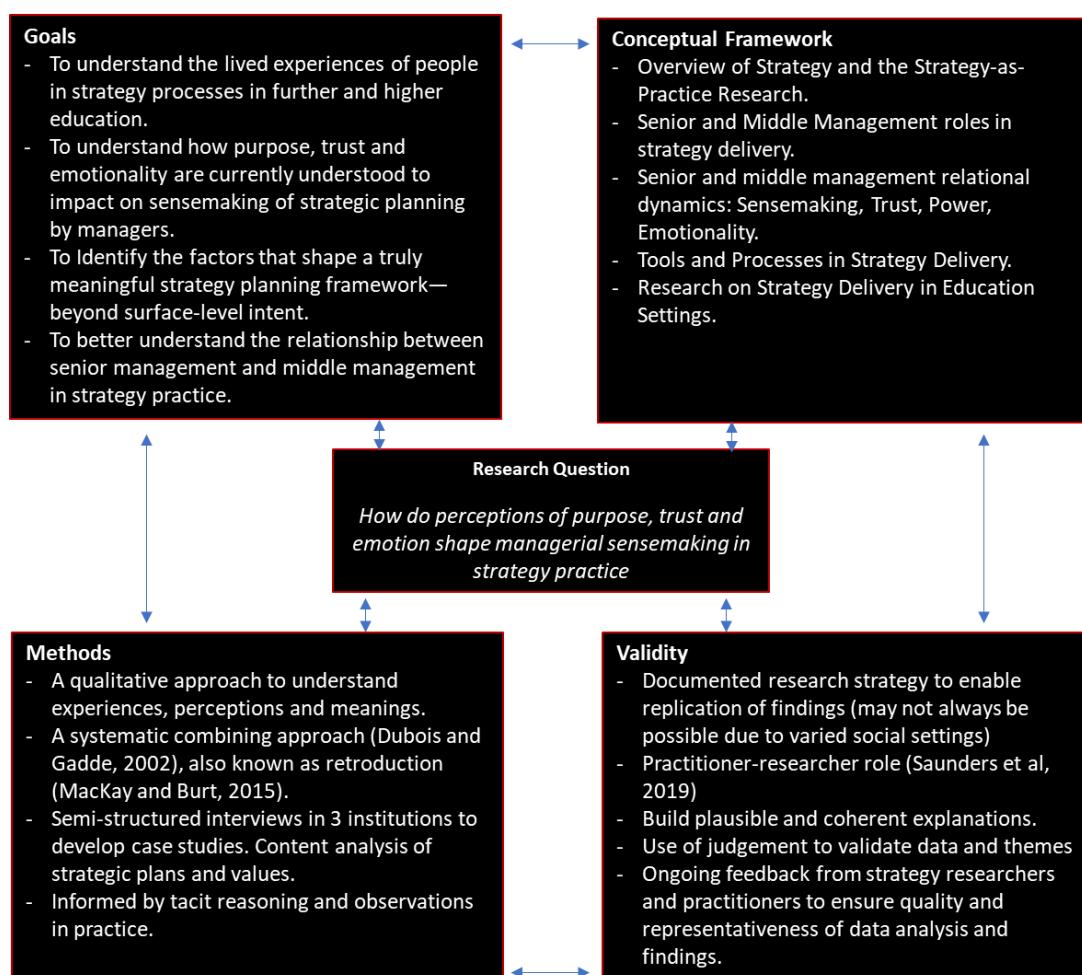


Figure 4 - Research design applied to Maxwell's (2005) framework

3.3.1 The Research Goals

As outlined in Chapter One, the research aims were shaped by the researcher's experiences with strategic planning in a higher education setting, as well as the findings from the inductive pilot study on strategic planning processes within an institution. The ambitions of the research were to:

- Understand the lived experiences of people in strategy processes in further and higher education.
- To understand how purpose, trust and emotionality are currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers.
- To understand what factors define a "meaning-full" strategy planning practice framework.
- To better understand the relationship between senior management and middle management in strategy practice.

A rationale for each of these is outlined below:

To understand the lived experiences of people in strategy processes in further and higher education

The researcher's experience resonated with the experiences of those who participated in the inductive pilot study and who expressed frustration with the current approach to annual strategic planning, a key strategic planning process in all institutions. Understanding the lived experiences of individuals involved in strategic planning processes within further and higher education was crucial, as it provided valuable insights into how strategies were perceived, implemented, and adapted within institutions. These experiences reveal the challenges, successes, and everyday realities faced by senior and middle managers, which have the potential to inform more effective and empathetic strategic planning and delivery processes and activities. By capturing these narratives, the researcher can help to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, ultimately leading to broader understandings and new approaches that are aligned with the institution's strategic ambitions and the needs and experiences of those directly involved with strategy practice.

To understand how purpose, trust and emotionality are currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers

Strategy is not purely rational. It is deeply influenced by how managers interpret situations. Purpose, trust, and emotion act as cognitive filters, shaping the way managers make sense of strategic challenges and opportunities. Investigating how managers integrate these dimensions into sensemaking can offer insights into how strategy is perceived and enacted. This goal was important because it could help scholars and institutions to pinpoint the critical factors that contribute to successful strategic planning. It will be addressed through the empirical research carried out in this thesis.

To better understand the relationship between senior management and middle management in strategy practice.

Exploring the relationship between senior management and middle management in strategy processes was vital for several reasons. This goal sought to uncover the dynamics, power structures, and communication patterns that influence strategic decision making and implementation. By examining multiple interpretations and new understandings, the researcher can identify potential areas of conflict, collaboration, and alignment between different management levels. This knowledge can inform the development of more cohesive and inclusive strategic planning processes, where both senior and middle management can contribute effectively and be heard.

This research specifically looks at annual planning processes and the dynamics of the relationship between senior and middle management through those processes. It does not look at strategic impact or whether strategic processes achieve the intended results. It explores which processes and tools underpin the annual planning process in each institution and how senior management and middle management behave throughout those processes. It seeks to understand the experiences of those tasked with strategic planning and whether they are deemed to be effective in delivering strategy.

3.3.2 The Research Question

The development and subsequent clarification of the research question driving a research study is crucial as it defines the focus of the research, sets boundaries that define the scope of the study, and act as a valuable touchstone throughout, keeping the researcher focused and informing the likely research methods and data required (Punch, 1998 cited by Silverman, 2005).

The exploration of the researcher's motivations, combined with the findings from the inductive pilot study, the literature review, and the research goals, led to the formulation of the following research question:

How do perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice?

Narrowing the focus of the research down to this fundamental question occurred during the early development of the thesis. Effective strategy practice in further and higher education settings is crucial for achieving the goals and objectives of institutions. This research question is important as it explores the fundamental cognitive and relational processes that shape managerial decision-making in strategy practice. It acknowledges that strategy practice is deeply influenced by how managers interpret situations and that this presents complex challenges to institutions. Purpose, trust, and emotion act as cognitive filters, shaping the way managers make sense of strategic challenges and opportunities. It recognises that successful strategy practice may not be achieved by simply having the *right* template, leader, staff, culture or process. It is multi-faceted, complex and interdependent on a range of factors. As the title of this thesis acknowledges, plans are useless, but meaningful planning is indispensable.

Ultimately, this research can contribute to the development of best practices and frameworks that support the continuous improvement of strategy practice in further and higher education settings.

The overarching research question has been broken down into three research questions:

A: From a strategy-as-practice perspective, how are purpose, trust and emotionality currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers?

This question was addressed in the literature review in Chapter Two.

B: How do purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?

This question is addressed through the empirical research in this thesis in Chapters Four and Five.

C: What factors might define a "meaning-full" strategy planning practice framework?

This question is addressed in Chapters Five and Six.

3.3.3 Research Design and Approach

The research aims to understand the lived experiences of people in the strategy process in further and higher education settings. A qualitative approach was taken to understand experiences, perceptions, and meanings through the participants' own words, whether written or spoken. In considering *how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice*, a qualitative approach was judged the most valuable method for identifying nuances, patterns, and gaps in the strategy planning process, as well as uncovering hidden organisational dynamics. It was also compatible with the researcher's belief that organisations are always evolving and are socially constructed with each person having their own set of beliefs, knowledge, and experiences.

The research design adopted a systematic combining approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), also known as retrodiction (MacKay and Burt, 2015). Dubois and Gaddes (2002) observe that many research methodologies present a linear approach when, in reality, the researcher must revisit the literature continuously to understand the phenomenon emerging from the empirical research.

The main objective of any research is to confront theory with the empirical world... systematically combining this confrontation is more or less continuous throughout the research process.

(Dubois and Gadde, 2002, p555)

"Systematic combining" observes the phenomenon, builds plausible explanations as to why something is happening and gathers empirical data to evaluate the resultant hypotheses (MacKay and Burt, 2015). This approach alternates between the theory and the empirical data to increase understanding. Dubois and Gadde's (2002) approach to systemic combining is outlined below.

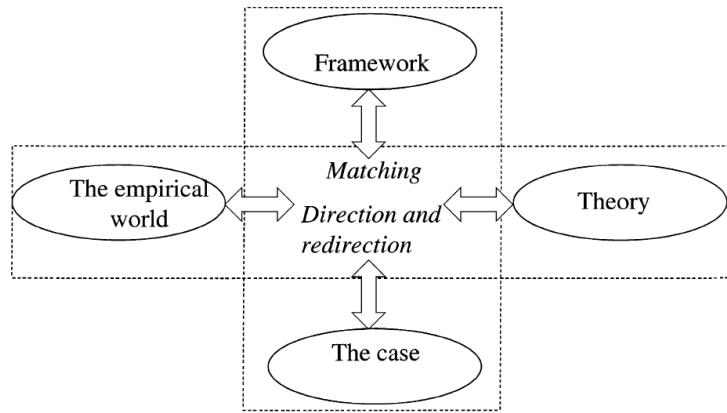


Figure 5 - Dubois and Gadde's (2002) systematic combining approach

The starting point outlined the preconceptions as to how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shaped managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. This was informed by the researcher's tacit reasoning and observations in practice, along with the findings from the inductive pilot study. The literature was consulted to identify the most relevant theoretical concepts. Next, plausible hypotheses to explain what was happening were formulated. In cases where multiple possible explanations were presented, only the most plausible were selected for further exploration.

Empirical research was undertaken to explore and evaluate possible hypotheses. The research consisted of a multi-method qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews to capture senior and middle management's experiences of strategic planning in their institution. Content analysis of strategic plans and organisational values of each institution led to further refinement, elimination or validation of the hypotheses. The "matching" approach in the framework allowed the researcher to continually reflect, going between the data sources, analysis and theory. This approach allowed the researcher to respond in a fluid manner to the emergence of unexpected data. 'Direction and redirection' continually validated the possibilities that emerged from the data and how the literature explained this. It unearthed a range of research avenues. The direction and redirection approach helped the researcher to be selective with respect to which discoveries or plausible explanations to pursue.

Whilst a grounding in relevant strategy literature was undertaken by the researcher, systematic combining allowed the research to escape the constraints of existing theory. Findings were continually evaluated against the theoretical framework and the systematic

combining process was continuous until the relevant findings were uncovered and the research questions answered.

3.4 Enacting the Research Design

3.4.1 Pilot Study

To narrow the focus of the research and more clearly define the research question, the researcher undertook an inductive pilot study. The pilot study served as an opportunity to trial key aspects of the research before undertaking the main study, so that any potential challenges that could have arisen in the main study were identified. This approach was necessary to help refine the focus of the main research study, given the broad range of potential research avenues available on strategy practice. The pilot study helped to strengthen the overall research approach, ensuring its feasibility while generating early insights that contributed to the literature review and the conceptual framework. By addressing potential obstacles and validating research design choices, the pilot study enhanced the reliability of this thesis and provided a foundational basis for the main study (Bryman, 2016).

The pilot study examined a strategic annual planning process in one institution known as Pilot X. The annual plans were the formal approach to strategic planning and were used by planning units to identify priorities and contributions to delivering against the strategy. The annual plans were one of the key tools in cascading and delivering strategy throughout the institution and were identified as a credible subject for undertaking an initial study on strategic planning.

Pilot Study: Research Methodology

Saunders et al. (2019) describe an inductive research study as one that begins with data collection through qualitative methods to explore specific experiences. The data is then analysed to identify patterns and themes, which lead to the development of understandings and theories grounded in the data. This flexible approach allows researchers to gain a holistic view, which allows them to adapt their methods as new insights emerge. An inductive approach to the pilot study was taken with the assumption that the findings would lead to a more specific research focus and clearer theoretical position at the end of the pilot, which would be used for the main research study. Two types of qualitative research methods were used: content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Content analysis was first carried out on six of Pilot X's annual plans created for the academic year 2019 to 2020. Six units were selected which consisted of four academic departments and two professional service plans. The purpose of content analysis was to uncover the explicit and implicit meanings and themes within the plans so that new understandings could emerge to inform the questions for exploration in the interviews. The executive summary and content from the three KPI sections were selected for comparative analysis. The relevant sections from the six annual plans were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and coded to protect the identity of each planning unit. The word count for each section was captured, with the most common words identified. Each section was individually analysed with the observations captured. All observations were considered together, with sections compared against each plan to draw out the similarities and differences.

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with six staff members who had direct involvement with the annual planning process for 2019 to 2020. Interviews allowed staff to discuss and explore their experiences, thoughts and feelings on the annual planning process. Six staff were selected using a purposive sampling approach, with two selected from professional services and four from the faculties. Each participant was selected based on the researcher's judgement as to who could provide rich responses to the interview questions and their relevant role in creating an annual plan for their area. Each individual approached was provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix D), which provided background information on the pilot study. Interviewees were informed that their involvement in the research was voluntary and would remain confidential. The interviews took place in late 2020, with interviews lasting between 20 and 45 minutes. The interview questions (Appendix A) were designed based on the themes that emerged from the content analysis. The interview data was transcribed into Excel, with each recording listened to at least twice. Each question was individually analysed and compared with responses from the other participants, with similarities and differences captured. Mind maps were created to further explore the responses and group the themes. Follow-up interviews were held in late 2021 to explore the themes that had emerged following analysis of the data from the first round of interviews and a review of the literature. The data from the second round of interviews was combined with the first interview data and analysed to uncover the overarching themes and support further explorations of the literature to inform the conceptual framework for the main

study which focused on trust, autonomy, power, deliberate and emergent strategy and strategy tools.

The researcher acknowledges that, for both research methods, small samples were used and that the findings may have been different had a larger study taken place. The interviewees consisted of five middle managers and one senior manager. Therefore, the views of staff in either more senior or less senior roles may have been different had they been included in the study.

Pilot Study: Implications for Full Research Study

The findings from the pilot study helped the researcher to narrow the focus of the research and design the conceptual framework for the full study. The study confirmed that the annual planning process provided a valuable lens for focusing the research, which was broadly replicable across multiple institutions in Scotland. Whilst the content analysis of annual plans was a useful starting point for the inductive study and provided helpful insight, the interviews proved to be more valuable, leading to richer data that shed light on the nuances of delivering strategy in a complex social setting. Therefore, content analysis of internal annual plans was not built into the main study. Overall, the pilot study improved the research design for the main study. The views from more senior managers were missing from the pilot. Therefore, a balance of senior and middle management participants would be sought.

3.4.2 Main Study

The main study represents a continuation of what was broadly investigated in the pilot study. However, the findings are presented independently from the pilot study as the research question and subsequent interview questions evolved from the pilot study findings.

Case study research was identified as the most suitable methodology for undertaking the main research. The case study approach is an empirical research method that investigates a situation within its real-life context. An explanatory approach was adopted to explain the causal links and nuances across the data that may have been too complex for other research methods such as experimental methods or surveys (Yin, 2009). It allowed for in-depth analysis of the data to provide richer insights, while helping to understand the relationship between a variety of factors within a similar context. It is viewed as a robust approach that strengthens

the validity of the findings and can aid the development of new theoretical perspectives (Yin, 2009).

Building on the established strengths of case study research in capturing real-world complexities, this thesis aligns with prior scholarship by adopting a multi-case study approach, as exemplified in Jarzabkowski's (2000) doctoral research focused on strategic practices within higher education institutions. Jarzabkowski (2000) explored the strategic practices of top management teams through an empirical, case study approach, drawing on data from three higher education institutions. The research in this thesis follows a similar approach, focusing on three institutions to explore the interplay between purpose, trust, emotionality and managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. By adopting a multi-case study design, this research aims to build on the tradition of strategy-as-practice scholarship, refining theoretical insights while ensuring empirical depth. This alignment emphasises the value of comparative institutional analysis in advancing our understanding of strategic behaviour.

Several challenges are presented by case study research in the context of this thesis. Due to the specific context being researched, the findings may not be representative of a larger population. Similarly, the findings may not be replicable due to the potentially unique circumstances of the organisation. For example, the data collection took place following the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a highly irregular, globally impacting phenomenon. The same study carried out at another point in time may not have led to the same results. Case study research is an approach that can be at risk of researcher bias, with significant variation in how case studies are carried out. Despite this, case study research is still viewed as a powerful way to explore complex phenomena (Yin, 2009). The researcher was mindful of the associated risks in adopting the case study research method and took steps to minimise these by following the approach detailed throughout this chapter.

Triangulation increases the reliability of qualitative research by capturing diverse perspectives, reducing subjectivity and ensuring insights are well-supported (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009). The inclusion of three further and higher education settings in the research provided a triangulated source approach, allowing a detailed look at each institution before cross-examining each case to identify the similarities and differences in strategy practice within each institution. The use of triangulation allowed the findings to be systematically linked to the theoretical concepts

within the conceptual framework. By comparing insights across datasets, themes such as relational dynamics and strategic tools can be assessed across diverse institutional settings. A triangulated approach strives to mitigate potential bias inherent in relying on a single data source (Eisenhardt, 1989). Triangulated data sources offer the depth and breadth of insight needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of senior and middle management experiences, enabling the researcher to uncover and interpret complex institutional phenomena. Triangulation also aids in theory development by verifying findings through multiple perspectives and analytical methods, enhancing the rigour of the work and allowing for a deeper understanding of complex organisational and relational dynamics (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009).

Unit of Analysis

This research took an embedded design approach to the unit of analysis. This allowed for multiple layers to be examined, whilst maintaining a primary focus on one main unit of analysis (Yin, 2009). The primary unit of analysis in this research is the annual planning process designed to deliver strategy in each education setting. The next level is the senior and middle managers engaged in the annual planning process and looks at the interactions, communication, relationships and emotions throughout the process. Some challenges with this approach are that it can generate an over-abundance of data, and it can be challenging to maintain focus on the main unit of research, as other interesting avenues arise. This approach offered several advantages: it enabled a more comprehensive understanding of each case, provided the flexibility to incorporate insights from contextual dynamics, and facilitated cross-case analysis to uncover both commonalities and variations in strategy practice. This approach also helped to strengthen the validity of the findings by comparing multiple aspects of the data (Scholz and Tietje, 2002).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and staff working in further and higher education settings were significant and are still being felt across the education sector, nationally and globally. The timeframe under observation in the study presents an insight into strategic planning during a hugely challenging time (Scottish Government, 2022).

Case Selection (Sample and sampling)

The population of the research was further and higher education institutions in Scotland. There are 19 higher education institutions and 24 further education colleges in Scotland (Audit Scotland, 2023). All of which vary in age, size, income, academic specialisms, and location. The rationale for selecting both further and higher education institutions was that they serve a broadly similar purpose and have similar funding arrangements in place with the SFC, with all institutions expected to report to the SFC annually via the Outcome Agreement arrangement. As outlined in Chapter One, they are facing similar external and internal challenges. While institutions differ significantly in operations, culture, history, and performance, they share a common goal: to provide education, generate knowledge, and contribute meaningfully to society and the economy. The identities of the case study institutions have been removed along with each institution's status as a further or higher education institution.

In determining which institutions to select, the researcher adopted non-probability sampling approaches such as purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling required the researcher to use their judgement to identify people within institutions who were relevant to the research and who would have the ability to answer the research questions (Saunders et al., 2019). While it was acknowledged that purposive samples are not considered to be statistically representative of the population (Saunders, et al., 2019), the researcher's judgement and logic for selecting viable and receptive participants was crucial so that rich data was gathered that provided insight to the research questions. The researcher contacted individuals at five different institutions. Based on the level of engagement from these individuals and the likelihood of identifying further participants at the institution, the researcher narrowed the focus to three institutions.

Snowball sampling enabled the researcher to contact key people in institutions relevant to the research, and through them, identify others who were also relevant to the research (Bryman, 2016). The snowball approach was beneficial as it was difficult to identify participants due to variation in job titles, organisational structures and the cultural language associated with strategy planning and delivery. One risk with the snowball approach was that participants may have recommended like-minded participants, leading to possible bias across the participant responses. However, the researcher interviewed participants from varying parts of each institution and conducted individual interviews so that they could not be influenced by hearing the views of others.

The researcher was interested in the hierarchical experiences of strategy planning and interviewed both senior managers and middle managers who have responsibility for strategic planning. The researcher strived for a gender balance across participants to ensure a representative sample of those involved with strategy. Where a sample population was too small for any of the institutions, a convenience approach was taken so that a minimum number of participants were identified (Bryman, 2016).

Participants were identified as having a key leadership role in annual strategic planning within their institution. This meant that they were involved with strategic planning processes that resulted in the design of their institution's strategy, or they led on the design of a sub-strategy or an annual plan for their unit that outlined how they contributed to the institution's overarching strategy, with responsibility for reporting on progress annually. This may have been more or less frequent depending on their institutional processes.

Participants were required to have been involved with strategic planning processes carried out from 2020 to 2023 and held one of the following positions in their institution:

- Senior manager (i.e., an executive officer of the institution)
- Middle manager (i.e., identified as holding a leadership position, at least one level below the senior management / executive team, with the responsibility for leading a planning unit / department)

Conducting in-depth case studies of three institutions and interviewing senior and middle managers introduced a significant challenge, as it required access to a relatively limited pool of participants within each institution. Given the absence of comprehensive data on the total population of this managerial group, the researcher had no way of establishing a definitive sampling frame, further complicating the process of securing representative insights. Additionally, engaging with senior managerial participants presented a level of risk to the study as it necessitated access to their experiences and perspectives, which may have involved commercially sensitive information. To mitigate this risk, full anonymisation of the case study institutions was essential, as any unintended revelation of strategic or financial details could compromise an institution's competitive position or operational interests.

Within each institution, the researcher aimed to interview up to 10 participants (approximately three senior managers and seven middle managers) who were closely involved with the institution's strategic planning processes. Despite contacting over 40 individuals, only 20 agreed to participate in interviews across the three institutions. Given the study's focus, the researcher prioritised depth over breadth, ensuring that interviews were conducted with individuals who held the appropriate seniority and level of involvement in annual planning. Rather than increasing the number of interviews at the expense of participant relevance, the researcher maintained a rigorous selection criterion to secure rich, meaningful data from those most qualified to provide insight. This deliberate approach safeguarded the study's integrity by preventing dilution of findings and ensuring that responses reflected substantive strategic engagement rather than peripheral perspectives.

McGrath's (1981) concept of dilemmatics emphasises the inherent trade-offs in research design, where methodological choices must balance competing constraints rather than strive for unattainable perfection. In this study, the interplay between access, sensitivity, time and the felt importance of the topic necessitated a pragmatic approach to fieldwork. While broader access to senior and middle managers might have enriched the dataset, practical limitations - including the restricted population pool and the researcher's inability to determine its total size - required a strategic approach to selecting quality participants. Prioritising depth over breadth ensured that the study captured meaningful insights from participants with direct involvement in annual planning. This approach aligns with McGrath's (1981) assertion that doing something within practical constraints is preferable to inaction driven by unattainable ideals. By acknowledging limitations transparently, this study aims to provide a foundation for future researchers to extend its insights through alternative trade-offs, whether by adopting a broader sample, longitudinal design, or different methodological framing. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for continued refinement of strategy research in education settings while maintaining methodological integrity.

The researcher adhered to the data saturation principle, ensuring that data collection ceased once additional responses no longer provided new insights (Saunders et al., 2019). Given the limited pool of senior and middle managers available, it was critical to balance methodological rigour with practical constraints. While broader access might have allowed for increased variation in perspectives, securing fewer, but highly relevant participants would enhance the

richness and specificity of the data and findings. This approach reflects an intentional trade-off, where the decision to conclude data collection was driven by both theoretical sufficiency and the realities of participant availability, reinforcing the integrity of the study while acknowledging its limitations.

Study Participants

This resulted in 20 interviews taking place across the three institutions. The breakdown of participants is provided below.

Table 1 - Overview of participants interviewed for the study

	Senior manager	Middle Manager	Male	Female	Total Interviews
Institution A	3	4	3	4	7
Institution B	3	4	3	4	7
Institution C	2	4	4	2	6
Total Interviews	8	12	10	10	20

To ensure anonymity for the participants, the level of seniority and their gender were removed throughout the findings. Respondents are labelled and presented in the next chapter as A, B or C depending on the case study institution, and assigned a number such as A1.

As mentioned previously, the experiences of participants throughout 2020 to 2023 may have varied significantly due to the impact of the global pandemic. However, it was also interesting to observe the impact the pandemic had on strategic planning, which was not a primary focus of this study.

Timeframe and Duration of Study

The data was collected from November 2022 to June 2024. The first two case study institutions were interviewed between November 2022 and June 2023. The respondents from these institutions were asked to reflect upon the strategy planning processes from 2020 to 2022.

Following the analysis of the data from the first two institutions, data was collected from the third institution between April 2024 and June 2024. Respondents from this institution were asked to reflect upon the strategy planning processes from 2020 to 2023. The time frame was extended to allow participants to reflect on their most recent round of strategic planning.

The annual planning timescales were broadly comparable across all three institutions as they were required to submit an annual “Outcome Agreement” report to the Scottish Funding Council.

It was anticipated that collecting and analysing in-depth data from each of the three institutions was feasible within the timeframe allocated for this doctoral study.

3.4.3 Content Analysis

A limited amount of content analysis was conducted on each institution’s strategic plan and organisational values published on their website during the interview period. Having knowledge of each institution’s strategic plan and values provided the researcher with valuable context regarding the organisation’s strategic ambitions, espoused culture, and values before the interviews took place. This information was also useful when analysing the interview data to correlate what the respondents said and whether this aligned with what the institution said publicly. This content analysis aimed to uncover explicit and implicit meanings and themes within the published documents to gain new insights that could explain responses and understand how engaged and embedded the language and ambitions of the plan were across the interview data. The content analysis was not a primary focus of the research or data collection, but it was helpful to inform and explain the interview responses.

A summary of the strategic plan, including the focus of the strategic ambitions, the style of language used, the level of ambition expressed, and the number of pages was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and coded to protect the identity of the institution. Each plan was analysed with observations captured which focused on identifying recurring words and phrases. Patterns emerged through the frequency of specific terms, reflecting dominant themes or underlying narratives. All of these observations were then considered together to produce an overall observation for each plan. Each institution’s plan was compared with the other institutions, with similarities and differences noted. Specific details of these plans and their analysis are presented at a high level in the findings section to ensure the anonymity of the institutions.

3.4.4 Data Collection – Semi-Structured Interviews

In considering the available methods for investigating strategy within further and higher education settings, surveys were judged unlikely to provide a reliable insight into organisational dynamics. Respondents could interpret questions wrongly or may not engage fully with the process. Instead, a qualitative approach was adopted, allowing the establishment of personal connection and the observation of gestures and facial expressions. Qualitative research is highly effective for understanding the world from the perspective of those studied (Pratt, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were identified as the most appropriate method for gathering the data required to answer the research question. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to more accurately capture "*the richness of people's experience in their own terms*" (Labuschagne, 2003, p101). The interview questions were pre-determined. However, the order was flexible depending on the flow of the discussion. It enabled the addition of new questions where responses offered new insights that had not been considered in the questions previously. The interview questions focused on the participant's role, the annual planning process and their role within it; the relationship between senior management or middle management throughout the planning process and the opportunity for meaningful exchanges between them; any tensions that existed; their connection to the strategic purpose and values; how decisions were made, and the autonomy they felt within the process. The interview questions are given in Appendix E and were mostly open-ended with probing when required. Some of the questions were refined as more interviews took place, since the researcher received similar accounts of the overarching process, allowing more time to discuss emerging themes following previous interviews. A semi-structured interview is more natural and less formal than a full structured approach but requires a competent interviewer to obtain rich data (Bryman, 2016).

To facilitate "matching" and "direction" and "redirection" in the systematic combining framework, interviews were scheduled to allow time for the researcher to analyse the data and reflect before conducting the next interview with a new participant. The researcher had permission from the participants to be interviewed a second time if further empirical data and exploration were required. This was not required.

A maximum of one hour per interview was planned with the average interview lasting 40 minutes. The audio from the interviews was recorded, with the participants' consent, and notes were taken during the interview as a backup in case of any technical issues. Due to the ongoing restrictions and impacts of the global pandemic, 18 of the interviews took place online using Zoom and MS Teams, with two taking place in person.

A data management plan was created to ensure that all data requirements and ethical considerations were followed. All data captured during interviews was fully anonymised so that no individual could be identified from it. The researcher adopted additional analytical aids, such as free writing, throughout the research to explore emergent interpretations of the analysis and capture observations from the interviews.

3.4.5 Data Analysis – Semi-Structured Interviews

In preparing the data for analysis, the interviews were revisited several times to ensure the accuracy of data capture. A data sampling approach (Saunders et al., 2019) was taken so that only participants' comments relevant to the research questions were transcribed. The data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and coded for confidentiality and ease of analysis.

The data were analysed to identify patterns, recurrent messages, and common themes, which were categorised and linked to the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). Thematic analysis was instrumental in recognising meaningful patterns within the qualitative dataset and highlighting relevant themes for investigation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While this approach allows for subjective interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the adoption of a triangulated case study method enhanced the validity by comparing findings across cases (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009).

The responses from each participant were considered individually and then compared against other participants for commonalities. The data were unitised so that quotes were coded to the relevant category. Sub-categories were assigned to identify the relationships between categories and situate the responses within a theoretical frame. This allowed for a comparison of data and for varying or similar themes to be identified (Sofaer, 1999).

Following this initial transcription and thematic analysis, the data were entered into a qualitative data analysis software called NVivo, which was used as a case study database. NVivo was used to manage data, manage ideas, query data, visualise data and report from the data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). This allowed for more rigorous storage, coding and analysis and was valuable for structuring the data and facilitating the organisation of information during the phase of thematic coding. It allowed the researcher to easily locate coded content, associate it with categories, and compare findings. NVivo played a crucial role in addressing the research question by facilitating the organisation of information and the development of insights and theory. The data analysis codes from NVivo are available in Appendix F, with examples of coded interviews in Appendix G.

The conceptual framework also served as an analytical tool, enabling a structured examination of the data to explore how perceptions of purpose, trust and emotion shaped managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. This approach was realised by linking the data with the emerging themes and the theoretical concepts embedded within the conceptual framework. This approach was undertaken using the following steps:

- After conducting an initial thematic analysis, the researcher mapped the emerging themes to specific concepts within the conceptual framework. This process enabled a structured examination of the data, allowing for deeper analysis and explanation of how these themes relate to theoretical constructs and real-world implications.
- This process involved a comparison of findings with the literature, with additional literature sources sought out to explain results, where necessary.
- The analysis progressed to identifying and describing similarities, such as recurring themes or shared strategic approaches, alongside differences, including variations in processes or contextual influences. It also examined the factors that enabled effective strategy practice and the barriers that challenged or hindered progress, developing a well-rounded understanding of the dynamics shaping the findings.
- There were examples where specific findings or themes connected with more than one concept from the framework. An example of this is the tension that existed in target setting for international students in two institutions. This required synthesising several areas of the conceptual framework to explore the complexity of the findings and connecting this to the literature. This example required exploration and synthesis

of senior and middle manager roles and autonomy, power, trust, emotions, and sensemaking concepts.

