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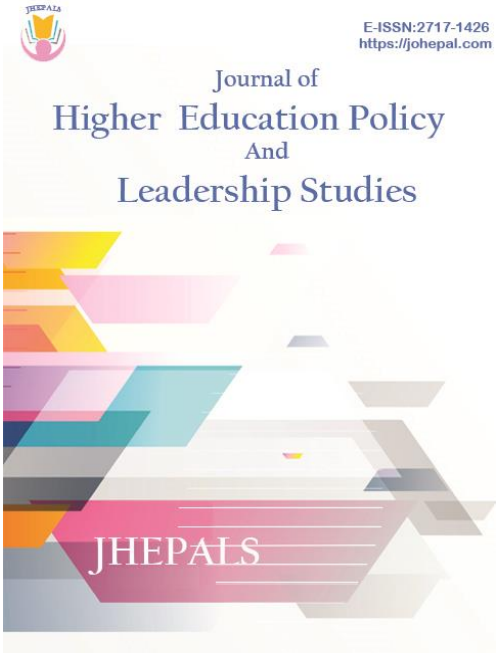

Connecting Students with Customized Technology Solutions: Embedding Partnership in a Digital Learning Strategy

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Abstract

Research increasingly suggests that when learners are engaged in shaping and leading strategy, they develop a greater sense of ownership over their learning (Healey et al, 2014). Technology is disrupting (Christensen, 1997) existing educational delivery models, providing more choice for students, for example, through new providers (Edsurge, 2015) and MOOCs having degree credits (University of Leeds, 2016). Developing a digital strategy is an integral part of every leader's responsibilities. However, there is no universal model or format for developing an e-learning or digital teaching and learning strategy. This paper describes an approach in how to develop a digital strategy in partnership with students. This paper includes observations, findings, examples of good practice and draws upon a wide range of literature. This paper will be useful if we are improving our own digital strategy or if we have not yet started on a strategy. Specifically, I will be looking at why a digital learning strategy is important. This paper argues the benefits to be gained from adopting a more business-like focus to developing a digital learning strategy in partnership with students. I will discuss the collection of key data and fundamental questions to ask, in order, to develop your strategy. The paper lays out a road map to developing and implementing a digital strategy in partnership with students.

Keywords: Higher Education; Digital Strategy; Student Partnership; Strategy; Digital Leadership; Digital Leader

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Introduction

The world in which we operate is dramatically changing, characterised by increasing uncertainty, complexity, volatility and ambiguity. Further and Higher Education in the UK are facing a period of unprecedented change. There is mass participation in Higher Education, boot camps, apprenticeships (Mirza-Davies, 2016), a world of competition with new providers and massive online open courses (MOOCs).

The withdrawal of direct government funding in England has resulted in the need for universities to generate income by demonstrating value to students. Learner engagement becomes increasingly important within this landscape and this presents both benefits and challenges for both students and institutions in sharing responsibility for working in active partnership. Learners' expectations of what constitutes a quality experience are changing within the external consumer-oriented higher education landscape. In a more competitive, high-fee market, students are seeking learning and support experiences that meet their specific and individual requirements. Learners are more demanding in a rapidly changing environment and want their learning to be what they want, how they want and when they want. Transformative learning technology is important. Today's students want flexibility and personalisation of their learning (Sharpe & Browne, 2015).

As Ansoff (1990) discusses in his work 'Implanting Strategic Management', turbulence in the business environment is the key factor driving strategy. Each organisation needs to align the aggressiveness of its strategy to the pace and extent of change in the environment, and to ensure that its management has the capability and competencies to match those changing conditions. There are many factors that are creating an imperative for a change in culture and an embedding of a staff-student partnership. There is a global demand for relevant and effective learning with employability being a significant priority. Only 43% of UK graduates say they feel prepared for working life (Office for National Statistics, 2013). In a world that is fast-changing and ever more 'connected', it is fundamental to develop a digital learning strategy in partnership with students, built around renewing social responsibility for the grand challenges we face in relation to global issues considering a) how we as individuals work more as communities in a world that is fast- changing and ever more 'connected', b) ensure that both informal and formal curriculum is future facing, relevant and interdisciplinary and c) that learning and teaching methods provide a rich, collaborative and engaged learning experience. Technology is an enabler in all facets of learning and teaching and is critical to the student experience.

