

Approaches taken by Australian universities to documenting institutional e-learning strategies



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The way in which a university communicates a strategy that it is attempting to implement to its staff can have an important bearing on the effectiveness of the strategy. However, there are currently no generally accepted conventions governing the scope, structure, content and language of strategy documents. E-learning is an area of activity in which most universities are currently striving achieve major change and therefore the documents being used to communicate institutional strategies in relation to e-learning merit investigation. A study was undertaken of the ways in which Australian universities are documenting their strategies in relation to e-learning and the types of activities that are being identified in strategy documents. The study found that two distinct approaches to documenting institutional e-learning strategies are being adopted. Some universities are developing discrete strategies whereas other universities are embedding their strategies in more general documents. The most common themes that were identified in discrete e-learning strategies included: learning management system(s), networking and infrastructure, planning, policy and strategy development, evaluation, support for projects related to e-learning, development of courses, teaching and support, learning spaces, and future developments. The themes that more than one university covered in general documents included: staff development, programs, use, improved access, effectiveness, and teaching/learning spaces. Comparison of the documents provided by institutions showed that when e-learning strategies have been embedded in more general documents the range of aspects of e-learning that are covered tends to be less wide-ranging than is the case when discrete strategies have been produced.

Keywords: strategy, planning

Introduction

The 2004 survey of online learning conducted by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) found that of the institutions surveyed, 71% claimed to have some form of online learning strategy and 93% reported either having a strategy or one under development, and that of the Australian institutions included in the survey, 63% reported having an online learning strategy (OECD, 2005). Strictly speaking, a strategy is a plan of action. What were counted in the OBHE survey were not the strategies *per se* but strategy documents. Given that the survey was completed more than three years ago, one would expect that those already high percentages would by now have climbed even higher. However, the figures quoted above tend to convey a misleading impression. The survey categorised strategies as “discrete”, “related” and “integrated”. Discrete strategies were strategies targeted specifically at e-learning, related strategies were strategies encompassing e-learning and a related area or areas, and integrated strategies were strategies incorporated into general strategic planning documents such as a Teaching and Learning Plan. The 71% figure included institutions that fell into all three categories. When educators talk about e-learning strategies they are usually referring to what the survey called “discrete strategies”. As will be shown, the number of Australian universities that have developed discrete strategies is very much lower than the figure that was arrived at in the Observatory survey.

The data from the OBHE survey were drawn on heavily for the OECD Survey on *E-Learning in Tertiary Education* that looked more closely at the ways in which universities were using e-learning strategies. The OECD survey studied nineteen universities across thirteen countries. However, it included only two Australian universities: Monash University and the University of South Australia. It cannot therefore be considered to provide a good a guide as to what has been happening in the Australian context. Working from the more representative OBHE data, Garrett and Verbik (2004) concluded that, at the time, Australia had the edge over Canada, UK, and South Africa in terms of the scale and scope of online developments.

There are many reasons why an institution may decide to develop a documented strategy in a specific area of activity such as e-learning. These reasons may include: to focus the attention of staff of the institution on that area of activity; to have staff moving in the same direction; to achieve alignment of processes; to enable critical information to be shared; to gain institutional support for e-learning; or to ensure that resources are allocated as and where needed. The form that such documentation will take will depend on the purpose for which it is used. For example, a document that is being developed to plan the allocation of resources is likely to look a lot different from a document that is to be used to gather support for a major new initiative. The form that strategy documents take will also reflect the maturity of the strategic planning processes that are used. Institutions that do not yet have well-developed strategic planning processes are also less likely to have well-structured, clearly articulated documents describing their strategies in particular areas of activity.

There are a number of alternatives to development of a discrete strategy. In the case of e-learning, an institution's strategy may be embedded in a document that covers a broader sphere of activity such as flexible learning. This approach may be adopted by an institution that sees e-learning as giving effect to its goals in relation to increasing flexibility. An institution may take an even broader view and integrate its e-learning strategy into a broader document covering the whole of teaching and learning. Finally, the institution may simply adopt a *laissez-faire* approach and leave it up to individual faculties and service departments to take such initiatives as they deem appropriate.

