

Chapter 2

Strategic Planning for the Integrated Use of Organizational ICT Processes and E–Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Universities currently face urgent demands to facilitate both lifelong learning and widening participation in an era of increasing global competition combined with the need for cost reductions. To cope with rising numbers of students, educators are rethinking teaching strategies to consider the potential of e-learning for academic delivery to an ever more diverse student population. However, there is a relative dearth of research examining the role of strategic management and the impact of organizational factors when considering the implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for administrative/management purposes and learning technologies to support teaching activities. This chapter analyses organizational ICT processes and e-learning in higher education (HE) through the use of a theoretical “rich picture.” “Soft systems methodology” (SSM) is applied to argue that since institutional settings, organizational vision, strategy and top-level support are critical to the success (or failure) of e-learning initiatives, these factors should equally be considered in planning for the implementation of integrated uses of ICT and e-learning. Academic programs are set in particular contexts within university environments and many have their own unique administrative procedures. In addition, numerous factors

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impinge on the implementation of technology enhanced learning solutions, including the roles of tutors, learners, courses, and the processes used to integrate teaching-related ICT. This chapter provides a theoretical “rich picture” of these processes at both program and faculty level to confirm prior research on the implementation of Information System (IS) projects, demonstrating that institutional issues such as strategic thinking and top-level sponsorship are key factors in successful outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

It almost goes without saying that society has been facing unprecedented changes in the 21st century. This is thought to be in no small part due to the influence of technological advances. The advent of ‘Information and Communication Technology’ (ICT) and the emergence of the Internet have spurred on the notion of international connectedness, now commonly referred to as globalization. The ensuing development of a ‘knowledge society’ (Drucker, 1994) has led to the ebb and flow of information resources on a worldwide basis. As a consequence, universities are being asked to endow graduates with a very different set of skills from those that they may have previously acquired. The growth of interest and activity in the ‘information society’ (European Commission, 1996) has led to increased competitiveness within most industrial sectors, including Higher Education (HE). Thus, numerous stakeholders are asking HE to meet the development needs of individuals for the benefit of society at large. While Billing (2003) found that team-work; self-management; and problem-solving skills were in high demand, he also argued that communication appeared to emerge as the most important skill valued by stakeholders in the majority of countries participating in his survey. Since then, this emphasis on communication skills has been steadily building as part of a rich variety of technological developments that have taken place over the past few decades.

Since its advent, ICT and other technological innovations have continued to accelerate in unprecedented ways, radically altering education, training and employment patterns around the

world, as prior research demonstrates (McPherson, 2003; McPherson & Nunes, 2006; Jameson, Davies & de Freitas, 2006; Stensaker & Skjerski, 2003). As there is no longer a guarantee of employment for any profession, there is an ongoing need for employees to cope with permanently increasing levels of innovation in skills and knowledge, as well as ongoing professional re-qualification. A few years ago, UK government policy (DfES, 2003) envisaged that the investment of independent learners in ongoing skills improvement would underpin innovation and enterprise in the economy and in society. More recently, with the world facing challenging economic conditions, the UK government has made it clear that it thinks that informal adult learning and skills training can provide a ‘way back’ into ‘further learning, qualifications and more rewarding work’ (DIUS, 2009).

As a result of these pressures, faculty and other educators are being challenged to offer flexible and accessible programs to more varied student communities. Yet at the same time they are also required to offer more attractive courses that will nevertheless engage students in a way that makes them take more responsibility for their own learning, thus providing students with the opportunity to acquire new skill-sets that are attractive to employers (McPherson, 2003). Recent government cuts to higher education as a result of the global ‘credit crunch’ also require that such changes take place within static or reduced budgets. As Middlehurst has observed, the UK government expects higher education simultaneously to ‘[i]ncrease efficiency, find new sources of income and improve performance across an ever-widening range of activities and services’ (Middlehurst,

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