This paper firstly provides a brief overview to strategy, why we need it and what it involves. The second section discusses institutional purposes and objectives, as well as, considering stakeholder relationships. The third section proposes research methods to collate data from your stakeholders to understand their objectives and formulate a digital strategy document. The penultimate section focuses on culture. Finally, the paper ends with a summary of the discussions and recommendations for moving forward. Throughout this paper, I argue that putting students at the heart of decision-making is crucial for the success of an institutional digital strategy. Learners' involvement develops a greater sense of ownership over their learning, increased motivation, improved self-esteem, greater achievement, better relationships with peers and staff and increased self-efficacy. The next section provides a brief overview of what strategy is, why we need it and what it involves.

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The Importance of Developing a Strategy in Partnership

In research commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2019), the demand for digital skills in the economy is ever increasing and ever changing, making a digital skills strategy pivotal in educational institutions. As Ansoff (1990) discusses in his work 'Implanting Strategic Management', turbulence in the business environment is the key factor driving strategy. Each institution needs to align the aggressiveness of its strategy to the pace and extent of change in the environment, and to ensure that its management has the capability and competencies to match those changing conditions. The Open University Business Barometer, which monitors the skills landscape of the UK, reveals that organisations in the UK are spending £6.6 billion a year as a result of the skills shortage (The Open University, 2020). The report findings show that three in five (61%) of organisations have a shortfall in digital skills and 56% of UK organisations have skills shortages. Digital skills boosts annual pay (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019) and students need a complete package in digital skills and softer skills. Employers report soft skills being a number one priority (Linkedin Learning, 2018).

There are many factors that are creating an imperative for a change in culture and an embedding of a staff-student partnership. There is a global demand for relevant and effective learning with employability being a significant priority. Only 43% of UK graduates say they feel prepared for working life (Office for National Statistics, 2013). In a world that is fast-changing and ever more 'connected', it is fundamental to develop a digital learning strategy in partnership with students, built around renewing social responsibility for the grand challenges we face in relation to global issues considering a) how we as individuals work more as communities in a world that is fast-changing and ever more 'connected', b) ensure that both informal and formal curriculum is future facing, relevant and interdisciplinary and c) that learning and teaching methods provide a rich, collaborative and engaged learning experience. Technology is an enabler in all facets of learning and teaching and is critical to the student experience.

Strategic Thinking

There are many definitions of strategy. This paper adopts a broad definition that strategy is following a pattern of activities in pursuit of long-term purposes (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). It is cross-functional and integrative and requires a balanced vision of all the functional areas within the institution whilst focusing on those which are a strategic priority. Strategic thinking often adopts the approach of answering three questions:

- Where are we now? This question provides a way to view the institution in its present state – current resources and capabilities and the strategies utilised to date to reach its current position.
- Where do we want to go? This question formulates your strategic intent resource-based considerations.
- How do we get there? This question will be your strategic choice.

The questions capture the need to integrate thinking about strategy content, processes and the analysis of the institution's context both internally and externally. The simple answer to why we need a digital strategy is to know what we are heading towards. The UK government state having a digital learning strategy is a fundamental core part of the institution's responsibility (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015). A strategy should capture the vision and commitment of your institution. It provides a framework for moving forwards with a sense of direction and purpose and

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focusing on the need to deliver for students and stakeholders. As all institutions are different, this paper cannot provide a strategy that fits all, however, the process of formulating a strategy can be similar for all. A strategy needs to be imaginative but consistent and clear with what you are trying to deliver for your students and other stakeholders. It needs to inspire people to achieve it and not be so visionary that students and other stakeholders feel detached and remote from it. At the same time, the strategy needs to be flexible enough so that you can exploit change and adapt to responsive market and environmental conditions.