By systematically associating data with theoretical constructs, the research generated deeper insights.

3.4.6 Approach to Case Analysis

Yin (2018) explains that analysing case study data involves reviewing, sorting, and organising information to find patterns, insights, and important ideas. This helps to decide what to focus on and why. A key challenge is making sure interpretations make sense, answer the research questions, and connect with existing research. The approach taken to building up the case study analysis is outlined below:

- The strategic plan and values were obtained from each case study's website. Observations were captured in a spreadsheet to provide a summary of each institution's publicly facing strategic intent and espoused values.
- Interviews were held concurrently with institutions A and B. The interview data was transcribed into Word with the recording listened to several times. The interviews with Institution C were held the following year, which enabled source triangulation of the data.
- The interview transcripts were printed out and read several times with key passages highlighted.
- The highlighted passages were transferred into an Excel spreadsheet for comparison with other interviews and case studies.
- Emerging themes and insights were captured in Excel and transferred to a mind mapping programme called Mind Genius and adjusted as new insights emerged.
- Interview transcripts were then added to NVivo with each case study, interview participant and key passages highlighted and coded. The NVivo coding evolved throughout this part of the process.
- The reports and visualisation tools in NVivo were also used to identify themes and connections in the data. The word frequency reporting available in NVivo enabled an exploration of the most common people-focused words used by participants in each institution. The total word count for each institution's combined interviews was

relatively similar, allowing for direct comparison of raw word frequencies without normalisation. The raw counts of how often each people-focused word appeared in participant responses are presented in Chapter Four, Section 4.3. Findings are presented descriptively, summarising occurrences of these terms without interpretative claims.

- All of the various analyses supported the development of theme identification, which was a key part of analysing the case study data, particularly when compared against the literature to find plausible explanations (Yin, 2018).
- Detailed case study overviews were developed in Word to allow for the collation of key insights, similarities, differences, cross-case analysis and connection to the literature. The cross-case analysis was important as it allowed the researcher to identify trends, improve the development of insights and ideas, and consider different possibilities. This added more certainty to the conclusions drawn, since the findings reflected broader patterns across multiple institutions.

3.4.7 *Emergence of Themes*

3.4.3 and 3.4.5 detailed the approach to identifying data extracts of analytical relevance. Each extract was subjected to initial coding, after which the codes were examined in relation to the Conceptual Framework. This iterative process enabled the grouping of related codes into broader thematic categories. The analysis commenced with 28 initial codes, which were progressively refined and consolidated into nine overarching themes. The initial codes and how these mapped with the Conceptual Framework, through to the overarching themes are available in Appendix H. The format of the findings in Chapter Four is structured around the nine themes, described in section 3.4.8.

Two examples of the thematic process from data extraction through to the identification of the overarching theme are provided below.

Example A:

Some respondents articulated a desire for greater autonomy in their roles, often contrasting with the constraints they felt from senior management, whereas others commented positively on how much autonomy they felt they had. Direct extracts such as *“My Heads should have the autonomy to make changes to their area. It shouldn’t be so difficult”* and *“It’s not a dictat in*

how we do things... you come up with solutions" were initially coded under 'Autonomy and Empowerment'. These specific examples connected with many aspects of the Conceptual Framework. In particular, 'Middle and Senior Manager Roles' and 'Relational Dynamics'. These extracts, along with others, led to an overarching theme of 'Middle Manager Autonomy'. This theme captured both the enabling and constraining aspects of autonomy expressed by respondents, illustrating how autonomy is not necessarily about freedom, but about being trusted, having clarity over responsibilities, and feeling confident in exercising judgment without fear of reproach.

Example B

Respondents' reflections on having feedback from senior management revealed how crucial this was for middle managers. Direct extracts such as "*when I am presenting something, I would expect to get feedback*" and "*As a team, we practically walked out of the meeting blushing about the feedback that we get*" were initially coded as 'Sensegiving and Receiving'. These specific examples connected with many aspects of the Conceptual Framework, but in particular, 'Sensemaking'. These extracts, along with others, led to an overarching theme of 'Sensemaking Mechanisms'. This theme illustrated the variety of ways in which both senior and middle managers attempted to make sense of institutional priorities and each other. This was described by some respondents as having constructive dialogue, and by others as having uncomfortable, undermining or non-existent feedback experiences.

3.4.8 Format of Chapter Four: Findings

Each institution is presented as a case study separately in Chapter Four, with the findings structured around the context and the overarching themes that emerged from the data analysis. These were:

- High-Level Strategic Intent of the Institution
- Strategic Annual Planning Process
- Meaningful Strategic Purpose
- Organisational Values
- Leadership Approach
- Decision Making
- Sensemaking Mechanisms
- Middle Manager Autonomy

- Emotionality

A cross-case analysis is then presented to synthesise the findings by identifying commonalities and differences across the three case studies using the themes above. By examining these themes and their interactions, Chapter Five provides a detailed exploration of the findings from the main study.

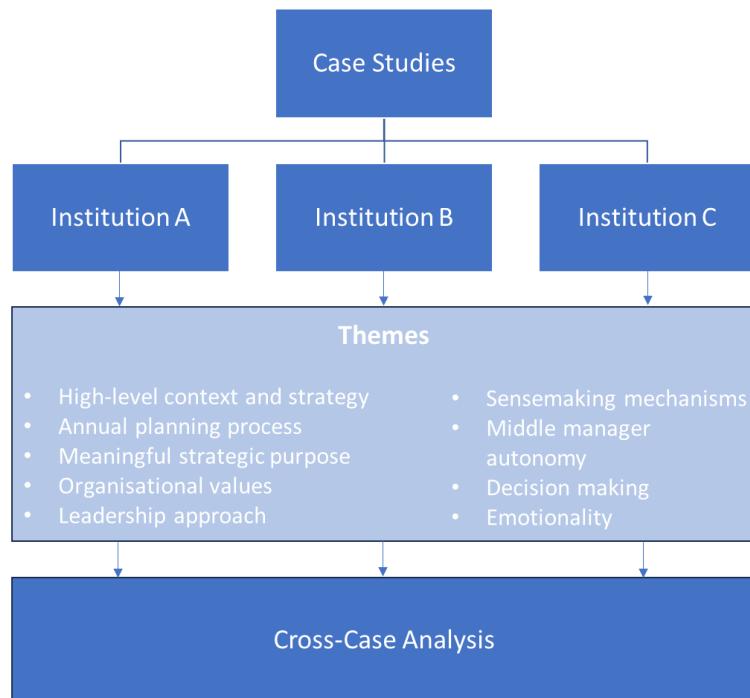


Figure 4 - Structure of how the findings from the main study are presented in Chapter Five

3.5 Data Quality

The research uncovered experiences, processes and perceptions which were complex and potentially ever-changing depending on organisational or personal factors. Therefore, the findings may not be fully replicable. The strategy literature that informed the research may be relevant in most organisational contexts, allowing the findings to be transferable beyond further and higher education settings. Having a documented research strategy with details on how the data was obtained and subsequently analysed can help in any attempts to replicate findings.

Since the researcher was not professionally independent of a number of the research subjects therefore, bias may be present in the study. However, this was carefully examined using a reflexive and open-minded approach. The researcher adopted the role of practitioner-

researcher (Saunders et al., 2019). The researcher sought feedback from strategy researchers and practitioners to ensure the quality and representativeness of the data analysis and findings on an ongoing basis. The researcher recognised potential cultural differences, experiences, and beliefs between themselves and the participants, actively challenging any assumptions formed throughout the research. Interviewer skills such as active listening, giving the participant full attention and repeating back or paraphrasing what they have said to test understanding were important (Saunders et al., 2019).

There were instances where the participants knew the researcher, and this may have resulted in the participants speaking more or less freely than others. Reassurances of confidentiality were offered, but the researcher could not be certain of the truthfulness of a participant's account. The likely validity was therefore judged on other accounts received and common themes that emerged (Bryman, 2016).

3.6 Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves examining one's own beliefs, judgments, and practices during the research process, and recognising how each may influence the research. It encourages researchers to scrutinise judgments and predispositions. Reflexivity often brings forth dilemmas and challenges, particularly when there is a significant difference in background knowledge, behaviour, and beliefs between the researcher and any possible aspect of the study (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher is part of the research (Finlay, 1998). A reflexive examination should address the positionality of the broader research discipline, questioning assumptions, the inclusion and exclusion of research questions, and dominant paradigms. To mitigate the risk of over-examining one's beliefs and biases, reflexivity should focus on specific areas within the research.

The researcher examined their assumptions throughout using a reflexive and open-minded approach to identify and challenge personal preconceptions and biases. This proved valuable throughout the research in ensuring the process was credible and transparent. The researcher has worked in higher education since 2009 and in a middle manager role since 2013. Their deep understanding of the sector inevitably carries biases shaped by experience and perception. However, the researcher continuously challenged assumptions, considering alternative viewpoints, and seeking deeper insights.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to the code of ethics within their home institution, requiring participant consent before commencing any interviews. Participation in the research was voluntary, and all respondents were given permission to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence. The data gathered and analysis respected each participant's privacy and confidentiality. Data was stored using strict data management protocols. All data captured was anonymised with no comment or quote directly attributed to the individual or their institution. The researcher acted with the utmost integrity throughout the research to protect the identity of participants. The researcher has reflexively challenged their assumptions throughout to ensure bias was acknowledged and that the data was accurate. The time volunteered by participants was respected, with the researcher striving to produce valuable and interesting findings to improve future strategy experiences for others. This additional layer of self-reflection for the researcher and their role as an employee within an education setting, as well as a part-time student, helped to produce more nuanced interpretations of the data. The reflexive approach allowed the researcher to be more adaptable throughout the approach.

The anonymity of the institutions and participants allowed for more meaningful and honest insights from participants. The researcher had concerns about conducting research that could be perceived as criticising institutions or senior or middle managers. Anonymising the data has allowed the researcher to present more honest accounts from the participants. There were times during the interviews when participants were concerned that what they said might be found out in some way. The researcher felt a great sense of responsibility in honouring the assurances given to participants at the start of the study, understanding the risks associated with speaking honestly, particularly about senior management. The assurances of confidentiality and the credibility of the research were of the utmost importance.

3.8 Validity of the Research

Validity is essential for ensuring that research accurately reflects and captures the true nature of the intended subject, leading to accurate results and findings (Saunders et al., 2019). Reliability refers to the consistency and credibility of findings if the research is repeated under similar conditions. These factors are crucial for the research to be trusted and accepted by

other researchers and stakeholders who may be interested in the results and their implications. Researchers have an ethical responsibility to produce reliable findings as they may potentially inform crucial decision making that impacts the world or the lives of others. These factors are important for establishing dependable outcomes that help inform future research.

To ensure the validity of the study, Yin (2009) suggests several areas that can help strengthen the validity of research. These include construct validity by studying the correct concepts, internal validity through causal relationships, external validity to generalise the study's findings, and reliability to show the study can be repeated.

To ensure construct validity, multiple sources of evidence were used, such as a systematic literature review and interview data and content analysis of strategic plans and values. Internal validity was established through an iterative process of reflection, checking and adapting assumptions based on the data. External validity was established through the use of the conceptual framework as the basis to structure the interviews, analyse the data and allow concepts to be replicated across the case studies. Reliability was established by using a case study structure, with NVivo used as the main case study database to store and analyse the data.

To further strengthen the validity of the research, data triangulation was incorporated into the design so that data were captured from three separate institutions. Methodological triangulation was also applied through the literature review (Chapter Two), semi-structured interviews, content analysis and the development of case studies.

By employing various methods, the researcher sought to minimise any risk of conclusions being influenced by the biases or limitations inherent in any single source or method. This strategy fosters a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the issues being examined (Maxwell, 2005). Two methods of data collection were used: interviews and content analysis. These sources of evidence were combined and cross-analysed, allowing observations to be drawn from multiple data resources. This process of developing the research methodology encouraged the researcher to challenge their assumptions and consider how their experiences shaped their thinking. This level of self-reflection and awareness of potential

biases and blind spots fostered a more reflexive approach, supporting the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.9 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter presents the research methodology employed throughout this study, outlining how the second sub-research question was addressed through empirical research. It explains how each component of the question and the connections between them were studied, allowing the second sub-research question to be answered in the remainder of this thesis.

The design of the research focused on annual planning processes in educational settings, whilst examining interactions and dynamics among senior and middle managers. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and content analysis of strategic plans and organisational values, captured from November 2022 to June 2024. The research aimed to understand the lived experiences of individuals involved in strategy processes within further and higher education settings, using a qualitative approach to capture the nuances, patterns, and organisational dynamics at play in each case. The study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, ultimately leading to improved strategy practice. Adopting a systematic combining approach, the study continuously revisited literature and empirical data to develop and refine hypotheses.

The case study method was used due to its ability to achieve in-depth analyses of real-life contexts. Three institutions were identified for the study so that triangulation could be employed to strengthen the validity of the findings. The study aligns with the pragmatist paradigm, which integrates individual and organisational levels of analysis. By challenging assumptions and fostering reflexivity, the researcher acknowledged personal biases and adopted a self-aware approach, ultimately supporting the validity and reliability of the findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings to the second sub-research question:

How do purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?

The data was collected from three Scottish education institutions and is presented as case studies. The chapter is organised into two main sections.

The first section presents each case study separately and examines the context and experiences of strategic planning in each educational setting, structured around the context and the common themes that emerged from the data analysis. These were:

- High-level strategic intent of the institution
- Strategic annual planning process
- Meaningful strategic purpose
- Organisational values
- Leadership approach
- Decision making
- Sensemaking mechanisms
- Middle manager autonomy
- Emotionality

The second section presents a cross-case analysis and synthesises the findings by identifying commonalities and differences across the three case studies using the themes above. By examining these themes and their interactions, this chapter provides a detailed exploration of the findings, exploring how purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in a tertiary education setting in Scotland.

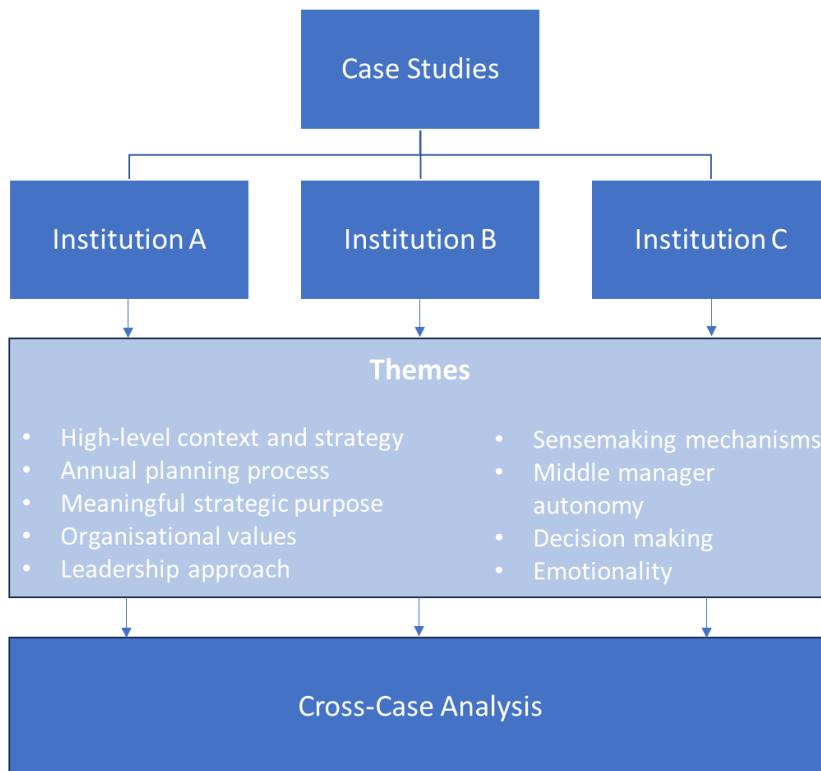


Figure 6 - Structure of how the findings are presented

4.2 The Case Studies

4.2.1 Institution A

Strategic Intent of the Institution

This institution produces a strategic plan every five years. The plan in place during the period the data was collected was almost 30 pages long. The language articulated in the plan was ambitious and internationally focused. The main goals of the plan focused on student learning and education, research, impact, partnerships and operations. The plan articulated the ambition of making a difference in society and achieving world-leading status. The strategy was underpinned by several key performance indicators focused on: student recruitment targets and population; research income; external relationships; student experience; and sustainability.

Strategic Planning Process: Annual planning process

The annual planning process was typically launched in February, with planning units expected to finalise planning by May, with plans to take effect from August of the same year. There

were three main planning processes: the creation of a new annual plan, target and budget setting, and workforce planning. Each planning unit was defined as a college, faculty, school, department, or professional service and each was required to produce an annual plan. A standard template with guidance was provided with each planning unit required to outline progress against the strategic goals and their plans for the year ahead, reflecting on strengths, opportunities, and challenges.

Each head of a planning unit would typically hold a strategy session with their leadership team and delegate aspects of the template out to members of their team who had responsibility for the delivery of a specific portfolio of work. All respondents were consistent in their approach to working collaboratively with colleagues within their unit to agree on the content and draft the plan.

Effectiveness of the process

As the strategy planning process had not changed significantly over the last 10 years, respondents knew what would be asked of them each year. All respondents found the process helpful for facilitating discussions within their planning units and they enjoyed those discussions. However, there were often delays to the planning guidance being issued, which resulted in short timescales for completing the task, and increased pressure on staff. The deadline dates often corresponded with key holiday dates, further exacerbating pressure on staff. Respondents expressed a sense of dread when the planning process commenced, as they knew from experience how much work it entailed. They felt frustrated with the lack of engagement from senior management and that they did not know if the plans were read by them.

Once the plans were submitted there would be no feedback to middle managers on their planning document. Any further interactions between senior managers and middle managers after this point would be in finalising or adjusting the budget or targets.

In June or July, the institution's overall annual plan would be shared internally with middle managers. This was created without consultation or feedback from staff, but included some sections from the faculty plans. Feedback from professional service staff interviewed for the study reported that they felt less important, as their plans were not referenced in the overall

annual plan. Adjustments made to targets mid-year meant that priorities often changed, which required more effort and rework which in turn caused panic and frustration for staff.

Target setting and management information

The respondents all commented that each planning process was completed separately and, that processes did not connect with each other. This was an area of great frustration as most of the processes were not perceived to be of value:

We have annual planning, then we have work force planning that drifts along in an unconnected fashion, then we have budget setting which drifts along in an unconnected fashion. And I just couldn't believe how disconnected these three major activities were that should all be interconnected as they all play against each other. And then the other disturbing thing for me is creating an annual plan? Why on earth are we doing this on a year by year basis, we should have a longer view and should be updating this on an annual basis in my opinion... having produced an annual plan for 5 or 6 years and turfing it into the wilderness without having any come back on it was a significant waste of time. (A2)

Do I think there is a solid connection between them in any meaningful way, no... They are three standalone processes for me that create duplication and work. (A7)

The annual plan is provided to the senior management and this is where my honesty comes out. Nothing happens. (A4)

Most people don't really care about it as they don't see it as something that is worth spending time on and don't have any faith that it means anything. (A1)

Target setting was an area of frustration for middle managers as they did not feel included or heard in target-setting exercises, and the decisions made by senior management had direct implications for their staff and students.

You think you know what your target is but then it gets changed at the last minute sometimes with there not being sufficient time for the leadership to discuss that at

sufficient length. There has been occasions recently where the [senior manager] just has to make a decision without any consultation whatsoever to increase our targets. That is not what planning is all about... you are going beyond what you feel you are capable of achieving or be able to actually deliver the student experience for. We need to get into a position where we are asked to be ambitious with our targets and we agree that for the year and then that's it. (A5)

The [institution] over the last few years has been unrealistic about setting budgets and we have to have a better understanding. (A4)

Meaningful Strategic Purpose

Throughout the interviews, neither the strategic plan nor the ambition, vision or specific goals was referenced by respondents. No respondents spoke about the strategy in a way that excited them or said that the strategy gave them a sense of purpose. When asked about the strategy planning processes and annual planning, the responses focused on the internal interactions, the how and what of the strategic process. The strategic vision and "why" of what they do was not articulated across the respondents' feedback. There was no mention of the bigger goals or a sense of pride or purpose in why they were doing their work. There was not a strong sense of common purpose or a clear direction of travel. Professional service respondents did not appear to see their contribution reflected in the strategy. Based on the feedback, the annual planning process was not an effective mechanism for reinforcing their purpose or motivation towards achieving the strategy.

The question I've always asked is "At the end of all of this, what does this mean?" ... I don't understand how I directly relate to the KPIs. (A3)

I think there needs to be more of a balance in terms of the strategy. It's very focused on the academic KPIs and associated student intake figures and all of that...there is very little about support services... I think there is a job there in terms of the higher levels of the institution in order to make us, as professional services, feel more like an equal partner in the institution and not how it appears that we're forgotten about. (A7)

...we need to prioritise more strategically. We can't just run about trying to do everything. (A1)

There was a willingness from all respondents to fully engage with the strategic planning processes, but the feedback was that they felt frustrated, exhausted, and demotivated by the process. The strategic planning process lacked meaning with the annual planning template viewed as a document that was not connecting staff with the end goals of the strategy.

Most people don't really care about it as they don't see it as something that is worth spending time on and don't have any faith that it means anything...If you wanted to, you could write it and stick it in a drawer and never look at it and no one would ever be any of the wiser...In order to make the annual plan work, there is a skeleton process there, but it needs you to care about it in order to make it useful to the area that you work in. (A1)

You carry on doing this for a couple of years and then you go "what the hell? Why am I doing this? What is the purpose of this?" (A4)

What came through in the responses was that staff do care, but something was missing for them that was making them question how valuable an exercise it was. Many of the respondents spoke about the emphasis on growth over recent years and, in particular, the growth of the student population. The focus on student recruitment had created tensions around the sustainability of the income, the impact on the student experience and staff wellbeing. The culture across the strategic planning process was very target-driven with expectations from senior management to achieve significant growth in all aspects of the business. There was consistent feedback that staff felt exhausted and found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the expectations of continued growth year on year, without investment in resources and systems. Many middle managers expressed that this was a challenging area to push back on with senior management, and this had impacted staff morale and relationships in recent years.

Organisational Values for Supporting Strategic Planning

The institution had published five words that communicated the values of how they expect their community to behave, what they believed and what was important. When respondents were asked about the values, most of the respondents knew what they were. The values were briefly mentioned by four respondents but were not routinely referred to throughout the interviews nor in the strategic planning processes. Two respondents commented that when they heard them spoken about, they did feel a sense of pride and that they were important. However, the feedback suggested that they were not embedded in the language or behaviours across the institution.

When I hear them [the values] being talked about, they do make me feel quite proud that we have these values... I think we talk about them as 'these are our values', but I don't see them routinely questioned in terms of decision making. It's maybe talking the talk and not walking the walk. (A6)

Some of the values are stronger than others. As someone who came in new and the values were there, I actually did feel the institution lived those values and I could get a sense of that from people that I worked with... Could there be other values that would better reflect the things we have done? Probably. We talk about them a lot but sometimes our actions don't reflect them. (A7)

One respondent mentioned the development of a sub-set of values for their unit that aims to create a 'culture of care' which they felt was not reflected in the current values:

... that's all about culture of care... everyone has to care, make sure they are looking after their staff... integrity, trust, fairness, honesty, and kindness. (A6)

Leadership Approach

When respondents were asked about the senior leadership approach in strategy planning, a common area of feedback was a desire to have more dialogue with senior management but that there was a lack of opportunity for discussion. The Principal was briefly mentioned by two respondents and the feedback suggests the Principal was astute and reflective. There were comments that faculties and professional services were perceived to be treated differently, with faculties viewed as more important. Respondents highlighted that senior management

did not read annual plans and that there was a micromanaging culture with initiatives rarely progressing unless senior management was involved:

I would never underestimate the cognitive powers of our principal (A2)

...the Principal wants to be involved in this, knowing what we want to do. The Principal – really? ...it's micromanaging ...There is a controlling element at the top that wants to know about everything. I don't think you can run an organisation like that. You've got Directors and Chief Officers for a reason. It can be great in some ways but prohibitive or inhibiting for other things. (A6)

Two respondents commented that the senior leadership did not always address challenges with staff in leadership positions and instead went around them instead of engaging in constructive dialogue. This impacted trust in relationships and created perceived inequality as to how people are treated:

When you are solutions-focused and you can communicate that and you follow through with that, it builds trust with the seniors, whereas if you don't have that and there is no trust, you get treated differently. I don't think that's right, but I've certainly seen it...so what you have is mistrust, so they then bypass the structure because they just remove that problem... I think that is one of the fundamental issues because if that is the way you feel about a senior person in your organisation, you should address that because it is not fair on them. They don't get an opportunity to improve if they don't realise how you view them. (A7)

I think there is a trust thing, but I think it depends on who the Head is and if there are issues there. Sometimes at a leadership level, there's maybe too much information coming their way on one side of a story. I don't think you can run a massive organisation like that. There are always two sides to every story. (A6)

Approach to Decision Making

There was consistent feedback about decisions being taken by senior management without consultation with middle managers who may be best placed to offer information and expert

advice. Middle managers wanted to be a part of the decision-making process, but the feedback suggests they were rarely invited to discussions, or, if they were, their advice was not taken on board. Feedback across both middle and some senior manager respondents highlighted decisions that were taken without the expertise of middle management often had negative unforeseen consequences which could have been avoided if middle managers had been consulted. Middle managers did not feel connected with the strategic decision-making processes. The approach to decision-making from senior management was not conducive to building good relationships with middle management and was a source of tension between senior management and middle management.

The senior folk in the [institution] often make decisions where they don't actually involve us in any advice to begin with. Decisions are made that we then are asked to deliver...There could be better ways of being involved with senior management decisions. At the moment we are disconnected. (A4)

"You rely on your experts to go away and come back with a proposal to consider...There has been occasions recently where the [senior manager] just has to make a decision without any consultation whatsoever to increase our targets... When there are more discussions, then people feel involved in the process. (A5)

We have our 2025 targets, but I wasn't part of the process in setting those. (A2)

There were delays in leadership making decisions, which respondents said had a disruptive effect on all areas of the business. Middle managers were asked to change course throughout the year. Respondents felt that many of the decisions lacked consultation and that attempts to consult lacked integrity.

We set budgets and set aspirations at the beginning but during the year we are asked to make savings and changes. The way we work, that is disruptive. We put a lot of work into planning something... Sometimes senior management decisions have an impact on things costing more. We are wasting significant sums of money just because we are making decisions in a certain way...This has a consequence of hundreds of

thousands of fees are lost and people's time is lost because we didn't actually think a bit more strongly at the beginning. We do that an awful lot. (A4)

There is a reticence to move forward with things in case it upsets...I can see with some decision making you know what the intention is and that it has to happen because someone wants it to happen (A6)

Sensemaking Mechanisms for Supporting Strategic Planning

When respondents were asked about what opportunities were in place to engage and communicate with senior management, there was consistent feedback that this was an area that middle managers found to be lacking. The sensemaking mechanisms in place were mostly top down sensegiving formal mechanisms from senior management. This included a weekly newsletter from the Principal, annual sessions where the senior leadership presented a strategic update to all staff and monthly meetings with senior and middle managers across the institution. There were limited sensemaking opportunities in place for senior management to sensereceive information from staff across the organisation.

The feedback was consistent across middle managers that they found the conversations valuable within their planning units during the strategic planning activities. However, there was rarely the opportunity to discuss or elaborate on the plans produced for senior managers. All respondents expressed disappointment with the lack of feedback from senior management. Constructive two-way dialogue between senior and middle management was viewed as a missing component by middle managers.

When I am presenting something, I would expect to get feedback...In reality, I don't know if senior management, finance, HR have any use of it...feedback is always good and that is the missing link there." (A4)

...the [senior manager] had a quick look at it and said "yep, that looks fine" and submitted it... annual plan we never get any feedback on. So, you just go "why are we doing it?". (A7)

The feedback from one respondent suggests that they rarely used sensegiving mechanisms to present an honest picture of the challenges faced:

You're always mindful where this is going. You're always taking out the negative comments (A5).

Middle Manager Autonomy in Strategy Planning

When the respondents were asked about how much autonomy they had for delivering the strategy, there was consistent feedback from both senior and middle managers. Respondents felt they had autonomy within the day-to-day delivery of the strategy, but some respondents expressed a desire to have more direction from senior managers. Some respondents, both middle and senior managers, reported that implementing strategic change was challenging unless supported by senior management.

I have full autonomy but within the bounds of the [institution's] strategic plan...I view that [strategic planning] very much as their [senior managers] area and they are best placed to tell me what they need, or what they think we might need... (A3)

In some regards, we do have discretion, we are kind of moving things around. I have discretion to move things around to be able to balance the books (A5)

[Strategic planning is] not an easy process to go through and very difficult to navigate. It's a very emotive process. Budgets as well, budgets are really tight, so that's frustrating. It's micro-managing... My heads should have the autonomy to make changes to their area. It shouldn't be so difficult. (A6)

Day to day we have full autonomy. The 'what' we do is determined by wider and senior stakeholder input, but 'how' we do it is fully led by us. All day-to-day decisions are taken within our directorate. We are fairly autonomous and have responsibility for decision making, particularly how our budget is spent...We can control the way we carry out our services with no interference. (A4)

You have to work within the parameters you are given. (A7)

Emotionality

There was a mix of positive and negative emotions expressed by respondents. Common positive words used were *like, comfortable, enjoy* and *informed*. Less positive words were *frustrating, irritation, dread* and *disappointed*. As the strategy planning process has not changed significantly over the last 10 years, respondents knew what was going to be asked of them each year. All respondents found the strategic planning processes helpful for facilitating discussions within their planning units, and they enjoyed those discussions. However, there were often delays in the planning guidance being issued which resulted in short timescales for completing the task, creating unnecessary pressure for staff. Respondents expressed a sense of dread of the planning processes, mostly because they knew how much work it required. They felt frustrated with the lack of engagement from senior managers and that they did not know if the plans were read by senior managers. The changing of targets and priorities adjusted mid-year caused frustration and panic. Middle managers and some senior managers felt frustrated as their expertise was not always sought by the senior management when making decisions. Professional services felt less important than faculties as their plans were not used within the overall plan.

4.2.2 *Institution B*

Strategic Intent of The Institution

The institution produced a strategic plan every five years. The plan in place for the period the data was collected was one page long with no accompanying strategy booklet or brochure. There were no published KPIs and no opening statement from the principal. The main goals of the plan focused on student outcomes, economic recovery and growth, and workforce development. The plan articulated the ambition of leading with empathy, being welcoming and inclusive.

Strategic Planning Process: Annual planning process

Each Faculty produced an aspirational plan every five years with an annual planning process each year. The timing of the process often varied each year due to delays in receiving confirmation of core funding. Each middle manager took part in an annual curriculum planning event with employers, engaged in budget and workforce planning activities, and completed a self-evaluation planning document three times a year. All of this was taken into consideration

when aspirational plans were reviewed yearly. Standard templates were provided by senior management with accompanying guidance. Each middle manager held strategy sessions with their teams to explore the questions in the templates and agree on the plan for the subsequent year and beyond.

