

Chapter 21

Strategic Deployment of E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Changes in higher education (HE) have continued in response to, or indeed in anticipation of, an increasingly competitive environment, technological advances and shifting demands of users. Introducing new technologies into a Higher Education Institute (HEI) requires management of complex change processes to deliver their full potential. Innovative ideas for technology and practice may be constrained, and compromised by people and cultural reactions thereby reducing their effectiveness and limiting their potential for improving teaching and learning. The management of change in organisational practices therefore involves attention to three aspects: processes, people, and culture. This chapter presents a longitudinal study of one HEI through the lens of two active participants in a number of e-learning initiatives, and discusses process, people and cultural change challenges. It proposes that new evaluation frameworks are required to establish success in the implementation of new and emergent delivery modes mediated through the use of ICTs, and provides one example, the Learning Technology Practice Framework. The use of such frameworks may help with engaging academics in thinking about how to embed e-learning successfully within courses, and at a broader level within the organisation. The changes in the roles of lecturers/tutors and learners is particularly important in light of the disorientation faced by both of these user groups as a result of changing organisational culture and work practices. Lecturers and students have to adapt to their new roles and be allowed the opportunity, time, rewards and training to allow them to adapt the technology to meet their needs in their different and particular contexts of use. Overall it is found that the adoption and diffusion of e-learning in higher education is likely to develop more slowly than imagined by some educational visionaries owing to the complex nature of technology implementation that is common across all sectors, be it industry or education.

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INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of technological transformation in higher education (HE) has become widespread internationally with the overarching pervasiveness of the Internet and the potential advantages this offers to higher education. In today's changing academic environment, leaders at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are confronted with increasing demands to transform their institutions, as stakeholders' expectations have risen and resources have diminished. HEIs compete intensely to attract students and to generate revenues as operating costs rise and they face greater scrutiny and accountability from outside agencies that impact on accreditation, funding and, in consequence, resources (Boyett, 1996; Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004; Raelin, 1995). It may benefit HEIs to consider parallels in the corporate environment for, as Kotter (1995) suggests, examination of corporate change efforts is becoming increasingly relevant to even more organisations as environments become more and more competitive.

Across the HE sector, the rationale for e-learning and its benefits are largely accepted. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) strategy for e-learning (2009) demonstrates a commitment to supporting sustainable e-learning in HE institutions and is indicative of an acknowledgement that students learn in different ways and wish to have information presented in alternative formats and indicative also of a response to changing student needs including the desire for flexibility in study provision.

Changes in HE have continued in response to, or indeed in anticipation of, an increasingly competitive environment, technological advances and shifting demands of users. Introducing new technologies into a HEI requires management of complex change processes to deliver their full potential. Innovative ideas for technology and practice may be constrained, and compromised by people and cultural reactions (Calverley &

Dexter, 2007) thereby reducing their effectiveness and limiting their potential for improving teaching and learning. Change management in organisational practices therefore involves attention to three aspects: processes, people, and organisational culture (HEFCE, 2003). Pennington (2003) highlighted three corresponding themes that influence successful change management in higher education: the recognition of change as a complex social process, the identification of change agents with appropriate skills, and the creation of a cultural disposition towards change. Resistance to change can be managed through ensuring that information is disseminated, communication targeted and that opportunities for staff involvement are maximised.

People are central to the HE process and therefore, in technological transformation in HE, it is critical to address the concerns and perceptions of academic staff in the light of the need for changing their attitudes and maturation of their practices in effective use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) alongside the ICT maturation process (Calverley & Dexter, 2007; Evans & Franz, 1998; Taylor, Lopez, & Quadrelli, 1996). Increasing availability of ICTs is not enough in itself to improve poor processes. Staff need to be confident in the reliability and availability of e-learning developments and, concomitantly, in those supporting and delivering those developments. Staff at the 'coal face' who are engaged in delivering the learning, teaching and assessment may feel that control of ICTs is out of their hands and this can be a factor hindering take-up. There is a need to try to ensure commonality of approach and the availability of support and advice campus wide.

Staff structures must be in place to meet the new challenges of electronic learning, teaching and assessment. Lack of appropriate structures may result in stress associated with role conflict and ambiguity with staff feeling ill-prepared to face the challenges and alienated from new ways of working (Moses, 1997; Sarros, Gmelch, & Tanewski, 1997). Staff development may involve

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