There are many strategic models that can be used to conduct a strategic review of your institution, for example, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis (Humphrey, 2005) or Porter's Five Forces Model (1985), which argues either you focus on being the lowest cost producer or you differentiate your product to attract students at a premium, but it does not identify what action is required to be a success. But I argue the greatest force to help you formulate your strategy is what your students are saying. Your students are the best placed to tell you what it takes to be successful. This together with a STEEPLE analysis (an acronym for Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political, Legal and Ethical) can be powerful in strategic formulation.

Be clear about your own institution's strengths and areas for improvement. Focus on the resources your institution possesses and how they should be used, as the basis for robust strategy. Daft (1983) suggests resources are the assets, capabilities, processes and knowledge which enable strategies to be implemented. Opportunities emerge from your own unique capabilities which are the outcome of using groups of resources in particular ways (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Grant, 1991). Grant's (1991) model of Industry Key Success Factors focuses on a STEEPLE analysis and how to survive the competition. Grant (ibid, pp.118-119) argues:

> There is a key distinction between resources and capabilities. Resources are inputs into the production process – they are the basic units of analysis…But, on their own, few resources are productive. Productive activity requires the co-operation and co-ordination of teams of resources. A capability is the capacity for a team of resources to perform some tasks or activity. While resources are the source of a firm's capabilities, capabilities are the main source of its competitive advantage.

These teams could be systems, buildings, staff, equipment, stakeholders, technology or financial resources. In short, a strategy needs to be at the heart of your institution and reflect the need for innovation and complexity in strategic thinking. The next section discusses purposes and objectives in a broader strategic sense and considers the three questions above, in further detail.

Purpose, Objectives and Stakeholder Relationship

Purposes reflect stakeholders' values and beliefs, the politics of stakeholder relationships and the organisational culture (Pearce, 1982). Objectives are more specific than purposes and specify stakeholder expectations and specific milestones to be achieved in the strategy. Policies derive from the intention that a particular pattern of strategy will be successfully implemented. When considering purposes and objectives, the question 'Where are we now?' is important to determine and the next section explains how to gather answers from your students to analyse this. Answering this question establishes what the institution likes being involved in and dislikes, important issues worth pursuing and who we work with. The questions 'Where do we want to go?' and 'What do we

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want to do?' are interlinked with achievements to date and enable us to take stock of skills we have and can further build on and where we need to acquire new skills. The third question on 'How do we get there?' implies a strong distinction between the ends that an organisation seeks and the means it follow to achieve those ends. In considering purposes and objectives, answers are also required for the following questions:

Who are we?
Who do we want to be?
What is important to us?
What do we believe in?

This paper does not attempt to answer these questions, but it is important that each institution formulating a digital strategy, to understand the answers for their own establishment. Values and beliefs need to be clearly understood, in order, to understand purposes and objectives.

It is impossible for any institution to define a digital strategy without first considering its stakeholders. At the heart of the strategy is a coherent sense of organisational purpose to meet a balanced view of stakeholders. Etzioni (1971) presents two reasons for stakeholders to have a relationship with your institution. This will be because they identify with the same values and beliefs or there is a tangible benefit to be involved. It is an institutional responsibility to ensure the best interests of stakeholders are being served (Kay, 1993; Baden-Fuller & Stopford, 1996). It is vital to be committed to putting students first by listening and responding to their views. Research increasingly suggests that when students are engaged in shaping and leading their own learning, this can result in benefits for all students, educators, the institution and the education system as a whole. Students' involvement develops a greater sense of ownership over their learning, increased motivation, improved self-esteem, greater achievement, better relationships with peers and staff and increased self-efficacy.

In the next section, adopting a pragmatic approach to determine the separate interests of stakeholders is recommended and recognising how those interests can be served.