Victoria University recently developed a discrete e-learning strategy. In the course of developing its strategy, information was sought on how other Australian universities were documenting their policies and strategies in the area of e-learning. The initial intention was simply to gain some insights into how other institutions were dealing with the area. However, interest expressed by other institutions in what the request for information had turned up led to the decision to adopt a more systematic approach. What began as an informal search for information therefore expanded into a much broader study.

Literature review

The literature related to the development of strategy documents in the area of e-learning is surprisingly thin. The OECD report *E-Learning Tertiary Education: Where do we stand?* (OECD, 2005) provides some of the best information that is available at the present time. Besides reporting on the results of a qualitative survey of 19 universities, it also draws extensively on qualitative data gathered via the 2004 survey of online learning by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education. Chapter 2 of the OECD report specifically examines e-learning strategies and rationales. In this chapter it is reported that of the nineteen institutions surveyed, ten had distinct written e-learning strategies, while five had integrated their e-learning strategies into other strategy documents. The authors point out that, around the world, the development of e-learning strategies is taking place in the context of a trend towards codification of institutional decision making for which there are both internal and external drivers.

Curran (2004) also examined the types of strategies being adopted by universities in implementing e-learning. He pointed out that universities began developing institutional strategies for e-learning as a response to their increased awareness of the potential of online technologies as well as because of their awareness of the consequent demands of staff time and central resources. He said that universities engage in e-learning for a variety of reasons but that these can be boiled down to three generic objectives: widening access to educational opportunity, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, and containing (if not reducing) the cost of higher education. He also observed that the most striking feature of the e-learning strategies being adopted by universities is their great diversity.

While the educational literature is replete with papers describing innovation projects of various types, papers describing the institutional strategies in e-learning are quite rare, while descriptions of the approaches used in developing institutional strategy documents are even rarer.

In a paper examining the types of change processes in e-learning, De Freitas and Oliver (2005) developed a case study examining the way in which a strategy had been implemented in a large UK post-1992 university in terms of five change models (Fordist, evolutionary, ecological, community of practice and discourse oriented). They suggested that the types of factors that were worth taking into consideration in trying to understand the ways in which change processes were taking place included: whether a top-down, bottom-up or combined approach would yield better results, the scale and extent of activity already being undertaken, the extent of the investment required to achieve the results desired, the ways in which other similar organisations have undertaken e-learning strategy implementations, the objectives and needs of user groups, the opportunity for cost savings and better resource access through partnerships and

collaboration, and the impact on the potential to drive change of considering the strategy through more than one of the five change models. Brown (2002) described the strategy adopted at De Montfort University for establishing the Electronic Campus or eCampus project as a centrally-managed, university-wide project to provide access to Web-based materials, email and conferencing learning support system. While the process Brown described encompassed establishment of a high-level committee, establishment of a working group responsible for operational planning, and the allocation of a budget together with a bidding process for allocation of funds, it was not guided by a documented and institutionally-agreed overarching strategy (Brown, personal communication, 2007).

One of the most ambitious attempts to apply strategic planning approaches to e-Learning in Australia was that employed by RMIT University. This project was preceded by a six-month long review of institutional needs that led to a comprehensive plan for enhancing the university's capabilities in the area of e-learning, the Information Technology Alignment Plan (ITAP). While the Plan itself is no longer available on the University's website, descriptions of a number of components of the project can be found in the educational literature (Kenny & McNaught, 2000; McNaught, Kenny, Kennedy & Lord, 1999). The Plan envisaged a wide-ranging and far-reaching set of changes including the establishment of a Distributed Learning System (DLS) based on the Blackboard LMS and a range of other tools. One of the key elements of the Plan was the development of an ambitious Academic Management System (AMS) to replace the university's aging student records system. However, this particular project ran into difficulties during the implementation phase, leading to substantial cost overruns and preventing the university from collecting student fees as they fell due. The failure led to an investigation by the Victorian auditor general (Auditor General Victoria, nd). This example highlights the fact that pursuit of a strategy can sometimes lead to outcomes that are the opposite of those being sought. As Snyder, et al. (2007) have pointed out, although technologies can have profound implications for higher education those implications are not always benign. If development of an e-learning strategy enables an institution to pursue its e-learning agenda more aggressively, then documentation the strategy may actually make it easier for an institution's position to be undermined if the strategy has not been well thought out.

