

Dilemmas Facing Universities in Implementing Online Learning Programmes

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Abstract: Primary research in this area was based on implementing Web assisted learning and engaging academic staff in the change process within a UK University. The thrust of the investigation was to establish the level of dependency of academic staff engaging in the change process. To this end academic staff perceptions were explored within the framework of Collis et al. (2001) 4-E model of staff engagement with technological change. This study found that the impact of fast, forced change on academic staff's attitude was yet to be ascertained. The paper highlighted the need to explore and measure the sub-factors which underlined the four key factors of the 4-E model.

The subsequent research paper entitled "Transition to Web assisted learning: influences on academic staff engagement" (Bagher, Marek & Sibbald, 2007) built upon technology acceptance models and the 4-E model applied to education, by attempting to clarify the key stimuli and inhibitors to engagement of academic staff in a mandatory web-assisted learning environment. The findings from that research highlighted that academic staff had a very positive attitude to web-assisted learning.

This study aims to further develop the whole reflective conversation with a view to making appropriate changes to the way in which we successfully deliver education in order to determine a new benchmark for developing learners' knowledge and understanding through a web assisted online environment. This will in turn identify the immense strength and limitations of technology enhanced distance education.

The focus of this paper is to extend the original research and explore the tensions which exist between "the Organization" and "the Academic" in the implementation and delivery of a sustainable online education.

In addition the paper aims to further develop the ongoing study of change management within the University sector by seeking to identify the main strengths and limitations of implementing online education, in particular within an environment that traditionally focused on physical face to face learning.

The paper will conclude with an identification of the core elements to be considered when measuring the success of implementation and the delivery phase of online learning practices.

Key words: online education, virtual learning environment (VLE), change management, sustainability

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1. Introduction

Globalization and recent advancements in communication technology has created a new platform for distance learning education. While this will bring new challenges for the planning, delivery and quality assurance of education within an online learning environment, it also provides opportunities to enhance the student experience.

As worldwide demand for higher education continues to grow, stimulated by economic growth, the changing economic needs of developing economies and the growth of the consumer class worldwide, web assisted technology provides educational providers with the tools to access this market place. It is recognized that Universities operate within a rapidly changing environment involving: pressures on public expenditure; uncertainty over international student fee income arising from changes to immigration policy; increasing international competition for students; and growing expectations of ourselves and our students in relation to the student experience. As such Universities need to adapt their learning models to address these. Changes are therefore required to enable the University to compete in an increasingly competitive environment both domestically and internationally, within which high quality learning resources are freely available online, on demand and at no cost (e.g., MOOCs, etc.).

In the last few decades a myriad of terms have been used to describe learning in an online environment, such as e-learning, i-learning, networked learning and virtual learning. However, common themes amongst these are the physical distance between the learner and the academic (Tutor) and the role of technology to access learning materials, engage with academic tutors and other learners, and support students.

For the purpose of this paper, online learning, as suggested by Ally (2007), can be defined as:

“The use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, Instructor and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience” .

Online learning aims to engage students as a group of virtual learners who may be geographically dispersed, providing them with a unique and culturally diverse learning experience. Software applications such as Moodle and WebEx are utilized to provide a platform to encourage students to engage in their learning process and further help them to build community and trust.

Historically the act of gaining knowledge through learning and education has focused on traditional, face to face on-campus interaction. However, although the concept of distance learning is nothing new, contemporary advancements in Information Technology has fostered a new paradigm where for the first time mass global education can take place at a distance, breaking down geographical barriers and supports the reintroduction of social interaction.

This new approach to distance teaching and learning utilizing web assisted technology will demand a revised methodology. As suggested by Moser (2007) “If an institution’s stated strategy is to promote the use of educational technology, that institution must establish an adequate framework for faculty to use technology successfully”.