Effectiveness of the process

The respondents acknowledged the work required to complete the planning activities was extensive but that they found the exercise helpful. The feedback was consistent in that the self-evaluation process was valued by staff as it gave them an opportunity to share thinking and gain peer and senior management feedback. Overall, the feedback suggests that they found strategic planning a useful experience and were happy to engage with the processes. Some respondents expressed frustration with the lateness of core funding being confirmed and how this came too late in the day for the institution. The planning processes had been in place for several years, and this gave staff reassurance as they knew what to expect:

I think the formal side gives a little bit more reassurance to the staff. It's that pressure in managing expectations. Having an agile way of working is really good for an education organisation and for the students we deal with. (B4)

It's not a ticky box exercise as we are always looking at how we improve and it gives us a good chance to stop and take a breath... In the main, things work. (B6)

The self evaluation process and the operational plan are the two pillars of how most teams plan and move forward... there are other teams that are invited to feedback on that and be a critical friend on how each service is operating and how they should be improving...Thinking of recent years, it has been really positive and it is exciting looking at the year ahead as to what we could achieve and what we did achieve looking back the way. (B3)

Two respondents commented on the pressure they felt due to the time needed to complete the process and the timing of deadlines coinciding with busy times:

There has been times when the pressure and workload is really high, so these longer-term tasks do take more time and effort and concentration, so at those times it is more challenging to get the head room to think about that. (B3)

The timing of it is quite crucial and we almost always do it too late when everybody is a bit tired and looking forward to going off on their holidays in the summer. (B6)

There was feedback from one respondent that the institution took a more reactive approach to planning rather than proactive:

I don't think I've ever seen a strategic plan for the [institution]...Everything is reactive. Everything. (B4)

Target setting and management information

The approach to target setting was led by the programme leads and the middle managers in the faculty who discussed and negotiated targets. If targets required adjustment, conversations would be held with senior management who would be open to changing them. The use of data analytic tools was also valuable in supporting managers with strategic planning:

We are looking a little bit shaky in terms of recruitment numbers. I said to the VP, we're as well to try and make a decision now before the budget is completed because once the budget is completed and targets are set and if they don't run, it will be more difficult a situation. Conversations like that and being able to reach out to the VP. It's well connected in that respect. (B5)

...when we are planning, we still go through a bit of consultation with staff so the planning of your courses should be taken into account your performance, your KPIs, your data that we rely on through PowerBI [a Microsoft data visualisation tool] which is absolutely key... PowerBI has been a game changer for us because we can really look at things like trends. We can look at anything on PowerBI and every day we are getting better. (B7)

Meaningful Strategic Purpose

There was common feedback that the institution had undergone transformational change over the last five years. Every respondent was consistent in their feedback that they thought the institution was a great place to work. What came through was a sense of purpose and meaning in how they spoke about strategy planning. The key issues driving the strategy focused on the student, retaining the student, and having the right curriculum that meets the needs of the students. The institution wanted to be a key enabler in producing quality students that contribute to the wider society. All respondents spoke the same way about students, with empathy and commitment to the institution.

All respondents referenced the strategy throughout their interviews but did not mention all aspects of the strategy or vision, such as economic recovery and growth. A strong connection to the community came through in the responses. The strategy was understood, and respondents were energised to deliver it. The common goal for all respondents was what was best for the student:

...we still have a moral obligation to facilitate the needs of the community (B5).

Over the last five years as a [n institution] we've taken not just steps, we've taken giant leaps forward in some of what we do... It's all about the best experience for our students, the best quality education for our students and the best outcomes for our students...There is a real dedication to the cause (B4)

Organisational Values for Supporting Strategic Planning

The institution uses three sentences for its values that claim to underpin the work they do. These focus on inclusivity, students and continuous improvement. All respondents referenced the values of the institution throughout the interviews and demonstrated a strong commitment to the values, which were developed under the current Principal. Some of the most common words across the interviews were *people* and *students*. The second most common word across all interviews was *team*. The feedback suggests that the values were embedded, used in everyday language, used as a framework for guiding decisions and set the tone for organisational behaviour. Respondents said they were simple and easy to remember and made sense:

It's not just lip service. (B2)

It's just who we were, the people and it just worked and it just clicked. (B5)

The values are now embedded in the self-evaluation framework. It forces you to reflect against the vision of the [institution]. Do we then do what we say we will do...I think they make so much sense for us. I know them off by heart...Wherever you are in the organisation.... They are really clear. (B6)

I think the values are invaluable as you can use them as a tool, but a positive tool all the time... I think that helps what bonds us all together in a family... It is a small [institution] and it has a small community feel...that's been our Principal again that did that when [they] joined us as we probably weren't facing all the same direction, but now we very much are. It really does affirm why we are here. (B7)

Sensemaking Mechanisms for Supporting Strategic Planning

When respondents were asked about what opportunities were in place to engage and communicate with senior management, there was consistent feedback that there were lots of opportunities for sensegiving and receiving at all levels.

The sensegiving mechanisms in place from senior management was weekly emails from the Principal, regular meetings between middle managers and senior managers, and regular informal chats with the Principal over a cup of tea for up to 10 members of staff. All of these mechanisms were also used as sense receiving opportunities. The sensegiving mechanisms from middle management was the self-evaluation document three times per year, planning and budget meetings with senior management, surveys, curriculum planning and the aspirational plan.

The feedback was consistent in that staff felt listened to and that senior management was open to hearing honest feedback and having constructive conversations. Senior management was fully engaged in the planning processes, read the self-evaluations and met with middle

managers to discuss feedback. The feedback suggests the senior management had more receiving mechanisms in place than giving:

They [Executive Team] would much rather we go and talk to them than just get a paper or a text and have to read it. Because I've been very open and honest about where we're going, there hasn't been an awful lot of challenging conversations and there hasn't been any difficult moments... Anyone can go and have a cup of tea with the Principal and have a chat...the Principal is accessible which I think is important as [they] can get open and honest feedback from anybody and [they] can share that with the relevant directors. So, it's a good way of finding out what is going on without telling tales outside of schools. (B5)

I've got to be honest about how I am and how the team are about things and push back on things... I had to say to [the VP] that we have to stop doing new systems development things for 6 months as we just had too many new things coming in. [They] supported that. As long as we go up and push, we do get what we need and they do help prioritise...I had a meeting yesterday with the VPs and Principal about our current budget and project plan for the next year. As a team, we practically walked out of the meeting blushing about the feedback that we get. (B4)

I think there is more openness... I think [they are] really keen to know what staff think of things. I think the vast majority of time that's really helpful and positive... We get plenty of opportunities to feedback... (B6)

There is also self-evaluation done at a leadership level, right across the leadership team, how things are going at a leadership level. (B3)

Leadership Approach

When respondents were asked about the senior leadership approach, feedback was positive. The senior management relocated to the central student services building so they were closer to the students and the professional services. This meant that they were in the thick of student-facing activities and visible and accessible to staff and students. A common area of feedback across the respondents was that senior management was approachable and

inclusive in their approach, and that they actively engaged with students and staff at all levels. It was thanks to this approach that they felt informed, consulted and respected. Senior management regularly acknowledged good work by saying “thank you”. The amount of positive feedback indicated that senior management led by example in embodying the values and collaborating in strategy. They demonstrated empathy and encouraged the empowerment of staff. Senior management were people-focused, and staff felt cared about, which made it a nice place to work. The feedback regarding the Principal was positive and said that their leadership was transformative at the institution. The senior management’s approach to delivering strategy was said to be honest and respectful:

The [institution] had stagnated, genuinely stagnated under previous management... over the last five years as [an institution] we've taken not just steps, we've taken giant leaps forward in some of what we do...Our Principal especially, is very good at giving feedback on how things are. The [Principal] does weekly updates to all staff about all the positive things that are happening in the [institution]. [The Principal] will come and seek you out if you have done something that [the Principal] has found out about or if you bump into [the Principal], [they] will talk about it openly. The whole senior team is good at that. I think that kind of thing is good. That's why it makes it a nice place to work. (B4)

The Principal had a session with us at the start of the year that was looking for feedback and asked, “what are you doing that is living and breathing the values? Show us that you are being inspirational, show us that you are leading with vision and empathy?... Anyone can go and have a cup of tea with the Principal and have a chat. It also makes people think they can go to the Principal at any time...the Principal is accessible which I think is important as [they] can get open and honest feedback from anybody. (B5)

The Principal really values the conversations [they have] with staff...She is keeping her ear to the ground and making herself available and [they are] visible and that helps I think the staff...I would say [the Principal] listens, [the Principal] reflects, [the Principal is] not frightened of being directive and I think that's helpful. We do sometimes disagree but we're collegiate. I think the teams feel that too... it's giving them

permission to think differently about these things and [the principal] is a big advocate for that. (B1)

From the Principal down, there is no them and us. So, the Principal is always accessible. [They] would have no concerns with you just knocking the door on the way by just to say hello, or to discuss anything. I don't have to have an appointment in the diary to do that. All members of the executive team are accessible. I think it's incredible. (B2)

With our Principal, [they are] very people-focused across the organisation and that is reflected in our survey results. Staff feel there is consultation and good open communication, and I would say, I feel listened to. (B3)

Our Principal is always asking, how does that affect the student and are they at the centre? The previous Principal was great but [they weren't] as visible, you didn't see them too much, you didn't feel like they were not as accessible [sic]. (B6)

... when [the Principal] joined us, we probably weren't facing all the same direction, but now we very much are." (B7)

"we are a public body, your reward and recognition is not going to be £50 in your pocket. It's going to be somebody saying thank you. For me, I think the [institution] is very good at saying thank you. It's finding that balance for people." (B4)

Approach to Decision Making

The institution used the strategy and values to inform decision making at all levels of the organisation. This provided a simple framework for staff to continually refer to. Middle management were consulted for their advice when needed. One respondent said that decisions were occasionally taken that were not aligned with their advice, but they respected it.

The approach taken by senior management to sensereceive information meant that they were informed, and this helped hasten decisions. There were positive relationships due to the way the leadership engaged and consulted on decisions.

[The Principal] sets up these informal discussions called "cuppa chats" ... it is really helpful as it expedites decisions. [They are] keeping [their] ear to the ground and making [themselves] available and [they are] visible and that helps, I think, the staff." (B1)

I feel listened to in terms of putting things across, views across, but in terms of the final decision, which is fairly typical of an organisation, it is the leader who makes the call on it, so in that respect, it's not like everything goes the way that I would ideally like to see. It's the way it's done and the way that decision is reached, I do feel included, but in terms of what you say is actually going to change direction... certainly I feel listened to when I'm asked for my input. There are certain decisions of course that have to be taken at short notice or there is a bigger picture and it's the Principal and Vice Principals who will have that high level overview across the organisation." (B3)

I wouldn't make any decisions without the [expert] as they know the detail... We make decisions together. (B7)

One respondent highlighted the reactive nature of some decisions:

It's not quite flying by the seat of its pants but it's very agile, eager to move, able to make decisions quickly, but not formalised. So, it's not always in that rigid way. There's that bit of things coming in at the back door kind of thing. Changes being made last minute. (B4)

Middle Manager Autonomy in Strategy Planning

When respondents were asked about the level of autonomy they had, the feedback was consistent in that staff felt they had a great deal of autonomy. They felt empowered in their role and trusted to deliver the strategic goals and find the right solutions when problems arose. The door was always open to engaging with senior management if middle managers needed support:

I would say the [institution] leadership does allow a great deal of autonomy." (B3)

On the whole, I think we do have autonomy, we are the experts (B7)

we have lots of autonomy in how we make that work and what options we have...It's not a dictat in how we do things... We are very much trusted in what we do and that what we do is the right thing and that we will come up with the right solutions. (B4)

It's not that we don't have autonomy, but I would still use a consultative process before making a decision. (B5)

Respondents observed that the institution had undergone significant transformation in recent years. Whilst staff were proud of what they had collectively achieved, comments were made about managing leadership expectations in maintaining the pace of change. Staff were working more than their contracted hours and there was pressure on staff to deliver. The institution had limited funding and had to deliver change within the allocated budget and staffing pool. Staff felt loyal and “dedicated to the cause”, but some respondents expressed concern that it was taking its toll on staff and teams in some areas. Middle managers felt comfortable discussing this with senior management so they could revise priorities when necessary. The pace of change was fast, but there was a sense that the senior management and middle management supported and cared for each other in pursuit of the common goals.

Emotionality

When respondents were asked what emotions came to mind when thinking about strategy delivery, the feedback was mostly positive. Common positive words used were *exciting, optimism, positive, proud, enjoy, valued* and *heard*. Less positive words were *challenging, frustrating, stress, pressured* and *exhaustion*.

The respondents acknowledged the work required to complete the planning activities was extensive, but they always found engaging with the processes to be helpful. The key process that each respondent valued most was the self-evaluation. Overall, the interview feedback indicated that the respondents were happy but felt the pressure of high expectations—not only from senior management and strategic goals but also from high expectations on themselves to deliver.

...there has been times when the pressure and workload is really high (B3)

It's a really good place to work. I don't want to work anywhere else. The place is nice, the staff are really good. There is just a little bit of pressure to try and deal with the expectations. (B4)

It's stressful, very stressful. It's a huge responsibility on your shoulders so you can't get it wrong. You have to be meticulous; you have to take time and sometimes they are pushing you fast but sometimes I need another day. Emotionally, you are in a washing machine. (B7)

4.2.3 Institution C

Strategic intent of the institution

A strategic plan was produced every five years. The plan in place during the time the interviews were conducted was just over 10 pages long. The content articulated in the plan was ambitious and internationally focused. The main goals of the plan centred around people, global challenges, teaching and changing the lives of others.

The plan used inclusive language and targeted a variety of audiences with a focus on community, making a difference, doing the right thing, and solving the problems of tomorrow. No specific KPIs were mentioned in the strategic plan nor on the website. The plan was wide-ranging and included teaching, research, partnerships, globalisation, and community.

Strategic Planning Process: Annual planning process

The institution's approach to annual strategic planning took place over nine months. Each planning unit produced annual plans, which fed into the institution's plan. There was mixed feedback on the approach. The plans were produced by each department in isolation with a lack of clarity as to how the individual plans knitted together.

... the whole idea was that these strategic reports, all the different dimensions would then feed into planning for staffing, planning for resource allocation and estates and all of that.... I don't know what was happening in the back office. Was there a team sitting reading those 26 strategic reports? (C6)

It's an annual process, but it's a process that really is happening right through the year... The fact that we do it over basically about nine months, although the fact it feels like it's never ending...there are template forms that people have to complete (C1)

it's quite devolved...there's one annual conversation. And then if you want more budget, you need to justify that around those strategic objectives (C5).

I think the planning and budgeting processes process works fairly seamlessly. (C3).

...the [planning unit] is very much an administrative unit...the centre provides an overall action framework and then the [faculty] supports the schools to turn that into something of substance and then we have governance around it to essentially hold the [planning units] to account for any of the targets and ambitions that they've had there... (C4)

Effectiveness of the process

Whilst there was mixed feedback from respondents on the overall effectiveness of the annual planning process, there was consistent feedback that respondents were unclear if the plans were read at a senior level and that the time and effort required to fully engage and complete the annual planning process was significant:

The process is valuable. I mean, you can't operate as a unit without having some sort of strategic planning process and some sort of plan that then you work to. (C6)

... the frustration I had with that, and still have to some extent, is that the process was driven by the completion of the report...there was a sense that you complete the report and that's it done. And where does it go? Just goes into this black hole and that was kind of my experience... It was like a 40-page form and we kept agitating to remove essentially the redundant features of what needed to be concentrated on. (C6)

Target setting and management information

When asked about how annual targets were set, there was mixed feedback. Some stated that these were set by senior management, with departments told what their targets were, while others stated that the targets were determined at a department level in collaboration with senior management. In determining targets for the subsequent year, one respondent highlighted that senior management would assume that programmes that had successfully recruited high numbers of international students would continue to do so.

...9 times out of 10, most targets would be set at the school with some kind of gentle encouragement from the [institution], but mainly they're set by schools. (C4)

...big issues around student recruitment, international student recruitment and the targets, there was a pretence of negotiation and agreement. But sometimes it was a hard line. And that's where you get that tension then with staff as well that it's very hard for a head of school in that situation as well. Staff realised that you know, they're working to targets that the school really has limited control over it. (C6)

...the other problem with planning is it seems like, "well, you've hit your target this year". Yes. It's the plus 10% every year. (C2)

One area of consistent feedback was the challenge of planning the number of international students. This created uncertainty and had a significant impact on staff:

We don't know what our numbers are going to be like this year. You know they could be great, they could be horrendous, they could be in the middle and we don't really know... I think it makes it really difficult for those middle kind of middle managers. (C4)

...strategic planning document is, you know, it's a, it's a moment in time and you know the bottom can drop out of the Chinese economy and then everybody's impacted. And so there's a bit of me that wanted as part of this process to try and get them to shift away from, this is not a yearly process. This has got to be five years, 10 years, 20 years. (C6)

I felt like I was flying blind. You had no clue. You had different systems telling you had different numbers of students. We were checking systems. We lost students. I mean it was, it was shambles... if you plan for 120 and you find 240 students on your doorstep, the [institution] was celebrating because it has lots of money but everybody is in full panic mode and staff are having meltdowns (C2)

the quality of the data improved somewhat, but there were errors. I mean, you know fundamental errors. So, I think there was a lack of trust, but the ability to rely on what was being produced... we weren't assured. We didn't feel assured by the accuracy of it. (C6)

Meaningful Strategic Purpose

Whilst respondents were not specifically asked about what the strategy meant to them and whether it gave them a sense of purpose, the strategy and its purpose were rarely mentioned by respondents.

I think that they do the job for which they're intended, for the audiences they were intended for, if you were to hand me the job of being totally responsible for the strategy, I wouldn't do it any other way...from those measurements come the things that make life worth living for everybody. (C3)

One respondent commented that the strategy was not read by staff and did not provide enough direction, with another commenting that they felt more connected with the brand.

...we've got a vision or mission. Nobody reads it...it's almost like we've got the plan for the house, but nobody's actually decided where we're putting the walls in or where the stairs are going... it was written without consultation and it was very external facing (C5).

I probably would say they engage more with the branding... you see and hear a lot of that coming through. (C6)

Many of the respondents spoke about the emphasis on growth and, in particular, the growth of the student population, questioning if a strategy for growth existed, what the end goal was and how it impacted the quality of the experience. What was perceived by respondents to be a sudden and unpredictable growth of students in recent years had created tensions around the sustainability of income, the impact on the student experience and on staff wellbeing:

My job basically, and my successor's job, was basically finding classroom space... we're just going to grow a little bit more but to what end, you know? (C2)

I think there's an endpoint to what campuses can comfortably accommodate and that's an issue. It's probably unwise to call an absolute endpoint to growth... most growth will come through particular routes and courses, and there's a huge unwillingness for obvious reasons in [the institution] to shut down courses that don't recruit this year. And so, you keep them open. And so, you're ending up with a situation where you're going to have to cap courses that could bring in the income to keep the other courses open. Because overseas students don't land evenly, that's a real challenge (C3)

when things are going well, then you're filling your boots with international students... it's a wee bit of carrot and stick. So the carrot is of course you get lots of support from the [institution] to grow, you get promise of nice space in new buildings, you get the promise of many more posts... The stick is the courses that you then have to deliver and be held accountable for that growth and you have a more laser-like focus from the [institution] on top of you... (C4)

Organisational Values for Supporting Strategic Planning

Institution C had published values under four key theme areas. When respondents were asked about the values, no respondents could remember what they were, and there was some scepticism as to whether these were genuine and embedded in the behaviours across the institution. There was a common theme that came through from middle managers that, whilst the institutional values existed, there were department-held values that were more important to them. These were mostly connected with the academic discipline of the department and the purpose of the work they were trying to do. Respondents acknowledged that the values

were referred to within the annual planning processes and individual staff performance reviews.

...if I was to tap most people on the shoulder in the team and the layer below us, they'd know broadly that values existed, but they wouldn't quite know what and why...I think it depends on the department you're in...if I was to go to one of the senior managers and say, well, in fact, I've done this, this situation happened and I don't think that represents the [institution] values. I'll be told "You're a senior manager. You just need to get on with it. (C5)

We were more focused at school level on our own values. (C6).

I don't know what [institution] values are... it is not stuffed down your throat here (C4).

They're annoyingly referred to... if you have a senior manager, she'll make you refer to them in your annual review. Okay, like a script. (C2)

One respondent spoke about the importance of the values for influencing decisions and telling the stories of the work of the organisation:

I'm now a values convert... we're using those to just feed into storytelling is really, really important actually and influencing how an organisation does its business. I mean I'm not going to try and list off the values, not least because I would forget them...It's also about the fact that we recognise that we're only going to do that well if we're driven by a range of values (C1).

One respondent commented that there were too many values:

If I've got values in my unit to which I'm an executive director and I've got values of estates and buildings have got values and everybody's got values, then that's a lot of values (C3).

Two respondents commented that the behaviours in the institution were representative of the values but, that there was not necessarily a direct link to the values creating that behaviour:

I think there's a much more collegiate, much more collaborative and much more respectful environment that exists there and I think that then fits through into the values. (C4)

...people are cynical about the corporatisation of values by [institutions]. So that's where I think we don't overplay them because actually you know, it's very hard to get it right within an institution, how to get people to buy into values that seem to have been created remotely at a distance. (C6)

Leadership Approach

Overall, the senior management and Principal were spoken about in a well-regarded and respectful way.

...the Principal is just sort of the [monarch] and just kind of the nice [person]. And I mean, you know, the Principal is lovely to talk to and stuff (C2).

Two respondents highlighted a challenging dynamic with some members of senior management, which highlights some potentially inconsistent leadership styles:

I would say there are individual [senior managers] who are very chaotic, lack of structured approach and are very...they're sycophants, basically. So, they go around, tell them everything they want to hear. And then just, you know, verbal diarrhoea back to us, whether that is or isn't aligned to the strategy and that's dangerous, but that individual, I've in the past tried to give him that feedback and they've responded to that very badly to the point to this day, they still quote me when I said that sometimes their approach was chaotic... One of the [senior managers] came into a meeting yesterday to say it's up to you how you do it, but this is what I want. (C5)

Too many veto players...somebody's going to raise an issue and object and so it's just not, you know, it's just not worth it... they used to tell me not to get involved in the weeds. Right, don't get involved. But that's kind of your job, right? (C2)

One common area of feedback was around the readiness, skillset and support for those in Head of Department/School positions. Some of the challenges were that many did not want to cause unrest, as they were working with peers and would return to their role at the end of their term, typically three years. This highlights a broader issue in the rotational nature of most of the academic leadership structures. This is not a key area of this research but is useful to observe and acknowledge in the context of effective strategy planning.

...you do not get people in these jobs who think of themselves as strategic managers. You sometimes do because they want to go on further or they just happen to be very shrewd...But quite often, you know that they are "what can I bring home to my people?" ... They're just looking for a win and a win nearly always means more staff or better facilities, but nearly always more staff. (C3)

...this goes back to just how well we prepare people for these roles. Inadequately... (C6)

One respondent highlighted that the institution had tried to recruit more dynamic leaders to reduce the risk of complacency and shake things up:

part of the strategy has not been just to improve subject areas, but it's to refresh the leadership team with that kind of dynamism. (C4)

However, this approach did not land well with one respondent who had worked in the institution for some time:

What concerns me a little bit is that there is an assumption if you've got people who worked in the [institution] for X amount of years, they're not the ones to take it forward. We have to bring somebody external in...I think a lot of us have the impression that if we're not delivering what's wanted, it's because we're the kind of problem...

maybe there's just a disconnect in your vision and what we interpret your vision to be
(C5)

Sensemaking Mechanisms for Supporting Strategic Planning

When respondents were asked about what opportunities were in place to engage and communicate with senior management, there was mixed feedback. The sensegiving mechanisms from senior management were predominantly formal meetings but also included a weekly newsletter to all staff and guidance around annual planning.

Truly strategic dialogue....I'd say it's a collaborative open relationship and I think there is a challenging relationship, generally speaking, in a well-informed way...there's a natural dynamic that makes you feel like you're in the dock when you're in these meetings with [senior management] and you know that they've got to balance the books across the piece then you're kind of pitching for you know convincing them of the value that you offer, and indeed the credibility of the plans that you're pitching. So, there is a kind of there's a natural pressure to tell a convincing story... I think there is an honesty brought to those meetings by those who are chairing the meetings, like the [senior manager] saying look, we've got lots of difficult stuff, but you know, we recognise that at the moment these are some of the key drivers that we're dealing with. (C1)

I don't think [they] necessarily wanted to be involved in the nuts and bolts of what a planning process would look like... I went to the Vice Principal once and [they] said "Well, let's continue the conversation" and that never happened. (C2)

I regularly meet heads of school... we're all friends... a budgetary discussion always, you know always needs careful handling because basically someone will get what they want in that nobody may get what they want. (C3)

Some of the middle managers expressed caution about speaking up on matters that might be perceived to be challenging, suspecting that honesty may not be appreciated:

you tend to speak up about the things where you think that a) you might be heard and b) that might make a difference. And sometimes I think part of the problem is if you think that the issue in question is actually too complicated or not going to be appreciated. Then those are the things, I think subconsciously, I'm not even going to go there. (C1).

Why do you think no one wants to say that? Because that was the Principal's creation. (C2)

I think they're [relationships] generally reasonably good at a senior level. But of course, there comes a time when influential people have a bee in their bonnet that they want to exercise, and there's always the risk of groupthink. In order to oblige them, if people don't feel very strongly, so decision making is not always optimal. (C3)

Two of the respondents acknowledged the importance of being informed and connected with the staff below middle manager level:

I'm not close enough to some of the coal face of the actual services (C1).

I actually keep an office in an academic department and have meetings in the office of Vice Principals rather than have any accommodation there... I do think it's important to be able to talk to academic staff about academic matters on a reasonably regular basis. Because sometimes you can let them know things are not as bad as they think and sometimes need to listen to what they have to say." (C3)

However, a tension existed where senior managers were not informed or open to receiving and hearing the feedback:

I where there's a genuine criticism or a genuine concern would be around do we know at the [institution] level, do we know what the experience is like for people running some of those programmes, and that gets very difficult. (C4)

I actually like constructive challenge... I think sometimes that's viewed within the area I work in as being unsupportive or being negative...I will no longer be as honest...It's not great because that's not my natural way of working... if I think of honesty coming back the way [to me] then no... I think it's very formulated and I think there is a view all of us in the middle layer and the team that we're all not quite good enough.... the difficulty is a catch 22, how do you get out of that feeling you communicate more, but we're afraid to communicate more. (C5)

There were forums across some groups of middle managers with the senior managers which were viewed as positive:

...we had college management group meetings monthly... Like strategy meetings monthly ... And then there would be a discussion and peer review, there'd be some feedback from the head of school and the head of college around it. That I thought was really very helpful... that process of peer review was really, really important. (C6).

There's the heads of schools' forum... it was the Principal and the deputy vice Principal or senior vice principal... that's where we came together... I do think when we brought issues to those forum and even if we brought them in through other routes, they took us serious and they took, they acted and they came back (C6).

It was not clear who was reading the plans, and no feedback was ever received on them:

I expected the senior managers above me at college and Senior university level to have a dialogue with me and to engage with me at different points of the process and that didn't happen. I was quite surprised at that. I was kind of agitating for it... I would have welcomed a conversation with the senior management of the university to the senior management group and not the college group about the future direction for the school...it would have been really good to hear back from them... So, we could have been writing anything...the fact that, that we didn't get any interventions and nobody came back... we must have been doing it right (C6)

Overall, there was positive feedback around the level of middle manager autonomy. However, more dialogue and direction would have been helpful:

...quite a lot actually...I think in terms of autonomy to highlight something like that as a key business issue and seek support for it, but also, I'd say agency, we feel agency and being able to be listened to when we say, but this is more confident. (C1)

"I've nobody breathing down on any of this." (C3)

It's a case of like, "we've got these partnerships, there's some central funding of the university there. Does anyone want to do anything with it? If you do, great, get on board if you don't. But you know that's OK" (C4)

One of the respondents felt that they had no autonomy and decisions would be taken without consultation.

You have no real autonomy because decisions are taken, and you just have to then be in front of that. (C2)

Decision Making

When asked about decision making, there was mixed feedback across the respondents, but overall, it was expressed that income and growth were often the main focus from senior management in strategic decision making, with less on change and disinvestment:

we've always been pretty good at focusing the dialogue on where we need to invest... we are not very good at being upfront with heads of school or whoever is leading the way on where should we dis-invest. What should we let wither on the vine, where do we actually need to do some more disruptive change to create enough capacity to do the things that are different and new and more growth oriented. (C1)

...what it did seem to come down to was posts and budgets for posts. (C6)

The decisions taken on international student recruitment targets were areas of dissatisfaction and tension across the respondents:

...big issues around student recruitment, international student recruitment and the targets. There was a pretence of negotiation and agreement but sometimes it was a hard line and that's where you get that tension then with staff as well that it's very hard for a head of school in that situation as well. Staff realised that you know, they're working to targets that school really has limited control over it. (C6)

Is this part of your structural budget now, or is this, are you viewing this as a blip? You know you take it, you pay off a few building loans and you don't. And they've considered this structural income (C2)

One respondent commented on the risk appetite of senior managers and how that impacts decision making:

There tends to be a slight bias towards novelty and risk taking because that's the kind of thing that will change the dimension of your budget, of your budgetary envelope if it succeeds and a lot about the implementation of a process...There's probably a slight anti-risk bias, but that is very reasonable because you're dealing with an anchor institution with fluctuating income and a lot of people indirectly or directly depending on it for employment.... decision making is not always optimal (C3).

Every [institution] I have worked at has a leadership issue in that...the senior managers I've worked with shy away from making some of the tougher decisions. (C5)

One respondent commented on how departments and senior management were detached from each other when decision making:

...people's expectations about what they might get funded at college level are sometimes rather detached from university planning and budgeting. But there's a huge element there of scalability and multiple financial commitments, which are not generally visible to people who just like another lecture in astrology. (C3)

Emotionality

There were a lot of positive emotions expressed by respondents. Common positive words used were: *like, collegiate, exciting, interesting, genuine, and heard*. Less positive words were *challenging, difficult, complacency, frustrating, and impotent*.

I think there's a much more collegiate, much more collaborative and much more respectful environment that exists there (C4).

Impotent. Impotent... It was hard to swallow that I felt that I failed in a role...the morale sapping nature of that [international student recruitment] (C2)

...sadness, resignation, complacency... (C5)

...very, very frustrating..." [the lack of data to inform strategic planning] (C6)

The senior managers expressed positive emotions regarding their experiences of strategic planning at their institutions. Two middle managers expressed negative emotions about their experiences, while the remaining two respondents were predominately positive about their experiences of strategic planning. Two middle managers enjoyed their roles, saw opportunities for improvement and utilised the mechanisms to advocate for and bring about change. They felt they had complete autonomy as to how they led their respective units.

4.3 Cross-Case Analysis

This section presents a cross-case analysis and synthesises the findings by identifying commonalities and differences across the three case studies. A summary is provided in the table below.

