e-Learning Strategies: Integrating e-Learning in Education Delivery

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

E-Learning has become increasingly important in higher education institutions. The development and introduction of a variety of e-Learning tools (from using email to a digital portfolio and a virtual learning environment) has been causing numerous changes in higher education institutions, especially with respect to their educational delivery and support processes. Over the last two decades, many higher education institutions have adopted a wide range of e-Learning tools into their educational delivery and support processes. Author here focuses on strategic use of e-Learning that has become important as the environment in which higher education institutions operate changes. Higher education institutions now have to deal with greater market forces, because of the decline in public funding, together with other challenges such as rising expenses, increasingly diverse student bodies and their changing needs and expectations and heightened demand for new and different programs and services. In order to respond to new student markets and changing needs and expectations, higher education institutions have to define clear and comprehensive strategies for the integration of e-Learning in their educational delivery processes. This study focuses on emerging scenarios with respect to the use of ICT in higher education, how future developments could be predicted and how strategic choices could be based on these scenarios.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

e-learning, e-learning strategies, ICT, educational delivery

\textbf{1. INTRODUCTION}

The term e-learning involves using the Internet as a communications medium where the instructor and students are separated by physical distance \textsuperscript{[1]}, Since in this study the focus is on strategic approaches of higher education institutions with respect to integrating e-Learning in their educational delivery and support processes therefore it becomes important not only to focus on the “narrow” definition of e-Learning of only offering complete on-line course, but on the “broader” definition that incorporates the use of digital technologies and the Internet to support and deliver education for both on-campus as well as remote exchanges and collaboration.

\textbf{2.E-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS}

As many universities are discovering, e-learning classrooms are the new frontier. There still exists a fear psychosis amongst students regarding learning barriers. Few of them being:

- Resistance to change
- The perception of no time to learn
- No experience of self-learning
- Content is not relevant or engaging
- Fear of technology

Keeping all these factors on one side and going ahead it is seen that higher education institutions now are making steps forward from the initiation to the implementation phase and even some higher education institutions are in the beginning of the institutionalization process. The focus being more on strategic use of e-Learning that has become important as the environment in which higher education institutions operate changes. Bates\textsuperscript{[2]} and Van der Wende and van der Ven\textsuperscript{[3]} have also argued in their papers that higher education institutions needs to develop strategies for integrating e-Learning in their educational delivery and support processes. Strategic approach to e-Learning is important for two reasons. One, in order to integrate e-Learning more systematically into the primary process of teaching and learning (institutionalization of change). And two, because e-learning plays an increasingly important role in the positioning of higher education institutions in their increasingly competitive environment. The same can be initialized by following certain steps:

- Pre-initiation and initiation, in which activities are mainly bottom-up experiences.
- Implementation, in which a more strategic approach is developed.
- Institutionalization, in which the change becomes institutionalized and becomes an integral part of the core processes in higher education institutions.

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\textbf{2.1THE NEED FOR E-LEARNING STRATEGY}

In order to respond to new student markets and changing needs and expectations, higher education institutions need to define clear and comprehensive strategies for the integration of e-Learning in their educational delivery processes. E-learning strategy is guided by a number of fundamental principles:
• Recognition of e-learning as both an enabler and enhancer of learning.
• Acknowledgement of the utility of e-learning in helping support improvements in the enhancement of learning.
• Awareness of it as a potentially cost-effective solution to supporting diverse groups of learners.
• The importance of disseminating existing good practice in design for learning and the use of appropriate tools.
• Enabling all staff to participate in e-learning.
• Endorsing and supporting one principal platform (Web CT); however, a range of e-learning platforms may be used by Schools.
• Celebrating diversity and a variety of approaches between Schools in the use and application of e-learning.
• Recognition of the key role of e-learning in enabling the University to achieve and sustain its competitive advantage.

2.2 E-LEARNING STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS
The first step in an e-learning strategic planning process is to fully analyze the current situation as it pertains to the ability to launch and sustain e-learning. This information is used to describe a desired situation, in other words to produce a vision statement. Once the vision has been agreed upon, the next step is to generate a mission statement to shape the actions needed to achieve the vision. E-learning strategic planning process involves studying:
• The nature of higher education institutions
• Decision-making processes within higher education institutions
Changing decision-making structures of higher education institutions and the same can be achieved by
• Supporting projects that enable staff to experiment and evaluate the use of e-learning,
• Regular evaluation of e-learning projects on the basis of robust and reliable research information,
• Enable staff to meet and share their experience and good Practice,
• Support staff development,
• Examine and learn from effective practice in other Institutions,
• Provide effective induction programs for students enabling them to develop knowledge and skills in the use of e-learning,
• Effectively deploy resources to support development of e-learning,
• Encourage diversity of approach, provided it can be supported within the available resources,
• Encourage the development of integrated systems and Support.

3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENVIRONMENT AND INSTITUTIONS:
One of the theories dealing with the explanation of the relationships between institutions and their environments is contingency theory. Contingency theorists argue that institutional choice and actions are limited by various external pressures and demands, and that institutions must be responsive in order to survive.

3.1 EXTERNAL CONTINGENCIES
The main basic assumption behind contingency theory is that an institutions contexts, its environments, are important for understanding actions and structures of institutions. Therefore to understand the behavior of an institution (i.e. actions taken by institutions) one must understand the context (environment) of that institution. This implies that an institutions response to external demands can, to some extent, be predicted from the situation of environmental contingencies confronting it. The key in this is the institutions ability to respond to environmental contingencies in order to survive.

3.2 INTERNAL CONTINGENCIES
The main focus of contingency theory is the influence environmental or external contingencies have on institutional choice and actions. Mintzberg⁴ et al. (1998) explain “it all depends”, on for example the size of the institution, its technology, the stability of its context, external hostility and so on” (p.288). This stresses both the importance of internal and external contingencies in understanding institutional behaviour.

4. STRATEGIC USE OF E-LEARNING WITH ICT
According to Bates⁵ (1997) Many e-learning initiatives have been justified on the assumption that ICT could improve the quality of learning while at the same time improving access to education at reduced costs. In the strategic planning process to implement e-learning or adjust existing e-learning initiatives, the focus should therefore not be primarily on how ICT can be used to achieve business goals, but also on the human aspects of teaching and learning.

A survey with respect to the use of ICT in higher education, showed different results with the first year students according to the four categories (theorist, activist, reflector, pragmatist) as defined by Honey & Mumford⁶ (1986) and their perceptual styles (auditory, visual and kinesthetic) about their preferred learning styles. An evaluation of e-learning environment with the students with the help of a questionnaire evaluated three principal aspects of e-learning in terms of teaching & pedagogy, technical aspects and user interface design. The research questions focused on:
• Relationship between students’ learning/perceptual styles with their performance in the exams
• Significant gains in students learning and motivation when using the online course environment
• Significant evidence to prove that the current e-learning environment does cater for the different types of learners

On evaluating the same it was found that an average, 52 % of students are reflectors, while 22 % are activists; 11 % and 13 % are theorists and pragmatists respectively. We also found that 48 % of learners preferred process visual information, 36 %
auditory and 16 % preferring kinesthetic and tactile instruction. However, no significant relationship with a student’s particular learning style with his perceptual styles was found.

CONCLUSION
Institutions can no longer ignore e-learning. Computers and the Internet have become an integral part of higher education. How effectively these educational tools will be used to enhance the learning process depends on building an e-learning strategy that not only optimises the use of technology to create convenience for learners but also addresses important pedagogical issues in the information age. And, in order to respond to new student markets and changing needs and expectations, it is necessary for higher education institutions to:

- REFERENCES


