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Commentary

A commentary on project portfolio and program
management terminologies, and relationships
with organisational strategy
by Alan Stretton

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INTRODUCTION

Difficulties with terminologies have long been a problem in project management. Aritua et al 2008 have described these difficulties as a terminological challenge, as follows.

> One of the biggest challenges in research and practice of project management is the lack of consistency and uniformity in understanding and use of terminology. This difficulty is especially acute in the simultaneous management of multiple projects.

The simultaneous management of multiple projects is the domain of both program and portfolio management. Each of these has attracted more specific comment about terminological differences, and their consequences.

For example, Pellegrinelli 2008 made the following observation in relation to programs.

> When individuals involved in projects and programmes meet, they each spend time trying to understand what the other means by programme management.

Aritua et al 2008 described terminological differences in the portfolio domain as follows.

> Like programmes, portfolios do not have a uniform homogeneous definition. The term 'portfolio' has been in use for some time and is used across different sectors and throughout many and diverse organisations. It therefore has a multiplicity of meanings.

This commentary does not attempt a broad discussion on terminological difficulties in the portfolio and program domains, but focuses on a particular issue shared by both. This is the need to clearly distinguish between specific "front-end" versions of each on the one hand, and their more common usages in later activities on the other.

We start with some definitions/descriptors of portfolios at large, and then look at "front-end" versions, which are described as *strategic investment portfolios.* We then move on to some definitions/descriptors of programs at large, and a note on similarities and differences between programs and portfolios, before looking at "front-end" versions, which are described as *strategic initiative programs.* This will be followed by a brief discussion on relationships between portfolios, programs, projects and operations, after which we will illustrate how the "front-end" versions of the first two also relate to a recursive organisational strategic management framework.

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PORTFOLIOS AND PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

We have just quoted from Aritua et al 2008 about the multiplicity of meanings that portfolios can have. More recently, Dalcher 2020 also observed that "portfolio management can mean different things to different people". This is illustrated to some extent in the following sampling of definitions/descriptors of portfolios and their management from the project management literature.

Portfolios at large and their management: Some definitions/descriptors

> ...I define a portfolio as a group of projects that share common resources. …. Projects in a portfolio share common inputs.   (Turner 2016)

> A project portfolio is a collection of projects to be managed concurrently under a single management umbrella where each project may be related or independent of the others.
> (Martinsuo & Dietrich 2002; Thiry 2004)

> A portfolio is a set of projects that are managed in a coordinated way to deliver benefits that would not be possible if the projects were managed independently
> (Platje et al 1994) [Artto & Dietrich 2004]

> A portfolio is a collection of projects or programmes and other work that are grouped together to facilitate effective management of that work to meet strategic business objectives.   (PMI 2013c) [Turner 2016]

In spite of the fact that this latter definition of portfolio includes both programs and other related work, this PMI Standard for Portfolio Management specifically describes the latter as "project portfolio management", as follows (PMI 2006b:5).

> There are many types and varieties of portfolio management. This standard does not attempt to address all types of portfolio management; instead, it focuses on "project portfolio management". Since project portfolio management is the focus of this standard, it is denoted throughout this document as simply "portfolio management".

So, although the descriptor *project portfolio* as used above can also include programs and other work, it appears to be a quite widely accepted – and therefore hopefully acceptable – broad descriptor for portfolios in the PM context, and will be adopted here.

It is noted here that the lack of identification of the nature of 'portfolio' in the title of PMI's "Standard for Portfolio Management" drew the following comment from Archibald 2009.

> As an aside, I would like to point out that the omission of the words "project" and "program" from the title of this PMI standard is indicative of the less-than-broad perspective that seems to pervade PMI today. …..

This raises another terminological issue, namely differences between internal project management jargon, the usage of similar terms in the broader world at large, and

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related difficulties in securing common understanding between the two. I hope to look further at these types of internal-to-external terminological issues in a future article.

"Front-end" strategic investment portfolios and their management

The following two quotations give portfolios a special place in the "front-end" of an organisation's strategic investment management approach.

> A organization's portfolio is the totality of its investment (or segment thereof) in the changes required to achieve organizational objectives.   (OGC 2011) [Turner 2016]

> A portfolio should reflect the total or parts of investment planned or made by an organisation. These should be aligned with the organisation's strategic goals via its business objectives. ….   (Fraser 2020)

Recently, Lobzov 2021 has done much the same with his paper entitled, "Portfolio balancing and project selection in case of alternative ways to achieve strategic goals".