A recent paper by Wills (2006) describes the much more measured approach being pursued at the University of Wollongong to development what is being called a "Strategic Plan for eLearning and eTeaching". According to Wills, this document, which at the time of writing had yet to receive final approval, will take over from an eTeaching Business Plan that has guided the University's developments in this area since 2003. The eTeaching Business Plan contains 22 strategic actions covering organisational structure, strategy, technology, management and roles and skills and is therefore quite wide-ranging. The evolutionary approach being taken at Wollongong has enabled the institution to learn from and build on its experience.

Method

All Australian universities were asked to indicate the ways in which they were promulgating their strategies in relation to e-learning. Institutions were also asked whether they would be willing to provide copies of the documents that they had developed. Thirty-seven of Australia's 38 universities responded. Most provided copies of the document or documents that they had produced or indicated where to find the relevant documentation on their institutional website. Of those that did not provide access to documents, many said that they had documents under development and would be willing to share these once they had been adopted.

The issue of what one accepts as a strategy can have a major impact on the findings of a study such as this. In this instance a broadly inclusive definition was adopted, which took into consideration the absence of standardisation in this area. To be counted as a strategy, a document needed to be goal-oriented, and to make some attempt to describe the means that would be used to achieve the stated goals. Some institutions distinguish between strategies, functional plans and operational plans. Such distinctions have meaning once an institution's planning processes have matured. However, for as long as an institution's planning processes are rapidly evolving, any attempt to distinguish between document types at this level may create false distinctions.

The responses received from institutions were categorised according to the following typology: integrated into general plans, discrete e-learning strategy, discrete e-learning strategy under development, related strategy, related strategy under development, and no attempt to document strategy. The categories were defined as follows:

Integrated into general plans — strategies in the area of e-learning were incorporated into documents such as the institutional Teaching and Learning Plan

Discrete e-learning strategy — a document specifically dealing with the area of e-learning

Discrete e-learning strategy under development — a document was being developed specifically dealing with the area of e-learning but had not been completed and adopted by the relevant institutional committee at the time the institution responded

Related strategy — a document encompassing a broader range of activities than just e-learning. For example, e-learning may be subsumed within the broader field of flexible learning.

Related strategy under development — a document is being developed encompassing a broader range of activities than just e-learning but the document had not been completed and adopted by the relevant committee at the time that the institution responded

No attempt to document strategy — the institution had not made any attempt to document its strategies in relation to e-learning although elements of Teaching and Learning Plans would incidentally cover developments in e-learning

Thematic analysis was undertaken of the documents that were supplied to determine the range and types of themes that were covered in the documents. Thematic analysis was undertaken for the documents in each category separately. All documents in the category were closely studied to identify the major themes that came through across the set of documents. Each document was then re-read to identify the themes specific to that document. The number of documents that addressed each theme was then tallied. Finally, the themes were then ranked from most frequently to least frequently addressed.

One of the difficulties that is encountered in attempting to categorise strategy documents in the area of e-learning is that explicit strategies may be meant to be read in conjunction with more general documents related to teaching and learning. In this study the focus has been on the document or documents identified by the institutional representative as carrying such information on the institution's e-learning and/or flexible learning strategy as was available in documented form at the time.

Results

The ways in which universities reported that they were documenting their strategies in relation to e-learning varied quite widely. The breakdown of the types of documents, according to the typology described above, is shown in Table 1. Rounding of percentages to the nearest whole number accounts for the fact these do not sum to 100.