Collecting Data and Formulating the Strategy

Ensure your digital learning strategy emerges through a process of wide consultation and includes ideas generated from across your institution and external stakeholders. Hamel (1996) argues that strategic processes have become too ritualistic, based on rules and driven by the calendar and to be successful, an institution must be subversive and ignore sector conventions and aim to be unique; actively promote change, let everyone have a voice and take risks. When implementing new projects and formulating strategy, it is vital to have student representation from the beginning to empower students to work directly in partnership. Start by carrying out institutional-wide research with your students. A study of this kind will ensure the involvement of students and the development of their student voice. "It is notable that for an institution to do well in engaging students it needs to work in partnership with the representative student body" (QAA, 2012, p.22).

The Jisc digital student project has produced excellent resources for carrying out research through three methods: questionnaires, card sort activity and focus groups. Through the data collection activities, students can express their opinions as part of a shared forum. The project resources for carrying out the card sort activity and the questionnaire can be downloaded from the Jisc website (Jisc, 2015), which includes a focus group protocol and consent form. The card activity asks four questions based on four different themes. Each of the items for sorting are presented on

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individual cards for the students to discuss and rank in their priority of importance. Carry out an extensive study of what your digital learning strategy should look like in your institution today and in the future, by utilising the Jisc resources. Key themes from your data results can be used to formulate the structure of your strategy.

Questionnaires are individual and empower students to communicate their views. They are a useful way to test and quantify experiences and expectations. Using open questions, a wide range of subject matter can be explored and closed questions can be asked to describe the data set, such as age, gender, technology device ownership, frequency of use of technology. Utilising the Jisc card sort activity focusses the attention of students and provides a useful prompt to aid discussion. It provides a useful aid for those who may find it difficult to articulate their viewpoint and acts as a helpful memory trigger for participants who may find it difficult to recall their expectation and experiences.

Focus groups are useful to explore the answers within the questionnaires and card sort activity in more detail and clarify understanding in interpretation of the data collected. When the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) launched their 2017-2020 strategy, they first collated data to formulate their strategy. They carried out organisation-wide consultation with their members and carried out a number of activities to gather the views of their membership. This included webinars, an online suggestion box for members to complete a form and share their needs and face-to-face planning focus groups, which were all used to formulate the strategy based on all the input from their members and stakeholders (Deepwell, 2017). The Chair of ALT, Martin Weller, said of the process:

> As Chair, I've found the manner in which the strategy has been developed as significant as the strategy itself. ALT champions open practice, and the development of the strategy was an opportunity to 'walk the talk'. The webinars, face to face session, and online form were all examples of how we seek to gather input from all members. The strategy itself provides a clear direction for the Association and positions it as a key voice in educational technology both nationally and internationally. (Deepwell, 2017)

The New Media Consortium Horizon Report (Johnson et al, 2015) identified the increasing importance of student-centeredness in educational approaches and a need to rethink how learning spaces should be configured for teaching complex thinking and for personalised learning. It reports online, hybrid, social and collaborative learning are all key pedagogical and technological trends. The report discusses the key issues likely to impact on education the most and important developments are bring your own devices and flipped classrooms and further ahead, adaptive learning technologies, makerspaces, wearable technologies and the internet of things. There are a number of challenges associated with these technological developments for example, redesigning learning spaces, personalised learning, improving digital literacy skills, the role of learning analytics in measuring learning and the use of blended formal and informal learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OERs).

From the outset, the task for creating a digital strategy must be framed in terms of research both from stakeholders and from the wider sector. Based on the research findings collated from all stakeholder groups, formulate outputs (core deliverables) outcomes and anticipated impact. Identify opportunities and challenges and include these in your strategy document. Define the objectives and list the critical success factors within the digital strategy document. From the objectives, shape and define projects and break down into key deliverables, outcomes and impact, communications and

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an action plan. Within the strategy document, maintain an overview of risks, issues, quality assurance and evaluation. Argenti (1980) identifies five distinct phases (these can be grouped into target setting, gap analysis and strategic appraisal) in which you should progress in managing strategy:

- Set targets
- Identify gaps that will emerge between targets and the current strategy
- Appraise the internal and external institutional environments
- Formulate a new strategy based on your strategic appraisal
- Implement the strategy by drawing up an action plan and budget.

