

Assignment 1: Analysis and Comparison of Rationales for E-Learning

ETEC 520

February 7, 2016

Kendra Grant

University of British Columbia

Professor Mark Bullen

The Current State of Higher Ed

According to the *Horizon Report for Higher Education* online and blended learning was on the rise and viewed as a short-term trend that will drive technology adoption in higher education over the next year or two (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2015). The report also highlighted current data that one in ten students were enrolled exclusively online and over 7 million students engaged in some form of online learning. With online learning growing, accounting for nearly 75% of all US higher education enrolment last year (OLC, 2015), there is growing pressure on universities to adopt an online learning strategy. The Horizon Report (Johnson, et al., 2015) also acknowledges that developing cultures of change and innovation is 5 years or more away. It notes difficult challenges related to concepts such as personalizing learning and teaching complex thinking, not to mention "wicked challenges", those that defy description much less solutions, related to competing models of education and rewarding teaching. The Online Learning Consortium (OLC, 2015) confirms this resistance noting only 28% of faculty see value in online learning. With such opposition it is difficult to imagine how universities will usher in new ways and means of learning if they are unable, at this point, to envision technology-enabled learning, move past transmissionist pedagogy and fundamentally alter roles and responsibilities.

Contact North notes the current state of e-learning tends to be "Let a Thousand Blossoms Bloom", where there is no strategy for e-learning, and "...the key systems of the institution – use of time, registration systems, financial arrangements and teaching – remain basically the same" (Contact North, 2011, p. 11). To move past this, many universities are developing distance and eLearning strategic plans. According to Bullen (2016) a generic framework for an eLearning strategy should include: Mission, Environmental Scan, Rationale for E-learning, Vision,

Objectives or Goals, Strategies and Monitoring. He notes, the rationale "...is often overlooked but it is essential because your reasons for giving priority to e-learning will have an impact on how it is implemented and what your goals and objectives will be" (Bullen, 2016, para. 4).

eLearning Strategy Overviews

This paper will explore the eLearning strategies for two public research universities: Ohio State University's *Strategic Plan 2014-2018* and the University of Western Ontario's *E-Learning Task Force – Report to the Provost*, referencing Bates & Sangrà's (2011) five key reasons for using e-learning in higher education:

- To enhance the quality of teaching & learning
- To accommodate the learning style of Millennials
- To increase access to learning opportunities and to increase flexibility for students
- To develop the skill and competencies needed in the 21st Century
- To improve cost-effectiveness

The Ohio State University

Ohio State is already recognized as a *top 10* public university in the US, however, it appears to be in the midst of rebranding itself as a global university. This is evident on their website and throughout their strategy document. Their goal is to move from "excellence to eminence" on the global stage and eLearning is one aspect of this initiative. It is apparent from the Associate Vice President's introductory letter that competition "...against well-established distance and eLearning programs at peer institutions" (Hofherr, 2014, p. 1) is spurring the university to action. As such, while the document's key strategies are intended to support the

faculty's "...mission to deliver the highest quality technology-enabled educational experience" (Hofherr, 2014, p. 1) the driving force behind this ambitious plan is monetary.

University of Western Ontario

The University of Western Ontario is ranked 7th in Canada and nationally recognized for the engaged and supported student experience it provides. The university assembled a task force, adopting a more collegial, less driven and more pragmatic approach to address the rapidly changing interests and expectations of learners, and the pedagogical and technological challenges in meeting them. The preamble also acknowledges the sense of urgency to develop an eLearning initiative based on changing public policy in Ontario focused on "...access, student mobility, and – perhaps wishfully, efficiency" (eLearning Task Force, 2013, p 1). While Western, wants to "extend its reputation", the plan's overarching purposes, in contrast to Ohio State's fiscal and competitive goals, is to create an innovative online program that engages learners, builds community and supports student success.

