

Inception to Dissolution: E-Learning Initiative at an Indian Institute

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Literature provides many success and failure stories of technology adoption in business that are often analyzed and discussed in the classrooms. However, when it comes to actual implementation, even academic institutions seem to be committing the same mistakes. This case presents the plan, action, and challenges involved in the e-learning initiative of a newly established institute of higher learning in India. The Institute under discussion partnered with a European university to bring in international standard of education. Its plan was to adopt technology for all its regular courses as well as to launch a fully online Master's degree within the first year of its operation. A team was gathered to set up e-learning in the Institute, which worked with full enthusiasm during the initial months. However, lack of vision and top management support, absence of institutionalized agenda, skeletal team structure and coordination, weak project planning, technology infrastructure, as well as lack of faculty involvement, became the bottlenecks for the e-learning adoption. Gradually, the team got scattered and there after the whole initiative was shattered. The case brings out the critical situations and factors that a brick and mortar educational institution needs to manage when moving on to the e-learning space.

Keywords: E-Business, E-Learning, E-Learning Project, Enterprise Application, India, Indian, Information Systems, Information Systems Strategy, Technology Adoption

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

In the wake of India opening up to foreign education, many known educational groups of India started partnering with established foreign universities promising an international standard of education to Indian students within their geographic and economic reach. Gyanesh Institute of Higher Education (GIHE)¹ is one such initiative taken by a well constituted industrial group of India. The group ventured into the field of education in early 1990s and opened K-12 schools across various states of the country. In 2009, the group entered into higher education

in partnership with an established European university and started offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in management. By 2010, its plan was to start the engineering courses also.

Soon after its first announcement for admissions, it attracted applicants, largely Indians, from various states of India and South Asian countries. Most of these students came from sound economic background and stayed in the hostel within the campus. Ambience of the campus matched the lifestyle of these children of affluent families.

GIHE followed a semester system (two semesters per year) for all its courses. A course meant a degree course and had multiple modules taught over a defined duration which varied

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from one year to three years depending on the course. Teaching model of GIHE was to provide international education through a mix of resident and foreign faculty well supplemented with technology. Resident faculty members at GIHE were all Indians but had adequate international experience either by way of education and/or service in a foreign university. In addition, visiting faculty from the region as well as from the Partner University (PU) were contracted on a subject teaching basis. Faculty reported to the Dean-Academics, who was responsible for liaison with its PU for academic matters and to ensure adherence to prescribed academic standards and processes. The Dean-Academics reported to the Director, who managed the overall functioning of the Institute and further reported to the Managing Director of the group.

Joint strategic leadership of this privately held, for-profit Institute involved representatives from its Indian as well as European counterparts. Electronic learning (e-learning) was high on the list of its priorities. Though its campus network and internet facilities were yet to be stabilized, its target was to launch a fully online Master's degree in management and also adopt technology for regular face-to-face (F2F) programs within the first year of its operations.

Thus, implementing the same software application for its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as in the PU was a key decision taken by its strategic leadership. And identifying a suitable team to set up their e-learning initiative was among the first few things on their agenda.

SETTING THE STAGE

E-Learning Adoption in the Education Sector

Allen and Seaman (2011) suggest four categories of e-learning adoption based on the extent of content delivered online. They are – Traditional (0%), Web facilitated (1-29%), Blended/hybrid (30-79%), and online (80-100%). Both blended and online models predominantly use Learning Management System (LMS), an integrated software application, as the base.

Though, the (pure) online model of e-learning has not picked up well so far, it is gradually paving its way in the form of blended learning, particularly in the developed countries. Salmon (2005, p. 202) remarked that in 2005, almost every higher education institution (HEI) was planning to use one or more VLEs for one reason or the other; and almost every HEI in the United Kingdom (UK) was attempting to do so whether for distance or blended learning. As per Allen and Seaman (2011), around 65% of the institutions in the United States (U.S.) see online learning as a critical part of their long-term strategy; and 31% of higher-education students in the US take at least one course online. Even though the growth rate is not steep, an upward trend of e-learning is clearly visible in developed countries. Such online/blended offerings are also becoming an acceptable norm with the accreditation authorities there.

The literature reports efforts and some growth of e-learning in developing countries also. Based on a study of top three universities of China, Lin, Ma, and Lin (2011) reported that e-learning in China was still at the distance learning stage. They also studied various universities in Taiwan and compared them with the University of Nottingham – which is an early and successful adopter of e-learning in UK and therefore well represents the Western style of e-learning adoption. Based on their observations of e-learning progress in China and Taiwan, they listed out three unique characteristics of Eastern style of e-learning. Firstly, the universities in developing countries preferred to build rather than buy their e-learning platform. Secondly, the main group in-charge came from the Department of Computer Science; and thirdly, the main reason for e-learning adoption was government policies and not jumping on the bandwagon. Based on another study of five universities from five developing countries of Africa, Ssekakubo, Suleman, and Marsden (2011) reported that the universities had high turnover rate of LMSs due to below the line performance. The authors concluded that such failures had little to do with the technology (whether open-source or proprietary) and

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