IT PLANNING FOR STRATEGIC SUPPORT: ALIGNING TECHNOLOGY AND VISION

ABSTRACT. While the appropriate adoption of modern technology creates new opportunities to facilitate life-long learning, universities have to grapple with how to provide on- and off-campus students with appropriate knowledge and transformative skills in an increasingly competitive environment. As universities revisit their mission and consider ways of dealing with the expectations of both society and students, a major challenge comes from aligning strategic planning and Information Technology (IT) planning. It is essential to have a strategic Information Technology Plan which assists in achieving core academic priorities. The challenge is to maximise the benefits of ongoing investment in IT by focusing on ways which ensure that the educational aims of the University are optimally supported. This paper considers such an approach to strategic IT planning in the context of a large international technological institution and critiques the implications of such an approach in the light of experience and in the broader context of the new geopolitical realities.

PROBLEM FORMULATION

The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT) was founded in 1887 and has around 45,000 students in Melbourne and offers courses in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Vietnam, The People’s Republic of China and elsewhere. RMIT emphasises education for employment, and its research focuses on solving real-world problems. Courses and research projects are technologically oriented and practical. People come to RMIT University from all over the world, to study or teach at any level from matriculation through Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and undergraduate to research degrees and professional doctorates. RMIT has recently been awarded the first Australian Export Award for Education. This award acknowledges for the first time the contribution of education – Australia’s fourth largest export industry – to the Australian economy. RMIT has the largest number of international students of the Australian universities, with 6,160 students enrolled onshore and 5,303 offshore. RMIT’s international success has been attributed to a variety of factors including the standard of its courses, the large network of partnerships that support RMIT, the university’s capacity to provide support to...
students, the city environment of its major campus; and the multicultural dimension of the university.

TOWARDS REACHING A SOLUTION

Recent analysis of RMIT’s current IT planning environment indicated that, while considerable investment of time and money had been made in IT, there was no coherent overall framework directly linking Faculty or Department IT plans with the mission of the University. This is typical of many universities and RMIT is no better or worse than the majority of institutions. There was no simple means to maximise the effectiveness of IT investments through sharing of resources or coordinated planning. Levels of IT knowledge and access to IT equipment varied considerably across Faculties. Knowledge of IT developments within the University was difficult to obtain and there were many instances of duplication of effort and poor dissemination of solutions to common problems. To capitalise on the opportunities offered by IT and to maximise the effectiveness of related investments, it was considered that an approach to IT planning should be developed to provide a stable and robust IT platform for teaching and learning into the next century and to guarantee the continued alignment of IT investments with the University’s educational priorities.

It is relevant to expound briefly on what was encompassed in the adoption by RMIT of the term ‘alignment’. RMIT took the bold step of drafting a detailed IT Strategic Plan together with costs and implementation plans which integrated and aligned the improvement of student management processes together with the definition of user requirements for new student and learning management systems. This involved prioritisation of existing and planned initiatives, and a management framework for IT projects. The outcome of such an approach was a Plan which included objectives, strategies, timeframe and resource requirements, including capital, development/integration and operating costs. It also produced an action plan for commissioning and implementing the recommended solution and specification of the IT architecture and delivery platforms. Such an ambitious and far reaching plan also necessitated reengineering major elements of the student management processes. The results included detailed User Requirements Specification for RMIT’s new Student Management System which assured complete integration with the University’s Distributed Learning System.

The challenge of developing a relevant strategic IT plan to support the educational vision of the University was founded on an analysis of the existing situation, identification of key issues, and an assessment of