Table 2 - Summary of findings across each case study

Theme	A	B	C
Strategic Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Almost 30 pages.• Ambitious – internationally focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1 page.• Ambition focused locally.• Wording focused on students. No KPIs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just over 10 pages.• Ambitious – internationally focused.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide-ranging strategy with KPIs. Corporate style language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive language created meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide-ranging strategy. No KPIs Inclusive language.
How respondents spoke about the strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy rarely mentioned. Lacked common purpose. Don't see themselves in the strategy. Focused on what they were doing and process, not why. Emphasised growth as an income generator resulting in tensions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy mentioned by all. Motivated by common purpose. Understood contribution to strategy. Spoke to all. Dedicated to the cause. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy rarely mentioned. Focused on what they were doing and process, not why. Emphasised growth as an income generator resulting in tensions.
Organisational Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rarely mentioned and not embedded. Separate to the strategy. 5 single words. Focused on ambition, not a culture of care or inclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentioned by all and unifying. 3 sentences integrated with strategy. Focused on people and inclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rarely mentioned and not embedded. 4 themes viewed as a separate institutional document. Most said they could not name them.
Leadership Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal only mentioned briefly. Very ambitious. Treats staffing groups differently. Nothing happens unless the Principal says – micromanaging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal mentioned frequently – all positive. Prioritises listening to staff. Accessible. Led with empowerment and empathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal mentioned by a few people. Described as nice. Some willingness to have honest conversations. Inconsistent approach from leadership.
Sensemaking Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mostly top down formal sensegiving. SM not sensereceiving. No SM or peer feedback on plans. MM experts felt not consulted or listened to. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lots of formal and informal 2-way sensemaking Sensereceiving from SM was greater than sensegiving. SM and peer feedback on plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A mix of 2-way sensemaking which was mostly formal. Mixed feedback on effectiveness. No SM feedback was given on plans. Some peer feedback.
Middle Manager Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Had autonomy within the day to day. Did not have autonomy for strategic change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MMs felt empowered and trusted to deliver. MMs best placed to identify solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Had a great deal of autonomy, just not with international student targets. Nearly all autonomy devolved to departments.
Approach to decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions taken without consulting MMs. Goal posts often changed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal was informed which expedited decisions. Experts were consulted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low risk appetite. Could influence most decisions but not with international student numbers.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative consequences with decision making approach. • International student targets felt imposed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MM respected SMs final decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some viewed income generation as most important factor.
Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt unheard and undervalued. • Thought strategy processes were a waste of time. • Frustrated with growth expectations and resource limitations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt heard, valued and empowered. • Excited and motivated by the pace of change. • Enjoyed working there dedicated to the cause. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixture of experiences • Some felt excited and heard. Some MMs felt frustrated and unheard. • The majority felt conflicted with international student growth pressure.

Legend: MM = Middle Manager, SM = Senior Manager

High Level Context and Strategic Ambition

Institutions A and C had similar strategic ambitions to be world-leading and expressed a desire to deliver excellent teaching and research and to make a difference to the world, focusing on innovation and transformation. Institution C placed more emphasis on the values throughout the strategy and expressed a desire to make a difference in the lives of others and on global challenges. Institution B had no emphasis on global ambition but focused locally on educational outcomes, economic recovery and growth for employers. The length of each institution's strategy varied greatly, from 1 page to 10 pages to 29 pages. Institution B's strategy was the shortest at one page, and it was these respondents who expressed the greatest connection to the strategic purpose and referenced it constantly throughout their answers. The respondents all spoke positively about their strategic purpose and the difference they were making. It was a common language to them. The respondents from Institutions A and C rarely mentioned the strategy. The language used in Institution A and C was more corporate, possibly aimed at funders and external partners. Institution B, and sometimes C, used more inclusive language, but all strategies wanted to make a difference to the lives of others. Only Institution A published KPIs within the Strategic Plan. The other two institutions did not publish details of specific targets or KPIs.

These variations prompt reflection on each institution's effectiveness in fostering a shared sense of purpose. Among the institutions studied, only Institution B appeared to have successfully cultivated a strong sense of purpose through its strategic framework.

How Respondents Spoke About the Strategy

The respondents from Institutions A and C rarely mentioned their institutional strategy and the strategic importance of the work they do. They focused on the internal strategy planning processes. There was common feedback from A and C that professional services did not fit the mould of the strategy and that strategic planning revolved around the colleges/schools. Another common theme was the tension that arose from the pursuit of international student recruitment and the pressure from senior management to achieve high targets in this area of activity.

Respondents from Institution B spoke about their strategy and were motivated by a common strategic purpose. They understood their contribution to the strategy and were “dedicated to the cause”. They thought it was easy to understand and could see how their role connected with the bigger picture. They constantly referred to the strategy and repeated the language used in the strategy throughout the interviews. The differences in how participants from each institution discussed their overarching strategy highlight questions about its integration within institutional approaches and its communication and interpretation by stakeholders.

Annual planning process

All institutions had annual strategic processes in place that consisted of target and budget setting, and resource planning. Institutions A and C requested all planning units create a new annual plan each year. Institution B required planning units to create an aspirational plan every five years with a reflective exercise three times a year which may have resulted in amendments to the aspirational plan. The feedback from A and C were that planning for one year was too short a time frame and that creating a new plan each year was a significant amount of work. Based on the positive feedback on the approach from institution B, a five-year plan that was reviewed three times a year was viewed as positive by respondents.

For all three institutions, the process had been in place for several years and had not changed significantly over that time. All respondents were consistent in reporting the deadlines for the processes landing at busy periods and that this contributed to a sense of dread when the process began as they knew the work involved to complete it. The feedback from A and C was that they felt no one read their plans, and they did not receive feedback, so the process felt

pointless. However, there was also feedback from A and C that the process did result in valuable conversations within their planning units, just not with senior management.

The plans for institutions A and C were created in isolation within planning units and did not join up across the institutions. Institution C did have a process within one college, which meant there was a peer review process to share plans, but it was unknown if this was standard practice in the other colleges. It was not known to any respondents from A or C if there was a team or person synthesising the plans together for the institution.

When talking about the annual strategic planning processes, the respondents often came back to the budget. Institution A and C talked about the budget being the primary focus of the planning exercise, yet the budget setting often occurred after an annual plan was written. If the budget was smaller than anticipated, this often resulted in the ambition and more strategic change aspects of plans being removed or not delivered.

The differing approaches to annual strategic planning, budget allocation, and target setting call into question the effectiveness of these processes as mechanisms for driving strategic progress.

Organisational Values for Supporting Strategic Planning

The values for Institution A were formulated as single words, whereas Institution C used four themes, each with two words. For both institutions, the values were published separately from the strategy. Institution B had three short sentences that were integrated with the strategy.

Respondents in Institutions A and C rarely referenced or used the language of their values throughout the interviews. Two respondents from Institution A mentioned that the values make them feel proud when they hear them but, overall, respondents were consistent in that they were not routinely used or referenced.

Most of the respondents from Institution C said they could not name their values and that they felt corporate. The feedback from Institution C suggests that there was a respectful environment, but it did not necessarily have anything to do with the institutional values.

The respondents in Institution B referenced their values throughout their interviews. One respondent claimed “it’s who we are”, providing them with a strong sense of purpose and respect in the workplace which supported them in pursuit of the strategy. They made sense to the respondents and as a result they refer to them almost constantly.

People-Related Word Frequency Analysis

The word frequency reporting available in NVivo enabled an exploration of the most common words used by participants in each institution. The words used most frequently varied between institutions, but similarities were observed among participants within the same institution. Across the interviews, frequently occurring people-focused words included *team*, *student*, *people*, and *staff*. The table below summarises the frequency of these words across the three institutions. It presents raw counts of how often each term appeared in participant responses.

Given that all institutions articulated being people-focused within their values, and that the research explored relational dynamics, consideration of people-focused words yielded some interesting results.

Table 3 - Frequency of people-focused words used by respondents across institutions

Word comparison	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
Team	21	95	46
Student	18	65	32
People	41	50	123
Staff	15	70	58
Total word count for each institution's combined interviews	15,087	14,598	14,572

Since word counts across institutions are relatively similar, the frequencies in the Table above provide a direct comparison of word usage patterns. Institution A had the lowest frequency of all four people-focused terms. Institution C recorded the highest frequency for *people*, while Institution B had the highest frequency for *team*, *student* and *staff*.

This summary presents the raw word counts from all three institutions without drawing conclusions.

Leadership Approach

The leadership approach across each institution was different. Institution A's leadership approach appeared to be more top down, with senior management perceived to be "micromanaging" a lot of the decisions such as budget, target setting and change initiatives, with middle managers rarely invited to engage in decision making. Feedback suggests senior management did not engage with the strategic planning processes, nor read the outputs from middle management. Professional service respondents felt they were treated differently from faculty staff. Where there were perceived challenges with individuals, senior managers would go round the person rather than have a direct and honest conversation. Overall, the feedback suggested that there were tensions between middle managers and senior managers in this institution.

Institution C had a devolved approach to leadership, where departments had some autonomy as to how they would grow and evolve, with senior management involved in setting the budget and targets. Where there were bigger initiatives that required senior management approval, the feedback suggests the institution was risk averse and rarely supported new ideas. There was mixed feedback on the relationship between middle and senior management, but common feedback suggested that middle managers were cautious about matters brought to senior management's attention. Some of the respondents did not agree with the target and budget expectations set by senior management.

The leadership approach in Institution B was different from the other two institutions. The feedback from respondents was consistent and positive towards senior management. The senior management was perceived to be visible, accessible and engaged with staff and students at every opportunity. The feedback highlighted the care and empathy shown for students and staff as a key quality demonstrated by senior leadership.

Given that the leadership approach varied significantly between institutions, it raises the question of the importance of leadership behaviour in influencing purpose, trust and emotions for managers engaged in strategy delivery.

Sensemaking Mechanisms for Supporting Strategic Planning

The sensemaking mechanisms were different across all three institutions. Whilst all three institutions had a weekly newsletter from their principal, there were different approaches taken.

Institution A employed predominantly top-down sensegiving from senior management to middle management. In meetings or fora with senior management, middle management received mostly one-way information from senior management. The sensegiving mechanism in place for middle managers to senior managers was their annual plans, but it was not clear if these were read, and no feedback came from that process. The feedback also suggests that, when middle managers did have the opportunity to speak with senior management, they felt they could not speak honestly. The sensemaking mechanism between middle managers and subordinates appeared to work well, with the plans developed in collaboration within planning units, and information flow in both directions.

Institution B had many examples of both formal and informal sensemaking mechanisms between senior management and middle management. Senior Management were proactive in creating opportunities to go out and meet with staff at all levels, and hear their feedback. The opportunities for senior management to sensereceive information was greater than what they sensegave to middle management. This meant that middle managers felt consulted and heard, and that they were able to speak freely. Senior management was well informed of the different areas of the business.

Institution C had mostly formal mechanisms for two-way sensegiving and receiving between senior management and middle management. There were forums between senior management and middle management to discuss challenges, and the feedback was that senior management was receptive to feedback and were led by middle management as to the agenda. Senior management respondents highlighted that they made the effort to engage with staff and hear their feedback. There was mixed feedback from those in middle manager positions as to whether they felt they could speak honestly about the challenges. Like Institution A, middle management was given no feedback on annual plans, with minimal opportunities to discuss the plans.

Given that sensemaking mechanisms varied significantly across each institution, the question arises of how each institution's approach impacted the trust and emotions of managers involved in strategic practice.

Middle Manager Autonomy in Strategy Planning

There were varying levels of autonomy for middle managers across the three institutions. Institution A appeared to have the least amount of autonomy for its middle managers. Whilst they had autonomy for the day-to-day, they did not have the autonomy to innovate more significantly or make strategic change, without permission. Senior management had to be involved, and this would stop things from progressing. Middle managers in institutions B and C had lots of autonomy, being best placed to innovate and could make decisions about strategic change. Feedback from Institution C suggests that some senior managers were more risk-averse, which hindered initiatives from proceeding.

Institutions A and C had similar feedback regarding the approach to target setting and budgets. This was managed by senior management and felt out of their control.

The feedback from Institution B is that they were empowered by leadership and seen as ideally positioned to bring about strategic change. The institution had undergone significant transformational change, and middle managers felt the pressure of keeping up with senior management expectations. Senior management was always informed and consulted, but was respectful of the middle managers' expertise.

The varying degrees of autonomy granted to middle managers across institutions raise important questions about how the process enables autonomy, and about the extent of senior management's influence in shaping the autonomy middle managers can exercise.

Decision Making

When analysing the feedback for decision making, senior management at Institutions A and C took a similar approach to setting targets with minimal to no consultation with middle management. The targets would be financially motivated, not linked to wider strategy or values, and would lack integrity and transparency. This led to a great deal of tension between

senior management and middle management. Both institutions took a long time to reach decisions, which could have negative consequences. Findings from Institution C also highlighted that senior management shied away from the tougher decisions, with a low appetite for risk and a reticence to disinvest.

Institution B took a different approach, with both senior management and middle management guided by the values and the strategy. Senior management was well informed through their proactive sense-receiving efforts with staff, and this helped to accelerate decisions. The pace of change at Institution B was swift, and respondents highlighted that there were often last-minute requests or decisions made. The pace of change and decisions made did create pressure on staff, but respondents spoke positively about the pace of change at the institution.

The differences across institutions raise questions as to how strategy and values influence institutional decision-making, and the impact of decision-making processes on the trust and emotional responses of strategic managers.

Emotionality

In considering the emotionality expressed throughout the interviews, all respondents agreed that having a planning process was useful and they found completing the process to be a helpful way to engage with their colleagues, particularly at the peer level and below.

Respondents from Institutions A and C felt frustrated with the approach taken by senior management with respect to target setting. The impact this had on respondents was that they felt that that aspect of the planning process lacked integrity and that they were being set up to fail as the targets were not achievable. One respondent expressed feeling “impotent”, another “panic”. Both Institutions A and C also felt that the annual planning document they produced was a waste of time as they never received any feedback and did not know if it was read. It was clear in the feedback that respondents cared about what they wrote and fully engaged with the process, but felt demoralised by the apparent lack of appreciation for their efforts. The lack of engagement from senior management in the process led to further tensions with middle managers and impacted the perceived value of the process. There were respondents in both Institutions A and C who felt they could not speak up honestly to senior

management and that staff who were viewed as difficult or challenging, would be bypassed. There were more negative emotions expressed in the feedback from the respondents at Institution A than C.

Respondents from Institution B expressed the most positive emotions throughout their interviews. They found the planning process and the approach to peer review and discussions with senior management most beneficial and enjoyable. All respondents shared that they enjoy their job and felt excited and proud to work in the institution. They acknowledged feeling pressure, but that this was often from high expectations of themselves and their “dedication to the cause” rather than from senior management. They also expressed gratitude that they could speak openly with senior management and that re-prioritisation was possible if a work task was negatively impacting staff.

Two respondents from Institution C mentioned the lack of preparation and support for those who stepped into Head of Department roles and the conflicted emotions they felt in the role. This was due to the role typically being a three-year term, and most who stepped into it were unlikely to want to cause significant disruption for their peers. Therefore, they might not have the same level of ambition and expectation that senior management had.

The differences in responses highlight the significant impact of senior management behaviour on the emotional experiences of those engaged in strategic practice.

4.3.1 Summary of Cross-Case Analysis

The following table summarises the key similarities and differences across the case studies:

Table 4 - Cross case analysis: similarities and differences across the cases

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All three had an ambitious strategic purpose, two with an international focus.• All had strategies and values.• All had similar structures of SM and MM.• A and C were more similar to each other than to B.• All three gave MM autonomy in day-to-day operations but limited their involvement in strategic changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A and C lacked a common purpose, with respondents focused on the process. B had a strategy that motivated staff.• A's MM felt unheard, undervalued, and frustrated. B's MM felt heard and valued through frequent consultations and open speech. C has mixed feedback from MM, with some feeling heard and others feeling frustrated.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A and C suggested limited trust in SM due to a lack of openness, empathy, and inconsistent decision-making. B had high levels of honesty, openness, and empathy from SM, creating trust. • All found the annual process helpful for conversations within their own planning units. • All desired feedback and engagement with senior management. • All found the planning process time intensive. • All felt the pressure of strategic ambition and financial constraints. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A's principal was seen as micromanaging and treated different staffing groups unequally. B's principal was well-informed and led with empowerment and empathy. C's principal was viewed positively with honest conversations, but some felt there's a low-risk appetite and too many veto players. • A's decisions were made without consulting MM. B's decisions were informed, expedited, and consistent, with expert consultation. C's decision-making was seen as inconsistent and lacking logic. • There were tensions between SM and MM due to growth and income ambitions. • A and C both mention values infrequently and saw them as separate from the strategy. B had a strong focus on values. • A had top-down formal sensemaking. B had two-way sensemaking with both formal and informal communication. C had a mix of two-way sensemaking, mostly formal, with mixed feedback.
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Legend: MM = Middle Manager, SM = Senior Manager

Similarities

Each institution demonstrated ambitious strategic purposes, with two placing particular emphasis on achieving international success and recognition. Each had a strategic plan and values, supported by comparable organisational structures, consisting of similar senior management and middle management structures. It was observed that Institutions A and C shared a closer resemblance to one another than either did to Institution B.

All institutions found the annual planning process to be a valuable mechanism for fostering internal dialogue within their respective planning units. In all cases, middle managers were granted significant autonomy in their day-to-day operations, although their involvement in strategic change was limited. This delegation of operational authority facilitated smoother functioning but potentially limited their impact on overarching strategic direction.

Despite these commonalities, all institutions faced shared challenges. The pressures of ambitious strategic goals, combined with financial constraints, were keenly felt across all

institutions. All respondents agreed that the planning process was vital, yet time-intensive, highlighting the significant resource required to engage and deliver the annual planning requirements. There was a desire from middle management for feedback and engagement from senior management, reflecting a need for strong communication channels.

Differences

Institutions A and C appeared to lack a clear common purpose, with respondents primarily focused on their strategic planning tasks rather than the overall strategic purpose. In contrast, Institution B had a well-known strategy that successfully motivated a common purpose among its staff.

Institutions A and C referenced their core values infrequently and treated them as separate from their overall strategy. In contrast, Institution B mentioned their values frequently. The values were integrated into their one-page strategy which placed a strong emphasis on people and inclusion.

Institution A employed a top-down sensemaking approach, with senior management driving formal sensegiving processes. Institution B, on the other hand, adopted a two-way sensemaking approach, utilising both formal and informal communication channels. Institution C combines elements of both approaches, relying primarily on formal communication but incorporating mixed feedback mechanisms.

Middle managers in Institution A felt unheard, undervalued, and frustrated. Meanwhile, those in Institution B felt heard and valued due to frequent consultations and an environment that encouraged open and honest conversations. Institution C received mixed feedback from middle managers, with some feeling heard and others feeling unheard and frustrated.

The Principal of Institution A was perceived as adopting a micromanagement style and exhibiting inconsistent treatment across different staffing groups. Other members of the senior management team were rarely mentioned in the interviews. Conversely, the Principal of Institution B was mentioned frequently and perceived to be well-informed, leading with empowerment and empathy, with the other senior leaders operating with a similar style and ethos. The Principal of Institution C was rarely mentioned, but a few respondents briefly said

they were open to engaging in honest conversations. Feedback suggests that there may be an inconsistency of approach from senior management, with a low appetite for risk.

Decision making in Institution A was typically made without consulting middle managers, often resulting in unanticipated negative consequences. On the other hand, Institution B's decisions were informed, expedited, and consistent, with input from experts. Institution C's decision-making was perceived as inconsistent and lacked logic, particularly in relation to international student numbers.

There was a notable difference in trust levels towards senior management across the three organisations. A and C reported limited trust in their senior management due to a perceived lack of openness, empathy, and inconsistent decision-making. In contrast, Institution B had cultivated high levels of trust, characterised by honesty, openness, and empathy from its senior management.

Finally, there were tensions between senior management and middle managers in A and C, primarily due to international student growth, the need to lead strategic change with little in the way of additional resources, and financial constraints.

4.4 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter provided a comprehensive exploration of findings to answer the second sub-research question: *How do purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?* Drawing on case study data from three Scottish education institutions, the analysis was structured around key themes such as the annual planning process, meaningful strategic purpose, organisational values, leadership approach, sensemaking mechanisms, middle manager autonomy, decision-making, and emotionality.

Through individual and cross-case analysis, commonalities and differences across the institutions were synthesised, highlighting shared challenges and insights while acknowledging institution-specific dynamics. The findings highlighted significant contrasts in approaches to strategy planning and the relationship between senior and middle management across the three institutions. Institution A faced notable challenges, including a lack of common purpose,

reliance on top-down sensegiving, with limited autonomy and input from middle managers. The approach to decision-making and perceptions of micromanagement further exacerbated tensions between senior and middle management, particularly around target setting and financial challenges. This case revealed challenges to effective strategy planning.

Institution B, by contrast, demonstrated several strengths in its approach. With a focus on fostering a common purpose and a people-centred strategy, it appeared to have created a positive organisational culture. Two-way communication was evident, with middle managers highly valued for their contributions. Trust and well-informed decision-making were recurrent features of this institution's leadership, reflecting a strategic planning environment that may be conducive to success.

Institution C presented a more mixed picture with sensemaking between senior and middle management, autonomy, and decision-making receiving varied feedback. Similar to A, the institution grappled with tensions arising from growth and financial challenges. These challenges illustrated the complexities of balancing strategic ambition with the realities of planning with limited organisational capacity and resources.

Across all institutions, shared pressures from ambitious goals and financial constraints were evident, alongside a unanimous acknowledgement of the time-intensive nature of the planning process. The findings highlight the critical importance of fostering common purpose, integrating values, building trust, and ensuring open communication for effective strategy planning.

These findings illuminate the complex interplay between purpose, trust, and emotion in managerial sensemaking within tertiary education institutions in Scotland. They emphasise the importance of cultivating trust, particularly for fostering credible and empathetic leadership, recognising the role of middle managers as key interpreters and communicators of strategy, and ensuring clear and transparent communication to support coherent strategic action. Additionally, they highlight the need to balance ambitious institutional goals with practical constraints, acknowledging the emotional dimensions of strategic decision-making. These factors collectively shape how managers interpret, adapt, and enact strategy, forming the foundation for the discussion in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the findings from both the literature review and empirical study to address the overarching research question:

How do perceptions of purpose, trust, and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice?

The previous chapters established the theoretical and empirical foundations necessary to explore this question. The literature review examined how, from a strategy-as-practice perspective, purpose, trust, and emotionality were currently understood to influence sensemaking in strategy practice. Building on this foundation, the empirical research across three institutions investigated how purpose, trust and emotion shaped managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in tertiary education settings. This chapter further develops these insights by exploring the implications of these findings and synthesising them into a proposed "meaning-full" strategy planning framework. The framework highlights the importance of embedding purpose within strategic processes and practices, ensuring they are inherently meaningful, rather than simply making a difference in a superficial way. By integrating the empirical and theoretical dimensions of the research, the discussion aims to define the key factors that support effective and engaged strategy practice, highlighting how a purpose-driven, trust-informed, and emotionally intelligent approach can enhance strategic planning, outlining the contribution of this research.

The first section of this chapter is structured using the key elements of the overarching research question:

- Purpose
- Strategy Practice
- Managerial Sensemaking
 - Cultivating Trust
 - Impact on Emotions

Following this, three propositions will be outlined that offer explanations of how purpose, trust and emotions shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice.

5.2 Purpose

5.2.1 *Strategic Plans for Meaning-Making*

A strategic plan plays a key role in articulating to all stakeholders what is important, providing a guiding set of principles for resource allocation and decision-making in organisations (Watkins, 2007). Whilst two of the institutions (A and C) had strategic plans, the respondents appeared disengaged from them, did not reference them, and seemed unfamiliar with their specifics. The plans for these two institutions could be perceived as all-encompassing and applicable to any educational setting. The respondents spoke about the mechanics of the strategy processes rather than the bigger purpose and goals of their organisation. This aligns with Mintzberg and Rose's (2003) view that institutions are broadly generic and that their approach to strategy may be more emergent and adaptive rather than deliberately planned. Although strategies were formally present in both institutions, they did not necessarily initiate activity. This reflects Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2024) assertion that strategic planning in higher education may be largely symbolic - serving not as a genuine driver of strategic action, but as a means of projecting rational management and institutional branding.

Porter (1996) states that strategy is about creating a unique and valuable position, intentionally deciding, and declaring what an organisation stands for and focuses on so that time is not spent on activities that are not in the organisation's stated purpose and ambition. If respondents from two institutions that lacked strategic purpose (A and C) were not inherently talking about the strategy of their institution or referencing the strategic goals in the work they do, were they delivering strategy? Perhaps the all-encompassing nature of the plans made them less memorable and overwhelming for middle management when used or referred to. The feedback across all institutions suggests that strategic activity was more emergent and reactive. One of the institution's approaches (C), due to the devolved culture of the organisation, was to make it up to schools whether or not they felt compelled to get involved in a strategic opportunity. There was little feedback about the key messages of the strategy being reinforced through the planning process, indicating that the strategy was not part of the language for creating meaning.

Institution B demonstrated a passionate sense of purpose, direction, and ambition, with substantial feedback to confirm that this institution had been on a transformational journey

over the last five years. Perhaps this institution had successfully found a balance by applying both deliberate purpose and intent, with the ability to embrace emergent opportunities and risks, as outlined by Mintzberg and Waters (1985). Martin (2014) highlights that strategy is not about perfection. It cannot accurately predict what will happen, and it needs to allow for contexts to change and for an organisation to be adaptable. This institution had enough of a blueprint of a strategy to guide them, but remained open and agile to opportunities along the way. They were not rigid in their pursuit of goals, adjusting their five-year aspirational plans throughout the year, or yearly, when necessary. This research confirmed that further and higher education settings do require both deliberate and emergent strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Isenberg, 1987; Mintzberg, 1987), particularly given the significant amount of disruption and change experienced by each institution during the time this study took place.

5.2.2 Financial Goals in an Education Setting

Whilst increasing financial returns has been a necessary driver for many organisations, it may not be the most compelling reason for staff working in an education setting. Two institutions expressed a desire in their strategic plans to be financially sustainable. Their strategies emphasised a focus on growing income from student recruitment, particularly internationally, and from research income. The feedback from these institutions showed that the focus on increasing income and recruiting high numbers of international students was an important aspect of their annual planning and budgeting priorities. Whilst the respondents acknowledged that ensuring sustainable income streams was necessary, many of the respondents expressed the view that they were not comfortable with recruiting significant numbers of international students each year due to the unpredictability of the intakes, larger class sizes, the perceived lower quality of student experience, and the additional workload and stress this placed on staff. What was missing in the pursuit of greater numbers of international students and the added income this brought was a narrative to go with the objective that outlined the meaningful purpose of increasing international student numbers, and recognising the broader value that increasing international students could bring. It was perceived as more work, and not something that people cared about for the greater good of the organisation. There was strong agreement from feedback from institutions A and C that expressed frustration with the expectation to recruit higher numbers of students, and having lower levels of perceived autonomy. This suggests they had no voice in determining this strategic pursuit, which is discussed later in the chapter.

Respondents in Institution B did not reference the financial ambitions in the same way. The respondents acknowledged external economic challenges and budget constraints, accepting this as creating a constant requirement to think differently and be agile. One of the goals of this institution's strategic plan was to support economic recovery, which was not articulated as increasing income for the institution, but as making a financial difference *beyond* the institution. This research does not explore whether an increased focus on financial income resulted in improvements to an institution's financial performance. However, the difference in the way each institution acknowledged and spoke about the organisation's approach to financial sustainability was something that emerged from the feedback. One explanation for the difference in approach across institutions was that financial gain was perhaps not viewed as a compelling strategic purpose within an educational setting. However, Institution B appeared to have successfully articulated a broader and more meaningful financial strategic intent that resonated with staff.

De Smet et al. (2023) suggest that organisations need to "*go beyond profits and seek to maximise value and impact for all stakeholders, including contributing to society and a healthy planet.*" (2023, Beyond profit to impact section). This study contributes to this thinking by presenting examples of where an organisation that has managed to achieve this, contrasted against two organisations that have not, and showing the difference it can make when staff have a greater sense of purpose.

Given the financial challenges that UK further and higher education settings have faced in recent years, a focus on financial sustainability was expected to emerge in the feedback. However, only Institution B had managed to communicate and cascade this strategic message to staff in a compelling way. Whilst this research has illuminated the importance of meaning making for actors involved in strategy practice in further and higher education settings (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000; Leader, 2004), further studies to understand what specifically motivates and inspires staff are needed.

To ensure leadership and management serve a higher purpose, Hamel (2009) outlines that it is crucial to move beyond financial goals, as this often fails to inspire and motivate staff. Hamel (2009) argues that organisations must prioritise socially significant goals that foster a sense of

purpose that resonates deeply with employees and stakeholders. The findings from this research support Hamel's (2009) view that financial goals do not inspire or motivate staff in organisations, and that a wider meaning is necessary to accompany any financial ambitions.

5.2.3 Organisational Values for Meaning-Making

There is a significant body of work highlighting the critical role of organisational values in organisational health, strategy execution, and long-term success (Schein, 2010; Kotter, 1996; Collins and Porras, 1994; Lencioni, 2012). These scholars collectively argue that values are not just statements but fundamental drivers of culture, strategic alignment, and sustained performance. This study builds upon their work by demonstrating that the depth of an institution's engagement with its values significantly impacts strategic coherence and purpose.

While all institutions published value statements, only Institution B showed a strong internalisation of those values, with respondents consistently referencing them and expressing pride in their meaning. This aligns with Schein's (2010) argument that espoused values shape organisational culture when they are embedded in practice. The institution's values appeared to function as a moral and ethical compass, guiding strategic behaviours and decision-making, consistent with Kotter's (1996) emphasis on the role of shared values in driving organisational change and transformation. Collins and Porras (1994) highlight how shared values foster long-term success, and this institution's value-driven approach reinforced strategic consistency through a passionate sense of collective purpose.

In contrast, the other two institutions showed weaker connections to their values; respondents rarely referenced them, and they were not visibly embedded in strategic behaviours. This disconnect suggests that simply having values does not drive strategic engagement. They must be actively practised and reinforced, as Lencioni (2012) emphasises. The findings show that organisational values are not simply declarative but must be ingrained in organisational discourse, leadership behaviours, and strategy processes to effectively contribute to strategic practice.

This research confirms that values, alongside strategic plans, play an essential role in creating meaning for staff and shaping strategic direction. However, further investigation is needed to

explore why and how values become embedded within strategy practices, and the specific mechanisms linking value engagement to strategic success in further and higher education settings. Given the broadly similar nature of these types of institutions, it could be assumed that comparable values would resonate across the sector. However, additional studies examining values across a larger sample of institutions could offer deeper insights as to which values are important and how strategic values become embedded in practice.

5.2.4 Style and Length of Strategic Plans

The style of writing was varied across all three strategic plans. One plan (Institution B) was written in what could be considered simple language, focused on diversity and inclusion, with the student at the heart of what they do. The same could not be said for the style of writing used for the strategic plans in the other two institutions (Institutions A and C) which were more formal and not specific in outlining intent or purpose. The writing was not focused on achieving specific objectives and was less direct. Considering the discussion above, the findings suggest that how a plan is written and presented plays a key part in translating and educating staff on the strategic purpose. The way a strategic plan is written is important for clearly outlining the overarching deliberate purpose of an institution. The more formal approach taken in Institutions A and C was not shown to be as effective at communicating the meaning and purpose of the institution to their staff. Whilst this aspect was not a primary focus of the research, it is a useful finding that agrees with much of the research on meaningful purpose and perceived “managerialist” leadership in further and higher education settings, which has been a long-standing critique for several decades (Lowe and Gayle, 2010; Simkins, 2000; Sutphen et al., 2019; Dearlove 1997). How strategic intent and objectives are articulated for further and higher education settings was found to be important. A formal and more corporate style is perhaps not the most resonant with staff. It may be valuable for future research to explore the impact of this approach on meaning making in further and higher education settings.

In addition to the style of writing in strategic plans being a possible factor in meaning-making, the findings also found the length of strategic plans to be important. The findings demonstrated that the institution with the shortest strategic plan, only one page (Institution B), was referenced most by their respondents. The other two plans which were substantially longer were rarely mentioned or referenced. This comparison suggests that lengthier and

wide-ranging strategic plans may be more difficult for staff to engage with and remember, and potentially are not as successful at creating meaning for staff. A shorter and more specific strategic plan that is easy to remember and embed into everyday strategic conversations may be more effective, allowing all areas of the institution to connect with it. Tjan (2011) explored the effectiveness of a one-page strategy and how it facilitates “*...discussions on what is truly important, and if done collaboratively, will create alignment on the most critical priorities*” (2011). This certainly seems to resonate with the spirit of Institution B’s one-page strategy: It was simple, memorable, and provided staff with a sense of purpose and meaning that they all connected with.

