

Taking the Lead: Strategic Management for E Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to inform the tertiary sector institutional senior leaders and managers in New Zealand about the strategies, processes and implications pertaining to e-learning and its uptake in Universities, Polytechnics and private training enterprises.

The intended readership of the research is quite small: the chief executives and senior executive officers of New Zealand's tertiary education institutions and organizations. It is designed to help these leaders consider the contribution they need to make to the strategic development and management of e-learning in their institutions¹.

It is strongly recommended that those involved in e-learning who wish to see it rate more highly in institutional strategic planning and operations make their Chief Executive Officers and Vice Chancellors aware of this work.

"E-Learning" in its various forms is transforming the way New Zealand tertiary educational institutions are teaching and supporting their students. It is a transformation involving fast developing technologies, some complex re-design and integration of institutional systems and the recruitment of new categories of specialists to assist teachers and managers use these new technologies. Much of the detail of this transformation process will, quite appropriately, be managed by specialist staff and middle managers rather than by senior executive staff. However, if these developments are to achieve the key strategic objectives of the institutions, these senior leaders and managers do need to exercise strong leadership in a number of key areas.

The purpose of this study has been to identify these key areas and to offer guidance to institutional leaders as to how they might be addressed most effectively.

This document is an executive summary of the complete research report of the “E-Learning Management Resource Project”. The fuller report – which is a substantial document of 100+ pages - builds on a set of nine themes. These nine themes were drawn from an earlier study on quality assurance for e-learning. In seeking to prepare a much shorter and tighter summary document, the authors have reduced and tightened these categories to just six:

- Strategy*
- Structure*
- Resourcing*
- Decision making*
- Collaboration*
- Selecting technologies*

Strategic Management for E-learning – the Key Message

'E-learning' in its various forms is transforming the way New Zealand tertiary educational institutions teach and support their students. It involves fast-developing technologies and the recruitment of new categories of specialists to help teachers and managers use them. It also involves some complex re-design and integration of institutional systems. Specialist staff and middle managers will manage much of the detail of this transformation process. However, if these developments are to achieve an institution's key strategic objectives, executives will need to exercise strong leadership in a number of areas. The purpose of this study is to identify these key areas and to guide executives in addressing them effectively.

This document is an executive summary of the complete report of the E-Learning Management Resources Project. It is available at the following site: www.akoaootearoa.ac.nz/takingthelead The fuller report, E-learning: Understanding the Key Strategic Issues Facing Institutional Leaders – a substantial document of 100+ pages – builds on a set of nine themes drawn from an earlier study on quality assurance for e-learning. In seeking to prepare a much shorter and tighter summary document, the authors reduced and tightened these categories to just six:

- Strategy
- Structure
- Resourcing
- Decision-making
- Collaborating and outsourcing
- Selecting technologies.

These six themes do not cover all the areas and challenges executives are aware of. They do, however, require strategic direction from those levels of the organisation where middle managers, technical experts or teachers cannot resolve challenges without executive involvement.

This document briefly describes each of these six themes, suggests corresponding strategic questions that executives need to ask and identifies some of the principal options available.

An important part of the larger project was to look at current institutional practice and develop a set of case studies (appended to the larger report) illustrating the themes that the report explores. This summary report draws a few of the key links between each theme and corresponding case studies.

1. Strategy

The primary questions executives might ask under this theme are:

What are the medium and long-term strategic goals and objectives of the institution?

How does the Learning and Teaching Plan reflect these?

How do the more specific plans for e-learning reflect these?

E-learning solutions are often promoted and endorsed without a clear understanding of the strategic objectives they are intended to serve. There are probably five reasons for an institution to introduce e-learning:

- to meet the service expectations of students, staff and stakeholders
- to enhance the quality of the student learning experience
- to improve study access and flexibility for students
- to increase enrolments by targeting new groups of potential students
- to deliver teaching services more efficiently.

All are legitimate objectives but it is highly unlikely that all will be achievable within the same application, programme or even institution. It is also highly unlikely that any e-learning solution that meets reasonable standards of quality for teaching or student support will be significantly cheaper than a conventional delivery option.

The key challenge for executives with respect to strategy is to ensure that institutional strategy drives e-learning strategy. Often an institution's e-learning strategy will be a solution-based plan that a committed group of enthusiasts somewhat detached from the broader strategic goals of the institution has developed.

The case studies identify a range of responses to this need for core institutional strategy to drive e-learning strategy. Otago Polytechnic provides an example of strong strategic direction at a corporate level. Otago University is an example of an e-learning strategy nested within a Teaching and

Learning Plan nested within a University Strategy, each level of which a governance group monitors and drives. Canterbury University avoids the danger of technology capture by not developing an explicit plan for e-learning at all, preferring to drive all planning for e-learning from their broader teaching and learning plan.