Table 1: Institutional approaches to documenting e-learning strategies

Type	Number	%
Integrated into general plans	14	39
Discrete e-learning strategy	4	11
Discrete e-learning strategy under development	9	24
Related strategy	2	6
Related strategy under development	1	3
No attempt to document strategy	7	19
No response	1	3

What is evident from the data presented in Table 1 is that the largest group was that comprising institutions that had integrated their e-learning strategies into more general documents. A small number of institutions reported having developed discrete e-learning strategies. However, a larger group reported that they were in the process of developing discrete strategies. On the other hand, just under a fifth of those that responded said that they had not made any deliberate attempt to document their strategies.

The documents that were supplied by institutions were quite heterogeneous in terms of form, scope, content and treatment. Some documents were very specific in identifying what an institution wanted to accomplish, how it intended to accomplish these goals, and by when it hoped to produce a result. Other documents described only general directions. Little commonality was evident in the ways institutions had structured their documents.

Four universities reported that they had developed what could be described, according to the definitions provided above, as discrete e-learning strategies. A fifth indicated that it had developed a strategy but that the document had not yet passed through the relevant approval processes. This case was therefore counted as still being under development.

The four documents that were supplied were subjected to thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from this analysis are shown in Table 2. This table also gives the number of documents that prescribed actions related to each theme.

Table 2: Themes in discrete e-learning strategies

Theme	Frequency
Learning Management System/Infrastructure/Technology	3
Planning	3
Policy and strategy development	3
Support for strategic e-learning projects	2
Development of courses	2
Staff development and support	2
Technologies in teaching/learning spaces	2
Futures research	2
Quality processes	2
Evaluation	1
Revenue generation	1
Monitoring progress	1
Pedagogical models	1
Student induction	1
Staff workload	1
Minimum online presence in units	1
Expanding range of offerings	1
Development of portals	1
Facilities for seamless searching	1
Streaming technologies	1
Podcasting	1

The thematic analysis indicates that somewhat greater attention was being paid to technical and administrative issues, such as the development of the centrally-supported learning management system (LMS) and planning processes, than to pedagogical issues in these documents. The components of strategies that related to learning management systems and to networking and infrastructure were concerned with upgrading the hardware and software supporting e-learning. The components of strategies that related to planning and to policy and strategy development were concerned with strengthening organisational processes around central management of e-learning. The teaching and learning aspects of e-learning did not feature prominently. It is perhaps understandable that this should be the case, given the ways in which institutional strategies are generated. However, it suggests that the institutions concerned view e-learning more in terms of technological potential than in terms of pedagogical benefit. It is important to acknowledge, though, that the number of documents was so small one should be cautious about what conclusions one draws from this data.

Table 3 shows the results of the corresponding analysis of the relevant sections of general documents in the cases of those institutions that have followed the route of integrating their strategy into a general plan for teaching and learning.

The thematic analysis of integrated plans shows an even stronger focus on matters of a technical nature. Themes such as planning, evaluation and pedagogical models that were evident in some of the discrete strategies did not show up in the integrated strategies. However, it is important to point out that integrated plans will subsume aspects of e-learning without necessarily making that fact explicit and this needs to be taken into account in interpreting these results.

Comparison of documents that correspond to discrete and integrated strategies reveals a marked difference that is not immediately apparent from Tables 2 and 3. Discrete strategies, as well as being more detailed, tend to cover a wider range of e-learning activities than integrated strategies. This can be appreciated from the relatively small number of references found in integrated strategies to many of the themes notwithstanding the much larger number of documents from which the data have been drawn.

