

Strategic Agility and Firm Performance: The Moderating Role of Organisational Culture

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Abstract

Firms around the world experienced challenges of matching organizational culture with strategies and overall firm performance. Managers of most business organisations in today's competitive environment find it difficult to constantly achieve targeted performance due to poor strategic response to uncertain and unexpected changes in the business environment and mismatch of organisational culture with 21st century globalization trends. Majority of firms especially in the developing countries have recorded unstable performance resulting from their inability to interpret strategic agility initiatives and evolve organisational culture adaptable with the challenges of global business trend. Theoretically, the study was conducted to investigate the link between strategic agility and firm performance with organisational culture as the moderating variable. The Dynamic Capability theory was the underpinning theory for the study. Thus, a conceptual model was developed to depict the interaction between strategic agility and firm performance through organisational culture as the moderator. Majority of past literature showed that strategic agility and organisational culture enhance firm performance. This paper recommended that organizational managers should employ strategic agility conceptual measures with organizational culture in their business thinking, activities, processes and direction to achieve overall performance.

Key words: Dynamic capability; Firm performance; Organizational culture; and Strategic agility
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INTRODUCTION

The challenges of open market competition, customer demand and globalisation that characterised different industries have made organisations around the world to experience a continuous dilemma of maintaining business performance. Most business managers in different industries today find it difficult in constantly achieving targeted business performance due to a mismatch of organizational culture with unpredictable global business policies and environment.

In this 21st century characterized with global ideal, dynamic business environment and different organisational culture, the rapid changes in the domestic and international business policies cut across different industries in developed, emerging and developing countries and this was attributed to both microeconomic and macroeconomic factors such as industry environmental factors, task environment, natural and technological environments, social environments, economic and cultural environments, and political, law and security environments coupled with the management of consumers, marketing content and product marketing. All these factors as pointed by Zafari (2017) caused unstable firm performance in most organizations in different industries. Furthermore, in the African continent, PricewaterhouseCooper (2018) emphasized that most firms recorded poor performance or continuous decline in financial performance resulting from challenges of unsuitable organisational culture with global business idea, political interference in organisational decisions, lack of transparency, regulatory uncertainty, policy instability, ongoing infrastructure deficit, institutional void, general uncertainty, delays in passing laws, and inexplicable non-implementation of passed legislations.

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Scholars around the globe have emphasized the importance of strategic agility in responding to these global trends in different industries (Appelbaum, Calla, Desautels & Hasan, 2017; Kitonga, 2017; Nejatian, Zarei, Nejati & Zanjirchi, 2018). For organisations to survive the global economy and prevailing dynamic business environment, Tabe-Khoshnood and Nematizadeh (2017) opined that such organisations must strategically sensitise in matching organisational culture with global business trend, be strategically agile, and respond to the challenges and opportunities brought by the business pressures and external environment in order to survive competitive tensions and continuously gain superior performance.

Strategic agility creates the organisational ability to continuously, adequately adjust and adapt in appropriate time the organisation's strategic direction in core business in relation to the changing circumstances of the environment and to cope with the strategic discontinuities and disruptions arising from a highly volatile and uncertain world (Weber & Tarba, 2014). In the 21st century business environment, embracing strategic agility will enhance continuous and adequate adjustment of the organisation towards dynamic business environment and adapt in appropriate time, its strategic direction in core business in relation to changing circumstances and sensitive to the business environment (Ofoegbu & Akanbi, 2012). The performance of an organisation depends on its strategic insight and foresight towards its competitors, customers, suppliers, partners and governments (Amniattalab & Ansari, 2016). Subsequently, global competition and open market policies in different industries have led to the downward rigidities of performance (Zafari, 2017). Oyerinde, Olatunji and Adewale (2018) emphasized that poor strategic response to these challenges and weak organisational culture have run down the performance of most firms in Africa.