The researcher explored research on the recommended length of strategic plans, but could locate no studies relevant to the discussion here. The findings presented here suggest that the length and style of a strategic plan may significantly affect its value in strategic meaning making. Whether this effect is more or less important than the actions of senior management to reinforce and embed strategic messages within organisational language is discussed later in the chapter.

Whilst the length of a strategic plan is not a primary focus of this research, it was noted as influencing the effectiveness of strategy practice in further and higher education settings. Further research in this area is needed to better understand this effect.

5.3 Strategy Practice

Strategy practice encompasses the routinised behaviours and tools used in strategic work, the actors engaged in strategy work, and the strategic activities carried out within organisations (Burgelman et al., 2018). This section examines how senior management behaviour, along with the processes and tools of strategic planning, influences the formation of purpose, emotional dynamics, and trust with middle management.

5.3.1 Senior Management

5.3.1.1 Values as a Blueprint

The previous section highlighted the importance of organisational purpose and values in shaping strategic planning and practice, reinforcing the importance of values as a guiding force in decision-making. This section further explores the significance of senior management

actively demonstrating these values, emphasising how leadership behaviours influence organisational culture and strategic practices. A significant body of work emphasises that leaders who embed values into processes, practices, and decision-making contribute to creating conditions that result in stronger organisational purpose and long-term strategic success (Schein, 2010; Kotter, 1996; Collins and Porras, 1994; Lencioni, 2012).

Senior management plays a pivotal role in ensuring that values are not merely stated but are embedded in everyday interactions and strategic discourse. One institution (Institution B) exemplified this by deeply embedding values into its leadership approach. Values were consistently referenced in discussions, incorporated into formal and informal communications, and reinforced across both senior and middle management. This aligns with Schein's (2010) assertion that organisational values must be actively enacted by leaders to shape and sustain cultural norms. Additionally, this institution used values as a decision-making tool, ensuring strategic choices remained aligned with its core ethical and moral principles. This supports Kotter's (1996) work on values-based leadership in driving transformation.

The findings further support Collins and Porras (1994), who argue that values provide organisational stability and continuity, as shown by the strong collective commitment within this institution. Senior management's consistent reinforcement ensured that values became part of the institution's narrative and strategic identity, influencing both staff and students. This reinforces Lencioni's (2012) position that values are most impactful when integrated into everyday decision-making and leadership expectations, rather than existing as abstract principles.

In contrast, the other two institutions showed a weaker connection to their values. These were not visibly embedded in strategic narratives, leadership behaviours, or staff engagement. This divergence highlights a key implication, which is that values must be actively lived and reinforced to contribute meaningfully to strategy practice. This further validates the theoretical foundations set by Schein (2010), Kotter (1996), Collins and Porras (1994), and Lencioni (2012).

These findings extend existing discussions in strategy-as-practice literature, particularly within further and higher education settings, by demonstrating that values are not only integral to culture and strategic alignment but also play a critical role in meaning-making within strategic processes. However, further research is needed to explore the mechanisms through which values shape strategic behaviour across diverse educational institutions, and to develop further insights into how values-driven leadership can be embedded within strategy practice.

5.3.1.2 Behaviour Towards Middle Managers

The findings reveal varying levels of autonomy for middle managers across the three institutions, directly affecting their ability to develop and implement strategy. Institution A exhibited the least autonomy, with middle managers controlling day-to-day operations but lacking authority to make strategic changes without senior management's approval. This aligns with studies suggesting that restrictive hierarchical structures for middle managers can hinder strategic responsiveness (Mintzberg, 1987; Burgelman et al., 2018). In contrast, middle managers in Institutions B and C experienced greater autonomy, enabling them to drive innovation and engage in strategic decision-making. However, responses from Institution C revealed inconsistent experiences of autonomy, seemingly dependent on the leadership style of individual senior managers, reinforcing the observation that trust-based relationships shape managerial discretion (Raes et al., 2011).

Institutions A and C shared similar constraints regarding target setting and budget management, both being largely controlled by senior leadership, limiting middle management's influence over strategic priorities. This reflects Johnson et al. (2003) and Ahearne et al. (2014), who highlight that middle managers function most effectively as strategy facilitators when granted decision-making autonomy. In contrast, Institution B's leadership adopted a consultative and empowering approach, recognising middle managers as critical agents in strategy development (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). This empowerment led to transformational change, though middle managers expressed concerns over high expectations from senior leadership. Their ability to adjust targets through constructive dialogue demonstrates the importance of collaborative leadership models, aligning with Clegg and McAuley's (2005) exploration of middle management influence within educational institutions.

The study reinforces existing literature on middle management as pivotal actors in strategy delivery, bridging top-down strategy with operational realities (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990, cited in Burgelman et al., 2018). Ahearne et al. (2014) argues that middle management's positional power equips them to navigate uncertainty, facilitating strategic adaptability. The findings suggest that granting autonomy fosters a dynamic organisational culture, accommodating both deliberate and emergent strategy approaches (Bhide, 1986; Isenberg, 1987).

The case studies highlight that middle management relies on senior management to establish the tone of their relationship, determining the extent of their involvement in strategy processes. Institution B exemplified a strong connection between middle management autonomy and strategic purpose, with respondents feeling valued, heard, and engaged in meaningful strategy work. This aligns with Collins and Porras (1994) and Lencioni (2012), who emphasise the role of leadership behaviours in sustaining strategic alignment. Middle management in Institutions A and C expressed frustration and disengagement, reinforcing Schein's (2010) assertion that excluding key actors from strategy discussions weakens organisational cohesion and trust.

By demonstrating how middle manager autonomy influences strategic success, this study contributes further insights into the role of leadership dynamics in shaping strategy-as-practice, particularly within the further and higher education sector. Future research could deepen understanding of how senior management behaviours enhance or limit strategic agency among middle management, providing a broader perspective on the connection between leadership behaviour and strategic effectiveness in further and higher education.

5.3.1.3 The Principal

CEOs and senior management teams are regarded as central architects of an organisation's strategy practices (Burgelman et al., 2018). The researcher did not directly ask the respondents about their principal and their leadership approach, but this unexpectedly emerged from the interviews and data analysis. Although none of the principals were interviewed for this study, the following assumptions have been pieced together from the responses to summarise the three different leadership approaches.

The feedback from respondents at Institution B suggested that the Principal demonstrated empathy and authenticity, resulting in highly engaged and empowered staff who were *“dedicated to the cause”*. They had created many opportunities to engage with a range of staff and listened to their feedback. This resulted in the Principal being informed, which expedited decisions. The feedback also suggests that their behaviour and their constant reinforcement of strategic ambitions and the organisational values were instrumental in setting the tone of and guiding behaviours and decisions. This Principal created an empowered culture and found an approach that enabled the organisation to get things done through a shared vision, as recommended by Pfeffer (1993). This, in turn, led to high levels of participative management. This approach demonstrates Kanter’s (1979) description of the positive results of sharing power, resulting in transformative change in the institution.

In contrast, feedback from Institution A highlighted that the Principal employed a more hierarchical and micromanaging approach. This included frequent changes to decisions or targets, unclear requests, and insufficient upfront planning, which often led to unintended consequences down the line. Such an approach created panic and frustration when changes were made at the last minute. Additionally, the Principal rarely sought input from middle managers when planning or setting targets, contributing to tensions within the institution. Their limited engagement with middle managers and experts resulted in decisions that had adverse effects. Command and control power seemed much more prevalent at this institution, with the Principal navigating politics less skilfully and eschewing participative management (Pfeffer, 1993) and empowering management (Kanter, 1979). This left the middle managers, and senior managers, feeling powerless to enact strategy and make decisions (Kanter, 1979). There were fewer examples of being agile and innovative across the data. This case highlights the difference that the approach to sharing power can have between senior management and middle management engage in strategy practice.

In Institution C, the Principal was described as "nice" and willing to have honest conversations. Based on the feedback, however, there did not seem to be a consistent approach to leadership taken by senior management, leading to varying experiences and tensions. The risk appetite across senior management was described as low, except when related to increasing overseas international student intakes. The responses indicate that the Principal is not a command-and-

control type of leader, but they do not display positive power in the way Pfeffer (1993) suggests, by creating a shared vision and common language.

Schein and Schein (2018) emphasise that leadership behaviour is crucial for effective strategy practice, particularly its influence on organisational culture. Leaders shape culture by what they pay attention to, measure, control, and allocate resources to. Schein and Schein (2018) argue that leaders must model the behaviours they expect as they set the tone for everyone else. They need to foster a culture of openness, trust, and collaboration for navigating complex and potentially volatile environments, making strategy processes more resilient and successful.

These three case studies and the respondents' experiences of engaging with their principal in a strategy planning process offer a valuable insight into the power dynamics between middle management and senior management engaged in strategy practice (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). Pfeffer (1993) emphasises that how power is applied and displayed by leaders can be dependent on a person's character, with some finding it easier than others to submerge egos and create conditions for effective participative management in the achievement of common goals. These case studies demonstrate varying examples of power dynamics and how they support or impede strategy practice. This research found that the behavioural approach of senior management had a significant bearing on the conditions for successful strategy practice, actions, decisions, culture, and perceived value of strategy processes. Leadership behaviour that embodies strategic values and ambitions helps to reinforce strategic messaging and builds trust. Whilst this research did not set out to explore the leadership behaviour of principals, it emerged as a relevant finding. Further research is required to more fully understand this, potentially encompassing the experiences and perceptions of a range of principals in further and higher education settings.

5.3.2 *The Processes*

The findings across the case studies highlighted varied approaches to strategic planning, reflecting both challenges and opportunities for institutional growth and coherence. While all three institutions had annual strategic processes, the design and delivery of these processes diverged significantly.

5.3.2.1 Planning Cycles and Workload

All respondents agreed that strategic planning processes were necessary and important. However, the findings highlight significant variation in annual planning processes, particularly in their effectiveness and impact on strategy execution. Two institutions (A and C) operated within a one-year planning cycle, which was broadly criticised for being too short-term and administratively burdensome. Respondents viewed the requirement to produce new plans annually as detracting from strategic focus, as the sheer effort involved in administrative compliance overshadowed meaningful strategic development (Ackermann and Eden, 2011). Middle managers in these institutions expressed frustration, noting that the process felt mechanical rather than purposeful, with limited engagement from senior management, raising concerns about whether such processes truly supported strategy practice.

The third institution (B) implemented a five-year aspirational planning framework, supported by tri-annual reviews, which was widely praised for fostering a forward-looking and adaptable strategic process. This approach suggests that structuring planning cycles around long-term goals, complemented by regular reflective and strategic adjustment reviews, can significantly enhance strategic continuity. However, participants did acknowledge the administrative burden this had, but they always found it worthwhile, regardless of the time it took. The success of this model aligns with Jarzabkowski (2005) and Johnson et al. (2003), who emphasise that planning should coordinate strategy practice effectively, rather than become an administrative exercise detached from meaningful strategic dialogue.

A consistent challenge across all institutions was the one-year funding model imposed by the SFC, which was widely regarded as hindering long-term strategic planning. The rigid nature of this funding cycle limited the ability of institutions to engage in sustained, transformative change, reinforcing the need for further research into alternative funding models that would better support strategic flexibility and institutional resilience.

The study also revealed long-standing reliance on static planning templates, which, although providing a sense of procedural familiarity, were often perceived as burdensome and of limited strategic value. In two institutions (A and C), middle management expressed significant frustration regarding the lack of engagement and feedback from senior leadership, suggesting that planning processes without meaningful leadership involvement risked becoming an

empty exercise. This confirms Powell's (2017) assertion that strategic planning processes must be understood as social and interactive activities, where ongoing engagement shapes the effectiveness of strategy practice.

Despite these challenges, respondents acknowledged that annual planning processes provided a structured opportunity for internal reflection within planning units. Even in institutions where senior management involvement was minimal, internal discussions prompted by these processes helped review alignment and progress against strategic objectives, reinforcing Johnson et al.'s (2003) perspective that structured strategic tools offer value when linked to meaningful organisational discourse. However, findings from the institutions expressing discontent with their planning processes confirm Ackermann and Eden's (2011) view that many annual planning cycles fall short of expectations, particularly when formal strategy tools are disconnected from leadership engagement.

The complexity and nuances within each case suggest that effective planning requires a balance between structured documentation and dynamic interaction. This study highlights that successful planning processes must facilitate ongoing dialogue between senior and middle management, ensuring clear expectations, strategic negotiation, and the opportunity to correct course if necessary. Short-term plans risk being too myopic, failing to capture strategic ambition, while longer-term plans may struggle to account for the volatility of the education sector.

The findings reinforce the importance of annual planning as a strategic coordination tool, but demonstrate that the process alone was insufficient. The value lies in the quality of conversations and engagement surrounding it. By demonstrating how middle and senior management interactions shape strategy practice, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the connection between strategic planning, leadership behaviours, and strategy tools.

5.3.2.3 Budget and Target Setting

Budget constraints emerged as a significant factor influencing the strategic planning process. Two institutions (A and C) noted that budgets often dictated what was feasible, yet the timing of budget setting often occurred after an annual plan had been created, which undermined

the ability to set goals within financial constraints. This mismatch between planning and setting budgets highlighted the importance of aligning budgetary and strategic processes to enable more effective resource allocation and the realisation of strategic initiatives within agreed expectations. One of these institutions (A) reported that there were frequent in-year adjustments and the requirement to make budget savings. This suggests that the budget process had not captured a realistic financial budget for the year ahead. Greater input and insight from middle management would have been valuable for planning a realistic budget. Senior management scrutiny of the budget is necessary so that they are accurately informed of any risks and opportunities across the business before setting the budgets.

The remaining institution (B) did not reference the budget in the same way. The respondents acknowledged and accepted the financial challenges and operated within the constraints they faced, but it did not dominate the feedback in the same way as the other two institutions. Perhaps there was greater scene setting from senior management on the financial parameters within which respondents had to work. The acknowledgement of risk and uncertainty may have also been a more integral part of their budget discussions. Many organisations are planning within contexts of uncertainty, and how organisations approach planning and setting their budgets, considering how to plan with such uncertainty, is more important than ever. The feedback highlighted that, when middle management did not feel that they had a voice as part of the budget setting and target setting process, and subsequently lacked ownership of that budget, it led to tension and often ineffective strategic planning outputs. This further contributes to the body of research on the importance of the involvement of middle management in improving strategy practice (Burgelman et al. 2018).

5.3.2.4 Peer Review

A lack of interconnectedness was a recurring theme for two institutions given that plans were created in silos, limiting the potential for cross-institutional synergies. One institution (B) had an embedded cross-institutional peer review process, which demonstrated an ethos of sharing ideas and supporting each other for the benefit of the common purpose.

In larger institutions, it may not be realistic to assume that middle managers and senior managers have the time to read all the plans created during strategic planning activities. However, introducing formal structures for plan integration, such as cross-unit peer reviews

could enhance institutional coherence by creating opportunities for more joint initiatives and sharing of ideas. Further research that explores this within a complex organisational setting would be beneficial. This finding supports Powell's (2017) view of strategy as a social process that more thoughtfully considers the doing by connecting with others across the organisation.

5.4 Managerial Sensemaking

This section of the discussion considers how trust and emotion impact managerial sensemaking in strategy practice.

5.4.1 Approach to Sensemaking

Strategy practice requires ongoing conversations and communication among strategic actors (Mintzberg, 1994; Grant, 2003; Ketokivi and Castener, 2004; Laamanen et al., 2015). These findings demonstrate that one institution (B) had a range of sensemaking mechanisms in place, with senior management actively seeking information from middle managers. The default in this institution was for senior management to sensereceive more information than they sensegave. Middle management in this institution felt they had access to senior management and could speak openly. Middle manager expertise was sought out and respected. One respondent highlighted that senior management was so informed that this helped to expedite decisions.

Institution A appeared to primarily sensegive information through top-down formal mechanisms. The annual planning process could have been an opportunity to sensereceive information, but it was unclear if the plans were read by senior management. Budgets and targets were also set in a top-down fashion. Respondents expressed higher levels of emotional dissatisfaction in this institution, characterised as not feeling heard or being unable to contribute to strategic decision making. Senior management were less likely to make informed strategic decisions, which had consequences down the line in the form of unanticipated risks and higher costs.

The remaining institution (C) had mixed levels of sensemaking in place which was dependent on individual senior management behaviours, suggesting that senior management needs to be more consistent in their approach and should increase efforts to engage with staff and hear what they have to say.

The findings demonstrate that, where senior management are more willing to listen and sensereceive information, staff are more likely to feel part of the bigger picture of strategic planning, and that their expertise is welcomed and heard. At Institution B, two-way sensemaking was found to be a key element of strategy practice, with senior management sensereceiving more from middle managers and across the institution. This confirms that middle management plays a key role when making sense of strategic planning, and that their involvement should be harnessed and encouraged (Balogun et al., 2015). Furthermore, too much control from leaders and too little involvement from other stakeholders can harm sensegiving practices (Maitlis, 2005).

Some senior management may struggle to sensereceive effectively depending on their capability, confidence, or willingness to be vulnerable, and create the conditions for constructive dialogue with colleagues, so that they are sufficiently informed to make decisions. However, sharing of meaning can happen in everyday organisational situations (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Kezar, 2013), and the consequences of ineffective sensemaking efforts can be damaging to strategy enactment and success (McKiernan and MacKay, 2017). Embedded sensemaking practices play a crucial role in creating opportunities for sensegiving and sensemaking, which helps others to understand and engage with strategy and change processes (Day et al., 2023).

5.4.2 Cultivating Trust

Exploring the prevalence of trust in strategy practice offers sensemaking insights into how strategic planning is influenced by the actions and behaviour of strategic actors.

Frei and Morriss' (2020) Trust Model

As outlined in Chapter Two, Frei and Morriss' (2020) model of trust identifies authenticity, logic, and empathy as key factors for cultivating trust. To determine the levels of trust in each institution, the findings were considered against the principles of the model. Considering all the aspects discussed so far in this chapter, the levels of authenticity, logic and empathy are summarised below and in Appendix I.

Authenticity

Frei and Morriss (2020) describe authenticity as senior leaders being their “true self”, being reflective, honest, and open to understanding the diversity of knowledge and experience, brought to the table by others.

In Institution A, respondents felt that they could only present good news, and that honest views were not welcomed by senior management. Clearly, middle managers were not fully permitted to be their true selves, or share their diversity of knowledge and experience. This was especially evident in the findings pertaining to decision making where middle managers were not consulted yet still had to deliver what had been agreed. There was a sense across the respondents’ findings that senior management felt they always knew best when taking decisions. There was one respondent who commented that, if a middle manager was not trusted by senior management, or was perceived to be opinionated or out of favour, they would be treated differently. Senior management, rather than have an honest and direct conversation with the member of staff involved, would not engage with the staff member and would by-pass the organisational structures that involved them, undermining them. The annual planning process had not changed significantly for several years, and senior management did not appear to engage with planning units or read the plans they generated, none of which suggests reflective approach.

In Institution B, senior management appeared to take an authentic approach, indicated by the consistently positive feedback, and senior management proactively sensed received information. Respondents felt able to speak openly and without fear of recourse, and felt that their expertise was valued. The reflective approach to planning, which took place three times a year, also demonstrated a thoughtful approach that encouraged honesty. There was a willingness among senior management to facilitate difficult conversations, acknowledging that middle managers played an essential role in solving organisational problems.

In Institution C, there was mixed feedback on the senior management approach, which suggests that there may be authenticity in some areas of the organisation, but not all. Some respondents had high levels of respect for their senior leadership and reported having constructive conversations where their expertise was valued. However, some respondents felt their honest and constructive feedback was not welcome, suggesting a lack of openness to a diversity of knowledge and expertise. Nevertheless, the level of autonomy afforded to middle

managers indicated that permission was given to be creative and entrepreneurial. One respondent described their senior manager as being a “doormat”, which implied that top-level management may be walking over other senior managers.

In summary, Institution A demonstrated limited leadership authenticity, with both the Principal and senior management failing to exhibit consistency. Institution B displayed strong leadership qualities, with both the Principal and senior management demonstrating credible behaviours. Institution C’s senior management exhibited variable authenticity, reflecting inconsistencies in leadership approaches across teams or roles. These variations are critical in understanding trust, as authenticity shapes perceptions of credibility and reliability.

Logic

Frei and Morriss (2020) consider logic to encompass a transparent and evidence-based approach to decision making, openness to learning from others, demonstration of empowerment leadership, and strong communication that is not afraid to be vulnerable.

In Institution A, the integrity of the budget and target-setting process was viewed by respondents as problematic, with significant stretch targets put in place that often changed throughout the year. This led to confusion and frustration among middle managers, particularly where there was no opportunity for discussion. Experts were often not consulted or involved in decision making, with limited sensereceiving opportunities provided by senior management. This suggests senior management was not open to learning from others. The findings highlight a lack of perceived value in strategy planning processes, with each undertaken in isolation, and the budget taking precedence among senior management as the main strategic planning tool. Annual plans not being read, despite the significant amount of human effort put into them, seems obtuse, illogical and deeply inefficient. One respondent highlighted that delays to senior management decision making had significant financial implications, which suggests a dangerous lack of direction and confidence in making decisions.

In institution B, senior management kept their ear to the ground and actively sought out feedback. This approach was said to expedite decisions. The approach to decision making was collaborative, and involved consulting with the relevant experts. The senior management approach to sensereceiving information and acting on the advice given demonstrated that

they were open to learning from others and encouraged the empowerment of middle managers to solve problems and innovate. The institution's simple strategy was widely understood, and senior management reiterated the strategic messages regularly, keeping staff focused on the big picture, and using them as a framework for decision making.

In institution C, there appeared to be no consistent approach to developing plans across the wider institution. Two respondents reported that, within their college, plans were shared and discussed amongst heads and the college leadership, but this did not seem to be replicated across the institution. The consequences of target setting and resultant class sizes were not thought through, indicating poor logic. This approach led to confusion, panic, and tensions with staff. There was little evidence to suggest that decision making was grounded in evidence or data. One respondent commented on an unwillingness to have difficult conversations about disinvestment from activities that were no longer of benefit to the institution. This suggests senior management shied away from more challenging conversations and conflict. Other feedback highlighted a culture of risk avoidance, which suggests that senior management take their responsibilities seriously and do not want to make decisions that could have negative tautological outcomes for the institution. The autonomy afforded to planning units to create their plans and pursue the partnerships and research they wanted suggests empowerment leadership towards middle managers.

In summary, Institution A struggled with logical decision-making through unsatisfactory budget and target setting, coupled with inadequate consultation on activities and decisions. Institution B achieved high levels of logic across strategic planning and decision-making processes, highlighting structured approaches and consultative practices. Institution C's logic faltered similarly to Institution A, particularly in budget and target setting, despite granting schools autonomy within a risk-averse culture. The disparities in logic illustrate how logical institutional processes and senior management behaviour shape trust and instil clarity and confidence, whereas illogical leadership leads to ambiguity and scepticism. This aligns with Kim and Mauborgne's (1998) work on procedural rationality, which demonstrates that fair strategic decision-making processes foster voluntary cooperation and that perceptions of unfairness can lead to resistance and reduced engagement in strategic initiatives. This suggests that logical decision-making is not just about structured reasoning but also about ensuring inclusivity and fairness (Kim and Mauborgne, 1998) through a structured, yet

adaptive, process that allows for negotiation, learning, and deeper understanding of strategic issues (Ackermann and Eden, 2011).

Empathy

Frei and Morriss (2020) describe empathy as leaders having the ability to fully listen and engage with staff, express interest in what others have to say, and demonstrate genuine displays of empathy so that staff feel cared about.

In Institution A, the lack of receiving opportunities and the way that senior management made decisions without middle manager expertise, may have led to middle management feeling that senior management lacked empathy. The creation of sub-values in one department to articulate a culture of care provides an example of middle management taking matters into their own hands upon recognising that something was missing from the organisational language. The respondents in institution A expressed frustration with the approach of senior management, which suggested that empathy was not at the forefront of their approach.

In contrast, respondents from institution B articulated a keen sense of empathy from senior management due to the approach taken by leadership to engage and receive information from staff. Respondents enjoyed their work, felt cared about and that the institution's values were strongly embedded throughout their work. The limited reward schemes available had not diminished the extent to which people felt valued and recognised for the work they did. Senior management routinely displayed empathy by saying "thank you" and recognising individual and team contributions. The senior leadership office relocation, to be situated near the students, proved beneficial in making the leadership visible and approachable.

In Institution C, the findings suggest that some areas of the institution had empathetic leadership, but not all. Feedback about the heads of school forum reported that senior management were willing to hear about the challenges faced and discuss them openly. The agenda was not fixed, the discussions were not controlled, and middle managers felt able to speak openly about the challenges. This suggests senior management displayed empathy and created a forum in which to listen and engage with heads of school. However, the approach

to international student recruitment and the impact this had on staff in middle management positions did not demonstrate an empathetic approach from senior management. This created stress and logistical challenges for middle managers, yet senior management was immovable in their position, due to the financial importance of the income stream. They did offer future investment in the department as a reward for achieving their target, but this is more of a motivational action rather than an empathetic one. The approach to annual planning, which saw some staff submitting documents up to 40 pages long and receiving no feedback from senior management, is also inconsistent with an empathetic approach from senior management.

In summary, Institution A exhibited low empathy, particularly from its Principal, undermining the relational dimension of trust. Institution B fostered high levels of empathy, creating a more supportive and understanding environment. Institution C presented a mixed picture, as senior management was inconsistent in their empathetic approaches, leading to unequal experiences for staff. Empathy serves as an emotional pillar of trust, and the inconsistencies across institutions highlight its importance in shaping interpersonal dynamics and emotions. These findings align with Liu and Maitlis's (2014) work on the emotional dynamics of strategic conversations of senior management. They argue that displayed emotions, including empathetic engagement, affect the quality of strategic dialogue and that a lack of empathy can result in negative emotions, potentially fracturing strategic relationships, and the strategy processes.

Levels of Trust

To determine the levels of trust across each institution, the indicators of trust across each case study institution is summarised below:

Table 5 - Levels of trust in each case study institution

Trust Model	A	B	C
Authenticity	Limited authentic leadership was perceived to have been displayed by the Principal and SM.	Authentic leadership was perceived to have been displayed by the Principal and SM.	Variable authenticity was perceived to have been displayed by SM.

Logic	Low levels of logic through budget and target setting, lack of consultation on activities and decisions.	Strong levels of logic were displayed in all areas of strategic planning and decisions.	Low levels of logic through budget and target setting. Autonomy given to Schools in a risk-averse culture.
Empathy	Low levels of empathy were displayed by Principal.	High levels of empathy were displayed.	Mixed levels of empathy due to differences in SM approach.
Trust	Potentially low levels of trust.	High levels of trust.	Some pockets of trust.

Legend: SM = Senior Management

Trust levels varied significantly across the institutions, reflecting differing levels of authenticity, logic, and empathy in leadership behaviour. Institution A exhibited low trust, with respondents citing inadequate displays of authenticity, logical consistency, and empathy from senior management, which aligns with Frei and Morriss's (2020) trust model, where deficits in any pillar compromise organisational trust. Institution B demonstrated high trust, reinforced by strong leadership behaviours across all three pillars, fostering a relational environment where strategy was embedded in a culture of confidence and engagement. Institution C presented mixed experiences of trust, with variability in authenticity, logic, and empathy across leadership levels, resulting in only partial trust among respondents.

Applying Frei and Morriss's (2020) framework to the findings provided a structured way to synthesise the link between senior management behaviour, emotions, and strategy practice. Trust was observed as a fundamental aspect in managerial sensemaking, influencing how staff interpreted and engaged with strategic direction. This study contributes empirical support to Frei and Morriss's model, demonstrating its applicability in practice. Further comparative studies across a broader range of institutions could deepen an understanding of how leadership behaviours shape trust in strategy practice.

The results also align with Watermeyer's et al. (2022) study on UK leadership in higher education, which states that authenticity is a key leadership quality essential for effective and ethical leadership in higher education.

Other Trust Perspectives

In considering the broader literature on trust, such as Simmel's (1900 and 1908, cited by Möllering, 2001) perspective, which describes trust as a form of faith or assurance, often difficult to articulate yet foundational in sustaining relational cohesion, Institution B's leadership approach remained steadfast in its values and purpose, embedding language and behaviours that reinforced organisational identity and strategic clarity. Staff in this institution expressed a powerful sense of belonging, trust, and engagement, echoing Simmel's perspective. This institution's sense of purpose was not driven by hierarchical control but rather a consultative, values-based leadership approach, aligning with Lencioni (2012), who argues that trust is cultivated through embedded leadership behaviours rather than formal structures.

The findings also illustrate Hamel's (2009) warnings about the damaging effects of command-and-control systems, where leadership distrust can breed organisational anxiety, hesitancy, and disengagement. Institution B's high-trust, consultative environment mitigated these risks by empowering staff, reinforcing the idea that trust-based leadership enhances strategic adaptability and engagement. Respondents described feeling "seen, heard, and valued", reinforcing Mládková et al.'s (2015) argument that trust, autonomy, and meaningful work are key drivers for motivating knowledge workers, strengthening knowledge-sharing and innovation.

In contrast, Institutions A and C exhibited lower engagement from leadership, resulting in reduced strategic buy-in and perceptions of alienation from decision-making, which echoes Kieran et al.'s (2020) assertion that trust is eroded when stakeholders feel excluded from strategy processes. Furthermore, Albrecht and Travaglione (2003) suggest that fairness, open communication, and organisational transparency reinforce trust and engagement, principles that were evident in Institution B but noticeably weaker in the other two institutions.

Möllering's (2001) model of trust, expectation, interpretation, and suspension, offers further theoretical grounding for understanding how strategic actors navigate uncertainty. Trust was most evident in institutions where middle and senior management engaged in continuous dialogue, allowing strategic ambiguity to be managed through relational assurance rather than control mechanisms. The findings suggest that the perception of trust, rather than its formal presence, shapes how managers interpret their role in strategy delivery.

Holstein et al. (2016) articulate that having hope in addition to trust acts as a stabilising force, allowing strategic actors to sustain commitment despite uncertainty. This study provides initial empirical support for these perspectives but highlights the need for expanded research on the way trust influences managerial sensemaking and strategy practice in further and higher education settings.

5.4.3 Impact on Managerial Emotions

Emotionality in strategy practice emerged as a fundamental influence on behaviours, decisions, relationships, and interactions, reinforcing its role in shaping strategy practice (Ackermann and Eden, 2011; Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Brundin and Nordqvist, 2008; Edmondson and Smith, 2006; Kisfalvi and Pitcher, 2003; Mangham, 1998; Samra-Fredericks, 2004). Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) argue that the affective states of actors involved in strategy directly impact how they engage with strategic processes and the consequences of their actions. This study confirms these assertions by illustrating the range of positive and negative emotional responses experienced throughout strategic practice and the real-world outcomes of those responses. Negative emotions were linked to senior management behaviours during strategy planning, particularly when decisions were made without consultation, when targets were imposed by senior management, or when leadership failed to engage meaningfully in the process. This research responds to Burgelman et al.'s (2018) calls for more research on the role of emotions in strategy work.

Respondents in Institution B - with the greatest levels of autonomy, strategic sensemaking, and alignment with organisational purpose - felt heard, valued, and empowered. Respondents at Institution A - where leadership was more micromanaging - perceived strategic processes as frustrating and performative, reflecting disengagement and disillusionment with hierarchical leadership structures. Institution C - with inconsistent leadership approaches - exhibited varying emotional responses, with some staff feeling engaged and supported, while others reported frustration and dissatisfaction, highlighting the critical role of leadership behaviours in shaping emotional climates within strategy practice.

The emotional impact of senior management engagement was particularly evident in the way middle managers interpreted strategic processes. Respondents emphasised the importance of senior management actively reading and engaging with planning outputs, as perceptions of

leadership disengagement had a negative emotional impact, affecting motivation and strategic confidence. These findings support Liu and Maitlis's (2014) research on the emotional dynamics within top management teams and Hodgkinson and Healey's (2011) research on the role of reflexivity and emotional regulation in strategic decision-making.

