

# Chapter VI

## The Role of Institutional Factors in the Formation of E-Learning Practices

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores institutional and socio-organisational factors that influence the adoption and use of learning management systems (LMS) in the context of higher education. It relies on a longitudinal case study to demonstrate the ways in which a set of institutional and organisational factors were drawn into the formation and shaping of e-learning practices. Factors found to figure predominantly include institutional conventions and standards, pre-existing activities and routines, existing resources available to the institution, and, finally, the institution's organisational culture. The analysis further shows that socio-organisational factors may influence e-learning implementation in various ways, as they both facilitate and hinder the adoption of technology and its consequent use. It is argued that institutional parameters have particular relevance in the context of hybrid modes of e-learning implementation, as they illuminate the tensions involved in integrating technological innovation into an established system.*

### PART I: BACKGROUND

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the institutional and socio-organisational factors that influence the use of learning management systems (LMS) in the context of higher education. Drawing on a

longitudinal case study in an academic setting, the chapter reveals the vital role of institutional concerns for understanding learning technology use and its consequences.

By exploring institutional and organisational factors in e-learning, this study addresses a definite gap in the literature to date. As shown in a literature review, various factors that may facili-

tate or hinder the effective use and integration of learning technology have been explored. These include technical factors such as availability, stability, and reliability, factors associated with instructional design, and, to a large extent, user related factors, namely attitudes and perceptions. Yet, these factors are typically studied in isolation and socio-organisational factors are effectively ignored. The significance of studying institutional factors stems not only from the potential role they are likely to play, and have repeatedly been shown to play in the context of information systems other than e-learning, but more crucially in the light of the prevailing mode of *hybrid* (or blended) e-learning. Within hybrid models of integration, the role played by the pre-existing institutional context becomes all the more important, as the technological environment is meant to complement, rather than replace, the existing and long established learning system.

Findings presented in this chapter demonstrate the ways in which a set of institutional and organisational factors were drawn into the formation and shaping of e-learning practices, defined as the shared and recurrent activities that emerge from learners' continuous interaction with learning technology. The analysis further shows that socio-organisational factors may influence e-learning implementation in various ways, as they both facilitate and hinder the technology adoption and its consequent use.

The case study reported in this chapter involves the use of a standard LMS in a traditional, well-established university in the UK. Focus is placed on the integration of the LMS into the provision of a masters degree in a faculty of social science. Data collection encompassed three consecutive years, starting from the point at which the technology was first introduced in the institution. A research design was devised so as to guide a systematic examination of the organisational context. Relevant institutional levels were mapped out and analysed as interconnected layers (Pettigrew, 1990).

At the core of this chapter is a set of institutional and socio-organisational factors impinging on e-learning which will be seen to arise from the case analysis. Factors found to figure predominantly include: (a) institutional conventions and standards, (b) institutional activities and routines, (c) organisational resources (physical, technological—other than LMS—and human), and, (d) organisational culture and social relations.

After introducing the factors and demonstrating their role in the formation of e-learning practices, a discussion of their implications follows. It is argued that these parameters have particular relevance in the context of hybrid modes of e-learning implementation, as they illuminate the *tensions* involved in integrating technological innovation into an established system. It will be shown that in cases where technology was introduced to supplement existing arrangements, that is, to compensate for deficiencies affecting the existing “off-line” setting, the integration process was typically vigorous and accelerated. Clearly, difficulties and challenges also arose as the LMS was seen to compete or clash with its veteran off-line counterpart. In some cases, interoperation and fusion were achieved through negotiation; in others, technological properties were ruled out and capabilities remained unexploited.

The next part of the chapter provides a review of the literature on factors influencing the use of learning technology. Although considerable research on the topic has been undertaken, findings on the institutional and socio-organisational factors are strikingly absent. The aim of the present study is to address this gap in the e-learning literature.

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING THE USE OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY**

Various factors that may facilitate or hinder the effective use and integration of learning technologies have been studied and are briefly reviewed

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