Chapter Four

eLearning Strategy at the University of Jos. Reflections and a way forward.

Tanko Ishaya

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of Information and Communications Technology (ICT)[2] has facilitated the emergence of a participatory World Wide Web (from now on referred as the Web) society. Youths now live in a world of download, podcasting, and blogging enabling them to participate at the global level. What is important about this participatory phase of ICT is that users have built social networks that are useful and effective. These changes have reached both developed and developing economies, albeit to varying degrees and levels of penetration. Developed societies have taken advantage of these changes with astonishing rapidity, gaining broad access to modern digital networks – making remarkable changes in the private and public sectors with the advent of eBusiness and eGovernment. Similar changes are taking place in education – fuelled by the rising expectations of citizens and global competition. Education is a very socially oriented activity and quality education has traditionally been associated with strong teachers having high degrees of contact with learners and students.

Developments in ICT have provided significant opportunities in educational settings to explore and develop new ways of delivering educational services. Furthermore, the widespread proliferation of Internet technologies and applications has paved the way for new learning environments. The use of ICT to support learning and teaching (from now on referred to as eLearning) has now matured considerably, especially in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the developed nations. Different researchers have defined the concept of eLearning differently, but most definitions cluster around the idea of utilising ICT for innovative approaches to the delivery of education that enhances the quality of learning and teaching - learner's knowledge, skills and performances (Sun, Tsai, Finger. Chen, and Yeh,, 2008; Woo and Reeves, 2007; Selim, 2007; Rovai, 2004). Learning and teaching are changing as we explore the possibilities presented by these new technologies, for example in communicating with students, and the creation and use of digital resources. These have included a growing need to explore efficiencies in terms of program delivery, the

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[2] The term Information Communication Technology (ICT) is here defined as the use of any equipment, which allows users to communicate or manipulate information electronically.

opportunities for flexible delivery provided by ICTs (Ishaya and Wood, 2005; Oliver and Short, 1997); the capacity of technology to provide support for the needs of individual learners (Wood and Ishaya, 2005; Kennedy and McNaught, 1997); and the growing use of the Internet and WWW as tools for information access and communication.Change therefore may come not just from explicit focus on technologies relating to learning and teaching, but from pervasive impacts and changes in other HE functions. New approaches to learning and teaching are emerging, both to respond to new and diverse student and employer demand and to utilise new technologies. These new approaches to the provision of learning and teaching practices may be blended with traditional or campus-based learning, and in the longer term with mobile learning. A major focus is innovation in approaches to learning and teaching, and enhancement of the quality of the learning experience (Reilly and Spratt, 2007).All three of these emphasise the importance of aligning technological, organisation, pedagogical, staff development and cultural developments for the full potential of eLearning to be realised.

Despite these developments and maturity, there is still an insufficient level of attention given to adequate, appropriate and efficient use of eLearning for the provision of quality educational activities in developing economies. This is particularly so in Nigerian HEIs. The main reasons for this low uptake include major barriers such as organizational, technical infrastructure, ability and willingness to adopt new teaching techniques (Miglino and Walker, 2010), limited knowledge and skills (Liu, et al., 2009), and getting staff (Starr, 2001) and students on board eLearning. While, most people would argue that eLearning should focus on getting-the-job-done, the approach adopted in developing an eLearning strategy for the University of Jos, was to step back from the day-to-day operational activities and take a holistic high-level view of what should be done in order to support the University's goal for improved academic performance through the adoption and development of eLearning practices across the University. After 3 years of the existence of the strategy, it is necessary to presents a reflection on the whole process, developments, its achievements and challenges towards proposing a way forward for the University of Jos and other Nigerian HEIs in the context of current ICT developments.

This chapter presents the development of the current eLearning strategy at the University of Jos as a framework for creating innovative and sustainable teaching and learning initiatives through an effective adoption and use of ICT with an evaluation of its implementation. It then presents a reflection on the whole process contextualised with current ICT developments to propose a way forward for the University of Jos and other Nigerian HEIs. Section 2 presents a background and motivation for e-learning uptake by presenting a brief historical perspective of the use of ICT, mapping out ICT policy development at the University of Jos as the core infrastructural base for effective

implementation of the e-Learning strategy being developed. Refer to Chapter 2 "Contextualising Educational ICTs at the University of Jos" for a comprehensive review of the development of the use of ICT at the University of Jos and its rise to the status of a leader in ICT in the Nigerian University System. Section 3 describes the strategic framework that guided the development of the existing e-Learning strategy. Section 4 presents an evaluation of the strategy from different perspectives including an analysis of the activities of the deployed learning management system to date. Section 5 presents a proposed model for the development of eLearning strategy based on the lessons learnt and in the context of current ICT developments. Section 6 concludes the chapter with a way forward for the University of Jos and other Nigerian HEIs.