The findings also echo those of Douglas et al. (2024), whose study on staff wellbeing in UK higher education institutions identified mental ill-health, stress, and burnout as critical sector challenges, and illuminated the emotional toll of strategic leadership roles. The sense of belonging and engagement observed in Institution B suggests that a positive emotional connection to strategic work could mitigate stress and improve retention and performance. The study also supports Albrecht and Travaglione (2003), who argue that open communication, fairness, equality in organisational policies, and perceived support enhance trust and engagement. Institution B exemplified these characteristics, fostering a collaborative, purpose-driven environment, while the other two institutions lacked these conditions, leading to higher frustration and disengagement.

In the institution that demonstrated the most cohesive strategic purpose and leadership approach (B), respondents felt cared about, connected to their strategy, and empowered to succeed. The consultative leadership style in this institution fostered stronger strategic buy-in, reinforcing Lencioni's (2012) thinking on emotional commitment and collective strategy ownership. The sense of community within this institution was cultivated through frequent and ongoing conversations with senior management, which deepened trust, strengthened strategic commitment, and improved overall staff morale. Respondents reported feeling seen, heard, valued, and confident in their roles. This emotional connection translated into higher levels of buy-in, loyalty, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Hamel's (2009) critique of command-and-control leadership systems highlights how high-trust, low-fear environments can foster innovation, engagement, and strategic adaptability, a dynamic reflected in these findings. This study provides real-world evidence supporting Hamel's argument that mistrust demoralises staff, reinforcing the need for leadership approaches that empower rather than constrain.

These findings confirm the vital role of emotions in strategy conversations, demonstrating that trust, engagement, and leadership behaviours fundamentally shape how middle managers interpret and enact strategy practice. When senior management actively cultivates relationships with middle managers, fostering open communication, shared purpose, and emotional awareness, strategy processes become more meaningful, cohesive, and effective. This study contributes to our understanding of how emotional dynamics shape managerial sensemaking of strategy, reinforcing the assertion that strategy is not just a rational process but is deeply influenced by relational and emotional conditions.

5.4.4 *Knowledge Workers*

Acknowledgement of the knowledge worker context within further and higher education settings appeared to be a crucial factor in shaping strategy practice, particularly in how trust, autonomy, and emotion influence managerial sensemaking and strategic contributions.

Mintzberg and Rose (2003) highlight the challenges posed by hierarchical structures, arguing that excessive control limits autonomy and strategic adaptability in knowledge-driven institutions. The findings from this research align with their conclusions, demonstrating that middle managers in highly controlled environments (Institution A) struggled to engage meaningfully with strategy, while those in more consultative environments (Institution B) exhibited stronger strategic commitment. This reinforces the argument that autonomy and trust are essential for knowledge workers to effectively contribute to strategy, particularly in higher education settings, where strategic adaptability is critical for the sharing of knowledge. Kim and Mauborgne (1998) emphasise the role of procedural justice in strategic decision-making within the knowledge economy, contending that voluntary cooperation, rather than forced compliance, is essential for knowledge workers to contribute effectively. This study supports their view, as findings show that middle managers in a high-trust environment (Institution B) felt empowered and engaged, whereas those in low-trust settings (Institutions A and C) experienced frustration and disengagement. This emphasises the importance of fair processes, leadership transparency, and inclusive decision-making in enhancing strategic commitment and knowledge-sharing.

Mládková et al. (2015) examined motivation in knowledge workers, identifying autonomy, meaningful work, and trust as key drivers of engagement and innovation. The findings from

this research corroborate their argument, revealing that middle managers with greater autonomy (Institution B) were more invested in strategy, while those in hierarchical, micromanaged environments (Institution A) struggled with disengagement and perceived strategic processes as performative rather than meaningful. This reinforces the idea that knowledge workers thrive when autonomy and trust are embedded in leadership practices.

Similarly, Donate and Canales (2012) explored how leadership influences knowledge-sharing and strategic adaptability, finding that effective leadership behaviours enhance managerial sensemaking. This study confirms their findings, demonstrating that consultative leadership fosters engagement, whereas disengaged leadership erodes trust and strategic alignment. The institution with the strongest leadership approach exhibited higher levels of strategic buy-in, reinforcing Donate and Canales' (2012) assertion that leaders must actively support knowledge workers to sustain strategic effectiveness.

These findings demonstrate that trust, autonomy, and leadership behaviours fundamentally shape knowledge workers' engagement in strategy practice. This research also considers the interplay between procedural justice, motivation, and senior management behaviour, highlighting their significance in further and higher education institutions where strategic adaptability and knowledge worker engagement are key to long-term success.

5.5 Propositions Arising from the Discussion

The findings from this research demonstrate the critical interplay between trust, purpose, and emotionality in shaping managerial sensemaking within strategy practice, directly addressing the research question of how perceptions of purpose, trust, and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice. Through the synthesis of empirical data and the literature, this research has shown how leadership behaviours, decision-making processes, and strategy processes influence middle management's strategic engagement and their ability to make sense of, and enact, strategy.

The following three propositions offer suggested explanations of how purpose, trust, and emotional dynamics impact managerial sensemaking within knowledge environments such as further and higher education environments. These are not presented as absolute facts, but rather serve as hypothetical explanations derived from the synthesis of findings and literature

throughout the thesis. By building on prior insights, these propositions aim to advance discussions on strategy practice, particularly within further and higher education settings.

This research suggests that for strategy practice to be impactful and useful in further and higher education settings, the strategic planning process must:

1. Have a compelling strategic purpose that creates coherent meaning for all strategy stakeholders.
2. Reflect the influential role of senior management behaviour, which shapes every dimension of strategy practice within institutions.
3. Incorporate both structured documentation and discursive engagement to ensure clarity, alignment, and dynamic conversations.

5.5.1 Have a compelling strategic purpose that creates coherent meaning for all strategy stakeholders.

This research indicates that a clearly defined strategic purpose is essential for meaningful engagement in strategy practice, directly shaping managerial sensemaking, commitment, and strategy delivery. Two of the case study institutions lacked a clear strategic purpose driving their strategy planning processes, and middle managers consequently reported frustration over strategy delivery mechanisms that felt disconnected from a unifying purpose. In these institutions, annual planning was perceived as a burdensome procedural requirement rather than an opportunity to contribute to long-term strategic goals, reinforcing the assertion that process alone is insufficient without an articulated purpose.

In contrast, the third institution demonstrated a powerful sense of strategic purpose and direction, which was woven into all aspects of organisational culture, shaping leadership behaviours and managerial engagement. Respondents spoke passionately about the institution's purpose, describing how their work contributed to a collective vision, fostering higher levels of strategic alignment and emotional investment. This institution exemplified the vital role of purpose in strategy practice, confirming that when strategic intent is clear, embedded, and actively reinforced, it cultivates shared meaning and commitment across both senior and middle management.

These insights emphasise the interplay between purpose, trust, and emotion in shaping managerial sensemaking and demonstrate that strategic purpose must not only be stated but consistently lived and reinforced through leadership behaviours and strategic conversations. The implications of these findings directly inform the next proposition, emphasising the role of senior management in embedding and sustaining strategic purpose within institutions.

5.5.2 Reflect the influential role of senior management behaviour, which shapes every dimension of strategy practice within institutions.

The role of senior management in driving successful strategy practice cannot be underestimated. The findings of this research reveal that middle management desires and benefits from greater engagement, interaction, and strategic direction from senior management. In two of the institutions studied, the absence of consistent active leadership involvement led to frustration, disengagement, and diminished strategic coherence, demonstrating that a strategic plan requires visible leadership commitment to become truly embedded.

The research also indicates that merely having an inspiring strategic plan is not enough to give staff a clear sense of intent. In the two institutions with a less defined strategic purpose, the findings suggest that without continuous communication, reinforcement, and alignment from senior management, strategic purpose remains abstract rather than actionable. This aligns with Jarzabkowski et al. (2007), who argue that strategy is a lived process, requiring continuous engagement and leadership presence to transform stated purpose into practical reality. Leadership must actively embed strategic purpose into organisational discourse, strategy processes, decision-making frameworks, and managerial interactions to sustain long-term strategic coherence. Strategic leadership is not just about setting direction; it is about embedding strategy into everyday organisational narratives, culture, and decision-making. The institution with the most cohesive leadership approach exemplified this principle, with senior management actively reinforcing strategic purpose through frequent communications, consultative leadership, and shared accountability.

Beyond strategic oversight, senior management must cultivate a culture of empowerment, authenticity, honesty, and respect. When leaders demonstrate openness to constructive feedback, acknowledge expertise, and foster inclusive decision-making, they create a stronger

collective commitment to achieving strategic outcomes. Conversely, where leadership is detached or overly hierarchical, strategy risks becoming performative rather than meaningful. These findings underline the interplay between trust, purpose, and emotion in managerial sensemaking, demonstrating that senior leadership behaviour directly influences organisational culture, strategic engagement, and long-term effectiveness. Without visible and engaged authentic leadership, strategy becomes abstract rather than actionable, making continuous reinforcement and visible leadership involvement essential to sustained strategic success.

5.2.3 Incorporate both structured documentation and discursive engagement to ensure clarity, alignment, and dynamic conversations.

This research found that strategic planning cannot rely solely on documentation, it must be complemented by meaningful discursive engagement. Middle management in two of the case study institutions invested considerable time and effort in completing annual strategic planning templates, yet these outputs were rarely reviewed, synthesised, or leveraged by senior management to create a collective strategic direction. Without active discussion, validation, and feedback, documented plans became static exercises rather than dynamic tools for strategic alignment, supporting the assertion that process alone does not guarantee strategic impact.

The absence of senior management involvement in strategy discussions had detrimental effects not only on the perceived value of the planning process, but also on middle management's trust in leadership. When strategic outputs were not revisited beyond the planning cycle, middle managers experienced frustration and disengagement, viewing the process as performative rather than meaningful. This aligns with Powell (2017), who highlights that strategic planning must be understood as a social and interactive mechanism, not merely an administrative exercise.

The third institution demonstrated a more integrated approach, combining a five-year strategic plan with tri-annual reflective planning exercises, peer reviews, and ongoing engagement with senior management. This approach ensured that strategy remained an evolving dialogue, reinforcing strategic objectives while allowing for necessary adjustments based on institutional priorities and emergent changes or opportunities.

The findings reinforce the idea that effective strategy practice requires both structured documentation and discursive interaction. The documented plan serves as a crucial anchor, ensuring clarity and institutional memory, but its value is only fully realised through engagement, validation, and strategic negotiation between leadership and middle management. When senior management actively participates in sensemaking discussions, strategy shifts from a static process to an embedded organisational *practice*, confirming the importance of both formal planning mechanisms and dynamic strategic conversations.

Whilst all three institutions broadly experienced the same external challenges, these challenges had little bearing on the effectiveness of the strategy practice. The researcher contends that enacting all three of the propositions outlined above - having a clear strategic purpose that creates coherent meaning; senior management behaviours that empower and invigorate staff, and; processes that facilitate and underpin a productive relationship between middle and senior management - is fundamental in creating the conditions that allow an organisation to navigate any challenge the external, or internal, environment may present.

These propositions stem from the observation that social interactions between middle and senior management - when embedded within a clearly defined moral and ethical framework and guided by a purposeful strategic intent - are at least as significant as, if not more so than, the formal plans they produce. This is because, while any plan can be rendered obsolete by changing external or internal circumstances, the shared sense of purpose, mutual trust and staff buy-in that effective planning can produce are enough to make almost any challenge tractable. To put it more succinctly: plans on their own are useless, but meaningful planning is indispensable. These propositions form the theoretical contribution that informs the framework in the next section.

5.6 A Theoretical Framework for Strategy Practice

The second part of this chapter focuses on answering the third and final research sub-question:

What factors might define a "meaning-full" strategy planning practice framework?

To answer this question, the findings from the first two research sub-questions are consolidated to propose a framework that enables more meaningful strategic planning practice to take place in further and higher education institutions. It incorporates the key findings and propositions that emerged from the research. This theoretical framework is structured around three key aspects of strategy practice found to be critical to strategy practice: Purpose, Behaviour and Action.

Table 6 - Theoretical framework for strategy practice

Purpose A compelling strategic purpose	Behaviour How senior management behaves	Action Simple strategic processes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a clear and succinct strategic plan. 2. Develop ethical and moral organisational values. 3. Connect financial goals to a more meaningful purpose. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Use strategy and values as a blueprint for behaviour and continually reinforce. 5. Harness and empower middle managers. 6. Establish greater feedback loops, with senior management listening more. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Create longer-term plans with regular check-ins. 8. Bring the budget and delivery plans together. Minimise administrative burden. 9. Set targets and budgets collaboratively. 10. Embed senior management discussions into planning timelines. 11. Establish cross-organisational peer review.

5.6.1 Purpose: A Compelling Strategic Purpose

“The thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die”

Kierkegaard, 1959, p44

This aspect of the framework is focused on the importance of having a compelling strategic purpose so that staff understand the institutional intent that connects all areas of organisational activity. This requires creating a clear and succinct strategic plan to facilitate meaning-making within the organisation. It should be specific about what the institution wants to achieve and written in a way that allows staff to draw meaning from it. It is important that the key messages can be easily understood and reinforced repeatedly. This can help to embed the strategic messages across the organisation which need to be reinforced through all remaining areas of this framework.

The purpose is further achieved by the identification of organisational values that provide a moral and ethical compass for staff. Clear and genuine values provide a framework for decision making by articulating what is important.

Whilst the imperative to ensure financial sustainability must remain a key feature of strategic planning, financial goals are not on their own enough to motivate and engage staff. Staff need to understand the deeper purpose of increasing income or reducing costs, what their impact will be on the ongoing health of the organisation, and why that is important. Any financial objectives should be connected to a deeper, more meaningful purpose, ensuring that organisational ambitions are both impactful and values-driven.

5.6.2 Behaviour: How Senior Management Behaves

“The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity.

Without it, no real success is possible”

Dwight Eisenhower, as cited by Cheley, 1958, p106.

The behaviour of senior management is a key component of effective strategy practice, and is fundamental to shaping all elements of strategic planning, particularly for building constructive relationships with middle management. It is not enough to have a well written strategy and inspiring values if these messages are not reflected in senior management and middle management behaviours. If there is a disconnect between what is said and what is done in practice, staff notice. This impacts relationships and causes confusion when the behaviour of senior management does not embody the institution’s values, or demonstrate a commitment to the institution’s purpose. Senior management need to hold themselves to account by living and breathing the values they claim to espouse. The strategy and values should be continually referenced and embedded in all aspects of the strategy process, reinforced consistently and used as a blueprint to guide actions.

Further and higher education settings, like most organisations, are social entities and staff at all levels need to find common ground to work together. Empathetic and empowering leadership, demonstrated authentically by senior management, creates the necessary conditions for staff to feel motivated, supported and cared about. Empowering middle

managers is key, and ensures that they are harnessed to support strategic goals effectively. Additionally, fostering stronger feedback loops between senior and middle management is essential, and senior management should place greater emphasis on active listening to enhance communication and collaboration.

5.6.3 Action: Simple Strategic Processes

“Strategy without process is little more than a wish list”

Robert Filek, n.d.

Coordinating strategy across multiple planning units within a large education setting requires straightforward planning processes which act as a key enabler for effective strategy planning and practice, holding both senior and middle management to account along the way. This includes developing longer-term plans complemented by regular check-ins to ensure progress and adaptability. Developing new annual plans each year is not effective for medium to long-term planning and is unnecessarily time intensive. Integrating budget and delivery plans is crucial, and an emphasis should be placed on minimising administrative burdens to enhance efficiency. Collaborative target and budget setting fosters alignment and shared responsibility, while embedding senior management discussions into planning timelines ensures strategic oversight. Finally, establishing cross-organisational peer reviews promotes accountability and knowledge sharing throughout the organisation. All the key steps outlined under the Action in Table 6 need to be carefully planned to ensure that key activities are completed in a timely way so that the management of the institution can focus their efforts on delivering against their strategy.

5.7 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter synthesised the findings from both the literature review and the empirical study to address the overarching research question: *How do perceptions of purpose, trust, and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice?*

The findings from three institutions highlight the critical role of leadership behaviours, strategic clarity, and relational dynamics in shaping effective strategy practice. Purpose, trust, and emotions are central to how management interprets and enacts strategy in Scottish tertiary education institutions. Variations in leadership behaviours, strategic alignment, and

institutional culture directly influence how managers engage with strategic planning and decision-making. Institutions with strong leadership engagement and clearly communicated strategic purpose demonstrated higher levels of trust, motivation, and strategic commitment. In contrast, limited leadership involvement and weak strategic clarity led to disengagement and frustration, reinforcing the importance of relational and affective conditions in strategy delivery.

The analysis led to three propositions that centred around purpose, behaviour and action, and which provide the foundations for a meaning-full strategic planning framework, based on observation that a purpose-driven, trust-informed, and emotionally cognisant approach strengthens strategy practice, and which emphasises the interplay between strategic purpose, leadership engagement, and emotional connection.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This thesis has examined how perceptions of purpose, trust, and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice, focusing on the Scottish further and higher education sectors. Through a qualitative case study approach, the study has explored the intricate dynamics between senior and middle management during annual strategic planning processes, shedding light on the complexities of decision-making, interpretation, and collaborative strategy practice.

To understand how do perceptions of purpose, trust, and emotions shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice, both theoretical foundations and empirical insights have been considered. This chapter synthesises these insights, reflecting on their implications for strategic planning, and proposes directions for future research and practice in the field of strategy-as-practice. The significance and contribution of the research are outlined, along with the strengths and limitations of the study.

6.2 Answering the Research Questions

This section presents a summary of the research questions and their corresponding answers, offering a concise synthesis of the study's key findings.

The overarching research question was broken down into three research sub-questions, which were presented in the Introduction (Chapter One). The first sub-question was answered following the Literature Review (Chapter Two). The second sub-research question was answered using the empirical results in the Findings (Chapter Four) and Discussion (Chapter Five), with the third sub-question answered in the Discussion (Chapter Five).

The three sub-research questions that guided this research were:

- *A: From a strategy-as-practice perspective, how are purpose, trust and emotionality currently understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers?*
- *B: How do purpose, trust and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?*
- *C: What factors might define a "meaning-full" strategy planning practice framework?*

The answers to each research sub-question are summarised below.

A: From a strategy-as-practice perspective, how are purpose, trust, and emotionality understood to impact on sensemaking of strategic planning by managers?

The Literature Review in Chapter Two established the theoretical foundations for the research by outlining key concepts that frame the research opportunities, addressing the first sub-research question. The literature review established that trust and emotionality are pivotal in shaping managerial interpretations of strategic intent, influencing how senior and middle managers engage with strategic planning. Middle managers play a crucial role as translators and enactors of strategy, navigating institutional constraints and relational dynamics. Strategic tools function as practical enablers, supporting sensemaking while being shaped by underlying power structures.

In further and higher education institutions, competing priorities and managerialist approaches present challenges to strategic decision-making. Corporate style leadership and governance frameworks have caused concerns over the erosion of educational values and have exacerbated tensions between senior and middle management. Both sectors share fundamental challenges in balancing purpose-driven leadership with stakeholder pluralism, in a knowledge worker environment of notable change and disruption.

Existing studies highlight the importance of meaning-making in strategic action but emphasise the need for deeper exploration into the cognitive and relational dimensions of managerial sensemaking. Trust, as defined by Frei and Morriss (2020), influences managerial agency and strategic collaboration. Emotionality plays a similarly vital role, shaping strategic interactions within pluralistic institutional settings.

This research contributes to the strategy-as-practice research by bridging gaps between cognitive, relational, and emotional perspectives in strategy practice, offering insights into how these factors collectively shape strategic planning. By integrating purpose, trust, and emotionality, the study enhances our understanding of how managers interpret, engage with, and enact strategy within dynamic and diverse institutional environments.

B: How do purpose, trust, and emotion shape managerial sensemaking in strategy practice in education settings in Scotland?

Empirical findings from three Scottish institutions revealed that purpose, trust, and emotion are integral to managerial sensemaking in strategic planning - influencing leadership dynamics, decision-making, and institutional engagement. A clear strategic purpose was found to be essential for meaningful engagement, directly shaping managers' commitment and sensemaking. However, to remain effective, purpose must be actively reinforced through leadership behaviours and strategic conversations. Trust emerged as a crucial factor, particularly in the relationship between senior and middle management. Middle managers sought greater strategic direction and interaction from senior leaders, demonstrating that leadership engagement was critical for translating strategic intent into practical action. In institutions where senior management fostered consultative leadership and transparent communication, strategy practice was more coherent and impactful. Emotionality significantly shaped managerial interpretations and strategic interactions. Leaders who demonstrated empathy, authenticity, and openness to feedback cultivated stronger trust and engagement, while hierarchical or detached leadership approaches risked making strategy performative rather than meaningful.

The findings of this research emphasise that effective strategic planning requires both discursive and documented elements. While structured planning documents provide clarity, they must be accompanied by ongoing dialogue and sensemaking discussions to ensure alignment and strategic continuity. Institutions that integrated these discursive practices experienced stronger strategic cohesion and trust. This was especially important in a knowledge generating and sharing environment. The interplay of strategic purpose, leadership behaviour, and process design proved fundamental in shaping managerial sensemaking and effective strategy practice in the face of changing external pressures.

C: What factors might define a "meaning-full" strategic planning practice framework?

The findings from the first two research sub-questions informed a framework structured around three core components essential for effective strategy practice: Purpose, Behaviour, and Action.

Purpose – A Compelling Strategic Purpose

A clear and meaningful strategic purpose is vital for aligning institutional intent across all levels. Strategic plans should be succinct, actionable, and reinforced through consistent communication. Organisational values serve as an ethical compass, guiding decision-making and embedding purpose-driven leadership. Financial sustainability, vitally important for further and higher education institutions, should be framed within a broader, values-driven vision to ensure that strategic purpose extends beyond financial targets, and secures staff buy-in.

Behaviour: How Senior Management Behaves

Senior management plays a crucial role in shaping strategic engagement, as leadership behaviour affects trust, commitment, and organisational culture, shaping all aspects of strategy practice. Strategy must be lived, not just documented. Senior management should embody institutional values and actively reinforce strategic intent through engagement with actors tasked with strategic delivery. Empowering middle management through participatory leadership enhances engagement, while fostering open dialogue that strengthens strategic alignment and collaboration.

Action – Simple Strategic Processes

Strategy practice should be supported by straightforward planning mechanisms that ensure alignment between long-term ambitions and short-term decision-making. Annual strategic planning should complement sustained multi-year planning, ensuring budget integration, clear accountability and efficiency of documented outputs, with peer review mechanisms promoting consistency and shared responsibility across the institution.

This framework emphasises that strategy practice is not just about documentation, it is an ongoing, interactive process shaped by leadership behaviours, institutional purpose and values, and structured planning mechanisms. By integrating purpose, trust, and emotionality, organisations can move beyond performative strategy exercises toward genuinely impactful and collaborative strategic planning.

6.3 Contributions of the Research

This study primarily contributes to the field of strategy-as-practice, particularly in the context of further and higher education settings within the UK. Whilst there is already a wealth of research available on strategy practice, there were opportunities to explore how purpose, trust and emotion shaped managerial sensemaking. This research has offered the following contributions.

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the strategy-as-practice body of literature by outlining the theoretical and empirical significance of meaning and purpose in strategy practice. Within strategy-as-practice, strategy is understood not as a static plan but as micro-level processes and practices that constitute the everyday doing of strategy (Johnson et al., 2003). Building on this foundation, the research presented here argues that for strategy to be effective, it must carry meaning for those it seeks to mobilise. Strategy without purpose lacks the capacity to guide behaviour and action, particularly in contexts of uncertainty. Purpose is not merely a conceptual anchor, it is a mobilising force that animates behaviour and drives strategic action.

A framework of Purpose, Behaviour, and Action, through which meaning is constructed and enacted in strategic practice is offered. It addresses a critical gap in the strategy-as-practice literature: the under-theorisation of strategy as *purpose*. By explicitly integrating purpose into the strategy-as-practice perspective, this research extends the field to account for the emotional, relational, and motivational dimensions of strategy. It demonstrates that meaning, rooted in purpose, is what breathes life into strategic vision. This work contributes a novel lens through which to understand how strategy mobilises individuals and organisations, offering both theoretical depth and empirical insight into the role of meaning, trust, and senior management behaviour in strategy practice.

Several previously unconnected strategy-as-practice concepts are synthesised offering a more integrated perspective on strategy delivery. While many of these concepts fall within the broader strategy-as-practice domain, they are often examined in isolation. This synthesis explores how purpose (Alvesson and Sveningsson's, 2024; Hamel, 2009; Mintzberg and Rose, 2003), trust (Frei and Morriss, 2020; Sillince et al., 2012; Holstein et al., 2016), and emotion (Burgelman et al., 2018; Lencioni, 2012; Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011)

shape managerial sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; McKiernan and MacKay, 2017; Day et al., 2023) in strategy practice. This contributes a framework for examining the relational dynamics between senior and middle management when engaged in strategy practice. This study enhances a deeper understanding of how managerial sensemaking is influenced not only by structural and procedural elements, but also by the more intangible - yet profoundly impactful - forces of purpose, trust, and emotion.

Three propositions are offered that explain how purpose, trust, and emotional dynamics shape managerial sensemaking in further and higher education settings. These principles derive from the observation that a compelling strategic purpose, not merely articulated but actively embodied, creates coherent meaning for all stakeholders, while senior management behaviours critically embed and reinforce this purpose. Additionally, the study demonstrates the need for combining structured documentation with dynamic, discursive engagement, transforming static strategic plans into interactive, meaningful practices. Effective strategy practice hinges on continuous communication and active leadership, rather than on a well-crafted plan alone. By demonstrating that strategy is a lived process (Powell, 2017) requiring ongoing engagement between senior and middle management, the research highlights that trust and emotional connections are indispensable for aligning strategy with organisational culture. The researcher contends that the simultaneous enactment of all three propositions - a clear strategic purpose that fosters coherent meaning; senior management behaviours that energise and empower staff; and processes that support a constructive relationship between middle and senior management - is essential for cultivating the conditions that enable an organisation to respond effectively to both external and internal challenges.

These propositions provide the foundations for a meaning-full theoretical strategic planning model that acknowledges purpose-driven ambition with trust-based leadership and emotional awareness. This model demonstrates that an articulated strategic purpose, when actively reinforced by engaged senior management and genuine emotional connection, transforms conventional strategy practice into a dynamic, resilient process. It shifts the focus from mere financial targets to a holistic strategic approach where authentic leadership and ongoing dialogue serve as the catalysts for sustained strategic practice and adaptability. The model emphasises the importance of embedding Purpose, Behaviour and Action within strategic

processes and practices, ensuring they are inherently meaningful, rather than simply making a difference superficially.

This theoretical contribution draws together established constructs from strategy-as-practice — including strategic intent, strategic planning, decision-making, trust, emotions and middle manager autonomy — into a coherent explanatory framework. While these individual elements have been examined across a diverse range of management contexts, their empirical integration through the Purpose—Behaviour—Action framework offers a novel perspective on how strategic meaning is created, communicated, and enacted. The originality lies not in the individual constructs, but in how they are configured to demonstrate the recursive and relational nature of strategy practice. This model illuminates the often-overlooked interdependencies between leadership behaviours, emotional resonance, and strategic action, offering a practical tool for analysing how strategy is lived and shaped across organisational levels.

The theoretical model makes a meaningful contribution to the strategy-as-practice literature within the context of further and higher education. This model challenges traditional, finance-centric approaches and offers a fresh, empirically grounded perspective for scholars and practitioners alike. This thesis challenges the idea that strategy succeeds through alignment to rational strategic processes and practice. Instead, it posits that emotional resonance and trust-based managerial relationships are essential in turning strategic intent into organisationally embedded action. Without attention to senior and middle management relational dynamics, strategic plans risk becoming performative exercises that are emotionally dissonant. This can diminish staff commitment, weaken institutional identity, and ultimately compromise the long-term viability of strategic ambition.

Empirical Contributions

While this research does not aim to present definitive conclusions, it opens a conceptual space for continued inquiry and theoretical refinement. At the same time, it offers several significant empirical insights.

Through a triangulated qualitative case study approach, this research provides empirical evidence on the role of purpose, trust, and emotions in managerial sensemaking within

strategy practice. This research is the first to systematically examine these dynamics in both Scottish further and higher education institutions, addressing a gap in the literature where studies have typically focused on one sector rather than both. Hence, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the existing bodies of literature outlined below by offering a detailed and empirically rich account of strategy practice within further and higher education. The depth of analysis provides valuable insight into the lived realities of strategic work in these institutional settings, shedding light on dynamics that are often underexplored.

The application of Frei and Morriss's (2020) trust model to three educational institutions offers original insights into authenticity, logic, and empathy in strategic leadership, representing the first known empirical study applying the model in the education sector.

The need for deliberate and emergent strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Isenberg, 1987) in further and higher education settings is confirmed from this research.

The extension of organisational values research (Schein, 2010; Kotter, 1996; Collins and Porras, 1994; Lencioni, 2012) demonstrates the critical role played by clearly articulated values in supporting strategy delivery in educational institutions. The study is also the first to examine the connection between strategic intent and organisational values.

New empirical insights are offered for the pivotal and catalytic influence of middle management autonomy in driving effective strategy practice (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Burgelman et al., 2018; Raes et al., 2011). The findings emphasise the crucial role of middle managers in the strategic process, highlighting their position as essential intermediaries who bridge the gap between senior leadership and operational teams (Ahearne et al., 2014; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Raes et al., 2011; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990, cited by Burgelman et al., 2018). This research also confirms the vital role middle management has in holding "positional power" when faced with managing uncertainty (Ahearne et al., 2014), reinforcing the findings of Clegg and McAuley (2005) and extending their applicability to educational leadership.

Furthermore, emotionality was found to be a key factor in strategy execution (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011; Vuori and Huy, 2016; Liu and Maitlis, 2014) and confirms that management

behaviours are inherently shaped by affective responses. This responds to Burgelman et al.'s (2018) call to expand emotionality research to include relational interactions, in order to understand the importance of emotions in strategy practice (Burgelman et al., 2018).

By characterising the importance of two-way sensemaking in strategy processes (Mintzberg, 1994; Grant, 2003; McKiernan and MacKay, 2017), the study confirms the crucial sensereceiving role of senior management and its impact on organisational alignment if weak sensemaking mechanisms are in place.

New insights are provided into the power dynamics between middle and senior management, extending Spee and Jarzabkowski's (2011) research, and demonstrating how leadership behaviours, as well as power, social order, and the agency of those participating in strategic planning, shape strategic outcomes through the interplay between talk and text in strategic planning.

The research confirms that trust, autonomy and leadership behaviours fundamentally shape knowledge workers' engagement in strategy practice, highlighting their significance in further and higher education institutions where strategic adaptability and knowledge worker engagement are key to long-term success (Mintzberg and Rose, 2003; Kim and Mauborgne, 1998; Mládková et al., 2015; Donate and Canales, 2012).

The critical role of meaning-making in strategic practice within UK further and higher education settings is highlighted from this research. Despite widespread financial pressures, only one of the three institutions successfully conveyed a compelling strategic vision beyond financial sustainability. Building on Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) and Leader (2004), the study demonstrates the need to further explore what truly motivates and inspires staff in these settings. Aligning with Hamel (2009), the findings demonstrate that financial goals alone do not foster engagement or commitment; rather, institutions must articulate socially significant objectives that cultivate a deeper sense of purpose among staff and strategy stakeholders.