Studies have pointed out that for organisations to strategically respond to business opportunities and achieve superior performance, organisational culture serves as a key factor and also enhances significant linkage between strategic agility and firm performance (Felipe, Roldán & Leal-Rodríguez, 2017; Bakhsh-Magsi, Ong, Ho & Sheikh-Hassan, 2018; Kamau & Wanyoike, 2018). Salehzadeh, Pool, Mohseni and Tahani (2017) emphasized that majority of firms in different industries face challenges in matching their organisational culture with global business trend especially in developing countries like African nations. Oduol (2015) asserted that organisational managers had trouble in instituting an effective organisational culture, which is a determinant for strategic responses, productivity and improvement in overall performance. Even in Africa, most organisations have recorded many issues stemming from difficulty in aligning organisational culture to projected performance and global changes in business environment.

Different organisations across developed, emerging and developing economies, organisational culture has played a key role in enhancing firm performance (Kamau & Wanyoike, 2018; Mwangi & Waithaka, 2018). Tierney (2006) emphasized that organisational culture alertness enables organisational goals, operational effectiveness, team work, analyse and differentiate organisations and unite employee behaviour. Most organisational managers especially in the multinational companies (MNCs) experienced hard-hitting challenges in establishing an effective and cohesive culture to achieve superior performance (Kamau & Wanyoike, 2018), owing to the existence of different employee background, ideology and belief. This makes it difficult for organisational managers to effectively employ organisational culture to sharply respond to unstable business environment and the unstable firm performance resulting therefrom.

Strategic management scholars have raised the vital role of how strategic agility and organisational culture aid organisations in exploiting environmental business opportunities, cope with global dynamic business pressure and policies in achieving firm performance (See Appelbaum, Calla, Desautels & Hasan, 2017; Kitonga, 2017; Nejatian, Zarei, Nejati & Zanjirchi, 2018). Ahmed and Shafq (2014) and Kamau and Wanyoike (2018) claimed that poor organisational culture integration negatively affects organisations

economic benefit, contribution and overall performance. Despite the significant recognition of organisational culture by scholars in enhancing firm strategic agility and performance, most studies in developing economies especially in African continents and within Nigeria context have not employed organisational culture as moderating driver that enhance strategic agility and firm performance. This serves as a literature gap this study intends to bridge especially literatures in the Nigerian context.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This paper is anchored on the Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) as baseline theory for the study. This theory was selected to guide this study because its perspectives are tied to the focus of the study and the variables under investigation and the theory adequately provides a theoretical explanation of the study variables.

Dynamic Capability Theory is the capability of an organisation to purposefully adapt an organisation's resource base. Dynamic capabilities theory, which was developed by Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997) was defined as "the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments" (p. 516) and it examines how firms address or bring about changes in their turbulent business environment through reconfiguration of their firm-specific competencies into new competencies (Teece, 2007). The theory explained the mechanism that links resources and product markets to competitive advantage and firm survival. The DCT further explains how firms gain sustainable competitive advantage, and survive in competitive and turbulent business environments in several ways.

The DCT operates on three fundamental presumptions: the capacity to sense and shape opportunities; the capacity to seize opportunities; and the capacity to maintain competitiveness through reconfiguring the enterprise's assets (Teece, 2007). Despite the popularity and insightful theoretical foundation, the DCT approach does not answer all questions of sustainable competitive advantage. Zahra, Sapienza and Davidsson (2006) argue that there are some inconsistencies and ambiguities in the literature of DCT. Another criticism of the concept is that DCT are difficult to measure empirically. In the opinion of Ambrosini, Bowman and Collier (2009), to understand dynamic capabilities, the managerial perceptions of the need for change - functions of their perceptions of their firms' external and internal environments need to be considered. Thus, it is possible for a manager to misperceive the need for change and as a result fail to apply appropriate DCT.

The DCT framework helps scholars to understand the foundations of long-run enterprise success while helping managers delineate relevant strategic considerations and the priorities they must adopt to enhance enterprise performance and escape the zero profit tendency associated with operating in markets open to global competition (Teece, 2007). The framework integrates the strategy and innovation literature and highlights the most important capabilities that the management need in order to sustain superior long run business performance (Teece, 2007). Easterby-Smith, Lyles and Peteraf (2009) emphasized that DC are higher-level capabilities, which enable knowledge gathering, fast response, sharing, and continual updating of the operational processes, interaction with the environment and decision-making evaluations in order to achieve firm competitive advantages and performance. More recently, Esbach (2009) viewed DC as the capacity of an organization to purposefully create and modify firm resource base so as to gain competitive advantage and ensure overall firm performance.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF STRATEGIC AGILITY, FIRM PERFORMANCE, ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND THE LINKAGE STRATEGIC AGILITY