The next section considers culture and its impact and role in strategy.

Culture

The bedrock of any educational institution is its culture and the shared sense of purpose and commitment to its students. Where "student engagement is highly developed, pervading institution culture and clearly recognised by staff and student alike, these institutions tend to be those where related features of good practice were found" (Quality Assurance Agency, 2014, p. 18). Put simply, culture is the way you do things (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Culture can either aid or impede organisational knowledge and structures, technology and strategy. A learning culture (Schein, 1992) is one that shares certain beliefs and attitudes that are shared amongst its stakeholders, for example, diversity is good and everyone communicates with everyone else. Working is carried out in a variety of ways – both individually and collaboratively and everyone is looking to the future. Experts can be questioned by others, for example, students speak with leaders and problems are resolved collaboratively. The most important part of a learning organisational culture is that it helps develop strategy. The ability to draw upon a range of people within the organisation from students to leaders to librarians to support staff is an inherent part of the strategy process and leads to improved stakeholder satisfaction, performance and growth (Hart, 1992).

Culture has a major impact on all aspects of developing a digital strategy, including analysis, choice of strategy and implementation. A useful way to look at the internal and external contexts of organisational culture is to view them as part of a cultural web (Johnson, 1992). According to Johnson, the web is made up of a network of internal structures and processes which reinforce the institution's view of itself, which shapes stakeholders' perspectives. Although internal and external capabilities affect performance (ibid), they do not in themselves, create strategy, it is the people that create strategy. Strategy is the product of both social and political processes shaped by the people's beliefs and assumptions, which embody an organisation's view of itself and its environment. Johnson (ibid) calls this an organisational paradigm, which is unique to each organisation. This paradigm is formed from six elements that make up the cultural web: rituals and routines, stories and myths, symbols, power structures, organisational structures and control systems.

Johnson (ibid) argues that to achieve culture change and paradigm, it is the soft elements of the cultural web which are important – stories, rituals and symbols, rather than the hard elements – structure, systems and control. By considering how the paradigm guides the way that leaders make sense of their environment, how a reality is constructed for their institution with stakeholders is the best way to see the impact of culture. Students need their learning to enhance their life choices in social and economic terms and to operate in a knowledge-building learning community that values diversity and multiple perspectives. They need learning that enables them to realise their life and career ambitions and fulfil their potential. Employers need employees coming into the workforce to

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have relevant knowledge and skills that can be directly applied in the workplace and society needs educational institutions to deliver value by increasing the social, economic and cultural capital of the greatest number of people.

It is vital that educational institutions construct a coherent orientation and induction experience for enquirers, new learners and existing learners progressing within the institution. A coherent learner engagement strategy within and around formal curriculum needs to be generated. If initiatives are set up across the institution to incorporate learner voice and it becomes normal business with student focus groups, embedding equality and diversity and having a direct voice with institution leaders, then there is no need for a specific learning learner council or union.

In summary, how leaders view and engage in developing, reinforcing or attempting to change culture is of critical importance in the whole process of strategy, making culture either a powerful source of advantage or stagnation.

Conclusion

In summary, the aim of our digital strategy is to achieve and sustain performance, utilising resources and capabilities. Technology impacts every aspect of an educational institution's operation and business, therefore, every level of stakeholder has a vested interest in the formulation of a digital learning strategy. Wider and more whole scale use of digitally enabled learning is needed in the sector; a fresh approach to strategy which is student focused is required. The norm is not acceptable. Reverberate the strategy across the institution; opening up student, employer, staff and all stakeholder voices.

Use initial feedback from stakeholders, starting with students, to refine the strategic feedback. Plan ways to capture further feedback through stakeholder engagement sessions and discussions with staff, students, librarians, support staff, governance bodies, employers and external stakeholders. The development of the strategy is an ongoing process, dynamic and constantly changing. Strategy is about charting the course of your institution in a constantly shifting environment. The nurturing of a culture which embodies student partnership is the glue which binds the institution into its network of relationships.

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