2. Structure

Form should follow function and it may seem perverse to give early prominence to questions of form and structure. However, the frequency with which institutions reorganise the units responsible for supporting e-learning may justify this prominence.

Questions of organisational structure and responsibility tend to be an executive province rather than being left to the discretion of those working within these structures. That is why executives must ask and find answers to the following questions:

How should you organise and manage for e-learning?

More specifically, who should be responsible for what and how should their various efforts be integrated and led?

Conventional classroom teaching is generally a one-person activity in the higher education sector. The teacher undertakes all the lesson planning, classroom teaching, assessment, student advising and administrative duties associated with delivering a course. It is also an activity that lends itself to autonomous decision-making. E-learning requires each of the above tasks to be performed but also requires the development of online teaching resources, the management of some form of learning management system (LMS) and the provision of a range of network services to allow both teachers and students to use the system. Executives need to make some important decisions about how institutions will support this.

Executives must decide how much help teachers will receive in the development of online teaching materials. Ideally, a subject teacher will have the help of a 'production team' including an instructional designer, a multimedia expert and a web developer, but realities of cost and time tend to preclude this approach. Most institutions opt instead for a small, central support unit comprising instructional developers who help teachers develop and manage their online courses. The extent of this assistance is likely to depend on the size of the support unit and the number of courses that are developed and redeveloped each year.

Executives must also decide where these online support people sit within institutions. One option is to establish a separate e-learning support unit. This provides a concentrated focus but may create overlaps and inconsistencies with other systems for teacher and student support. Institutions are instead increasingly co-locating their academic support staff to ensure the optimum use of limited support personnel and to avoid divorcing e-learning from other

modes of teaching and learning. A related issue is whether to encourage teaching units to appoint their own e-learning facilitators to ensure a more responsive and customised support for teachers. Again, this is a fairly expensive option that requires strong and sustained leadership encouragement for it to succeed and be sustained.

Most institutions have no trouble separating teaching support and network support operations. The latter commonly remain the responsibility of the institutional IT unit, which unit has the appropriate expertise and mandate. Problems are likely to arise where there are ill-defined accountabilities between service units or where there is inadequate institutional leadership for the e-learning programme. For example, an IT unit and e-learning support unit are likely to have quite different principles and assumptions regarding the purchase or replacement of a LMS so to reach a balanced decision executives will probably need to get involved.

This last point illustrates the crucial need for strong leadership from a designated member of the senior management team or, better still, the chief executive. However, a chief executive may not want to champion individual projects or causes. It may just as effective if another member of the senior team takes on this role. There is a danger in delegating final responsibility for the e-learning strategy and programmes further down the management line to, say, the director of an e-learning unit as they will probably lack the resources or mandate to drive a strong strategy across the institution. It is hard for them to solicit the continuing co-operation of divisional and programme heads, and to promote their own resource and system requirements against the competing claims of other, larger units.

The case studies demonstrate a variety of organisational arrangements for supporting e-learning. At the University of Auckland, the e-learning support unit is part of a larger aggregation comprising all the teaching and student support units. UCOL (universal College of Learning) has recognised the central role of the Library in knowledge management and is locating its e-learning support services within that unit. AUT University (Auckland University of Technology) is an interesting example of a senior manager seeking to exercise strategic leadership over his institution's teaching and learning activities, including e-learning. NorthTec is an example of the chief executive driving this leadership strongly. Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and Manukau Institute of Technology are instances of strong leadership at the e-learning support unit level.

3. Resourcing

Executives need to be clear about two things relating to e-learning resourcing:

How should they resource e-learning within the organisation?

What will it cost?

While the second question may be of more immediate interest to senior managers, the first question is probably more important. The full report charts a common evolution of resourcing for e-learning among New Zealand institutions:

- targeted grants support early adopters
- a pilot programme receives similar targeted funding
- as the numbers of users increase, gaps are identified in the provision of services
- central services are established and resourced to fill these gaps
- e-learning support services are made available to teaching units generally without charge
- as usage grows, these units start rationing their support provision.

By this stage, most institutions have a fairly stark choice to make when it comes to funding the wider development of e-learning strategies. The first option is to 'ring fence' the resourcing and management of e-learning and treat it as a centrally planned, centrally resourced and largely stand-alone stream of activity and funding. 'Top-slicing' generally resources this option. The central e-learning unit is allocated sufficient resources to develop a given number of courses to a given standard. A selection process then determines which courses will be developed and to what standard.