Strategic agility was considered by Tabe-Khoshnood and Nematizadeh (2017) as a concept consisting of two components: responsiveness and knowledge management. They further interpreted strategic agility as the ability of an organization to detect and fast response to business environmental changes through the opportunities and threats existing in the business environment, and to give rapid response through the recombination of resources, processes and strategies. Extensive review of the strategic agility literature shows that an agile organisation can be successful in competitive environment through the abilities of responsiveness, competence, flexibility and speed so that it achieves competitive advantage in the market and other overall firm performance (Ganguly, Nilchiani & Farr, 2009; Oyedijo, 2012). Doz and Kosonen (2008) considered strategic agility to be a means by which organisations transform, reinvent themselves, adapt, and ultimately survive. They see strategic agility as the capacity of a firm to continuously adjust and adapt its strategic direction in a core business in order to create value for the firm. Sampath (2015) considered strategic agility to be about being adaptive to changes in the business context, spotting opportunities, threats and risks, and launching new strategic initiatives rapidly and repeatedly; while Teece, Peteraf and Leih (2016) referred to strategic agility as “the capacity of an organization to efficiently and effectively redeploy and redirect its resources to value creating and value protecting (and capturing) higher-yield activities as internal and external circumstances warrant” (p. 8). In this paper, strategic agility is described as how an organization employs strategic insight and foresight, internal response orientation, external response orientation, human resource capability, and information technology capability to achieve overall firm performance.

Firm Performance

Firm performance as the dependent variable, is a measure of the firm’s performance, both financial and non-financial. It refers to the growth in turnover, employee numbers and profits in a business; it entails a business achieving planned growth rate, financial security, and achieving financial goals set in advance for the business (Matchaba-Hove & Goliath, 2007) and the attainment of the non-financial goals set for the firm. It is important to measure the performance of a firm from this holistic standpoint in order to satisfy the needs of all stakeholders of the firm. In this paper, firm performance is conceptually defined in the aspect of non-financial performance indicators like market share, firm efficiency, competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, firm creativity. The concept of firm performance is fundamental to businesses as the key objective for business organisations is profit making (Olanipekun, Abioro, Akanni, Arulogun & Rabi, 2015). Syafarudin (2016) defined firm performance as the outcome or accomplishment affected by the operations of the company in utilizing the resources owned. Jahanshahi, Rezaie, Nawaser, Ranjbar and Pitamber (2012) also described firm performance as a result of the actual outcome fashioned by a company which is measured and compared with the expected results. Musyoka (2016) portrayed firm performance as having improvement over time as a result of the shared values in the company.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is defined as the system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that govern how an organization interacts both with internal and external environments (Stafford & Miles, 2013). These shared values have a strong influence on how the internal organizational actors interact with others within the environment. Organisational culture is the set of important assumptions that members of an organization share and this includes beliefs, values and norms (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). To them,

organisational culture is a set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organisations by defining appropriate behaviour for various situations.

Kazmi (2008) describes beliefs as assumptions about reality that are derived from and reinforced by experience; values are assumptions about desirable ideals; while norms are the expected standards of behaviour. When the three assumptions are shared in an organization, they create organizational (or corporate) culture and affect employees' identification with the organisation. In Carvalho, Sampaio, Rebertisch, Carvalho and Saraiva (2017), the concept of organisational culture is regarded as "denoting a wide range of social phenomena, including customary dress, language, behaviour, beliefs, values, assumptions, symbols of status and authority, myths, ceremonies and rituals and modes of defence and subversion, which contribute to define the organisation's character and norm" (p.7). Ahmed and Shafiq (2014) however limits his consideration of organisational culture to three key elements: beliefs, behaviours and attitudes. Hayes (2010) defines organisational culture as "the pattern of basic assumptions that are invented, discovered or developed by a group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (p.110).