Turner 2016 describes the OGC definition as an *investment portfolio*. In Stretton 2020l, which discussed Fraser 2020, I described it as a *strategic investment portfolio.* The latter descriptor is perhaps a little more precise, and I will stick with it for the present. Fraser further elaborated on these types of portfolios as follows.

> A [strategic investment] portfolio is where priorities are identified, investment decisions made, capacity is analysed, and resources … are allocated. …..

> [Strategic investment] Portfolio management is the centralized management of one or more portfolios, which includes the enabling, identifying, balancing, measuring, adjusting and reviewing/ renewing of programs of work, projects and other work to achieve specific business objectives.

These definitions/descriptors very clearly spell out that *strategic investment portfolio management* is specifically involved in identifying an organisation's strategic investment priorities, and in making decisions about which ones to run with – as well as having overall responsibility for their ongoing development and implementation.

Turner makes the point that a *strategic investment portfolio* is only one type of portfolio, within the overall domain of what we have described as *project portfolios.* I am not sure how you would describe portfolios that do not include the strategic investment stages – perhaps *implementation project portfolios?*

Summarising portfolio-related terminologies

The broad descriptor *project portfolios* was given to collections of projects, programs and other work at large, which are managed concurrently in a coordinated way to deliver synergistic benefits.

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"Front-end" *strategic investment portfolio management* specifically includes involvement in identifying an organisation's strategic investment priorities, and in making decisions about which ones to run with, as well as in their ongoing management. This quite specific version should be terminologically differentiated from *project portfolios* at large.

PROGRAMS AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

When individuals involved in projects and programmes meet, they each spend time trying to understand what the other means by programme management. (Pellegrinelli 2008:3)

Programs at large and their management: Some definitions/descriptors

The following definitions/descriptors of programs and program management are broadly equivalent, although their emphases are a little different in each case.

> …I define a programme as a group of projects which contribute to a higher order strategic objective. (Turner 2016)

> A program is defined as an undertaking in which a group of projects for achieving a program mission are organically combined (PMAJ 2008:57)

> Programme management is the coordinated management of projects and change management activities to achieve beneficial change. (APM 2012:14)

> [Program]… A group of projects, subprograms and program activities, managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually.
> (PMI 2013b:2)

> [Programme]….a temporary flexible organization created to coordinate, direct and oversee the implementation of a set of related projects and activities in order to deliver outcomes and benefits related to the organization's strategic objectives:….
> (OGC 2011) [Turner 2016:32]

Some of the themes in the above include coordination of the component projects, the inclusion of other related activities, and combinatorial benefits.

A note on similarities and differences between programs and portfolios

It can be seen that these program definitions/descriptors are very similar to those for project portfolios. At this point I will include a quotation from Turner 2016, who says that,

> …we quickly learned to differentiate between a program and a portfolio. A programme is a collection of projects contributing to a common objective; a portfolio is a collection of projects sharing resources.

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As far as I can tell, this particular mode of differentiating between portfolios and programs has not been all that widely adopted. However, it is important to note that this particular type of distinction has been made, and by a very prominent contributor.

At this point, we also note that the above definitions/descriptors of programs and their management also mention or imply program contributions to strategic objectives. Such contributions overlap with more specifically focused types of "front end" programs and program management. We will focus on "front-end" programs which are initiated very early in the organisational strategic management context.

"Front-end" strategic initiative programs and their management

For some time now I have used the descriptor *strategic initiatives* for the actual actions taken by an organisation to achieve its strategic objectives, broadly in line with the following definition from Cooke-Davies 2016.

> ….a project, portfolio of projects, other discrete program or series of actions undertaken to implement or continue the execution of a strategy, or that is otherwise essential for the successful implementation or execution of a strategy. This includes some (usually high priority) projects, but does not entail the entire project portfolio.

In Stretton 2020d I proposed the appointment of strategic initiative managers to cover their management from inception to completion. Shortly after, in Stretton 2020f and 2020h, I linked these directly with the types of programs described in the UK's Office of Government Commerce's publication "Managing Successful Programmes (MSP)" (OGC 2007).

OGC's Figure 1.2 indicates that their programs are initiated, and program managers appointed, directly after the organisational strategies, policies, initiatives and targets have been established. The timing of these early appointment closely corresponds with those of my recommended appointments of strategic initiative managers.

This "front-end" initiation of programs has been in place for quite some time in the procurement and acquisition processes of public sector organisations in the UK. I have been told that these types of "front-end" programs have been in place for even longer in some government agencies in the USA, notably in defense, energy and transportation.