This study aims to further develop the whole reflective conversation with a view to making appropriate changes to the way in which we successfully deliver education in order to determine a new benchmark for developing learners’ knowledge and understanding through a web assisted online environment. This will in turn identify the immense strength and limitations of technology enhanced distance education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Context

Recent advancements in communication technology coupled with the popularity of social media platforms have enabled educational providers to open up access to education to a wider community of learners. Nonetheless, the success of online education depends on the appropriate technology being fully embedded within existing practices of an educational provider.

Whilst online learning technology provides opportunities it also poses a competitive threat as traditional universities are now faced with strong competition for students from Universities across the globe and private sector providers.

This reinforces the need to overcome possible complacency and take advantage of the opportunities being presented — “otherwise there is a threat of being left behind” (O’Neill, Singh & O’Donoghue, 2004; Volery & Lord, 2000).

2.2 Online Learning

As noted by Ciussi & Freitas (2012) “e-Learning is now fully part of our learning environment and no longer an add-on to traditional pedagogies. It is integrated in the way we live, work and teach..... However, there is a potential tension in the manner that this has been launched into Institutions in relation to online distance learning courses”. Cubic, Lilley & Clarke (2012) claim that in traditional UK institutions these have been “bolted onto long established practices without clear institutional understanding of the need for a distinct student-centred distance learning pedagogy”. To this end they highlight the need for Institutions to have a “clearer vision to enable the delivery of the benefits and scalability which technology seems to promise”.

This notion by definition questions the appropriateness of the current structure of Higher Education institutions which are geared to deliver education on a face-to-face basis. Hence the need for Institutions to adapt a more hybrid model where they can accommodate both traditional and online distance education. This hybrid model must have the capabilities to deliver a high quality learning experience for students, maintain academic standards and quality of awards in line with QAA benchmarks and protect and enhance the brand and reputation of the institution. Furthermore, it must facilitate the development of learners to acquire the skills which will enable them to transfer their knowledge into practice. This notion is reinforced by Mayes & de Freitas, cited in *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age* (Beetham H. & Sharpe, eds., 2013), who argue that “the role of technology may be primarily to get remote learners into a position to learn as favourably as though they were campus based, rather than offering a new learning method”. This highlights the fundamental importance of making sure that “both campus based and distance learning needs to be within the same theoretical constructs”.

According to Hiltz and Turoff (2005) “current evolutionary changes in educational technology and pedagogy will be seen, 50 years from now, as revolutionary changes in the nature of higher education as a process and as an institution”. They consider that “we are in the process of moving from face-to-face courses to online and hybrid courses using digital technologies...”, and further suggested that “online learning would infiltrate and change the nature of traditional face to face delivery”.

Hall et al. (2012) interprets these changes as the fusion of “formal and informal learning”. As suggested by Leadbeater (2000), cited by Hall et al. (2012), “Schools and Universities should become more like hubs of learning, within the community, capable of extending this into the community.....more learning needs to be done

at home, in offices and kitchens, in the contexts of where knowledge is deployed to solve problems and add value to people's lives".

Puzziferro & Shelton (2008) note that "online education has forever transformed Higher Education, and we are learning that quality is really about flexibility and the ability to adapt to the changing demands of learners, the new promises of technology, and the new competitive landscape of Higher Education (HE). If HE is to remain competitive we must focus and redesign our paradigms, as well as design business processes that integrate with quality assurance models". Further, "in order to compete in the online HE market, we need to get relevant high quality product to market quicker. In a market where students expect fast service, consistency and quality, a more streamlined production approach is now required".

2.3 Organizational Change

Change is an integral part of everyday life and is the only thing which is certain to happen. It is also said that the only constant thing in life is change and according to Darwin (1859) the adaptability to change determines "species fate".

There are a variety of approaches which an organization can choose in order to implement change. For the purpose of this paper we will focus on hard and soft systems of change.

As suggested by Senior & Swailes (2010) models of change management can be divided predominantly into "hard" and "soft" systems. According to Senior & Swailes (2010) by "asking a number of questions about a change situation may help to identify whether it is likely to involve hard or soft complexity and whether it can, therefore, be seen to be more of a difficulty or more of a mess".