Table 3: Themes related to e-learning in integrated plans

Theme	Frequency
Learning Management System/Infrastructure/Technology	11
Staff development and support	4
Expanding range of offerings	4
Increasing extent of use of e-learning	3
Improving access	3
Efficient/effective use	3
Technologies in teaching/learning spaces	3
Course and program design	2
IT/Information literacy for students	2
Streaming technologies	2
Quality processes	2
Futures research	2
Assistive technologies	1
Videoconferencing	1
Support for trials	1
Learning materials development	1
Annual reviews	1
Hybrid delivery mode	1
Assessment methods	1

Discussion

The findings of this study in relation to the development of strategies as a whole are broadly consistent with the findings of the OBHE survey. In the OBHE survey 63% of institutions reported having an online learning strategy whereas 54% reported having one in this study. The difference corresponds to two institutions and is likely to be explained by coding differences. However, what this study adds to the picture provided by the OBHE survey is that there is now evidence of a trend towards generation of discrete strategies with approximately one-fifth of institutions surveyed reporting that they now have discrete strategies under development. However, this does not mean that there is a swing away from integrated strategies.

The OECD report indicated that 26% of Australian universities that had responded to the OBHE survey had adopted an integrated approach. This study has found that as of January 2007, 41% of the much larger sample were reporting using an integrated approach. The OECD Report observed, based on comparison of the 2002 and 2004 OBHE data, that universities were trending towards the adoption of an integrated approach and the figures reported here indicate a continuation of that trend.

In Australia, a national Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, managed by the Carrick Institute, provides substantial funding to universities for innovations in teaching and learning. To be eligible to participate in the Fund, universities needed to have a Learning and Teaching Plan or Strategy and to have published this on their institutional public website. The role that Teaching and Learning Plans have been playing in conferring eligibility for funding has elevated the importance of these documents and this may have been a reason why some universities integrated their e-learning strategies into these documents.

The OECD Report said that the OBHE data indicated that six out of the nineteen universities that had responded to the survey had reported having developed discrete strategies. However, the study being reported here found only four that appeared to have done so. Of these four, two had developed their strategy documents since 2004. However, there is no evidence of institutions merging discrete strategies into general strategies. The discrepancy is therefore likely to be accounted for by the differences in the way the categories have been applied. The more interesting finding is that a number of institutions reported that they were working towards the development of discrete strategies. What we appear to be seeing here, therefore, is the development of parallel trends towards integrated and discrete strategies. This conclusion is also supported by anecdotal evidence. While there is an obvious reason for institutions choosing to develop integrated strategies, the reasons for choosing to develop discrete strategies are less apparent. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in deciding to develop discrete strategies, institutions are seeking to focus attention on an area of activity that they consider to be of immediate strategic importance. It also points to the possibility that reliance on discrete strategies will be a transitory phenomenon.

If the number of universities currently developing discrete e-learning strategies does indeed indicate a new trend amongst universities, then what will be of interest in future will be to discover which of the two approaches if either has been more effective in engendering change and the what are the types of changes that have been engendered are. The development of strategy documents demands a considerable investment of time and the development of a discrete strategy will generally demand a greater investment in time than the incorporation of e-learning components into an integrated strategy. To establish this would require a longitudinal study extending over several years and it may turn out that other factors mask the effect of the difference between integration and non-integration. The fact that there is now a growing group of institutions that have or are in the process of developing discrete strategies provides the opportunity to further research to be undertaken in relation to this issue.

There are other reasons, too, why an institution may decide not to make strategies explicit: requiring departments to conform to institutional planning processes can reduce flexibility, and focussing attention on one area of activity may be at the expense of other related areas of activity, and documenting strategies takes time and incurs a cost. Developing an explicit strategy is not therefore inherently “good practice” but needs to be evaluated in terms of the demonstrated benefits. Given the risks associated with strategies that are ill-conceived, a more appropriate approach to development of strategies supporting technologically-mediated learning may be to attempt to increase the level and range of curriculum change activities that to try to push development in any particular direction, relying on existing and accepted quality processes to ensure that initiatives that are unlikely to advance the institution’s interests to be weeded out and those that have the potential to move the institution forward to gain institutional support.