Additionally, it is noted here that Thiry 2016 links the OGC 2011 edition with the third edition of PMI's *Standard for Program Management* (PMI 2013b), and it with the third edition of Japan's P2M (PMAJ 2015). Thiry says that all three standards agree that programs "are a means to execute the organisation's strategic objectives". Although not specifically stated for the latter two standards, it is implied that they also make provision for similar "front-end" programs, as well as for programs initiated later.

In light of the earlier association I have made between "front-end" program management and strategic initiative management, I propose describing the former as

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strategic initiative program management. This descriptor then clearly distinguishes it from other types of program management which are initiated later in the organisational strategic management context.

Summarising program-related terminologies

With this new addition to program management terminology, we have a situation where all *strategic initiative programs* are programs, but not all programs include these "front-end" strategic initiative components. I have been looking for an appropriate descriptor for the latter types of programs, but without much success. The best I have been able to come up with to date is *implementation programs* – which I will adopt for the present.

RELATIONS BETWEEN PORTFOLIOS AND PROGRAMS

Some regard project portfolios as being components of programs

One group of definitions has positioned portfolios of projects within a broader context of programs, as is illustrated by the following quote from Jamieson & Morris 2004.

> Program management was defined as the management of a portfolio of projects sharing a business objective of strategic importance, probably utilizing shared resources.

Lonergan 1994, and Ribbers & Schoo 2002 have made similar definitions. Turner 2016 also suggests that a program can include portfolios of smaller projects.

Clearly, the above imply that the types of portfolios relevant to this perception are *implementation project portfolios.*

Others regard portfolios as comprising component programs and/or projects

On the other hand, another group specifically includes programs and/or projects within the broader context of portfolios. This is typified by the PMI definition quoted earlier.

> A portfolio is a collection of projects or programmes and other work that are grouped together to facilitate effective management of that work to meet strategic business objectives.

This perception tends towards regarding portfolios more in the light of *strategic investment portfolios.*

Relating [strategic investment] portfolios with programs, projects and operations

Turner 2016 relates this type of portfolio with programs and projects as follows.

> [Strategic investment] Portfolios set the strategic objectives for the organization and are the main vehicle for linking strategic objectives to the programmes and projects being

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undertaken by the organisation. The strategic objectives are primarily about developing new operations, ….

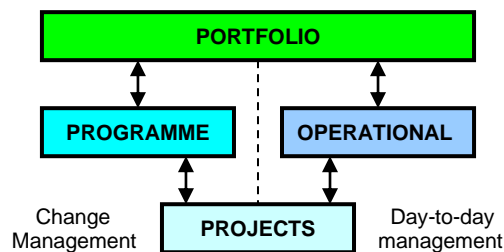Turner illustrates this relationship between portfolios, programs, projects and operations as follows:

Figure 1. Relating portfolio, programme, operations, projects. Adapted from Turner 2016, Figure 3.4

Further relating the above to an organisational strategic management framework

Fraser 2020 compares some key attributes of *strategic investment portfolio management* with those of program and project management as follows.

> ….[*strategic investment*] portfolio management considers the achievement of objectives at a strategic level whilst programs of work, projects and other work are focused around the achievement of specific outputs and outcomes - ….

> ….modern [*strategic investment*] portfolio management whereas program of work and project management have defined starts and end points. [*Strategic investment*] Portfolio management therefore has an incremental and adaptive nature.

Stretton 2020l illustrated some management responsibilities in relation to a recursive organisational strategic management model I have been using in recent times. I have adapted this to incorporate the front-end forms of portfolio and program management discussed above, and the relationships shown in Figure 1, as shown below in Figure 2.