Strategic Agility and Firm Performance

Strategic agility creates organisational ability to continuously, adequately adjust and adapt in appropriate time with the organization's strategic direction in achieving overall firm performance (Weber & Tarba, 2014). In the 21st century business environment, embracing strategic agility will enhance continuous performance and adequate adjustment of the organisation towards dynamic business environment and adapt in appropriate time (Ofoegbu & Akanbi, 2012). The performance of an organisation depends on its strategic agility measures toward its competitors, customers, suppliers, partners and governments polices (Amniattalab & Ansari, 2016). Rohrbeck and Kum (2018) conceptually viewed strategic agility as a powerful predictor to guide against negative effect of business environmental changes and for future preparedness in order to outperform other competitors and attaining superior profitability. Studies have emphasized that strategic agility enhance operational productivity, product reliability, quality of service and speed and operational performance (Somuyiwa, Adebayo & Akanbi, 2011; Oyedijo, 2012; Chirchir, 2015; Okotoh, 2015; Osisioma, Nzewi & Mgbemena, 2016; Appelbaum, Calla, Desautels & Hasan, 2017; Al-Romeedy, 2019). Most literatures on the link between strategic agility and firm performance in different industries have shown that strategic agility practices by organisations significantly improve firm competitive advantage and overall performance.

Organisational Culture as a Moderator of the Relationship Between Strategic Agility and Firm Performance

The linkage of how strategic agility and organisational culture significantly contribute to and enhance firm performance have been established in literature. For example, Nejatian, Zarei, Nejati and Zanjirchi (2018) evolved a methodology through the application of which, the company could find the most suitable improvement paths to organisational agility: Oliveira (2017) found that product innovation, agility and flexibility have strong effect on business performance; Waweru (2016) found that strategic agility enablers like staff skills, attitudes, experience and competence are significant in the performance of insurance brokerage firms; while Sajdak (2015) showed that both perspectives of agility (strategic and operational) may lead the firm to outstanding results and ensure competitive advantage in the unstable market. Organisational culture, acting as a firm's strategic asset, has some advantages that are critical to organizational success. An organisation's strategic effectiveness is affected by organisational culture by shaping the behaviour of people towards outside stakeholders, which in turn influences the purchasing

decisions of customers and the extent to which suppliers, customers and financiers will cooperate with the organization (Haberberg & Rieple, 2001). It also shapes the motivation of people in the organization to put the organisation's interests ahead of their own. More importantly, in the context of this study, organisational culture influences strategy by affecting organisation's capacity to react and change: the stronger the culture of the organization, the more difficult it can be for people to force themselves to consider new types of strategy. Hence cultural awareness is essential prior to the deployment of any strategic initiative (Maull, Brown & Cliffe, 2001) and the support of organisational culture is needed for a successful implementation of such an initiative like strategic agility (Irani, Beskese, & Love, 2004).

Napitupulu (2018: 4) citing Coulter and Robbins (2012) revealed that organisational culture is an important supporting factor to the success of the management accounting information system of an organization by way of its characteristics which include attention to details, innovation, team orientation and aggressiveness. These characteristics of organisational culture make it possible for the management accounting information system to perform its role as an integral part of the organizational structure and the set of human and capital resources within an organization that is responsible for the production and dissemination of relevant information for internal decision-making (Belkaoui, 2002). Nerur, Mahapatra and Mangalaraji (2005) stated that organisational culture has a significant impact on structure which in turn influences the behaviours and action of people in the organisation in the areas of decision-making processes, problem-solving strategies, innovative practices, information filtering, social negotiations, relationships, and planning and control mechanism. Thus culture, which is the glue that holds the organisation together, gives identity to members, generates commitment, and enhances social system stability (Maull *et al.*, 2001). They argued that culture is both a belief system and a strategy with the implication that the development of strategy is cultural development and any cultural change is also regarded as strategic change. Therefore, organisational culture has a role to play in providing an enabling and a conducive environment to innovation and consequently the strategic agility initiatives of the firm.