Ohio State Rationale and Strategic Plan

Ohio State's understanding and vision of eLearning is comprehensive. While there is no official eLearning definition in the plan, their mission statement references technology-ready classrooms, centralized learning systems, innovations in technological pedagogy and distance education opportunities. Their understanding of and commitment to the full spectrum of eLearning is also evident within their five strategic focus areas:

1. Classroom and Collaboration Spaces
2. Learning Technology
3. Learning Systems
4. Distance Education
5. Student Support Services

These 5 areas highlight the department's understanding of all aspects of eLearning and how to drive change in both f-2-f environments as well as online spaces. For example their classroom and collaborative spaces plan recognizes "...more collaborative spaces [need to] be created, inside and outside of the classroom, to enhance group dynamics, student teamwork, and coordinated student research" (Hofherr, 2014, p. 8), and then outlines how and when this will happen.

The plan follows the generic framework outlined earlier and includes an in-depth environmental scan. At an external level the document recognizes today's students want 24/7 access to learning materials and instruction, and "...expect their instructors to understand and utilize technology inside and outside of the classroom." (Hofherr, 2014, p. 7) while it also acknowledges that many students do not feel prepared to use the technology in higher education. They also address how connected learning has altered pedagogy and the difficulty associated with the changes required to teach differently. However, while the external scan acknowledges several of Bates and Sangra's 5 key reasons for eLearning, at the university or internal level, the main focus is on addressing demand, competition, growth and cost savings.

...[t]echnology affords Ohio State the opportunity to effectively reach new students in new markets at economies of scale that will inform better educational experiences for all Ohio State students, and better meet its mission to be the land-grant institution of the world. (Hofherr, 2014, p. 19)

Further evidence of this focus can be found in the ODEE's top 10 Strategic Goals. Easily sorted into two categories: Money and Numbers, and Technology Tools and Infrastructure (Figure 1).

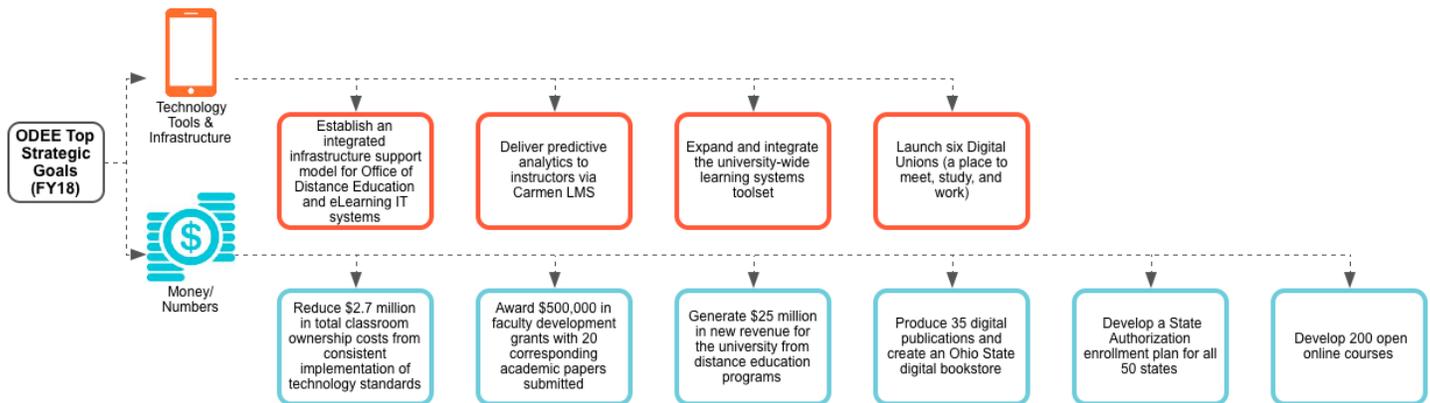


Figure 1. ODEE Top Strategic Goals

There are no unstated rationales in this document. It is a detailed, comprehensive and somewhat overly ambitious 4-year plan with many additional sections. There is a SWOT analysis, administrative support section, detailed financial and staffing charts as well as a comprehensive overview relating the plan to the university's four key competencies (Teaching & Learning, Research & Innovation, Outreach & Engagement and Resources Stewardship). Regardless of the impetus to change (or the scope of the initiative) the strategies and rationales are sound.