A common variant of this approach is the use of development grants which are awarded on the basis of applications from across the institution. This approach has a number of strengths:

- it allows executives to make a corporate and strategic decision about which programmes will make use of e-learning and how it will be deployed
- it tends to encourage a programme-wide approach to e-learning rather than a more piecemeal, course-based approach
- it may act as a strong incentive for programme groups to make the effort to develop their online programmes.

On the other hand, in a regime of devolved funding, targeted central funding can distort the decisions that programme managers make about the delivery of their programmes. As the scale of an institution's e-learning grows, this mode of funding e-learning will represent an ever-growing proportion of each unit's total funding. Therefore it is probably not likely to ensure the accountability of individual unit and programme managers.

The other alternative is to minimise the level of centrally funded support services and encourage divisional and programme leaders to view e-learning as just one of the many delivery options that they should consider resourcing from their current income. In theory, this should encourage programme leaders to make rational and cost-effective choices among competing delivery options. A downside of this approach may be a slower uptake of e-learning than with a more centrally funded approach. There may also be a variance in the quality and range of approaches adopted which will probably attract the attention of a quality assurance unit.

On balance, the evidence seems to favour a continuing level of central resourcing for central services. Institutions with development grants to facilitate e-learning developments can target developments on a more strategic basis and ensure a more even standard of provision. The scale of such grants can vary considerably. One or two regional polytechnics are investing up to \$1 million in targeted development projects each year while a couple of much larger universities are investing \$100,000-200,000 across a large number of projects.

Massey University is endeavouring to resource its e-learning development on a fully devolved funding model. Otago University and AUT University have competitive grant systems delivering modest support for selected programmes. NorthTec and Otago Polytechnic have larger-scale central investment in e-learning on a targeted basis.

4. Decision-making

Who makes the decisions about which courses and programmes will make use of e-learning and how they will do so?

The locus of decision-making within institutions about the use of e-learning is strategically important. It also closely relates to the previous discussions on leadership, organisational structure and resourcing. As with these, the options vary. At one end of the continuum, individual teachers primarily make decisions on behalf of each of their courses and according to their own preferred teaching mode. In most divisions of most New Zealand universities, e-learning is viewed as an option which teachers can elect to adopt, or not. Support services assist teachers in using the institutional LMS and there are generally opportunities for teachers to undergo targeted training in this mode of delivery. Teachers are rarely instructed to deploy a given mix of e-learning tools to support their course delivery. In these institutions, academic developers tend to see their role as supporting and encouraging teachers to develop and teach in the ways that best suit them. It is not their role to enforce an institutional standard or to prevail on the unwilling to adopt a new mode of teaching.

To a greater or lesser degree, individual teachers in all the case study universities make decisions about the use of e-learning.

Some institutions recognise that decisions about mode of delivery should sensibly be made on a whole-of-programme basis rather than a course-by-course basis. Students commencing a programme should reasonably expect some continuity in their mode of study rather than being subject to the vagaries of choice from a sequence of teachers. A programme that is targeting a particular student demographic may be seriously compromised if some teachers opt not to employ the delivery mode suited to that target market. In such institutions, these decisions are made increasingly at a divisional or, more commonly, a programme basis. A decision might be made, for instance, that a programme will target the part-time student market in its region. In order to meet the needs of that market, the programme might offer

a blend of face-to-face block courses, supported by a suite of online learning resources and communications services. A minimum level of online service is specified for the programme and there is active assistance for all teachers contributing to the programme so their courses meet these requirements. These standards might conform to a wider, divisional or institutional standard, or they might be specific to the programme in question.

Arguably, every institution should strive to achieve a functional level of programme-wide service. It will require the active intervention of programme leaders and ideally of divisional leaders but it should not be seen as a threat to academic freedom. Teaching with e-learning methods is no more an attack on academic freedom than the implicit expectations that conventional courses will be delivered in lecture and seminar rooms, that teachers will be available to tutor and advise students, and that the course will normally last for the duration of a semester.

Whitireia Regional Polytechnic has decided as a matter of policy that decisions about utilising e-learning will be made on a programme basis, and that support services will target programmes and programme teams rather than individual courses and teachers.

In some institutions further along the continuum decisions about what is taught and how are made at a corporate level and for strategic ends. These models normally involve a strong injection of central resourcing and central support as well. Much of the early literature on e-learning favours this model. Potentially it allows a concentration of development resource and effort on those programmes that are likely to yield the greatest educational and financial return for the institution. It allows a relatively rapid development and rollout of a high quality product. This approach requires hard choices to be made between competing options for scarce resources. It will therefore work much better in an institution with a relatively corporate culture. It will also require a high level of commitment among the leadership team to a shared vision and a steady uptake of this vision by the staff at large.

The Open Polytechnic has a highly centralised corporate approach to managing e-learning. The senior executive team makes all decisions about e-learning on the basis of thorough business plans prepared on a programme-by-programme basis. The senior executive team also drives the uptake of e-learning at Otago Polytechnic, although there is greater use of targeted central funding to help programme teams make the change.

