

Chapter 1

Evaluation of Information Strategy Implementation: A Critical Approach

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ABSTRACT

Information strategy is often relegated to an information technology element of corporate strategy, or worse, ignored in favour of IT operational planning. This research, conducted over a five-year period, stresses the correct framing of an information strategy and its implementation. The authors propose a framework that assists in the evaluation of such strategies, primarily those at higher education institutions, but also in a wider range of organisations seeking to improve the understanding and implementation of their information strategy.

INTRODUCTION

This research presents guidance for developing and evaluating information strategies of organisations, and in particular those of higher education institutions (HEIs). The guidance reflects a critical systems approach, and draws on a broad range of theory and empirical experience to provide analytical support for the evaluation. The process works

by identifying specific elements of an information strategy, and for each element directing the evaluator to the relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence that illuminate the issues raised. The primary aim is to identify underlying causes for problems and difficulties exhibited by an information strategy either under development or as implemented, and to suggest ways to resolve these.

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Abai (2007) defines an information strategy as “an organization’s unified blueprint for capturing, integrating, processing, delivery, and presentation of information in a clean, consistent, and timely manner. All information in an organization should meet a certain standard for quality.” This definition emphasises the pragmatic aspects of such a strategy where the underlying aim is to make effective use of the organisation’s vital information resources.

This research, by examining some of the problems encountered in information strategy development and implementation from the point of view of the end users, aims to advance the understanding of aspects of organizational and end-user computing (OEUC). In particular this work reflects ideas set out for a new direction for OEUC (Clarke, 2004) which emphasises the need for adopting critical systems approaches so as to overcome the limitations of using exclusively either technologically-based or human-centred approaches.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research context for this paper was a desire to improve understanding of the development process of information strategies in UK HEIs. Any information strategy has, at its heart, a need to provide information systems that facilitate the work of the organisation. Within the UK Higher Education sector, as part of the wider strategic planning that has become a requirement in these HEIs, there has been increasing emphasis on the development of information strategies. An important driver for this was the increasing competition faced by UK universities and colleges in the expanding global education market, and increased expectations of students and the wider society.

In this context, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) of the Higher Education Funding Council in England has been charged since the 1990s with encouraging the development of information strategies within HEIs. To facilitate

this development, JISC selected six UK HEIs as pilot sites, and guided these through the process of information strategy development. This process highlighted the requirement on UK HEIs to develop information strategies so as to ensure value-for-money from their IT, including exploiting technological advances, for coping with the rapidly increasing number of students, and most importantly, for attempting to bring about a change in attitude towards the ownership and accessibility of information within their institutions.

The experience with the pilot sites led to the publication by JISC of the *Guidelines for Developing an Information Strategy* (JISC, 1998a) and *Case Study Reports* drawn from the individual sites (JISC, 1998b). At the same time, JISC selected a further nine universities to be ‘exemplars’ to represent HEIs at different stages of information strategy development. Subsequently most HEIs in the UK have gone on to develop their own institution-wide information strategies.

A good definition of such a strategy, as it applies to an HEI, is that provided by the University of York (2005). This says that an information strategy embodies the following principles:

1. **Knowledge-based organisation:** A University is a knowledge-based organisation *par excellence*. Information is critical to a University’s success and needs to be managed as a strategic resource.
2. **Quality:** Information should be fit for purpose – relevant, up-to-date, accurate, secure, and compliant with legislation and University policies. Information should normally be shared and duplication minimised.
3. **Ownership:** Each area of information or element of data should have a *custodian* who will be responsible for ensuring the quality of the data and for implementing the access policy.
4. **Users of Information:** All users should be fully aware of their rights and responsibilities in the handling of information.

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