An examination of Distance Education, one of the documents 5 focus areas, gives a sense of the plan's depth. In this section (repeated for each of the other 4 focus areas) is another scan of the current state of distance learning and top strategic goals with measurable specific actions such as creating transparent policies and procedures for developing distance education programs and implementing a self-sustaining funding model. It then goes on to envision the "future state of

eminence” that explores existing and new markets in the space. In addition there is a detailed year over year projection graph showing expenditures and revenues until 2023. Finally the plan includes a high-level enhancement plan described within a metrics and indicators chart. In this section the chart contained 16 specific goals related to revenue, ranking, product creation, advisory groups and professional development to help move the university’s distance education program from a decentralized, “thousand blooms” model to a highly effective, connected and collaborative program.

The University of Western Ontario Rationale and Strategic Plan

Western’s concisely expressed learner-centric vision for eLearning focuses on pedagogy, deep learning, active engagement and a continuing emphasis on high academic standards. The task force recognizes some programs “...are keen to see the University mount a coherent, well-supported strategic effort to support e-learning...” while noting that others had “...yet to be persuaded of the opportunity in eLearning” (eLearning Task Force, 2013 p. 1) [emphasis added]. While openly acknowledging the “predominant themes” from faculty: concerns related to workload, insufficient support, lower teacher and course evaluations, intellectual property and the changing role of instructor, the inclusion of the word “yet” suggests such concerns will not stop the initiative. Western’s learner-centric vision with its “soft” support for faculty was in direct contrast to Ohio State’s growth driven, “outside threat” tactics.

Unlike Ohio State, the report defines eLearning for the reader as "...all shades of technology-integrated learning, from online components of face-to-face courses to blended or hybrid courses to fully online distance courses" (eLearning Task Force, 2013, p. 1). Like Ohio

State, they also clearly outline their rationale, closely aligning it with Bates & Sangrà's (2011) five key reasons for using eLearning. Analyzing the guiding principles into a graphic organizer, visually reinforces Western's emphasis on quality teaching and learning and meeting the needs of learners (Figure 2). It is evident from their plans that both universities understand the full spectrum of eLearning and are committed to providing it. However, Western focuses on learners: providing flexibility and choice, creating innovative, engaged courses based on evidence-based pedagogical strategies and maintaining and assuring high academic standards for online courses, while Ohio State is more focused on the technology, classrooms and systems, with "Student Support Services" appearing fifth in its list of focus areas.