This research reframes strategic practice in further and higher education settings not as a rational, mechanistic process, but as a deeply human endeavour shaped by purpose, trust, and emotion. By highlighting how these elements intertwine within managerial sensemaking,

the study offers a timely and necessary recalibration of how strategy is both theorised and enacted in further and higher education. In a time of intensifying institutional and sectoral pressures, this work asserts that strategic resilience depends not on tighter controls, but on meaningful engagement.

When these relational dynamics are embedded in strategic practice, they not only strengthen cultural alignment and emotional safety but also have the potential to deliver measurable performance benefits such as improved staff retention, greater success in student recruitment and engagement, more agile decision-making in times of uncertainty, and enhanced cross-departmental collaboration. The findings suggest that fostering a meaning-full strategy is not simply a conceptual contribution, but a critical performance lever, one with tangible implications for institutional adaptability, innovation, and long-term sustainability. By reframing these dynamics as core mechanisms of performance, the research contributes to both academic debate and the practical advancement of strategy within mission-driven educational environments. Scholars, leaders, and policymakers are invited to reconsider what counts as effective strategic practice, and recognise that cultivating emotional connection, authentic leadership, and trustful relationships is not secondary to strategy, but core to its success.

6.4 Future Research Considerations

The findings from this research suggest many opportunities for future study. Future research could explore the link between strategic plans and organisational values in further and higher education settings, to build on existing studies by Schein (2010), Kotter (1996), Collins and Porras (1994), and Lencioni (2012). Exploring the alignment between strategic objectives and institutional values may offer deeper insights into how strategic actors construct meaning, while also identifying actions that can strengthen engagement, and the implementation of strategy.

Additionally, there is an opportunity to examine the role of financial goals in shaping strategic motivation among staff across a broader range of institutions, further supporting Hamel's (2009) work. Investigating how financial objectives interact with intrinsic and extrinsic motivators could provide a nuanced understanding of strategic commitment in educational environments. Similarly, deeper inquiry into what inspires and motivates staff in further and

higher education would further the work of Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) and Leader (2004), offering practical insights into meaning-making in further and higher education contexts.

Further studies could explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Principals of further and higher education institutions, particularly in their leadership approaches and strategic decision-making. This could provide insight into how institutional culture, emotional dynamics, and personal values shape strategic priorities and implementation. It may also illuminate the nuanced tensions Principals navigate between managerial accountability, relational trust-building, and educational purpose.

Examining what is communicated about strategy by senior management versus what happens in practice remains a key area for investigation (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). Addressing this gap could reveal critical factors influencing strategy practice, particularly in relation to transparency and alignment in strategic interactions. Finally, applying Frei and Morriss' (2020) trust model to broader case studies would provide comparative data, with greater applicability across different institutional contexts. This could offer valuable insights into the ideal levels of trust required for effective functioning within large and complex institutions.

6.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Whilst the study has provided useful insights, there are several limitations to consider. A strength of the study is that three further and higher education settings in Scotland participated in the research, allowing a triangulated source approach to the data collection and analysis. Another key strength of the study lies in its deliberate prioritisation of depth over breadth of participants. Despite the challenge of limited access, the researcher maintained a rigorous selection criterion to ensure that interview participants held the appropriate seniority and strategic responsibility within their institutions. This safeguarded the study's integrity by securing insights from those most directly involved in annual planning, thereby generating rich, contextually grounded data. The use of multiple case studies enhanced the robustness of findings by facilitating cross-institutional comparison, while the anonymisation of institutional identities further strengthened the credibility and ethical rigour of the fieldwork. This methodological strategy aligned with McGrath's (1981) concept of dilemmatics, with careful trade-offs made to optimise the relevance and trustworthiness of the data collected.

Nonetheless, the study faced several limitations. Accessing a small and relatively opaque population of senior and middle managers posed recruitment challenges. Additionally, the sensitive nature of participants' roles introduced risk, as discussions often touched on commercially or operationally sensitive topics. Although full anonymisation mitigated this concern, it constrained the level of contextual detail that could be reported. Furthermore, while the decision to prioritise participant relevance over sample size preserved analytical depth, it also limited the breadth of perspectives represented across and within institutions.

Moreover, the research data for the main study was collected from 2022 to 2024. This was in a post-COVID-19 context where the education sector had seen significant economic, social, and political challenges. There was a general level of exhaustion from respondents following the preceding years of change and disruption, which had a major impact on both the student and staff experience. Had this study been carried out prior to COVID-19, or after the effects of the pandemic have fully diminished, the results may have been different. However, the timing of the data collection could also be considered a strength, offering valuable insight into strategy practice amid significant disruption and adversity, conditions that serve as a compelling test of strategic efficacy.

Taking all of this into account, the findings from this study may not be fully replicable if carried out at the same institutions or at other institutions. However, the findings from this study still offer valuable insights into further and higher education settings during and following periods of major disruption. Conducting the research across a broader range of further and higher education settings could enhance the transferability and validity of the findings, providing a broader understanding of strategy practice across the further and higher education sector.

6.6 Practical Implications

The implications of this study for strategic practice in further and higher education settings could not be more timely. Amidst a period of profound global disruption, economically, politically, and socially, the demand for effective and adaptive strategic leadership is more pressing than ever. This research highlights the critical role of senior management in shaping purposeful, cohesive and responsive institutions. This research emphasises the need for leaders to reflect deeply on their strategic objectives, to articulate clearly what truly matters, and to align their actions with these priorities. A reliance on top-down directives or narrowly

defined financial targets is insufficient. Instead, senior leaders must cultivate a culture of collective purpose, grounded in shared values and transparent goals, that engages and motivates staff so they can build resilient institutions capable of responding to the evolving challenges of the modern world.

Building on the rich body of strategy-as-practice literature, this study has informed the development of a new theoretical framework for strategy practice in further and higher education settings. The model is shaped around the main themes that emerged from the research: Purpose, Behaviour and Action. The model is transferable to any organisational context, providing leaders and middle managers with a practical approach to deliver against their strategic ambitions more effectively. By applying the recommendations presented here, managers can create greater engagement, strategic clarity, and empower staff in the pursuit of strategic goals.

Practically, these findings emphasise the need for leadership development approaches that go beyond technical competencies to include emotional intelligence, relational trust-building, and the active embodiment of strategic purpose. Institutions seeking to improve performance outcomes such as staff retention and cross-functional responsiveness must prioritise strategic behaviours that foster psychological safety and collective meaning-making. Embedding these relational dimensions into leadership practices, internal communications, and performance metrics offers a tangible way to not only align staff with institutional goals but to sustain motivation and adaptability in the face of ongoing sectoral turbulence.

Key practical implications for strategic actors and practitioners in institutions are:

- Prioritise creating a succinct strategic purpose and organisational values that resonate with all stakeholders.
- Integrate strategic purpose and values into everyday activities, aligning decision-making, resource allocation, and performance with the institution's purpose.
- Senior management should lead by example, embedding themselves in the strategy process and demonstrating behaviours that reflect organisational values. This could include regular engagement with middle managers, creating spaces for open dialogue, and fostering a culture of empowerment and respect.

- Leadership training and development programs could focus on enhancing senior managers' skills in authenticity, active listening, and collaborative decision-making.
- Organisations should focus on implementing structured planning processes that integrate both detailed documentation and meaningful conversations. This could involve transitioning from annual planning templates to more iterative, reflective processes, such as quarterly reviews or strategy workshops that encourage feedback and refinement.
- Senior management must ensure that documented plans are actively utilised and revisited as tools to guide strategy delivery, rather than as static reports. Collaborative online platforms or dashboards could enhance transparency and keep plans dynamic.
- Peer reviews, cross-departmental collaborations, and benchmarking against similar institutions could further refine practices and share successful approaches across the sector.

The following offers a suggested outline for practical training that could be delivered to senior and middle management in further and higher education settings. The training would consist of four sessions shaped around the Purpose, Behaviour, Action model as outlined in Figure 7:



Figure 7 - Suggested practical training outline

Session 1: A compelling strategic purpose – the 'what and why'

This would explore the organisation's purpose, reflecting on their strategy and values to identify any adjustments that are required. The organisation's values would be critically evaluated, reflecting on the students and stakeholders they serve. Senior and middle management from the organisation would be encouraged to explore deeply what the

values mean to them and what they stand for morally and ethically. They would be challenged to condense their key messages from the strategy and the values down to one page. Where there are financially motivated goals, they would be asked to articulate them in a way that provides a greater level of meaning and purpose.

Session 2: Leadership Behaviour – the ‘how’

This would explore the dynamics of the senior and middle management relationship. Using Frei and Morriss' (2020) model of trust, participants would be encouraged to reflect on their authenticity, logic, and empathy, encouraging feedback from a selection of senior and middle managers across the organisation. This would require the senior management to be open to feedback and willing to adapt their approach. Senior management would be asked to explore the current methods of receiving feedback from staff at varying levels of the organisation, and how this could be improved to expand their opportunities for sensereceiving.

Session 3: Strategy in action – the ‘how and when’

This would explore the processes and mechanisms in place for strategic planning and delivery. Senior management would be asked to reflect on their current planning approach to explore whether there are opportunities for improvement. If they create an annual plan every year, they would be encouraged to review the frequency of planning, and move to longer-term plans with adjustments made when required. Organisations which develop their plans and budgets separately would be encouraged to bring them together and establish a mechanism for cross-organisational peer review. They would be asked to reflect on and articulate the roles and expectations of all strategic managers involved in these processes, so that there is greater clarity of purpose in future.

Session 4: Bringing it all together – the ‘how, what, why and when’

This would encourage the leadership to reflect on the outcomes of the previous sessions, identifying the important aspects of strategy delivery that must be changed and devising a plan that will put these changes in place, including a mechanism that ensures accountability, should the plan not be put into practice.

By translating the conclusions of this research into actionable steps, organisations can enhance their strategy practice, improving outcomes for staff, students, and the institution.

Chapter Seven: Reflections on the Thesis Journey

As a professional who has worked in higher education since 2009, this research has not only challenged and broadened my theoretical understanding of strategy practice, but it has also greatly informed my practice as a middle manager tasked with delivering strategy.

Saunders et al. (2019) highlight the opportunities and challenges that come with being a practitioner-researcher, such as the ability to access information and endless opportunities for research potential. Whilst knowing the sector has been an advantage, I have continually had to take a step back and challenge my preconceptions and assumptions. However, both roles have informed each other along the way, and I have evolved as a stronger leader throughout this experience because of this research.

Being a postgraduate researcher has been quite a journey of reflection and self-development by acknowledging and challenging my professional and philosophical assumptions and view of the world. Thinking back to when I wrote my research proposal and discussed my research idea with supervisors, I used language such as “strategy alignment”, “strategy execution”, and “strategy deployment”. Reflecting on those words now, they sound so hard, unfeeling, and mechanical. They are not words that acknowledge the social dynamics of an organisation which I now understand to be fundamental for creating the collaborative conditions for effective strategy practice. I never thought of myself as being cold or unempathetic, but I think the language I used lacked empathy and warmth. My view of organisations had been hierarchical and was shaped by my experiences of hierarchy and power, having progressed in my career from being an entry-level administrator to now a senior manager in higher education.

One example of a change to my perspective relates to the concept of sensemaking, I thought it was the most obvious and pointless concept I had ever come across. It seemed so evident that we convey and acquire information and then make sense of it. I immediately discounted the concept as something that might be of use to my research. Throughout my research, my attitude to sensemaking changed completely, which has both surprised and amused me, given my strong feelings initially. Following the initial pilot study, I found myself being drawn to sensemaking to help explain what I was seeing in the data and understand how the respondents were feeling. Again, in the bigger study, the concept of sensemaking was crucial. I have changed in so many ways throughout this journey.

I started my part-time PhD journey in October 2019 and commenced a new role as Faculty Manager in March 2020, the same day that the whole of the UK went into lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is hard to express just how challenging it was to take up a new leadership role, being a mum at home with a toddler and find time to progress my PhD. However, I did. Somehow, I kept going. I applied the little and often approach and made incremental progress. I achieved my mandatory modules and completed the pilot study in those first few years of my PhD and presented a paper at the British Academy of Management Conference in 2022. It was hard and many sacrifices were made as it meant being on my laptop for an unhealthy amount of time. It is not a time any of us would want to repeat, but I am proud of myself for keeping going. In September 2024, I stepped into an even bigger role when I was appointed to the position of Registrar for the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. A lot has happened both personally and professionally in the last six years, and I am delighted and proud to have reached the end of this journey and produced this thesis. That is not bad going for someone who failed their Higher English, twice.

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Appendix A - Pilot Study Interview Questions

1. What do you think is the purpose of the annual plan?
2. Who are the users and the intended audience for the annual plan?
3. How does the annual plan help you to deliver against the strategy?
4. Can you describe the level of autonomy you have in designing and executing your annual plan?
5. How do you go about creating your annual plan? Was it created collaboratively? Written and then shared for feedback? Not shared at all?
6. How does the annual plan help you to identify your priorities for the coming year?
7. How do you actively use and communicate these plans in your area?
8. How well does the annual plan reflect past performance?
9. Is there a particular section in the annual plan that you find most useful? Why?
10. Is there a section you find least helpful?
11. How relevant do you think the 19/20 plans were in light of COVID-19 hitting 8 months into the plan?
12. Describe how you adapted your 19/20 plan during the covid crisis? Have you had the autonomy to do this?
13. How relevant do you think the 20/21 plans are in light of the covid pandemic?
14. You created the covid impact statements as an addendum to the 20/21 annual plan. Do you think this was a good approach? Is it a true reflection of how you will adapt over the coming year? Do you have autonomy with this?
15. How do you really feel about the annual plan process and your annual plan?
16. What would you like to improve about the annual plan and the process?
17. How can more joined-up thinking and cross-institutional working happen throughout the annual planning process?

Questions for Second Pilot Study Interviews

Meaningful Dialogue

1. One of the themes that emerged from the first round of interviews was that there was limited to no feedback from Senior Team as part of the annual planning process. Why is feedback as part of this process important to you?
2. Are there any aspects of the process that provide you with meaningful exchanges?
3. In what ways do you think meaningful dialogue could take place through this process?
4. How willing is the senior leadership to listen to feedback in this process? Could the process better inform or adjust the strategic plan?

KPIs

5. Some respondents mentioned a sense of KPIs being “imposed” on academic budget holders. What is your experience of this? How does it make you feel in your role?
6. How do you feel if you don’t achieve your targets?
7. What impact does annual stretch targets have on your motivation levels, and your ability to inspire and motivate others?
8. How could the allocation of KPIs/targets be better approached?
9. Some of the feedback suggests that senior leadership compare academic areas against each other with KPI performance? Why do you think they do this? Is it helpful?
10. Do you think you have the necessary resources required to achieve the targets?

Autonomy

11. What does autonomy mean to you in the annual planning process?
12. Do you have the autonomy to make strategic decisions?
13. What difference would it make if you had increased levels of discretion within your area? E.g., the ability to sign off on resources. Clearer routes for seeking investment.

Investment and Resources

14. How do you gain support for your investment ideas? Are those processes transparent?
15. What changes do you think could be made to make growth vs investment discussions and decisions more effective and transparent?

Tensions

16. How honest do you think you are in the writing of the plan and any discussions you may have as part of the process?
17. What is your perception of the senior leadership’s willingness to adapt the strategic plan if the context within which it was created has changed?
18. What aspects of the annual process feel authentic to you? Do you feel the senior leadership are authentic in this process?
19. How do you think empathy is displayed throughout this process from all parties?

Appendix B - Pilot Study Findings

Introduction

To narrow the focus of the research and more clearly define the research question, the researcher undertook an inductive pilot study which looked at a strategic annual planning process in one institution which shall be known as Pilot X. The annual plans were the formal approach to strategic planning and used by planning units to identify priorities and contributions to delivering against the strategy. The annual plans were one of the key tools in cascading and delivering strategy throughout the institution and were identified as a credible subject for undertaking an initial study on strategy delivery. This Appendix provides the comprehensive findings for the pilot study.

Content Analysis Findings

Content analysis was first carried out on six of Pilot X's annual plans created for the academic year 2019 to 2020. Six units were selected which consisted of four academic departments and two professional service plans. The purpose of content analysis was to uncover the explicit and implicit meanings and themes within the plans so that new understandings could emerge to inform the questions for exploration in the interviews. The executive summary and content from the three KPI sections were selected for comparative analysis. The relevant sections from the six annual plans were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and coded to protect the identity of each planning unit. The word count for each section was captured, with the most common words identified. Each section was individually analysed with the observations captured. All observations were considered together, with sections compared against each plan to draw out the similarities and differences.

Suitability of template

The template was designed around the strategic KPIs, and this did seem to be a useful way to connect the plans to the high-level strategy. The template was simple and perhaps this simplicity had left it open for each area to interpret the template differently, particularly with the KPI narrative. The template was pre-populated with disaggregate targets at the faculty level. For professional services, there were no disaggregate targets, and they mostly described

their service, outlining initiatives that would support the achievement of the KPIs over the coming year. Having no targets raised the question as to whether professional services were absolved of accountability for delivering the strategy.

The intended audience was not clear

Although the planning guidance stated that the executive summary was for wider stakeholder viewing, the intended audience of the plans was often unclear. Some plans were aimed at a senior audience as they were used as an opportunity to promote how well an area was doing or to justify challenging performance. Other plans communicated detailed objectives that would be the focus for driving activity over the coming year.

Variation in style and tone

There was no consistency with how the plans were written and it appeared as if there may have been different authors for each KPI section as the style of writing changed. Five of the plans referenced the institutional strategy in their executive summary but there was one that did not and gave the impression that they were a standalone unit. Five plans took the opportunity to present their area in the best possible light with optimistic content that outlined their long-term ambitions. In one plan, there were no specific priorities outlined and provided general information. The two professional service plans were presented differently to the academic departments in tone and accountability. One of the plans described their services with no targets or goals for the coming year. The other plan outlined projects underway that were in support of the KPIs, but there were no goals or targets for the projects. Although the planning guidance stated that plans were to be no more than five pages, the plans ranged from a minimum of eight pages to twelve pages, with one as high as 27 pages with appendices. Three of the plans were succinct and relatively clear. Within KPI sections of two of the plans, the tone was defensive and unwilling to accept the targets and baseline data. Despite a significant amount of explanation in the accompanying guidance to explain how the data had been compiled and that it was a snapshot at a certain point in time, two plans presented revised numbers accompanied with detailed justifications.

Each plan was standalone

Although a standard template had been issued, each plan was standalone. They had been created in isolation so the ability to analyse, compare, and join up with other areas of the business was absent from the process.

Too many priorities

Although only four sections were analysed, within each KPI there were multiple priorities. For one plan, they outlined their objectives and several priorities for the coming year, up to 11 for each KPI. It raised the question as to how realistic these plans were in practice. Two plans only described what they did and the services they provided with no clear objectives or goals. Three of the plans outlined long-term initiatives, whereas the other plans were only focused on the year ahead.

Minimal reflection on the previous plan's performance

Although each KPI section was meant to include a brief narrative on progress, the planning units put into words what was already provided in the target and baseline figures, with no deeper context or reflection. Two of the plans added their own Red, Amber and Green status at the start of each KPI to communicate whether they assessed themselves to be on track in delivering their targets. It was a useful addition for the reader, but it is unknown if this was perceived to be useful at a senior level.

At the end of the content analysis, the question remained as to whether the annual plan template was suitable for *doing* strategy. In comparing the six plans and the significant variation within each, it was perceived that each planning unit had the autonomy to pursue their ideas and priorities that would deliver against the strategy. What was not clear from undertaking the analysis of the plans was whether the plans were useful or not. Having a consistent template created a sense of order, coordination and consistency, however, the variation of content within each presented mixed findings as to the effectiveness of the annual planning template. There appeared to be strengths and weaknesses within each of the plans, yet there did not appear to be one strong example.

Pilot Study - Interview Findings

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with six staff members who had direct involvement with the annual planning process for 2019 to 2020. Interviews allowed staff to discuss and explore their experiences, thoughts and feelings on the annual planning process. Six staff were selected using a purposive sampling approach, with two selected from professional services and four from the faculties. Each participant was selected based on the researcher's judgement as to who could provide rich responses to the interview questions and their relevant role in creating an annual plan for their area. Each individual approached was provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix D), which provided background information on the pilot study. Interviewees were informed that their involvement in the research was voluntary and would remain confidential. The interviews took place in late 2020, with interviews lasting between 20 and 45 minutes. The interview questions (Appendix A) were designed based on the themes that emerged from the content analysis. Follow-up interviews were held in late 2021 to explore the themes that had emerged following analysis of the data from the first round of interviews and a review of the literature. The data from the second round of interviews was combined with the first interview data and analysed to uncover the overarching themes and support further explorations of the literature to inform the conceptual framework for the main study which focused on trust, autonomy, power, deliberate and emergent strategy and strategy tools.

Purpose of the Annual Plan

Four respondents outlined that the purpose of the annual plan was to ensure that the faculties and directorates were aligned with the central strategy and joined up. This approach allowed middle to senior leadership across the institution to make sure that what they were "trying to do aligns with what [they are] trying to do" (Respondent 6). Two of the respondents outlined that they felt the annual plan was a short to medium-term planning tool helping to "translate the [institution's] high-level strategic plan over 5 years into something more concrete at a local level" (Respondent 4) and that it "gives us a clear direction of travel and also a framework that we can refer back to" (Respondent 6).

Three respondents felt that the purpose of the plan was to exercise control through monitoring and compliance. The plans existed as "there needs to be seen to be some annual

planning process" (Respondent 4), and they were a way to "create oversight of all areas within the [institution] and understand what they are working on" (Respondent 1).

One respondent highlighted that as the process had been in place for several years, staff know what to expect year on year:

"I think now it's been the same process for a few years, you have that comfort in that you know what's coming. (Respondent 3)

Four respondents acknowledged that an annual planning process was a necessary requirement:

"I think there is definitely value in have the annual planning process...we need one. We need a plan." (Respondent 6)

"There is an element of inevitability about it." (Respondent 2)

"...a paper exercise to let Court see that we're doing something which makes the [institution's] strategic plan real and implementable." (Respondent 4)

"...something we have to produce... for its own tick box exercise" (Respondent 5)

Three of the respondents outlined that the main audience of the Annual Plan was senior leadership such as Executive Team and Court. There were varying responses as to who the audience and users should be in practice:

"Internally it is for ourselves, and we ought to be writing it for ourselves." (Respondent 4)

"It should be of interest to everyone" (Respondent 6)

"I would hope that the line management of the department/directorate is the audience and the user of that plan. You would hope that the senior officer... would have a plan that you would feed into...you would hope that the audience would be other interested parties, and this plan should be supporting your plan." (Respondent 5)

The Annual Planning Template

The two professional service areas highlighted that the template did not fit well with their planning unit and that they would like to have a separate template:

“Creation of a PS Template as the current one feels targeted to the faculties. Clearer targets for PS Directorates. (Respondent 1)

“We actually need a different type of planning document for a service department instead of an academic department. (Respondent 5)

Four respondents outlined that they enjoyed writing the qualitative executive summary of the annual plan:

“I prefer writing the exec summary as it doesn't feel constrained by the KPIs. The executive summary is important as I feel that is the key selling page so it is important that it clearly and succinctly articulates what we do and how we will deliver against the strategy (Respondent 1)

“This year I wrote a different style of introduction (Exec Summary) and the reason behind that was that I felt that the KPI-driven numerical bit of it I felt that was taking us away from a more people-oriented approach and values-driven approach” (Respondent 2)

“The front opener is really useful and has a purpose. (Respondent 3)

“For some, the executive summary is key” (Respondent 6)

There were mixed views about the KPI section. All KPIs were presented with the current targets and performance data for each KPI. One respondent felt this section was useful as they set objectives for the coming year within each of the KPIs:

“It is useful to write down what you are doing in order to achieve that KPI. The bit that is most useful to us is setting objectives in all of the themes” (Respondent 4)

Three respondents highlighted that the structure of the KPI section limits what they can say in the plan:

“These plans have to produce a relatively small footprint, and you cannot have everything in them... an awful lot of what you're delivering as a basic support service is supporting multiple if not all KPIs.” (Respondent 5)

“We are curtailed because it is already a big document ...there is a hell of a lot of activity that takes place outside those KPIs.” (Respondent 6)

"You end up with lots of good stuff that you would like to see but you can't because there is nowhere to put it." (Respondent 3)

"As we don't have targets, it can be difficult responding to each KPI. We may only have one or two big initiatives that year and it gets a bit repetitive." (Respondent 1)

One respondent highlighted that not all KPIs hold the same weight depending on the faculty or department:

"...that all KPIs are applicable to all the faculties and that's not true. Because of the nature of what faculties do. There are some core things we all do there are some things that are less significant depending on the nature of the business. (Respondent 2)

Process for creating the plan.

The two professional service directorates like to hold a strategy day with staff in their area, however, one respondent said that it was just too time and cost intensive to do that every year. They found this approach beneficial for engaging staff and hearing their views:

"They are generally very positive and inclusive." (Respondent 1)

"This is usually a positive experience as it brings people together and it gets people's voices heard" (Respondent 5)

Five of the respondents outlined a broadly similar approach with a small group of senior leaders responsible for writing their sections within the plan:

"I then write up the plan... share with Director and then submit." (Respondent 1)

"Some key people will write sections such as internationalisation, recruitment." (Respondent 2)

"I use last year's version and just do an update... Then I'll just highlight relevant sections and pass that to the relevant vice deans/associate deans along with the Dean having overview of it and ask them for feedback on that" (Respondent 3)

"[senior leads] work on their own bits...then the [lead] brings it together...Once it is finalised then we share it." (Respondent 4)

“...leads have written our sections in isolation then circulated around senior staff. Once it is finalised, then (we) share it across the directorate” (Respondent 5)

“We carve it up into sections... We get that into a basic draft and then...unify it as one plan.” (Respondent 6)

One respondent outlined that previously they used to write all of the plan but changed the approach:

“I used to do all of it, but I felt there wasn't enough ownership from across the management team... I started to change the approach and divide sections up” (Respondent 6)

Within the faculties, each of the schools/departments must also create annual plans. The faculty sets internal deadlines for the department/school plans to be created first so that the faculty plan can be written:

“(We) meet with each school individually to discuss their contribution and develop a school plan that should tally in with the overall plan.” (Respondent 2)

“We ask for the Heads to submit their plans before we finalise ours. So at least some of what we write is informed by what they are about.”(Respondent 4)

“It's useful as I get evidence and titbits from the departmental plans that will add flavour to the faculty plan. (Respondent 3)

Some respondents did highlight that the dialogues led by middle managers in planning units are useful. This demonstrates that the process is generating a rich exchange of ideas but only at the middle manager and below.

“The world below the actual official process is potentially more meaningful.”
(Respondent 2)

“it is more a catalyst for discussion with the planning areas below the level of faculty.”
(Respondent 2)

“a useful way to take stock each year with the team so that we are all on the same page regarding our purpose and direction of travel.” (Respondent 1)

Plans in use

Five respondents did not actively use the plan once it was created:

"We don't tend to share it any wider than our team... We don't really look at it again for the rest of the year." (Respondent 1)

"That is something with lack of resource or whatever, we haven't got it quite right... We dabbled with having meetings with the heads halfway through the year but most years these haven't really happened. There is scope for that follow-up piece to be more comprehensive and more rigorous. (Respondent 2)

"We tend to use our own strategy when we talk about it to staff ... we don't share it across all faculty members. I don't know how the departments use it. (Respondent 3)

"We have lots of other plans that we will go back to and keep up to date. Therefore, it has very low utility to me as a manager. (Respondent 5)

"you've always got that reference point but that is also something that can be clearly shared right across the faculty. How many people look at it on a regular basis... probably relatively small" (Respondent 6)

One unit actively tries to use the plan. Each KPI has three key objectives identified which were then extracted into an action plan:

"We look at it at every meeting we have every 6 weeks or so and we'll say, "what steps can we take to make that happen?" This is saying that we really do mean this. It wasn't a paper exercise." (Respondent 4)

Connection to delivering strategy

Two respondents found that the most useful part of the process was that *"it is more a catalyst for discussion with the planning areas below the level of faculty." (Respondent 2)*. It is *"a useful way to take stock each year with the team so that we are all on the same page regarding our purpose and direction of travel." (Respondent 1)*

Two respondents said that the process did help to provide focus by taking things a step further and creating action plans and *"using it for real" (Respondent 4)*.