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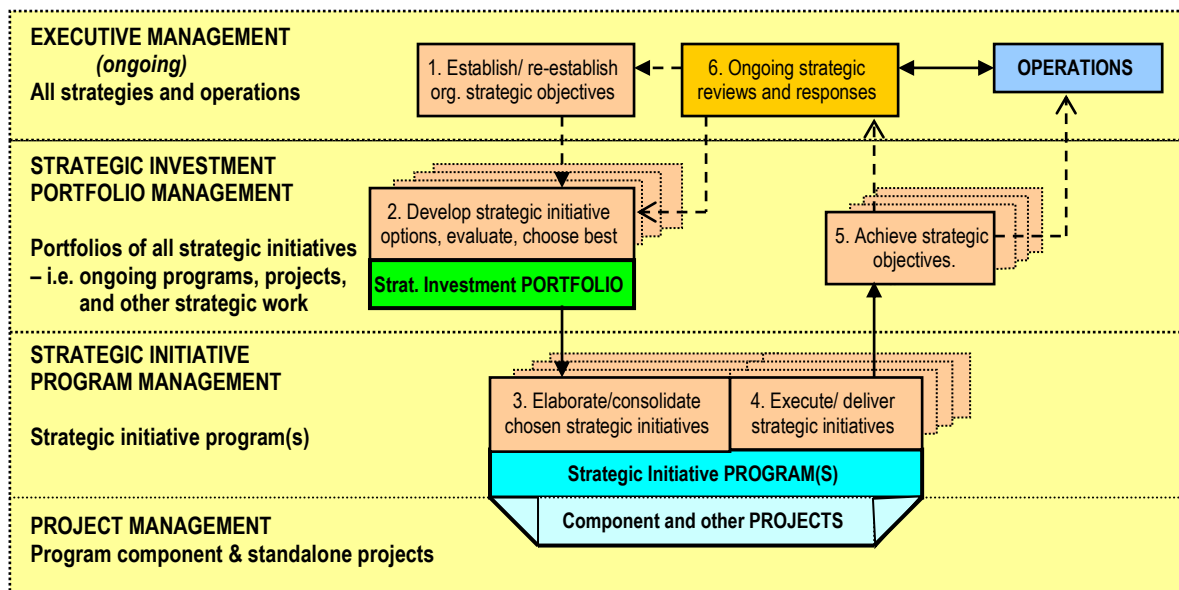by Alan Stretton

Figure 2. Executive, strategic investment portfolio, strategic initiative program, and project management responsibilities in an organisational strategic management context

- The executive management level is shown as ultimately responsible for establishing, reviewing and re-establishing the organisation's strategic objectives, as well as for the organisation's operational effectiveness.
- The strategic investment portfolio management level indicates an ongoing responsibility for the complete portfolio of strategic initiatives – i.e. with Fraser's "achievement of objectives at a strategic level". As Fraser says, it "has a rolling-wave nature i.e. it never ends".
- The strategic initiative program management level is concerned with individual strategic initiative programs and their component projects, "focused around the achievement of specific outputs and outcomes".
- I have added the individual project management responsibility level, so that Figure 2 now replicates all the elements in Figure 1, within the overall organisational strategic management framework

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

This commentary has been mainly concerned with one particular aspect of sometimes confusing terminological issues relating to portfolios, programs and their management in the project management context – namely, to clearly distinguish between the more general understanding of portfolios and programs at large, and the more specialised "front-end" versions of each.

We first looked at how portfolios and portfolio management at large are represented in the project management environment. These representations vary, but are broadly depicted as collections of projects – sometimes with programs and other work added –

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managed concurrently in a coordinated way to achieve synergistic benefits. These have often been described as *project portfolios*, which is the identifier used in this article.

We then looked at a particular type of "front-end" portfolio, which Turner describes as an investment portfolio, but which I had earlier described a little more precisely as a *strategic investment portfolio.* S*trategic investment portfolio management* is specifically involved in identifying an organisation's strategic investment priorities, and in making decisions about which ones to run with – as well as having overall responsibilities with regard to their ongoing management, and the achievement of strategic objectives.

Using these terminologies, all *strategic investment portfolios* are *project portfolios*, but not all *project portfolios* include these "front-end" strategic investment components. This article is suggesting that it is important to distinguish between them by using the specific descriptor *strategic investment portfolio* when this type of project portfolio is being discussed.

We then discussed a somewhat similar situation that applies with programs and program management. Common definitions/descriptors for these are very similar to those for project portfolios, but we recorded the perspective of one writer on differences between the two. We then noted that some programs are initiated much earlier than normal – i.e. around the same time as the sanctioning of strategic initiatives to achieve an organisation's strategic objectives. I have described these types of programs *as strategic initiative programs*, to distinguish them from the more usual types which are initiated later, and which might be termed *implementation programs*.

We then briefly discussed relationships between portfolios, programs, projects and operations, after which we illustrated how *strategic investment portfolio management* and *strategic initiative program management*, as well as projects and operations, can be represented in the context of an organisational strategic management framework.

Hopefully this commentary will help clarify at least one of the terminological challenges that exist in the project management domain.

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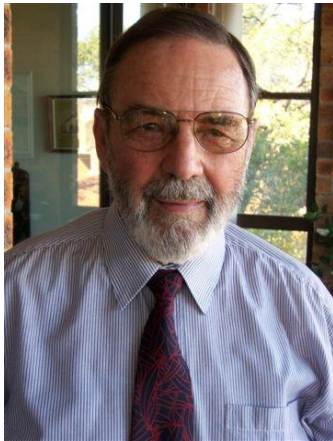
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