5. Collaborating and outsourcing

E-learning, more than many other teaching modes, lends itself to collaborating with other institutions or outsourcing to contracted service providers. Executives must consider options for either collaborating or outsourcing various aspects of e-learning activities.

There are a number of reasons why institutions might collaborate with another entity to support e-learning activities. These include:

gaining access to specialist expertise, knowledge, systems, courseware, networks or hardware
expanding the visibility and market reach of a teaching programme
taking advantage of the regional footprint and support services of an institution in another region
achieving economies of scale by increasing the size of the student market and the institutions' combined capacity to meet this market
complying with an external policy, regulatory or funding requirement for such collaboration.

The choice, in any given instance, is usually between collaborating, outsourcing a set of services, or developing them in-house. Collaboration or outsourcing may enable executives to make an earlier commitment to a new service; it should allow executives to plan and control costs more reliably; and it may allow them to buy-in services that lie outside 'core business'. The downsides may include a loss of direct control over the processes; a disinclination to develop these services in-house; some alienation from the contracted services and the service provider; and the high cost of managing relationships. Nevertheless, executives should view the opportunities for collaboration and outsourcing on a case-by-case basis rather than decide one way or the other by principle alone.

The two case studies illustrating collaboration and outsourcing respectively are examples of what can be achieved.

TANZ is a collaboration among six medium-sized regional polytechnics. Right from its outset, TANZ has seen greatest scope for collaboration among its member institutions in the planning, development and provision of e-learning programmes and services. There has been early success in offering joint programmes in applied business and plans are underway for larger-scale collaborative offerings.

For a number of years, Wintec has contracted Intuto to deliver a range of e-learning services and products on its behalf. The relationship allowed Wintec to take advantage of a market opening that it would have been unable to service on its own. It is a commercial relationship that changes constantly as the nature of the service mix changes.

6. Selecting technologies

Periodically, executives need to make decisions about purchasing or upgrading ICT systems. These are often very high cost items in terms of capital and recurring costs. The technology itself can be very complex and challenging for a lay-person to fully master, and executives may sometimes feel that the proponents of such solutions virtually set an ambush. They present few viable alternatives to the preferred option and present the issue as mission-critical.

It is unrealistic to expect the average chief executive to master the technical details of many of these solutions. But executives do need to have some way

to assure themselves that they are reaching a decision on the basis of a reasonable understanding of the fit between the strategic needs of an institution and a particular 'solution'. Executives need a set of diagnostic questions that they can ask of each proposed solution. The following is a basic list:

Strategy questions

What problem will this technology solve or help us with? What sort of priority is it?

Do our teachers/students wish to teach/study in this way?

How do we know students will achieve their learning outcomes?

Will we suffer if we simply don't adopt it?

Staff development questions

What are the implications for staff workload? Can this be managed?

Can our teachers use and manage this technology themselves or will they be dependent on support personnel?

What are the implications for staff development?

Marketing questions

Will it open up new markets (geographic, demographic, subject) for us?

How does this technology impact on the existing mix of technologies both for supporting and delivering teaching and for administrative/support systems? Does this technology offer the necessary range or quality of functionality and interoperability?

What are collaborators and competitors using? Why would we want to use the same or a different system?

Finance questions

Is it a cost-effective solution in terms of capital and recurrent costs?

How do the anticipated costs compare with current technologies?

Will it displace any current services and associated costs?

Can we control and/or anticipate future costs?

Technology questions

Is it a robust technical solution?

Is it emerging, 'bleeding edge', established or 'twilight edge'?

How big is the user base?

How will users access support both locally and remotely?

Is this technology readily scalable?

Can we support/maintain this technology ourselves or will we be dependent on an outside supplier? How dependent will this technology make us on outside providers? To what risks are we exposed?

What infrastructure do we need to support this system? Do we have it already? If not, what will it cost to develop?

What level of disruption will this technology bring to our operations?

Have we an exit strategy for this technology?

Intellectual property/Privacy questions

What implications does this technology have for intellectual property – both our use of others' IP in the technology itself, and others' use of our learning materials?

Does this technology bring with it any implications for student/staff privacy?

Conclusion

These six themes cover most of the strategic issues for which executives, and only executives, can take responsibility. There are other important dimensions of e-learning that executives should certainly understand and provide leadership for. The full report addresses all of these. They include quality assurance, instructional design and development, teaching and learning, staff development, student support, assessment and moderation, and technological infrastructure and support. Staff at other levels in an institution can usually identify and address these issues, however. The purpose of this project is to help you address the issues for which executives are uniquely responsible.

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