2. Background

Academics were prominent among the early users of email and the World Wide Web, initially to support their research, access information, or communicate with colleagues, and later to supplement their teaching. As a consequence, many of the diverse strategies now in place in traditional universities can be traced to early, often modest, pilot projects and initiatives by individuals or departments. While many of these early applications involved little more than making lecture notes, or other instructional materials, available online, some teachers went further, using online technology to communicate with their students, provide access to external resources and develop web-based courses. It is interesting to see that most of these early programmes were developed by staff in departments of Computer Science, Informatics, or mathematics, where the essential infrastructure for course development and delivery are most accessible (Keengue and Kidd, 2010; Curran and Fox, 1999). Similar synergistic opportunities stimulated involvement by schools of education, continuing education, and other departments. At the University of Hull, UK, for example, the staff of the Centre for Internet Computing –including the author of this chapter, set up an intranet (https://centralperk.cic.hull.ac.uk/) that was used to provide students with learning materials and also served as a means of communication between faculty and students. Meanwhile, other departments within the same University were then using Merlin (https://merlin.hull.ac.uk/merlin/) a Learning Management System (LMS) that was developed internally, in the University. These practices then evolved into the development of a coherent approach. Similarly, the development of the eLearning strategy at the University of Jos can be traced to initiatives undertaken by individual(s) in the Department of Mathematics - through the Jos Carnegie Partnership (JCP), Technology for Teaching (TfT) Mathematics intervention (see Chapter 3 of this book for details). The Moodle Learning Management system was initially deployed for TfT Mathematics in 2006 and saw the digitization of materials for MTH 103. While, this may have met the desired objective of providing accessible learning materials, the focus clearly was on the "eLearning" part and

perhaps less on the "strategy" part. Although the JCP had clear expected outcomes from the TfT Mathematics initiatives, there was some difficulty getting the University to embrace what TfT Mathematics was doing. In January 2008, whilst on sabbatical leave to the University of Jos, and as the founding Director of ICT, I assessed the initiative and thought that the University needed to put things in the right balance – giving eLearning practice and eLearning strategy the desired focus and attention, thereby resetting the whole compass through the developed long-term perspective. This assessment lead to the development of the eLearning strategy for the University of Jos. The development of this long-term view requires clear tactics, operational objectives and a proper backing of a strategy. Without the right tactics, we face obstacles we should have anticipated and problems we could have avoided. Likewise, without a strategy we end up with lots of activities with little value and benefits. This is clearly seen by the following relationship between strategy and tactics as expressed by Sun Tzu, The Art of War *"Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat."* Although the University had the required infrastructure (to some extent), and the product to enable eLearning, there was little adoption by other departments and the efforts made by TfT Mathematics were probably seen as unsustainable and noncontributory. It immediately became obvious that an endorsed strategy was needed if the University of Jos was to deploy sustainable eLearning activities. While we believe that a solid eLearning strategy would define the desired destination, a tactical plan was an essential component in defining the destination.

The holistic thinking of a strategy from a progressive and sustainable perspective meant that the required functioning and operational ICT was put in place. Thus, the development of an eLearning strategy was done alongside the development of the University's ICT development plan (see section 2.1 for a summary of the developed ICT plan). In order to ensure certain level of ownership, the author of this chapter suggested (in a memo to the Vice-Chancellor) that management set-up a committee to develop an eLearning strategy for the University. Having recognized the potential of the proposal, the University management – under the leadership of the Vice-Chancellor (Professor Sonni Tyoden) constituted a committee in May 2008 to develop the University's eLearning strategy with the following terms of reference (as suggested by the author):

1. Review existing Teaching and Learning Strategy
2. Develop the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy that would encourage and monitor good practice and innovation in Teaching and Learning through the use of ICT
3. Develop a Learning Outcomes Development Tool, a guidance document that would help staff clarify learning outcomes for programs and courses