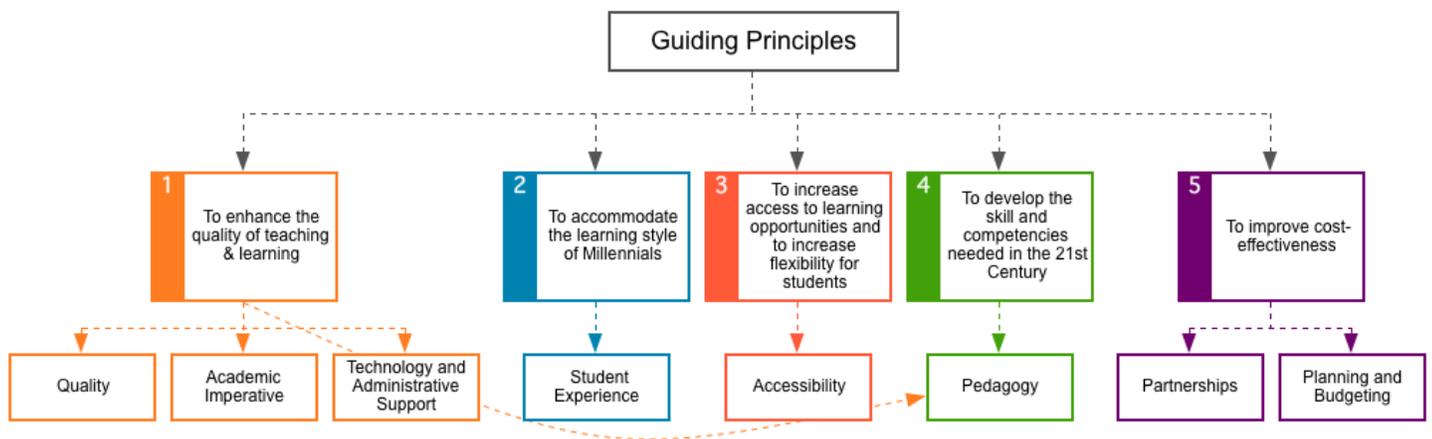


Figure 2. Graphic Organizer - Western's eLearning Guiding Principles

The Western plan also follows the generic outline defined by Bullen (2016), but is far briefer with fewer headings. Within two pages the plan includes the mission, vision, rationale and a high level environmental scan. After the introduction, the strategic plan continues with its concise presentation as it discusses "Current Practices, Challenges and Opportunities" related to 6 key areas:

1. Faculty Engagement
2. Student Experience
3. Pedagogical Support
4. IT Infrastructure
5. Policy Context
6. Management, Planning and Budgeting

While the Ohio State plan thoroughly addressed all aspects of an eLearning policy including the changes to pedagogy and creating collaborative learning spaces, it continued to emphasize revenue, growth and the university's status by leading with these topics. Western on the other hand not only consistently led with teaching and learning but further emphasized its importance by writing in greater detail on the first three topics. It is highly likely the committee put faculty engagement first as they recognized the key importance of faculty buy in (and perhaps union realities). By leading with engagement they acknowledged the faculty members who had "...expressed fundamental concerns about the changing role of faculty, and indeed, some perceive e-learning as a threat..." (E-Learning Task Force, 2013, p. 3) showing commitment to supporting them throughout the process. Ohio State only briefly acknowledges concerns, and took a more "fait accompli" approach evident in its metric driven charts.

As with Ohio State, there are no unstated rationales in this document. It provides a clear overview and is a comprehensive but very much less ambitious plan. For each of the 6 key areas an overview of the current situation was reviewed with the challenges summarized at the end, usually in one sentence followed by 2 to 4 recommendations. Unlike Ohio State's highly detailed, and at times overwhelming plan, Western's plan is simple and straightforward, with a total of 18 recommendations compared to Ohio State's 34 top strategic goals.

For example, Figure 3 compares Western’s “Student Experience” in which the task force recommends 4 student centred goals, in contrast to Ohio’s “Student Support Services” goals, which do not students.

Western – Student Experience	Ohio State – Student Support Services
Extend the hours of technological support services and increase the number of support staff	Develop a State Authorization plan for all 50 states
Develop analytical framework to assess the effectiveness of online courses	Achieve State Authorization in targeted states in support of initial Distance Education program offerings
Develop orientation materials or workshops for students on how to be a successful online learner	Implement “OSU Online,” an internet portal to collect and maintain a listing of all Ohio State online offerings
Develop training workshops for teaching assistants on supporting the best student experience in online learning	Develop a “Catalogue of Services”
	Promote and increase the visibility of our student support services and offerings to the university community
	Manage all events for State Science Day in support of \$4.5 million in scholarships and awards

Figure 3. Comparison: Western University's "Tasks" and Ohio State University's "Metrics & Indicators"

If the Western document had ended here it would not have addressed actual strategies for implementation. In the Ohio State plan, strategies (and monitoring) were built in to each section. In the Western plan the recommendations were included in an appendix, recast as actionable items that included a task description, person responsible, deadline and projected outcomes. Again, in comparison, Western was less ambitious, narrowing the scope of the initiative to 18 **tasks** related to course and program development, infrastructure, programming and instructor

support, administrative and policy. In contrast, Ohio State included 83 strategic **metrics and indicators** related to its 5 focus areas.