In an organisation, individuals share a culture or common values, attitudes and behaviours (Parnell, Koseoglu & Dent, 2012) and of this, when faced with opportunities and threats from the environment, organisational culture affects decisions, feelings and behaviours of these individuals (Ozigbo, 2012). This position was echoed by Sampath and Krishnamoorthy (2017) when they maintained that an organisation moving to become strategically agile is a great challenge because neither the culture nor the mind-sets of the people can be changed easily. According to Kotter (2012), organisational culture has the potential to enhance the performance of any institution and the sense of certainty about problem solving. Organisations that are strategically agile do recognize and pay attention to the influence of organisational culture on how people set personal and professional goals, perform tasks and administer resources to achieve those goals (Lok & Crawford, 2004) and they therefore note the importance of a shared participative process involving employees and managers in strategic decision-making (Carvalho *et al.*, 2017).

Literatures in developed countries have established that organisational culture moderately drives strategic agility and firm performance, but employing organisational culture as a moderating role driver between strategic agility and firm performance have not been extensively discussed in literature within developing economies especially Nigerian context. This indicates a conceptual literature gap that this study intends to bridge.

LINKAGE MODEL OF STRATEGIC AGILITY AND FIRM PERFORMANCE THROUGH THE MODERATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Conceptually, Cameron and Quinn (1999), Crocitto and Youssef (2003) and Felipe, Roldán, and Leal-Rodríguez (2017) argued that majority of organizations are unsuccessful in their attempt to manage business environmental changes and unstable firm performance effectively, resulting from incapability to implement cultural changes accurately. Specifically, Crocitto and Youssef (2003), Ashrafi, Xu, Sathasivam, Kuilboer, Koelher, Heimann and Waage (2005) and Mao, Liu and Zhang (2015) established that one of the most commonly ignored variables in literature that affect strategic agility is organisational culture. Felipe et al. (2017) further stated that the linkage between strategic agility and firm performance with organizational culture as moderating variable have been suggested to a certain extent but until now there has been a scarcity of studies especially in the developing countries like Nigeria providing how organisational culture moderates the link between strategic agility and firm performance, thus this serves as theoretical gap in literature that this study intends to bridge.

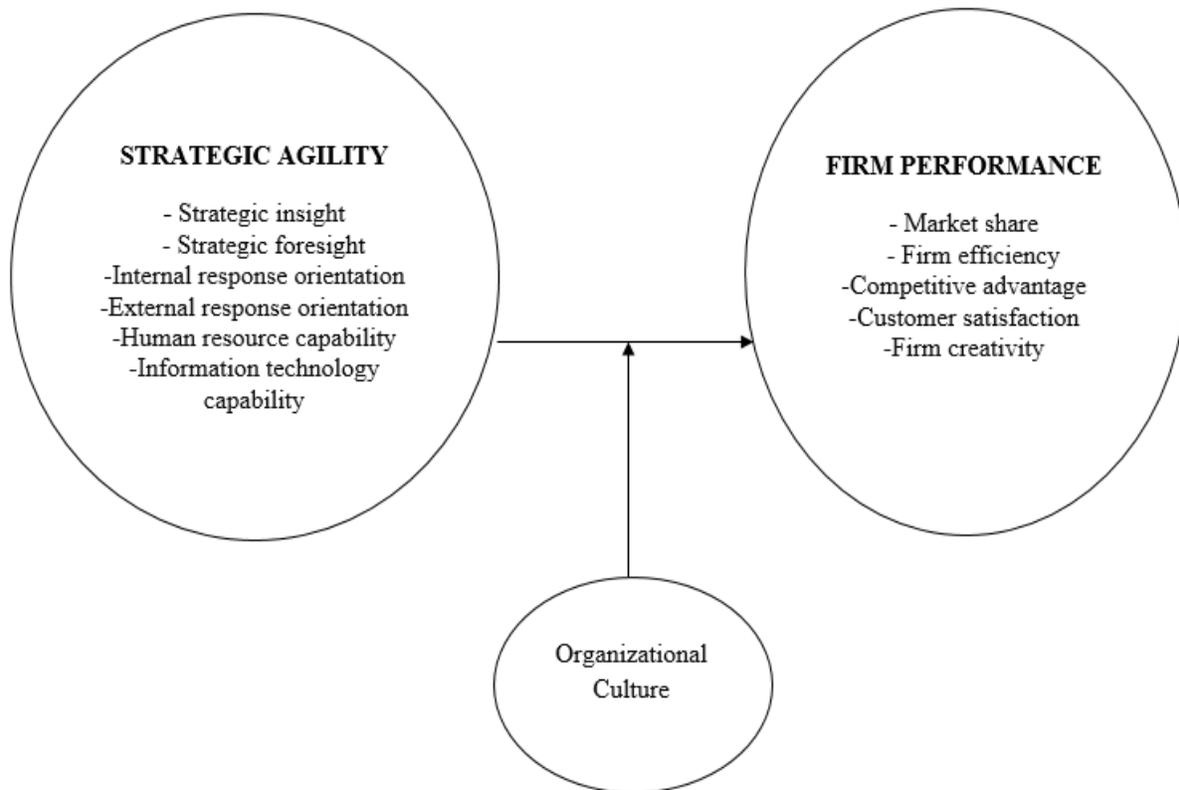
The conceptual model for this study shows the link between the independent variable and the dependent variable. The dependent variable is firm performance conceptualized as non-financial performance indicators such as market share, firm efficiency, competitive advantage, customer satisfaction and firm creativity while the independent variable is strategic agility and is also conceptualized as; strategic insight, strategic foresight, internal response orientation, external response orientation, human resource capability and information technology capability with organizational culture as moderating factor between strategic agility and firm performance. This conceptual model is depicted below in figure 1.