Two respondents outlined that they felt it was a bureaucratic process that was time-intensive:

"The formal return of the plan is something of a bureaucratic exercise. We submit a draft...There's not much in the way of further interactions once the final version goes in." (Respondent 2)

"a bit of a burden for faculties to complete... It can be useful to have everything in one place but if you're the one drafting that, it can be a bit of a burden... It's a beast to complete and time-intensive" (Respondent 6)

Five respondents felt that the annual plan did not help them to deliver against the strategy:

"I think other things help more rather than the production of that particular document." (Respondent 5)

"We have our own strategy and always have had our own strategy... I think there are things that all other faculties are doing which is important to them which is kind of invisible to the management because we are not able to talk about it in that document." (Respondent 4)

"The template doesn't work for professional services. It feels a bit like square peg, round hole. One size does not fit all." (Respondent 1)

"The world below the actual official process is potentially more meaningful." (Respondent 2)

"...if I'm honest, I felt [the previous approach was] more useful and more relevant to staff on the ground as it was translated to an easy to digest list of initiatives which if we're able to deliver those, would all in some way shape or form contribute to the overarching goals" (Respondent 6)

Autonomy in the process

Four of the respondents said that they felt they had autonomy within the process within their own remit and that whilst they complied with the process, they tried not to attract too much attention:

"I think we have a lot of autonomy with our plan...Overall, it feels as if we fly under the radar and don't receive much scrutiny." (Respondent 1)

"how you choose to use it to interact with your schools, you have autonomy there. The world below the actual official process is potentially more meaningful. (Respondent 2)

"I try and write as little as I can as it's meant to be short anyway, but you just end up in a debate if you put too much in. We just try and put everything is on track and get some commentary around that. (We have) reasonable autonomy yes within a structure." (Respondent 3)

"Maybe we find it sufficiently inclusive that we find our own space in it. We have the freedom as to how we go about delivering against the objectives and so long as we are seen to be trying to deliver. (Respondent 4)

One respondent felt that the KPI targets agreed by senior leaders removed a sense of autonomy:

"The KPIs is the single area where the [institution] is imposing on us in a way that means we are not autonomous. None of us would have agreed to the targets that were set... We didn't have any option but to try to write something which looks like we might even get to the figures for 2025." (Respondent 4)

A common area of the feedback was that there was felt to be limited autonomy in the annual planning process:

"We have the freedom as to how we go about delivering against the objectives and so long as we are seen to be trying to deliver. (Respondent 4)

"I think we have a lot of autonomy with our plan" (Respondent 1)

"how you choose to use it to interact with your schools, you have autonomy there. The world below the actual official process is potentially more meaningful. (Respondent 2)

"[We have] reasonable autonomy yes within a structure." (Respondent 3)

"We have the freedom as to how we go about delivering against the objectives" (Respondent 4)

"We did have autonomy as we simply took autonomy to change things" (Respondent 5)

The limitation with autonomy is that the plans are not a route for seeking investment or permission to gain more resources. The feedback suggests that there is only permission to create an annual plan within the planning unit's existing means (budget and resources). Individual plans are created in the annual planning process, with budget, target-setting and resource approval processes discussed separately:

"...join up all the financial and human resources side would also help them join up better. It would stop people putting in pipe dreams that you are never going to deliver... Completely disconnected from the financials" (Respondent 5)

"We have these meetings that are meant to be around the plan, and they are never anything to do with the plan. They are always essentially about budget and finances." (Respondent 3)

"Each plan is standalone and I think we miss opportunities to work on bigger initiatives together. We don't often see if we feature in anyone else's plans" (Respondent 1)

"Just expecting them to magically join up while we're all writing them at the same time means they don't talk to each other." (Respondent 5)

"The process [for investment and resources] is almost inappropriate. If you move beyond routine filling/replacing a post and you're looking at broad scale investment, it's very much, on the whole, about informal approaches to the principal. (Respondent 2)

One aspect that all respondents expressed frustrations with autonomy was the distributed KPIs across the faculties. The respondents perceive there to be a lack of integrity and fairness in the KPI target setting:

"The KPIs is the single area where the university is imposing on us in a way that means we are not autonomous. None of us would have agreed to the targets that were set... We didn't have any option but to try to write something which looks like we might even get to the figures for 2025...some of the KPIs are nonsensical and the idea of any of us will be held to account over such nonsense is not right. I don't think it's a question of resources. Even if I had a much bigger recruitment team for example, I still don't think

I could achieve the recruitment figures that they are looking for because this is the real world. That affects my confidence that this is a valid process and that leads to behaviour in writing the plan. This year we will all be using the covid excuse but what about the year after that? We told you in the first place that we would never make that target.” (Respondent 4)

“The KPI targets on recruitment are absolutely bloody shocking. Really, really hard to live with that. Did we take a sensible approach to the KPIs, no we bloody didn’t. That sets a tone that was completely reckless. We were forced into quite an uncomfortable position because everything was so absurd. (Respondent 4)

“There is never any further data collection or accompanying empirical picture on how the KPIs are put together...The first few times you are involved with the process you realise there’s quite a macho culture driving the whole thing, but then after it’s happened two or three times, people think “it’s a fantasy world and I don’t relate to it at all...I think it’s perfectly acceptable for a Vice Chancellor to set ambitious targets, ambition all round, but the whole process must be a meaningful one and must have integrity... It lacks integrity as a process. (Respondent 2)

“There is a fine line with having ambition and demotivation... there were KPIs that myself and colleagues had reservations about but our feedback was not accepted and the KPIs remained as they were. There is a level of imposition.... It is demotivating particularly for those teams that are right at the delivery end of that” (Respondent 6)

All respondents stated that they have limited strategic decision-making ability and that this had reduced in recent years. There is now more senior leadership control over decision making which is reducing middle managers' sense of autonomy in the process:

“I would say we do not have the autonomy to make strategic decisions. We have the autonomy within our area to spend within our budget, but we cannot recruit the resources we want or need without permission. We cannot take on strategic projects without permission. So, often we go after smaller initiatives which inhibit bigger potential.” (Respondent 1)

"I think that has become significantly less as time goes on. There has been a significant degree of centralisation over the last 2-3 years. The degree of control exercised from various channels is much greater than it used to be. There is often really unhelpful intervening in autonomy. In my mind, if you have a plan, it appears to be working and stacks up, then there shouldn't be interference." (Respondent 2)

"The fact that targets are imposed leave you with little scope for decision making. I would say there is very limited scope for decision making." (Respondent 4)

"... the actual strategic decisions are being taken elsewhere and maybe not with a reference to that plan.... I think there is a break down there." (Respondent 5)

"I think faculties have less autonomy than they used to. I think there is more of a directive approach for some things than there used to be. We do have autonomy to a degree. I think faculties have more autonomy than professional services as you are a budget holder and an income generator... albeit, staffing appointments have become more difficult. There is more restrictions on faculties than previously... What we've seen in the last few years is investment is supported by faculties, but then it gets to the central process and some of those investments are stopped... That's not something that happened a few years ago." (Respondent 6)

The lack of integrity and fairness of KPI target setting has led to respondents feeling they have significant responsibility without the means or investment to achieve it:

"I think you have to distinguish between writing a plan and being enabled with the resources to implement it. Fine, you can plan, but implementation is difficult because approval processes are no more light touch or than before covid." (Respondent 2)

"If we don't invest in staff then they can't give any more." (Respondent 3)

"I would love to do more... but it comes down to capacity...I would love to take it that bit further and make it truly useful." (Respondent 3)

"There's a bit of you that goes "we said we wouldn't, and we didn't, so why are you so surprised?". It's very hard to sit in the meeting having to justify what you should never have had to justify." (Respondent 4)

"Don't expect them to still deliver it if you refuse to provide the resources." (Respondent 5)

Usefulness in Times of a Crisis

The global pandemic of COVID-19 hit the UK in March 2020, eight months into the plan. All six respondents stated that they did not look at or revisit their plan for 19/20:

"I haven't actually looked at the 19/20 plan in light of covid. To us as an exercise, it's sort of done. You tick the box and you move on and you're now on your 2021 plan."
(Respondent 3)

"It hasn't hugely. The biggest thing for me is that it's pointed to a need for us to accelerate certain things that we'd been staging over a longer period. "(Respondent 2)

"We should have looked at it when COVID-19 struck but I don't think any of us have looked at it." (Respondent 5)

"No adaptations were referenced or acknowledged." (Respondent 1)

"Activities changed but we didn't refresh the plan itself and by then we were already finalising the plan for next year. "(Respondent 6)

"We didn't go back to the 19/20 plan... We didn't think the plan ought to change even though the circumstances have changed. I don't think that's a problem. In the main, we were just trying to keep going." (Respondent 4)

The process timeline

The timeline for creating plans meant that the plans for 20/21 were already drafted and just awaiting final sign-off in March 2020. In May 2020, the Executive Team decided that each plan would remain as drafted unless there were any requests to change them, but that each Faculty and Directorate were asked to produce a statement outlining the impact and opportunities that COVID-19 could bring during the 20/21 period. There were mixed views as to whether the Annual Plans for 20/21 were still relevant:

"The impact statement presents quite an optimistic picture. In reality, staff will not have capacity to engage, and income will be lost but it is not acceptable to write that as bluntly... The annual plans are now a work of fiction as a result of covid."(Respondent 1)

"I think it (the 20/21 plan) is still relevant. Again, a need for intensification of our efforts." (Respondent 2)

"COVID-19 will impact us more for the 20/21 plan. The plan itself is no longer relevant for the coming year. We weren't even aware of COVID-19 when we wrote these." (Respondent 3)

"Reflecting back on the COVID-19 part that we had to submit, it was optimistic. That was probably the environment we were in and wanting to demonstrate opportunity. At the time we wrote the statements at the beginning of May, we didn't know we would still be off-campus at the start of the semester and definitely not off-campus till next year." (Respondent 3)

"When I think about it now in the light of covid... you make what you think is a sensible plan and it's all going to fall to pieces anyway. (Respondent 4)

The impact of COVID-19 is much more lasting than what we anticipated at the time we were drafting it. (Respondent 6)

Each respondent was asked whether they had had the autonomy to adapt to how they deliver against their 20/21 Annual Plan in light of COVID-19. Two respondents highlighted that they needed additional resources and quicker approval processes to respond more quickly:

"I think you have to distinguish between writing a plan and being enabled with the resources to implement it. Fine, you can plan, but implementation is difficult because approval processes are no more light touch or than before covid." (Respondent 2)

"...If we don't invest in staff then they can't give any more." (Respondent 3)

Two respondents felt that they had had the autonomy to respond in a crisis but that this had required a significant amount of staff effort:

"We did have autonomy as we simply took autonomy to change things because if not, a lot of the institution could not have moved off campus when it did... We have achieved an amazing amount. People are working extremely long hours, and I expect that is true of us everywhere. (Respondent 5)

"Obviously we can operate really quickly as the last six months have proven. We must have implemented so many changes in the last six months, and we've just been so busy

that we haven't had a chance to document them. So, it will be interesting to see how we reflect on that as we go forward." (Respondent 3)

Resources/capacity to do more with the plan

Three respondents would like to have had the capacity and/or resources to do more with the plan:

"I would love to do more... but it comes down to capacity...I would love to take it that bit further and make it truly useful." (Respondent 3)

"I would like to build in a six-month review so that where things weren't working it could be more formalised to identify things that were going astray. At the end of the planning period, there should be a review along with strategy and policy. If there was more looking back, then you could look to the future with more confidence because you would be clearer about what had worked. Perhaps reviews that could focus on one dimension. (Respondent 2)

"Don't expect them to still deliver it if you refuse to provide the resources." (Respondent 5)

Reflection within the Plans

Three of the respondents felt there was sufficient opportunity for reflection within the plans:

"Yes, and I think there is a little bit too much of that...Plans need to be looking forward and not naval gazing backwards" (Respondent 5)

"Yes, I think through KPIs and that you are expected to write what did or didn't happen last year. That's reasonable." (Respondent 4)

"Yes, because we always start the introductory section. I still put the traffic light thing in to indicate whether we met our target and ones that were off and why." (Respondent 6)

Three respondents felt that more could be done to enhance reflection within the annual planning process:

"It doesn't (contain enough reflection). I feel this is an area that more could be done."
(Respondent 1)

"I don't think there is enough focus on this. The way that the documentation is structured doesn't invite that [reflection]" (Respondent 2)

"Reasonably, but you don't get much opportunity to talk about...You are only able to talk about the year before as a bit of data. There's always a lag." (Respondent 3)

Improvements to the timeline for creating plans

Three respondents acknowledged that the timeline for the annual plans was perhaps too far in advance and needs to be reviewed:

"Because we do it so early in the year, so there is a big gap between that plan being drafted and then actually being effective for that period. It can get confusing. "Hang on, we're in this year but we're already talking about next year?" You've always got two working in parallel which can make it slightly confusing. (Respondent 6)

"I would change the order in which plans are created. How can they be joined up if everyone is doing them at exactly the same time? You have to look and say what is the logical order is for producing these plans. You need to look at your academic departments before your service departments." (Respondent 5)

"It's really hard to get people to think to the next year ahead. They only think about what they are doing now. (Respondent 3)

Create a more joined-up Planning Process

All respondents felt there was more that could be done to encourage joined-up thinking and cross-institutional initiatives:

"Each plan is standalone, and I think we miss opportunities to work on bigger initiatives together. We don't often see if we feature in anyone else's plans" (Respondent 1)

"I know that we try to read each other's but who has realistically... it's bad enough just get your own one done within the timescales." (Respondent 3)

"One of the things that is a failing is that we don't share enough. We can see each other's, but we don't have to look at them... I wouldn't want to put a whole lot of work around it, but it could be more useful. (Respondent 4)

"Just expecting them to magically join up while we're all writing them at the same time means they don't talk to each other." (Respondent 5)

"It's really difficult because we're all so busy. We all go off and beaver away at our own plans and we don't really engage out with the faculty." (Respondent 6)

Two respondents highlighted that there were other planning processes such as budget and workforce planning which were disconnected with the annual plan process:

"join up all the financial and human resources side would also help them join up better. It would stop people putting in pipe dreams that you are never going to deliver... The amount of work that went into that workforce planning. Completely disconnected from the financials" (Respondent 5)

"We have these meetings that are meant to be around the plan, and they are never anything to do with the plan. They are always essentially about budget and finances." (Respondent 3)

"We have previously met with the Principal around March time about the plan, not this year...But because it became so budget-focused, it lost something." (Respondent 4)

Senior Management Approach

All of the respondents felt that a stronger feedback loop from senior leadership would be beneficial and that they were unclear how the plans were used at a senior level. The lack of opportunity for meaningful discussion and feedback from senior leaders was mentioned by all respondents which signalled a lack of engagement from the Senior Leaders with the annual planning process:

"I don't feel we get much back." (Respondent 1)

"People spend a lot of time writing their plan and putting a lot of thought into it, and to have some recognition of the time dedicated to the significant task would show it has been worthwhile." (Respondent 1)

"I do find the interactions with [the strategy team] a bit limited and could be more of an ongoing dialogue which could help strengthen the plan." (Respondent 2)

"There's very limited feedback that you actually get... The lack of feedback is quite a significant deficiency. In terms of any feedback from ET, Court or Senate, it is non-existent." (Respondent 2)

"We don't get much feedback from them. We just tend to get generic feedback so that does make you think "what's it being used for?" (Respondent 3)

"I'd love to know if the Principal read them." (Respondent 4)

"There was some quite good feedback from [the strategy team] which was manager to manager, but not top-down feedback." (Respondent 4)

"There is absolutely very little feedback or anything much comes back from that process...I don't think there is [meaningful feedback] ...if what we're planning to do isn't going to make sense, or isn't achievable, or isn't feasible, then there has to be some sort of feedback." (Respondent 5)

"...there is a capacity issue there in terms of there is just so much other things to be done. The capacity to prepare detailed feedback is not there." (Respondent 6)

Respondents highlighted an unwillingness from senior leaders to listen to middle managers around discussing challenges or risks. One example in the data highlighted that a new strategy for Institution X was launched immediately before the global pandemic COVID-19 impacted the UK in March 2020. Despite the pandemic impacting KPI performance significantly, the strategy and KPIs remained unchanged.

"The impact statement presents quite an optimistic picture. In reality, staff will not have the capacity to engage, and income will be lost but it is not acceptable to write that as bluntly... The annual plans are now a work of fiction as a result of covid." (Respondent 1)

"I think probably when they put down their plan and paper that they were very proud of it but they probably aren't necessarily thinking about the level of change the organisation might have to do or they might need it to do...despite that evolutionary change will occur during the duration of that that strategic plan...there's so many

uncertainties out there in there will be things that occur in five years which will just be beyond what we can imagine at this moment." (Respondent 5)

Three respondents who have been through the annual plan process several times outlined that they try to write as little as possible so they can avoid drawing attention, which suggests that they are unable to be fully honest in the annual plan process.

"I try and write as little as I can as it's meant to be short anyway, but you just end up in a debate if you put too much in. We just try and put everything is on track and get some commentary around that." (Respondent 3)

"Overall, it feels as if we fly under the radar and don't receive much scrutiny." (Respondent 1)

"...staff will not have the capacity to engage, and income will be lost but it is not acceptable to write that as bluntly..." (Respondent 1)

"where I was careful was in an area where we weren't doing very well and I'd try to put the best spin on it without telling any lies. (Respondent 4)

Appendix C- Saunders et al. (2019) Philosophical Positions

Table 4.3 Comparison of five research philosophical positions in business and management research

Ontology (nature of reality or being)	Epistemology (what constitutes acceptable knowledge)	Axiology (role of values)	Typical methods
Positivism			
Real, external, independent One true reality (universalism) Granular (things) Ordered	Scientific method Observable and measurable facts Law-like generalisations Numbers Causal explanation and prediction as contribution	Value-free research Researcher is detached, neutral and independent of what is researched Researcher maintains objective stance	Typically deductive, highly structured, large samples, measurement, typically quantitative methods of analysis, but a range of data can be analysed
Critical realism			
Stratified/layered (the empirical, the actual and the real) External, independent Intransient Objective structures Causal mechanisms	Epistemological relativism Knowledge historically situated and transient Facts are social constructions Historical causal expla- nation as contribution	Value-laden research Researcher acknowledges bias by world views, cultural experience and upbringing Researcher tries to mini- mise bias and errors Researcher is as objective as possible	Retroductive, in-depth historically situated analysis of pre-existing structures and emerging agency Range of methods and data types to fit subject matter
Ontology (nature of reality or being)	Epistemology (what constitutes acceptable knowledge)	Axiology (role of values)	Typical methods
Interpretivism			
Complex, rich Socially constructed through culture and language Multiple meanings, interpretations, realities Flux of processes, experi- ences, practices	Theories and concepts too simplistic Focus on narratives, sto- ries, perceptions and interpretations New understandings and worldviews as contribution	Value-bound research Researchers are part of what is researched, subjective Researcher interpreta- tions key to contribution Researcher reflexive	Typically inductive. Small samples, in-depth investiga- tions, qualitative methods of analysis, but a range of data can be interpreted
Postmodernism			
Nominal Complex, rich Socially constructed through power relations Some meanings, inter- pretations, realities are dominated and silenced by others Flux of processes, experi- ences, practices	What counts as 'truth' and 'knowledge' is decided by dominant ideologies Focus on absences, silences and oppressed/ repressed meanings, interpretations and voices Exposure of power rela- tions and challenge of dominant views as contribution	Value-constituted research Researcher and research embedded in power relations Some research narratives are repressed and silenced at the expense of others Researcher radically reflexive	Typically deconstructive – reading texts and reali- ties against themselves In-depth investigations of anomalies, silences and absences Range of data types, typically qualitative methods of analysis
Pragmatism			
Complex, rich, external 'Reality' is the practical consequences of ideas Flux of processes, experi- ences and practices	Practical meaning of knowledge in specific contexts 'True' theories and knowledge are those that enable successful action Focus on problems, prac- tices and relevance Problem solving and informed future practice as contribution	Value-driven research Research initiated and sustained by researcher's doubts and beliefs Researcher reflexive	Following research prob- lem and research question Range of methods: mixed, multiple, qualita- tive, quantitative, action research Emphasis on practical solutions and outcomes

Appendix D - Participant Information Sheets for Pilot and Main Studies

Participant Information Sheet – Pilot Study

Introduction

My name is Heather Lawrence, and I am a part-time PhD student within the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship. I also work full time at the University of Strathclyde and until recently I was Head of Continuous improvement, but I have recently commenced the role of Faculty Manager in the Faculty for Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS) since March 2020.

I completed my MBA three years ago and for my final project I investigated how concepts such as organisational control, performance management, and employee engagement were driving a strategic KPI at a Scottish university. The findings of that project highlighted that the impact of these concepts in higher education institutions is relatively unknown, with gaps in available research as to how effectively execute strategy within higher education.

What is the purpose of this research?

I am interested in the tools and mechanisms for ‘doing’ strategy, and the behaviours associated/needed for effectively ‘doing’ strategy. I want to carry out a pilot study in order to help narrow the focus of my literature review and enhance my learning on gathering and analysing data. It also provides an opportunity to design and shape a more effective research approach as part of my thesis overall.

Do you have to take part?

Participation is voluntary, and you are free to refuse or withdraw participation at any time without having to give a reason and without any consequences.

What will you do in the project?

You are agreeing to take part in a semi-structured interview which will involve questions aimed at gaining a better understanding of your perception, role, and approach to the institution’s annual planning process. The interview will take place online and will not last longer than 1 hour.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been selected due to your role within the University of X and the responsibility you have for directly leading the annual planning process in your planning unit. The research is specifically looking at the annual planning process for 2019-2020 so you need to have been involved with the annual planning round at this time.

What are the potential risks to you in taking part?

There are no potential risks to you in taking part in this pilot. All information recorded in my report will remain confidential. No information that identifies you or any other participant will be made publicly available.

What information is being collected in the project?

At a high level, I will be capturing whether the individual is from Faculty or Professional Service and all other data will be focused on understanding the participant’s role and thoughts on the annual planning process.

The data collected will be the responses to the questions within the semi-structured interview. The data gathered and subsequent analysis will respect each participant's privacy and confidentiality. This will be addressed through strict data management protocols. Audio will be recorded in the interviews with notes taken throughout as a backup. The data will be entered into Excel and coded for further confidentiality and ease of analysis. All data captured will be anonymised with no comment/quote directly attributed to anyone. The description/coding of the individuals will ensure that individuals cannot be identified. The researcher will act ethically and respectfully, protecting the identity of all participants.

Who will have access to the information?

Only the main researcher will have access to the participant's information and audio recordings. The anonymised data entered into Excel and subsequent analysis will be shared with the researchers' supervisors and reviewers.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

I will store data on the University of Strathclyde's OneDrive. Any password protected coding files will be stored in my private H drive. Only the researcher named in this document will have access to the files that contain the anonymised data files. I will store this data for the duration of my PhD and will securely destroy it 6 months after achieving my PhD.

What happens next?

If you would like to participate then please email me confirming you have read this Participation Information Sheet. You will be contacted back for a suitable time to be arranged. You will be asked to sign a Consent Form prior to the interview.

You are under no obligation to take part and if you would prefer not to take part then your time taken to read and consider this was appreciated.

Participant Information Sheet – Main Study

Name of department: Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship, Strathclyde Business School

Title of the study: Understanding the relationship between top and middle management when engaged in strategic planning activities.

Introduction

My name is Heather Lawrence, and I am a part-time PhD student in the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship at the University of Strathclyde. I also work full-time at the University of Strathclyde where I am the Faculty Manager for Humanities and Social Sciences, one of the largest faculties at Strathclyde comprising of six Schools and eight research/innovation centres. I lead the faculty's professional and operational services portfolio, and I have a keen interest in understanding how to better navigate strategic planning and delivery within further and higher education settings.

What is the purpose of this research?

There has been a vast amount of research across all strands of strategy process and practice, however, one less understood area of strategy research is around the relationship between top and middle management when planning and delivering strategy. The purpose of the research is to explore how strategic planning in further and higher education settings

impacts those who are tasked with delivering strategic progress. The potential impact of this research could help further and higher education settings to navigate strategic planning activities more successfully, understand what contributes to building successful relationships between the top and middle management and ultimately, deliver strategic ambitions more effectively.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been suggested as someone who is involved with annual strategic planning within your institution. By this, I mean that you are involved with strategic planning processes that result in the design of your institution's strategy or you lead the design of a sub-strategy/annual plan for your college/department/unit that outlines how you contribute to the institution's overarching strategy, with responsibility for reporting on progress annually (this may be more or less frequent depending on your institutional processes). The research is specifically looking to engage with those who have been involved with strategic planning processes from 2020 to 2023.

Ideally, you will hold one of the following positions in your institution:

- Top / senior management (i.e., an executive officer of your institution)
- Senior middle managers (i.e., identified as holding a leadership position, at least one level below the top management / executive team with the responsibility for leading a planning unit/department)

If you are not best placed to participate in this research, then please accept my apologies for taking up your time. If you are aware of another colleague who may be best placed to participate in the research, I would greatly appreciate it if you could put me in touch with them or pass this information on to them.

Do you have to take part?

Participation is voluntary, and you are free to refuse or withdraw participation at any time without having to give a reason and without any consequences.

What will you do in the project?

You are agreeing to take part in a semi-structured interview that will involve questions aimed at gaining your perception of your institution's approach to annual/regular strategic planning, your role within that activity, and your interactions and relationship with top/middle management throughout that process. The interview can take place online using Teams or Zoom and will not last longer than 1 hour.

My research design approach alternates between theory and empirical data to increase my understanding and gain new insights. Therefore, I may request to re-engage with you at a later point if I have further questions. You are under no obligation to take part in a further interview if you do not wish to.

What are the potential risks to you in taking part?

There are no potential risks to you in taking part in this pilot. All information recorded in my thesis will remain confidential, with no personal identifiers. I am carrying out this research at multiple institutions. Each institution will be anonymised as will each participant.

What information is being collected in the project?

At a high level, I will be capturing the seniority of your role in your institution and where your department/unit sits within the institutional hierarchy, without naming your college/faculty/department/directorate. I will capture how you would like to be identified (he, she, them). All other data will be focused on understanding your role and experiences in your institution's strategic planning processes.

The data collected will be your responses to the interview questions. Audio will be recorded in the interviews, with permission, with notes taken as a backup. A data sampling approach will be taken so that only your comments relevant to the research questions will be transcribed. The data will be entered into Excel and NVivo and coded for further confidentiality and ease of analysis. All data captured will be anonymised with no comment/quote directly attributed to you. The description/coding will ensure that institutions and individuals cannot be identified.

Who will have access to the information?

Only I will have access to your personal information and audio recordings. The anonymised data and subsequent analysis will be shared with my PhD supervisors and reviewers.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept?

I will store the data on the University of Strathclyde's Microsoft OneDrive, only accessible by me. Any password-protected coding files will be stored in my private cloud-based personal drive (H drive). I will store this data for the duration of my PhD and will delete it 6 months after achieving my PhD.

What happens next?

If you would like to participate then please contact me confirming, you have read this Participation Information Sheet. You will be contacted back for a suitable interview time to be arranged. You will be asked to sign a Consent Form (page 4 in this document) before the interview.

You are under no obligation to take part and if you would prefer not to take part then I thank you for your time in reading and considering my research.

Appendix E - Main Study Interview Questions

Strategic Planning

1. Can you tell me about the process/processes your organisation takes to annual strategic planning?
2. What is your role in those processes?

Autonomy

3. Can you describe the level of autonomy you have in designing and executing your annual plan?
4. What difference would it make to you if you had increased levels of discretion within your area? E.g., the ability to sign off on resources. Clearer routes for seeking investment.

Meaningful Dialogue

5. How would you describe the relationship with your senior management/direct reports throughout strategic planning processes? Open? Honest? Fair? Challenging? Tense?
6. What opportunities do you have for discussions with your senior management/direct reports during the planning process?
7. How receptive is your senior leadership/direct reports to feedback in the planning process? Does your input make them reconsider their position?

Tensions

8. How honest do you think you are in the writing of the plan and any discussions you may have as part of the process?
9. If you can think back to recent years of strategic planning activity, what emotions have you typically experienced throughout the planning process? Why do you think that is?
10. How do you really feel about the strategic planning processes in your organisation? What do you think works well? What doesn't work so well?

Strategic Purpose and Values

11. How connected do you feel with the overall purpose of the strategy?
12. How do the values guide behaviours in strategic planning and decision making?
13. How do senior leadership demonstrate the values?

Others

14. How are KPIs and targets set and disseminated across the institution? What is your experience in this part of the process?
15. Can you tell me what happens when progress against targets isn't where it should be?
16. Can you tell me if you experience a sense of empathy from your senior leaders/direct reports throughout this process?

Appendix F - Main Study Data Analysis Codes from NVivo

Code	Files	References
Autonomy and Empowerment	17	48
Weight of Responsibility	2	2
Community Culture How People Are Treated	7	9
Emotions	17	43
Feeling valued	4	8
Relationships	10	17
Collaboration	5	9
Tensions	9	30
Reward and Recognition	3	5
Staff Wellbeing	2	4
Leadership Style	13	35
Accessibility of Leadership	6	11
Authenticity	1	1
Decision Making	13	30
Use of Data	2	2
Managing Expectations	12	25
Trust	6	24
Meaningful Strategic Purpose	12	30
Values-led	11	35
Sensegiving and receiving	16	74
Experts Respected	6	9
SM Reviewing the Plans	8	18
Strategy Process	17	69
Agility of Strategy Delivery	4	6
Disconnected Planning Processes	6	18
Integrity	12	37
Timing and Effort Required	6	10

Appendix G - Main Study: NVivo Extracts from Coded Interviews

Extract 1

How receptive are your senior leaders to feedback?

B3

That's an interesting question. Possibly less so in terms of... I feel things across, views across, but in terms of the final decision, within organisation, it is the leader who makes the call on it, so in that regard the way that I would ideally like to see. It's the way its done and I do feel included, but in terms of what you say is actually going to be listened to when I'm asked for my input. There are certain decisions at short notice or there is a bigger picture and it's the Principal area that high level overview across the organisation.

- Leadership Style
- Emotions
- Relationships
- Experts Respected
- Researcher
- Autonomy and Empowerment
- Decision Making
- Sensemaking and Meaning
- Managing Expectations
- Timing and Effort Required
- Strategy Process
- B3

Researcher?

How honest do you think you are when writing your self evaluation?

B3

That is definitely an honest reflect of what the challenges have been indicated before about the pressure on the team, that maybe they have been reignited because of where we have been, however it is like supportive. If there are challenges or issues, these are brought forward under the carpet or anything like that it is an open culture and if there are sometimes frank decisions about it.

Community Culture How

Extract 2

C2

There was very little on that, to be very honest, I felt like I was no clue. You had different systems telling you you had different We were checking systems. We lost students. I mean it was, it don't grow a campus by that many, that quickly, and not have It was basically a mad dash for cash. I think they thought the b during COVID. And the reality was it's [the finances] robust.

CODE STRIPES

- C1
- C2
- C3

• Leadership Style

• Values-led

• Meaningful Strategic Purpose

• Sensemaking and receiving

• Emotions

• Researcher (3)

• Trust

• Integrity

• Tensions

• C2

The problem now is they were 1800 students short. I went in and this day happening I was called, you know, inappropriate to these students that have shown up - is this part of your structure? this are you viewing this as a blip?" You know you take it, you loans and you don't. And they've considered this structural issue other problem with planning is it seems like, "well, you've hit yes. It's the plus 10% every year, right. And this is the entire sentence face the consequences of there aren't any more students to take

- Managing Expectations
- Decision Making

Researcher

How did that make you feel that this happened?

Appendix H - Emergence of Themes

Code	Mapped to Conceptual Framework	Overarching Theme
Decision Making	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	Decision Making
Emotions	Emotions	Emotionality
Feeling valued	Emotions	
Tensions	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Reward and Recognition	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Staff Wellbeing	Emotions	
Trust	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	High-level Strategic Intent of the Institution
Strategic Plan Content	Strategy Purpose and Practice	
Meaningful Strategic Purpose	Strategy Purpose and Practice and Emotions	Meaningful Strategic Purpose
Community Culture: How People Are Treated	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	Leadership Approach
Relationships	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Leadership Style	Senior and Middle Manager Roles and All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Accessibility of Leadership	Senior and Middle Manager Roles and All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Authenticity	Trust	
Integrity	Trust	Middle Manager Autonomy
Autonomy and Empowerment	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Weight of Responsibility	Middle Manager Role and All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Managing Expectations	Senior and Middle Manager Roles and All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
Values-led	Strategy Purpose and Practice	Organisational Values
Collaboration	Senior and Middle Manager Roles and All Relational Dynamics Concepts	Sensemaking Mechanisms
Sensegiving and receiving	Sensemaking	
Experts Respected	All Relational Dynamics Concepts	
SM Reviewing the Plans	Sensemaking	

Use of Data	Sensemaking, Annual Planning and Strategy Tools	Strategic Annual Planning Process
Strategy Process	Annual Planning and Strategy Tools	
Agility of Strategy Delivery	Annual Planning and Strategy Tools	
Disconnected Planning Processes	Annual Planning and Strategy Tools	
Timing and Effort Required	Annual Planning and Strategy Tools	

Appendix I - Summary of the Indicators of Trust (Frei and Morriss, 2020)

Indicator of Trust	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
Authenticity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Limited Authenticity 2. Only good news welcomed. 3. Middle managers not consulted. 4. Decisions dominated by senior management. 5. Vocal middle managers treated differently. 6. Senior management disengaged from annual planning 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Authentic Leadership 2. Positive feedback on senior management's approach. 3. Safe environment for honest discussions. 4. Reflective Planning: Thoughtful and reflective planning 5. Willingness to handle difficult talks. 6. Valuing Middle Managers 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Variable authenticity displayed from senior management 2. Some valued constructive conversations. 3. Some felt feedback was unwelcome. 4. Middle managers had creative freedom. 5. Some senior managers undermined other senior managers.
Logic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stretch targets often changed, causing confusion and frustration. 2. Experts not involved in decision-making 3. Strategy planning seen as ineffective 4. Significant effort in planning not utilised by senior management. 5. Slow decisions with financial implications, lack of direction. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Senior management sought and acted on feedback, expediting decisions. 2. Experts consulted, showing openness to learning. 3. Empowerment of Middle Managers: 4. Simple strategy understood and regularly reiterated. 5. Values-Driven Decisions 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inconsistent planning approach 2. Consequences of targets not well thought out, causing confusion. 3. Lack of Evidence-Based Decisions: 4. Senior management avoided challenging discussions. 5. Departments had autonomy but within a risk-averse culture.
Empathy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of Empathy 2. Senior management made decisions without consulting middle managers 3. One planning unit created sub-values for culture of care. 4. Frustration with Leadership 5. Strategy planning was seen as ineffective 6. Decision-making delays had implications. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empathetic Leadership 2. Senior management engaged and sought feedback. 3. Respondents felt valued and enjoyed their work. 4. Senior management regularly acknowledged contributions. 5. Visible Leadership: 6. Strongly embedded values guided decision-making. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mixed Empathy 2. The heads of school forum allowed open discussions. 3. International student recruitment caused stress 4. Future investment offered as motivation 5. Long planning documents received no feedback from senior management.