Western's 3-year action plan presents a doable set of tasks, smaller and less ambitious than Ohio State. For example, Western's goal is to create 40 new distance studies courses. Ohio State's goal is to create 150 courses, 35 publications, 50% increase in iBook and MOOC creation and 100% increase in iTunes courses. Western mentions a target of 3000 new students while Ohio State is driven to increase revenue by \$24.8 million, reduce technology costs by \$2.7 million and reduce IT infrastructure co-location costs by 30%. Western discusses the development of 3 mid-sized "smart" classrooms while Ohio State intends to launch 6 additional Digital Unions (staff and tools to support digital content creation), ensure 3 devices/seat wireless capabilities, provide 4 classrooms with enhanced student computing, provide 8 classrooms with enhanced videoconferencing technology and provide 9 additional collaborative common area spaces.

Summary and Conclusion

Both Ohio State and Western are focused on bringing eLearning to their respective universities. They understand eLearning and the challenges related to institutional change. The two universities address many of the same problems and propose similar solutions although in very different ways.

Ohio State's eLearning strategy applies a business model to the change process. Its overarching goal is to build Ohio State's brand and achieve eminence. The initiative includes specific and detailed benchmarks based on a careful environmental scan and SWOT analysis. The scope and sequence of planned strategies to achieve success is very large with meticulous

metrics focused mainly on numerical targets. The plan's main weakness could very well be its sheer size and focus on compliance and achievement (perhaps a malaise over the entire US school system) before support and learning.

Western eLearning strategy applies a "concerns-based" model to the change process. Its overarching goal is to improve teaching and learning to better meet the needs of students. The initiative employs a pragmatic and efficient approach. Focused on teachers, students and pedagogy, the plan provides a clear, concise overview of tasks and next steps. There is little emphasis on competition or cost savings, rather a limited set of actionable tasks to move the university forward. The plan's main weakness could very well be its limited scope and emphasis on less disruptive support over pressure to change.

While both institutions understand eLearning, the need for cultural change and the urgency to get there, a blend or balance of both models would create a more effective eLearning strategy. Taking the bold approach advocated by Ohio State and blending it with the collegial support of Western could enliven both the universities eLearning enthusiasts and support those who are unsure or fearful. Western's learning first focus helps frame the changes to pedagogy and roles, while Ohio State's metrics and specific targets help move talk about change into measureable action.

Bibliography

Bates, A.W. & Sangrà, A. (2011). *Managing Technology in Higher Education: Strategies for Transforming Teaching & Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bullen, M. (2016). The elements of a strategic plan. Retrieved January 30, 2016, from <https://blogs.ubc.ca/etec5202015/unit-5/unit-4-the-elements-of-a-strategic-plan/>

Contact North. (2011). *Template to plan online learning*. Retrieved from <http://teachonline.ca/tips-tools/template-plan-online-learning>

E-Learning Task Force. (2013, May). *E-Learning task force - Report to the Provost* (Rep.).
doi:10.4324/9780203842485

Hofherr, M. (Ed.). (2014). *Office of distance education and elearning strategic plan 2014-2018* (Rep.). Retrieved <https://odee.osu.edu/sites/default/files/odee-strategicplan.pdf>

Johnson, L., Adams Becker, S., Estrada, V., and Freeman, A. (2015). *NMC Horizon Report: 2015 Higher Education Edition*. Austin, Texas: The New Media Consortium.

OLC. (2015). *Keeping pace with the changing face of online learning*. Retrieved from <http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/2015-infographics/>