

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING AT COVENTRY UNIVERSITY

SUBMITTED BY:

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Coventry University was one of the first higher education institutions in the UK to roll out a virtual learning environment (WebCT) across its entire campus. The cost was substantial, but the cost of not doing it was regarded as even higher. The case gives an example of an institution gaining first mover advantage by striving to improve its product offering. It is written deliberately in a scholarly style, to give the reader additional references to follow up as required.

Higher education market:

Various authors (Gunasekaran *et al* 2002, Armstrong *et al* 1997, Inglis *et al* 1999 and Davies, 1998) elaborate on the current changes in the higher education market. Higher education institutions operate in a dynamic environment and are expected to keep up with and accommodate changes in society. Changes in society have an effect on higher education institutions, in terms of student numbers, methods of learning, demands for education and convenience in learning (Inglis *et al*, 1999:16). Davies (1998:175) explained the need for higher education institutions to become open systems, which interact with and relate to movements within society. Open systems require education institutions to be sensitive to new demands in learning. Open systems allow the learner to cope with a changing society and work life as people learn at the place, pace and time that satisfy their needs. Tiano, 1996, cited in Inglis *et al* (1999:18) explained the change taking place in higher education as a 'paradigm shift', contrasting features of the new paradigm with those characterising the old, as shown in Table 1. These factors in the higher education market affect institutions in terms of reaching organizational goals and satisfying customer needs.

TABLE 1: OLD AND NEW PARADIGM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Terminal Degree	Lifelong learning
Student ages 18-25	Cradle to grave
Delivery in classroom	Delivery anywhere
University as ivory tower	University as partner in society
Institution-centric	Market-centric
Technology as an expense	Technology as differentiator

Inglis *et al* (1999:16)

In the new paradigm (Table 1), technology is perceived as a differentiator, rather than an expense. Inglis *et al* (1999:16) states that technology in higher education goes beyond the mere delivery of information, it needs to be structured in a way to achieve educational purposes. Electronic learning (e-learning) is defined as Internet-enabled learning (Gunasekaran *et al*, 2002:44) that provides institutions with the ability to turn change into an advantage. E-learning allows people and institutions to keep up with changes in the global economy that now occur on Internet time.

Coventry University (CU):

Gray (1991:2) explains that education is a service. It can be argued that students enrol at CU for the core service of gaining an 'increased knowledge'. Supplementary services provide additional benefits to enhance the core service or to differentiate it from other learning institutions. CU uses WebCT as an e-learning tool. At CU, WebCT is regarded as a supplementary service offering. Newman (2001) explained that WebCT at CU aims to supplement the traditional classroom instruction and enrich students' academic and technological experience.

CU offers courses to full-time and flexible learning students. As WebCT supplements traditional classroom teaching and learning, it forms part of the cluster of satisfactions that customers (students and lecturers) evaluate.

WebCT at Coventry University:-

WebCT was fully implemented at CU in September 1999. It was chosen as the preferred platform, for its flexibility, pedagogical nature and value for money (Orsini-Jones and Jones, 2002). WebCT's Company strategy is to make the best use of an institution's intellectual and technical resources in developing technology to support teaching and learning. It facilitates the building a flexible framework to enable education institutions to meet the challenges faced. (WebCT, 2002).

CU adopts strategic aims to respond to the dynamics in the market (Inglis, 1999, Armstrong *et al*, 1997, Thomas and Beaty, 1998 and Coventry University, 2002).

The teaching and learning strategy at CU is based on their mission, core values and corporate aims, which are to:

- provide maximum educational opportunities through quality teaching and research;
 - pursue quality, innovation and leadership in educational thinking;
 - achieve the highest quality in learning and personal development by a diverse student population, and
 - sustain a high standard of service and reputation.
- (Coventry Academic Board, 2002)

Once e-learning had been implemented into the structures of CU, the institution needed to develop a services marketing mix that reflected its entire service offering. The services marketing mix is a set of controllable marketing variables that the institution needs to blend together to produce the response it wants in the target market (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006:50). As CU understands how variables in the marketing mix impact upon each other, it can communicate the distinct position it occupies in the market. A survey of WebCT at CBS was conducted in order to determine stakeholders' opinions of WebCT. The survey asked staff and students at CBS for their opinions of WebCT as a teaching and learning resource. In Table 2, the properties of WebCT are gathered from the opinions of stakeholders in the survey (Ellis, 2003) as well as WebCT evaluation reports.

TABLE 2: STAKEHOLDERS OPINIONS OF WEBCT

Properties of WebCT	Opinions of WebCT
WebCT provides easy access to education	WebCT allows a diverse student population to access CU at a time and place that is suitable to them.
WebCT assists learning	WebCT assists student in modules studied via discussion fora and accessing course material, library links and useful websites.
WebCT assists with teaching	Lecturers perceived WebCT as a method of communication with students. Newman (2001:3) in his discussion of the impact of WebCT at CU, explained that web-based communication and community tools and resources available on WebCT have strengthened the interchange of class participants and provided more efficient access to academic materials and support for students.
WebCT assists in providing an Integrated-learning platform	Lecturers viewed WebCT as an integrated teaching and learning resource. Deepwell and Syson (1999) explained that (in keeping abreast of the dynamic needs of learners) there is an attractive feature of WebCT at CU, which directs students out of WebCT to external websites for further learning activity and research
Education can be provided to more students	Quality education, possibly even enhanced by WebCT's interactive nature, can be provided to an increased student population online without requiring additional buildings and staff.
Lack of Consistency of use of WebCT	Both students and lecturers mentioned the lack of consistency of usage of WebCT between module leaders. If the teaching group comprises individual lecturers who do not collaborate on methods of teaching and learning, this leads to a diverse use of WebCT, which presents confusion to students in terms of when or how to use WebCT. Beaty and Deepwell also state that high face-to-face contact hours for academics remains a disincentive for staff to invest time into online learning (cited in Bhanot and Fallows, 2003).
Lack of Student Support on WebCT	The current role of the Computing Services Department is to provide student support, however students mentioned that they have turned to school technicians or the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) for help on how to use WebCT. This may require a redefinition of roles and responsibilities (Beaty and Deepwell, cited in Bhanot and Fallows, 2003)
Potentially increasing cost of WebCT	CU is also pressured to upgrade as newer versions of the WebCT are released which is costly (Beaty and Deepwell, cited in Bhanot and Fallows, 2003). It is possible that once expectations have been created in terms of WebCT being part of the service package for students, the University could get locked into a strategy that becomes increasingly expensive to maintain.

Source: Ellis (2003) and (Beaty and Deepwell, cited in Bhanot and Fallows, 2003).

By adopting a proactive approach at CU (Thomas and Beaty, 1998) a culture of continuous improvement was practiced. WebCT is still being maintained and evaluated at CBS in terms of how it meets the institutional needs as well as satisfy customer goals.

Questions:

1. From the information given in the case, what environmental factors indicated the need for WebCT?
2. What needs does WebCT satisfy?
3. How does WebCT influence the services marketing mix?
4. How does WebCT assist CU in achieving its teaching and learning goals?

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