Hard systems approach originates from the field of project management with industrial origins. The model consists of description, options and implementation phases with a main objective of problem solving. As suggested by Senior & Swailes (2010) the hard system model of change can be applied "where there is an emphasis on means and ends..... and is especially useful when dealing with situations that lie towards the 'hard' end of the hard-soft continuum".

The so called soft system approach to change for continuous change that affects an organization and its departments within and it requires support and buy in from top management through collective ownership. It must take cognizance at all those that change can affect. The soft system model for change focuses on people as main deliverers of change with particular emphasis on their values, beliefs and culture combined with their developmental needs. The soft system model of change aims to develop the organization by placing emphasis on developing the people involved within the organization.

Burnes (2004) views this from two different perspectives. On the one hand change "can be viewed as a one-off event, an exception to the normal running of an organization" and on the other hand "some organizations see change not as an exception but as a norm, a continuous process that forms part of the organization's day-to-day activities".

According to Morgan (1997) "In times of change it is possible to look at almost any industry and find once successful firms struggling to survive". Morgan (1997) cites Peters & Waterman (1982) example of IBM as a once successful company struggling by the 1990's and suggests that IBM's "particular style of excellence had become a trap that prevented them from thinking in new ways and from transforming themselves to meet new challenges". Morgan cites Miller's (1990) interpretation of the "analysis of some of the reasons why this occurs" further arguing that "organizations can get caught in vicious circles whereby victories and strengths become weaknesses

leading to their downfall” (Morgan, 1997).

2.4 Organizational Change

Organizational change falls into two types — strategic and operational. Strategic change is considered as a long-term broad set of plans which are organizational wide. Senior & Swaile’s interpretation of “classic thinking” suggests that “strategic change assumes that the planning process rely on the ability to join-up causes and effects” and to this end this model “underpins the top-down approach to strategy analysis and implementation” (Senior & Swaile, 2010).

Operational change relates to the achievement of aims and objectives of the plans set out within the strategic framework. This is closely linked to “operational strategies” which is interpreted by Johnson & Scholes (2002) as being “concerned with how the component parts of an organization deliver effectively the corporate and business level strategies in terms of resources, processes and people”.

Whether hard or soft system approach for change is chosen, the common denominator is the actual management and sustainability of that change. In addition the approach needs to fit the context within which the organization is operating in.

3. Methodology

Prior to considering the appropriate research process it was necessary to reflect on the aims and objectives of the paper.

The aim was to extend the original research and explore the tensions which exist between “the organization”, “the academic” and “the learner” in the implementation and delivery of a sustainable online learning strategy. In addition, the paper aims to further develop the ongoing study of change management within the University sector by seeking to identify the main strengths and limitations of an online learning paradigm, in particular within an environment that traditionally focused on physical face to face on-campus education.

As the paper is concerned with glancing at the past for comparison, it was not possible to gather primary data which was altogether current. However, it was still possible to consider whether there is an overall belief by responding academics that change has taken place and to identify the extent of the change..

The philosophy by which the paper is developed is based on phenomenological approach to research. As suggested by Saunders et al. (2012) phenomenology is “based on the way people experience social phenomena in the world in which they live”. In addition O’Donohue (1999) suggest “phenomenology has shown us that all consciousness is consciousness of something...and the way you think determines what you will actually discover”.

The chosen approach to this research is by means of qualitative measures and according to McBride & Schostak (1991) qualitative research is often contrasted with quantitative research. Qualitative researchers are interested in answering “why” questions and are often not prepared to simply accept the quantitative answers. They further state that quantitative perspective seeks measurement as the basis for forming generalization concerning social reality. This approach is adopted in order to create the opportunity to establish respondents’ values and beliefs.

To gather primary data questionnaires were used. Although the questionnaire would not fully provide the means of understanding how people really perceived the notional change, it would provide a further assurance in the subsequent interview results and final analysis of data.