The researcher's conceptual model indicates how organizational culture moderates the link between strategic agility and firm performance. Based on evidence from extensive literature, the arrow indicates that strategic agility enhances firm performance and for organizations to continuously achieve performance through strategic agility, organizational culture plays a significant role. This indicates that if organizations adjust organizational culture in line with their strategic agility to suit current trend in the global business environment, such organizations will surely achieve targeted performance.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Matching strategic agility with organisational culture may be complex to execute and apply but it is easily understood by organisations in this current 21st century where unstable environmental turbulence and ineffective implementation of organisational culture hinder firm performance. Literatures have shown that employment of strategic agility strategies and flexibility in organizational culture in line with global business trend can be a solution to the threat of unstable business policies and environmental turbulence thus enhancing firm performance. Conceptually, organisational culture can be viewed as antecedents for the successful operation and application of strategic agility strategies and also for enhancing performance apart from other strategies that may be employed by the firm in order to achieve superior results. Based on extant literature reviewed, organisational culture is found to contribute to application of strategic agility and determine firm performance. Therefore, this study recommended that organizational managers should endeavour to embrace strategic agility dimensions in order to achieve greater firm performance such as market share, firm efficiency, competitive advantage, customer satisfaction and firm creativity. Organisational policy makers, owners and managers should employ both strategic agility and organisational culture in their business activities, processes, decisions and direction so as to flow with current global business trend and thus achieve overall performance.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



Source: Researcher's Literature Review (2019)

Thirdly, managers should promote a culture that is good and fits the business strategy of the firm by formulating a strong organisational strategy matched by a strong institutionalised organisational culture. In this regard, this study agrees with Maull et al. (2014) that any strategy development is a cultural development, and therefore business managers must strive to create an appropriate strategy-culture fit through their managerial behaviour arising out of the organisational culture. Furthermore, managers should promote the culture of free flow of information within the organisation that allows them to find ideas in unexpected and unusual places especially information about the business environment, customers and competitors. Moreover, organisations must recognize the need for building effective top management teams as they important role in producing a conducive environment for idea generation and in taking critical decisions regarding resource mobilization, deployment and redeployment. Finally, this study agrees with Ojha (2008) that strategic agility is a dynamic capability which from the resource-based viewpoint can be a valuable, rare, irreplaceable and inimitable resource, and therefore can facilitate the ability of a firm to gain and maintain competitive advantage. So managers should strive to initiate strategic agility practices into their organisations.

Further study should empirically investigate how organizational culture moderates the relationship between strategic agility and firm performance in oil and gas industry and other key industries that determine economic activities, growth and development in Nigeria. Similarly, further study should also

empirically examine how higher educational institutions in Nigeria (Universities and Polytechnics) can employ strategic agility and culture in enhancing global educational standard and superior performance.

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