Manukau Institute of Technology: The contribution of strong leadership

A number of tertiary institutions are avoiding adopting a strong, institution-wide, strategic position on e-learning and related delivery modes. They prefer to encourage a focus on the educational ends being sought, rather than on the means for achieving those ends. The success of this approach depends very much on the experience, focus and credibility of the senior manager with delegated authority for supporting learning and teaching. Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) is an instance of this combination working well – a relatively broad, enabling strategy together with a highly focused and experienced manager.

MIT IS AN INSTITUTION THAT values information and communications technologies (ICT) in its learning and teaching. It does not claim to engage in 'flexible delivery,' but rather it uses a range of teaching strategies best described as 'blended learning.' As a regionally based institute of technology, MIT is also a member of the national Tertiary Education Alliance, comprising other large and financially robust polytechnics.

MIT has seen a change of three Directors of Information Technology in recent years, one of whom was an advocate of the Phoenix University model of delivering learning to students anywhere, anytime and at the students' own pace. The general thrust of this philosophy met resistance in the past because several key staff did not see how ICT could be used in the very practical courses taught at MIT. This perception is changing as more courses begin to use blended learning methods.

In the past, the Learning Technology Centre (LTC) worked as part of the Staff Development Unit. MIT took the important step of moving the LTC away from staff development to give it its own identity. The current LTC Director believes that this move has been beneficial because it allows for a separate voice on important institutional committees. While this separation can sometimes lead to a weakening of the advocacy for e-learning and related teaching approaches, this has not been the case in this instance. The Director has been a very strong advocate for the inclusion of technologies in learning and teaching for many years. She is able to use the opportunities provided by the specialised organisational structures to have an important influence on institutional resourcing and policy, as well as on teaching practice at a programme and course level.

TAKING THE LEAD
Strategic Management for e-Learning

Case Study

In general, papers taught at MIT might contain an online suite of learning materials, they may have interactive learning objects or they might be fully planned and costed online offerings, although there are very few of the latter offered currently.

MIT provides a centrally managed development fund for ICT in learning and teaching that is available for use in its strategic areas, for example, in the National Certificate in Adult Literacy Education.

MIT uses Blackboard as its Learning Management System (LMS). Senior managers expect that teachers at the institution should become more familiar with it and be using it in most elements of their teaching. The LTC supports the Blackboard product with pedagogical and technical advice and assistance. An annual grant fund allows teaching staff to seek support for using the learning management system. This encourages a 'bottom-up' approach to the spread of e-learning. This approach might be contrasted with that in place at Otago Polytechnic where the main driver is now at the strategic level.

In terms of scale, MIT has over 900 'class occurrences' on its Blackboard platform which means that 3,000 or more students (more than half of the total enrolment) use the LMS. The LTC includes two trained teachers on its staff to provide the necessary pedagogical support for the move towards online blended learning. The mix of strategies in the blend of learning and teaching are determined at the local level, with input from trained teachers. This gives academics using these strategies more ownership of the process. Students report that they are highly supportive of blended learning using the LMS.

Moves towards blended learning are made simpler for staff by the use of templates. Related administrative work is undertaken by skilled administrative staff rather than by academics. However, academic staff retain control of the electronic classroom environment.

Quality assurance for e-learning is regarded as part of the normal quality assurance regime at MIT. However, access to computers and to the network is somewhat limited at the ICT end of the process because of a general staff shortage in the area. Student support is undertaken by the IT section within normal business hours.

Reflections

MIT's e-learning strategy is very much driven by the Director of the LTC. The Director's presence on high-level committees and her high standing among staff and students alike ensure that e-learning has passed the take-off threshold. It remains a moot point whether this momentum would be maintained under a change of leadership, without a stronger and more explicit institutional strategy for e-learning and flexible learning.

The use of a grant system fosters a bottom-up approach to e-learning acceptance. However, the pressures it creates are now revealing the need for a more strategic approach to e-learning.

The separation of learning technology from staff development proved beneficial at MIT because it allowed the LTC Director to promulgate e-learning or blended learning as a valuable activity in its own right. Again, other institutions have found that this kind of separation risks diminishing rather than augmenting the institution's focus on e-learning.