Although questionnaires can prove to be the quickest method of gathering data, it could potentially lose the personal views and considerations which is an important element of this research. Additionally, it was important to provide academics with an assurance as to how the data was going to be used.

One to one interviews were part of the method chosen to gather primary data, as it provided an opportunity to probe initial answers.

The methodological approach determined the depth of the paper by ascertaining the validity, reliability and the degree of the credibility of the overall conclusions. Above all it determined whether the research objectives have been met successfully. To this end, the paper's methodological approach has been heavily influenced by the subject matter.

4. Research Findings and Analysis

The previous research, Bagher, Marek & Sibbald (2007), explored staff attitudes to the implementation of web-assisted learning within the traditional face to face educational environment. With the extension of web-assisted learning into Distance Education the objective of this paper was to ascertain the views of the academic staff to the progression into pure online education.

4.1 Online Learning

The first question sought to determine whether there was a common understanding amongst the academic staff within the Business School as to what is Online Learning. The paper found that staff surveyed expressed similar views to that proposed by Ally (2007). Respondents considered it to be "Learning without face to face contact, providing students with the opportunity to study for a qualification at a time and place which meets their individual needs via a virtual learning environment". There was also a growing recognition that online is a mode of delivery which enables education to reach out to a wider learning community by removing an access barrier, although, some were "sceptical that this was for economic rather than andragogical reasons and a bolt onto established practices". This view was also expressed by Lentell (2012), cited in Cubic, Lilley & Clark (2012), who described the situation in traditional UK institutions that online learning has been "bolted onto long established practices without clear institutional understanding of the need for a distinct student-centred distance learning pedagogy. If it is to deliver efficiently the benefits and scalability which technology seems to promise, a clearer vision is needed".

Academics surveyed recognized the desire and demand by online students for flexibility in the way in which education is delivered, which online learning can offer. The majority of respondents accepted that the move into online learning was the way forward "preference is face to face contact but it is the way forward to reach many learners all over the world..... so we have to embrace it". However, respondents expressed caution that such developments must be supported by adequate resourcing and training in the development of online materials, online learning and student support. "Works if invested in properly."

In addition, respondents did not consider that online learning is an economical way to increase student numbers, the nature of such study means that online learners seek more support on an individual basis than traditional face to face education.

4.2 Staff Attitudes

The research highlighted a positive attitude towards the move into online learning. The responses included

comments such as: “good and pioneering move”; “keep going”; “it is very exciting that we are doing this!”; “it is the future”; “getting more and more popular but we need to get better at it”; “means more resources”, “good, but we need training and support”.

Davids (2010) highlights a number of barriers to technology adoption: perception; resistance to change; technological support; financial support; infrastructure; knowledge/information; and technophobia, also supported by Rogers (2003), Butler and Sellborn (2002). This notion of barriers is reflected by the respondents highlighting the need for additional training to develop in order to acquire the necessary skills to facilitate the development and delivery of online programmes. The comments from respondents included: “my frustration comes from my own lack of confidence [knowledge] with ICT”; “perhaps support amongst module leaders and the ability to share best practices would be more helpful than formal training”; “need academic experts to tell us about best practice and latest innovation..... more evidence based guidance required”; “finding time to attend training sessions difficult”.

According to Eckel & Kazar (2003) “people think differently”.... and the process of “getting people to adopt new mind-sets is a cognitive and intellectual process spurred by a set of activities that can be intentionally designed to leave behind old ideas, assumptions and mental models”. This reinforces the notion that to achieve this, there is a need for organizations to provide the environment for individuals to develop new “mind sets”.

4.3 Institutional Strategy

The Business School’s development of online programmes was partly a result of the need to enter an alternative educational market place in order to fill the gap with the reduction of overseas non EU students. This reduction was mainly due to the UK Border Agency’s revised non EU student entry requirements which included the removal of post study stay.

