

Chapter VI

Falling Behind: A Case Study in Uncritical Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the major findings of case study research investigating uncritical assessment of an institution-wide learning management system in an Australian university. Suburban University illustrates the ways in which a range of social and institutional influences, operating internally and externally to an organization, can affect managerial decision making. Many of the parties involved were unaware of the influence of some of these factors upon them at the time of assessment. When these parties also lacked a background in the areas they sought to manage (i.e., the educational enterprise of the university), critical assessment was made even more difficult. Therefore, universities that teach skills in critical assessment to their students can sometimes be uncritical in their own decision making, particularly when the vice chancellor fears “falling behind” other adopting universities and key organizational decision makers lack relevant theoretical frameworks to inform decision making in the areas they manage.

INTRODUCTION

I was talking to him the other day and I said you were coming out and I said, “how honest do you think we should be?” Because, I said “it’s a really intriguing topic that someone is actually going to

ask the question, you know, how were these decisions [made] and against, how were these decisions evaluated basically”. And the short answer is “they’re not”. And I think you know that. And from a management perspective, I was interested because there’s a lot of research in management

that tells you how you could go about these things, and who should be the stakeholders you know. But this place avoided doing all that, because, well, for whatever reasons. I don't know why we've got WebCT as opposed to Blackboard. But once you've got it you know, you've got it for life. The cost for anyone in management to contemplate changing tools now, it's just impossible. And that's a shame because it's not like it's being used, it's just expensive (An anonymous respondent from Suburban University¹).

This chapter discusses the major findings of case study research investigating the process of examination and assessment of an institution-wide learning management system in an Australian university. The case explores the operation of a range of internal and external influences on the organizational decision making process, ultimately leading to uncritical assessment and underwhelming organizational outcomes.

Readers of this chapter will have the opportunity to see the ways in which a range of social and institutional factors interact to shape the assessment and decision making process in organizations. This chapter will thus provide an illustrative case study of the challenges involved in evaluating pervasive technologies, particularly when organizational leaders believe they are 'falling behind'. It will also provide a number of recommendations for organizational leaders and decision makers.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AS PERVASIVE TECHNOLOGIES

During the mid to late 1990s, a number of alternative strategies for delivering higher education utilizing new educational technologies became more accessible to universities. In March 2002, the first national attempt to assess the extent of online learning among Australian universities

was published, based on a survey of 40 out of 43 Australian universities between August and September 2001 (2002). Online learning, according to these authors, comprised

Subjects or course components, in which at least some of the content is delivered and/or some of the interaction is conducted via the Internet. This may be optional or compulsory. (Bell et al., 2002, p. x)

In this study, the authors found that there were 207 fully online university award courses (comprising of multiple subjects or units) with no face-to-face component offered by 23 (58 percent) out of 40 responding Australian universities (Bell et al., 2002, pp. ix-x). These fully online course offerings were not, however, the most common form of course delivery among Australian higher education providers. The prevalent form of online delivery involved optional student participation on the World Wide Web (herein referred to as the Web) in 46 percent of units (whole subjects or course components), with all universities employing the Web to some extent for teaching and learning purposes (Bell et al., 2002, pp. ix-x).

Assisting this online delivery of teaching and learning were a number of commercial and in-house learning management systems, of which there were sometimes several systems within the same institution. The most popular of these learning management systems were WebCT (29 universities), in-house systems (20 universities), and Blackboard (17 universities), with institutions preferring WebCT and then Blackboard as institution-wide systems (Bell et al., 2002, pp. 22-23).

Bell et al. noted that there was little information available on the extent of online course delivery in other parts of the world at that time (Bell et al., 2002, p. 3). The exception was Canada where in 1999/2000, 57 percent of the 134 higher education institutions that participated in this research project claimed that they ran subjects that were delivered with no traditional face-to-face teach-

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