Possibly of greater importance than the form that strategy documents are taking is what they cover. Analysis of the contents of strategy documents reveals many similarities as well as many differences. The diversity found amongst the documents that were examined is consistent with Curran’s (2004) finding based on examination of strategies adopted by universities elsewhere in the world. This lends further support to the conclusion that, within universities, strategic planning processes in relation to e-learning and possibly more generally are at an immature stage of development.

The fact that discrete strategies are generally more comprehensive than integrated strategies is consistent with the notion that discrete strategies provide a sharper focus on areas of an institution’s activities that are regarded as being of particular importance and is likely to be a pattern that is maintained over time. If the primary purpose of documenting a strategy is to advance the strategy, then one would expect the contents of strategy documents to reflect the factors that have been found to be important in enhancing technology-mediated teaching and learning. However, it is not clear that such an alignment is occurring. Part of the problem is identifying what outcomes should be sought.

Based on their fifteen case studies in Australian universities, Snyder, et al. (2007) have argued that technology-mediated curriculum change to be maximally effective at generating increased student-centred or self-regulated student learning, educational and organisational objectives need to be in harmony, and when corporatist objectives dominate at the cost of pedagogical objective benefits are limited. They also found that the optimal conditions for sustained innovation with ICTs are obtained when discipline areas have academic and financial autonomy as well as academic and financial capacity, a devolved administrative structure and tolerance from the university centre. For an institutional e-learning strategy to be effective it should presumably be oriented towards establishing these conditions. Yet the factors identified by Snyder et al. are not the factors that were most evident in the explicit strategies that were examined in this study. The focus in the documents that have been examined was much more on the practical aspects of program delivery such as the development of technological infrastructure and administrative procedures than on creating the conditions for innovation.

Conclusion

While the majority of Australian universities have made some attempt to promulgate their strategies in relation to e-learning to their staff there are still a number that have not. Even amongst those that have, many of the attempts are quite perfunctory. On the other hand, there are now a number of universities that have developed strategies that are reasonably comprehensive and others that report they are in the process of doing so.

The way in which e-learning strategies are being promulgated varies from institution to institution. In this study evidence was once again found of the practice earlier reported by the OECD study on *E-learning in Tertiary Education* (OECD, 2005) of institutions integrating their strategies into more general documents such as teaching and learning plans. However, emergence of what appears to be a parallel trend towards

development of discrete strategies. This trend was particularly reflected in the number of institutions reporting that they had begun working on the development of discrete strategies.

Thematic analysis of the documents provided by institutions pointed to there being distinct differences between the discrete and integrated strategies in relation to their specification of e-learning activities. Discrete strategies tended to specify a wider range of e-learning related activities than integrated strategies. Integrated strategies tended to focus on technical and administrative matters. Nevertheless, by situating activities supporting of e-learning in the broader context of provision of teaching and learning support in general universities that adopt the approach of developing integrated strategies are less likely to create a separation between e-learning and other forms of learning.

This study has focused on the approaches taken to documenting strategies. However, what ultimately is of greatest importance is the success with which strategies are executed. It remains to be seen what the long-term implications of the adoption of these alternative approaches to documenting e-learning strategies will be for the support and take-up of e-learning across institutions.

One other important finding to come from this study relates to the form that strategy documents take. The lack of commonality amongst the documents supplied by institutions indicates that there is currently no consensus on what information a document setting out a strategy should contain and how the information should be structured. Adopting a standard approach to setting out such documents has the potential to offer universities substantial benefits. It would reduce the time required in preparation and increase the likelihood of the strategies themselves being embraced by staff. This must surely therefore be something that universities address in their ongoing development of processes for managing strategic change. Development of a standard approach to the set-out of strategy documents might be something that a group of universities could consider undertaking jointly.

This paper has presented a snapshot in time of a field that is rapidly developing. What will be of interest is to see how institutional practices change over time. The intention is to continue monitoring the progress of Australian universities in documenting their strategies in relation to e-learning in order to see what influence this may have on the way e-learning is practised.

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