Whilst academic staff recognized the rationale behind the move, they felt that it was necessary to develop a strategy for online education at Institutional level and this should be followed by the necessary resources to design and develop specific online learning materials. Respondents’ comments such as: “we absolutely need some time to review online provision”; “to get this right we need to have the necessary time and resources to offer an appropriate distant learning experience”.

The above reflects suggestions by Puzziferro & Shelton (2008) that “Integration of online education into the institutional strategic planning and goal setting process is critical to achieving the level of quality need to compete in the competitive industry of online education”. Furthermore, Greenberg (2004), cited in Puzziferro & Shelton (2008), points out that “universities are indeed businesses, and if they are to compete in the ever-growing competitive online higher education market, they need to take a hard look at their culture and practices”.

The above perspectives are reinforced by the findings where respondents believe that “the systems and processes are not fit for the purpose of online education” and as such they “need to be revised across the board”.

4.4 Sustainability

Respondents acknowledged the move into online learning is one of the key determinants to the “successful delivery of the University’s overall Strategy”. However, the respondents further highlighted the “need for adequate resources for initial training and ongoing development”. They further expressed the “importance of developing learning materials which are interactive, relevant, engaging and academically challenging”.

The above factors reinforces the need for investment in appropriate technology coupled with supporting administrative infrastructure to ensure a quality student experience, albeit from a distance, however, comparable to that on campus. This view is supported by the findings of Puzziferro & Shelton (2008) who note that in order

to meet the demand for online education, Institutions need to put in place a “a sustainable ‘business model’ for online course development that offers a scalable production process that is the foundation for quality, efficiency and productivity for the entire institution”.

Respondents were concerned over the perceived lack of appropriate human resources to meet the strategic objectives both at academic and support staff level. Respondent comments included: “careful consideration must be given to an appropriate model to ensure adequate levels of staff are in place in order to sustain growth in student numbers”; “online learning should not be seen as a cheap option, and business processes should integrate with quality”.

The respondents highlighted that in order for the delivery of online materials to be sustainable they (academics) “must have the appropriate knowledge and skills”, and “all related academic team members need to be actively engaged with online delivery”. Additionally a need was identified for “relevant training in various aspects of online development and delivery at appropriate times which academics could attend”. Suggestion that possibly “more informal training in the form of peer support” would be more appropriate together with “debriefs for online programmes using workshops for development”.

4.5 Student Experience

There was a myriad of responses to the question on potential benefits of utilizing online learning assets on other modes of deliveries such as “face to face, blended distance learning and Transnational Education”. A number of respondents saw benefit in the “materials being an additional resource for these modes, affording students the time to reflect on the topic”.

In addition a number of respondents suggested that online learning “enhances flexibility and provides alternative methodologies that may suit the ‘students learning style’....‘rate of learning’; and ‘attendance issues’”; “my thinking has developed as a result of reviewing and updating my online materials”. Few respondents perceived that there would be no benefit to student experience.

5. Conclusions and Reflections

The focus of this paper was to extend the original research and explore the tensions which exist between “the Organization” and “the Academic” in the implementation and delivery of a sustainable strategy for online learning.

The findings highlighted that there were benefits in the shift into online education, and these were recognized by academics. Nonetheless, they expressed the fundamental importance of a clear and focused strategy for online education.

Furthermore, the paper established the need for careful planning and guidance in order to manage and sustain the change process. In addition there has to be appropriate and timely training and development supports in place. This needs to be matched by adequate levels of technical and administrative support. The paper further highlighted the importance of creating the necessary steps for change to take place.

In addition, a number of key areas have been identified to ensure the successful implementation of an online education. These include:

The need to embed online education into normal academic activity.

- The importance of ensuring that the online student experience is comparable with that of face to face students.

- University systems and processes must be capable of supporting the requirements of the mode of delivery.
- Clear and concise information must be provided to learners, explaining what and how the Institution will deliver the online education.

The paper has also highlighted the need for a further study into the views of past and current learners with a view to establishing the main strengths and weaknesses of online education.

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