

# NorthTec: Leadership of core strategies

A rule of thumb for chief executives is to identify those strategies most critical to their institution's future and then take personal responsibility for the execution of those strategies.

NORTHLAND INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (NorthTec) has a challenging region to serve. The population of Tai Tokerau is relatively low and widely dispersed across a number of small centres and rural communities. Travel distances to the main campus in Whangarei are frequently long and expensive for many in more remote communities. Telecommunications are also difficult, with patchy broadband provision and fairly low levels of internet access across the community.

For a number of years, NorthTec has recognised that improving access to study opportunities right across its catchment must be one of its top priorities. One strategy has been to take NorthTec to the community by establishing a second campus in Kerikeri and learning centres in Rawene, Dargaville, Kaikohe and Kaitaia. Another strategy has been the use of flexible delivery options to reach the institution's scattered client base. These options have included blended forms of on- and off-campus delivery, e-learning and e-support systems.

These strategies have been given added force and focus by the recent round of negotiations over the institution's Investment Plan. The Plan recognises that students are likely to continue to find it difficult to attend classes on a fixed timetable or at a given site. It recommits NorthTec to expanding its range of flexible learning solutions to meet these challenges. It also recommits to providing enhanced study opportunities for students in their home localities.

In November 2007, NorthTec decided to restructure its management team to help it achieve the goals agreed to with the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). From 2008, the management team operates collectively with those areas that are key funding drivers, reporting directly to the Chief Executive. Consequently, both Flexible Learning and Information Technology (IT) have been combined and now report to the Chief Executive on all strategic matters. For more operational issues, the management team reports to the Deputy Chief Executive. Student Support has also undergone major reorganisation to provide a more student-oriented and responsive service. Student Support has been detached from its former Human Resources host and set up as a separate unit. Its new manager has an e-learning background and anticipates enhancing the support that students can access online.

Learning and Teaching Development at NorthTec is provided through a network of central services. The different areas of Flexible Learning, Learning Development, Educational Development, aspects of the Library, and the Educational Media Unit all work together to support academic staff in the various programmes.

## TAKING THE LEAD

Strategic Management for e-Learning

## Case Study



The management co-location of Flexible Learning and IT means that both sets of activities use Microsoft Office communications software (OCS), allowing:

- students to listen to, watch and take part in lectures no matter where they are;
- staff to deliver lectures from anywhere;
- students to collaborate on projects from different locations;
- lecturers and students to communicate with each other using instant messaging, email and audio/video conferencing. Even if students do not have broadband or a webcam, they can still make use of the services;
- staff and students to work on documents together from different locations, to share information and even manipulate each other's documents on screen;
- students to see what the on-site class can see on the board, using SMART Board in conjunction with OCS.

NorthTec regards staff development as one of the most important issues facing the New Zealand tertiary sector in regard to e-learning. The Chief Executive, along with other chief executives, raised this matter with the TEC. At NorthTec, staff are encouraged to take up e-learning and receive training in blended and e-learning unless they have some other compelling training need. The Human Resources department now services organisational development while the Teaching and Learning Unit prepares staff for e-learning.

It might be said that the NorthTec solution has created a management structure for e-learning staff development ahead of its demand by both narrowing and deepening other management reporting relationships. However, the leadership believes the institution needs to ready itself for a future in which a significant proportion of its programme will be delivered in some form of flexible, blended mode. To this end, NorthTec is sending senior staff (who are also union representatives) to an international conference of community colleges to review how industrial agreements can better reflect the new paradigm of e-learning.

This strong commitment to technology-supported teaching is balanced against a continuing commitment to local, site-based delivery. While the main campus and learning centres are now wireless, there are 70 community teaching locations in the region. Apart from its campuses and learning centres, NorthTec uses dozens of marae and community halls as delivery points, some with internet access, others still without. But again, NorthTec is planning for an imminent future when it will make much greater use of telecommunications and the internet. A horticultural trial, funded by the e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund, is testing the OCS system to see if effective links can be established and maintained between rural students and Whangarei. A similar trial with an industry training organisation is being explored.

## Reflections

If a tertiary institution is serious about making a major shift to blended or e-learning, it may need the personal leadership and involvement of the chief executive. At the same time, the chief executive is unlikely to be able to devote adequate attention to the day-to-day and operational requirements of this area. Sharing these leadership tasks with another member of the senior leadership team, as is the case at NorthTec, may be one solution but it does not remove the need for a manager with specialised knowledge and responsibility for the various modes of programme delivery.

This case study demonstrates the need for tight linkages between an institution's e-learning unit and its IT section. The two services depend on one another to deliver an effective e-learning programme but this practical interdependence is seldom matched by an organisational merger of this kind.

This case study illustrates the scale of change that will be necessary if institutions are to make optimal use of e-learning.