Developing an E- learning Strategy in Higher Education Institutions

A Step-by-step Guide

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This document presents the Guide for the development of a strategic plan of e- learning, outlining how Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) can embrace the strengths and opportunities as emerged from SWOT analysis (output of WP1) to meet the challenges of distance and online education. It describes the steps for developing an e- learning strategy by outlining its strategic components and connecting the knowledge acquired during WP1 of the MIELES project.

Through this Strategic Planning process, the members of the consortium will develop an e- learning strategy through a collective identity and voice, resulting in each institution's vision, mission and objectives.

The following sections will provide baseline information about the e- learning strategy and serve as ongoing indicators of the level of successful implementation of this strategy. Within this guide we use the term e- learning to refer to the use of technology to support teaching and learning in distance education format, blended learning, or classroom learning.

Introduction

The overall higher education environment is changing. Total global higher education enrolments are forecast to grow by 21 million between 2011 and 2020 across most countries. This rapid expansion of higher education is expected to increase from 150 enrolments today to 250+ million by 2025 (UNESCO 2011 as cited in Marope, Wells, & Hazelkorn, 2013). China and India are forecast to account the fastest growth in tertiary enrolments with 60% of young people to have a higher education qualification (OECD, 2012). The growth driven by these Asian emerging economies will play a key role in re-shaping the global landscape of higher education sector by 2020 (British Council, 2012). Distance learning continues to grow, demonstrating institutions commitment to host programs that meet the needs of today's students. Even as overall higher education enrolments have dropped by 3.2%, distance education enrolment growth continues with a 3.9 % increase, recorded between the years 2012-2015 (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

Today, higher education system faces major challenges and these are related to student recruitment, limited financial resources, accreditation, quality assurance, credit and recognition, open access, quality of teaching and learning, affordability, career adaptation to labour market needs, infrastructures and training, students evaluation and so forth (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008; EC, 2013). Emerging technologies have the potential to address and alleviate several of the challenges facing today's higher education, including the aspects raised above.

Since higher education is a force for individual growth, societal progress and cultural development, there is every reason to harness the potential of technological advances in the service of higher education (Hunt, 2011, EC, 2014). Enhanced use of digital technologies can promote active participation in society and global economic grow (Kiss, 2017). A study found that students feel unprepared for the world of work and lack relevant skills needed to be competitive in today's workplace (McKinsey 2013). Therefore, HEIs' must prepare students to thrive in the digitalised era acquiring skills that are essential in the labour market.

Emerging Technologies to Address the Challenges

Technological innovations developed in the last decade have a transformative effect on higher education provision and hold great promise to enrich and revitalize higher education system. The impetus of digital technologies has the potential to serve as the hub for initial training and capacity development within an institution. Teaching staff needs to be fully trained and incentivized to use new technologies and pedagogies to best integrate online instruction into course curriculum (Beichner 2014; Shuvelitz 2014; Ahalt & Fecho, 2015).

The rise of e-learning is considered as one of the most positive and spectacular consequence of the rapid technological advancements. E- learning refers to technology enhanced learning, blended learning, open and distance learning as well as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Divjak & Redep, 2015; Veletsianos & Vrasidas, 2015). It is recognized as a powerful tool that can support and enhance the learning experience of higher education students (Ellis, Ginnsb & Piggott, 2009; Urh, Vukovic, & Jereb, 2015). Likewise, e- learning enables HEI to fulfil their strategic objectives and plans including their mission and vision statements and goals (Bralić, 2016; Divjak & Begičević, 2006; Van der Klink & Jochems, 2004). The success of e-learning implementation depends on many factors, including the institutional structure and context.

Currently, there is no ready model or a clearly defined successful path for developing institutional strategies that will ensure that e- learning is productively embraced within the institutional structure (Pradeep Kumar & Panchanatham, 2016). E-learning strategies are built on the main aims of institution strategies and need to be integrated within a strategically developed framework; clearly linked to the mission and vision of the institution (Moser, 2007). It is therefore necessary to align institution's overall strategy with e-learning strategy by exploring the institutional structure that enables the adoption of e- learning initiatives to support its strategic objectives (Pradeep Kumar & Panchanatham, 2016). Consequently, institutions need to formulate clear vision, mission, goals and actions in order to set a positive environment that will foster e- learning development (Arabasz, Pirani, & Fawcett, 2003). Ultimately, the process of developing a well-thought-out and successful learning strategy will include a focused e- learning strategy (Schiffman, Vignare, & Geith, 2007; Bralić, 2016).

Mission and Vision of HEI

Prior developing a strategy for e-learning, it is important that Higher Education institutions develop an overall strategy plan for the university as a whole. The e-learning strategy will then come and fit in and address specific issues raised in the overall plan. The success of strategic e- learning plan depends on the correct identification and formulation of the four components: vision, mission, strategy, and action (Ozdem, 2011). Strategic planning aims to nurture a culture that defines and supports mission and vision statements. A well-prepared mission statement is a set of goals that help an organization to achieve its strategic objectives. Additionally, mission is a unique long-term goal, a shared value and belief (Dinçer, 2004 as cited in Ozdem, 2011). Mission statements should be clear, concise, and intense and concerns quality rather than quantity. On the contrary, vision statement reflects an additional important element of strategic planning and concerns a living and dynamic reality. Vision defines what the organization wants to become in the future by combining current facts, hopes, dreams, threats and opportunities (Efil, 2004 as cited in Ozdem, 2011). Therefore, every institution should have a vision which envisages what it expected to grasp in the long run, and constantly strive towards transforming it into reality.

All in all, the mission statement "is about the here and now," whereas, the "vision statement describes the future (Lewis, 2005, p. 5)". Withal, mission statement reflects the realities of an institution's environment, while vision statements drive these realities (Hartley, 2014). Lastly, mission and vision statements establish an institution's identity and place in the higher education sector (Abelman, 2014).

Develop vision and mission for e-learning strategy

The development of a vision and mission to support institutional policy goals for the higher education system is an essential first step in delivering an e-learning strategy across nations. This section aims to support strategy development by providing guidance to key stakeholders to develop the vision and mission of their institution. The following tables (see Table 1 and Table 2) comprise a set of tips and questions to consider for developing a vision statement and moving a mission statement forward.

Table 1. Developing a Strategic Vision

Vision: Inclusive, flexible, engaging and transformative learning for everyone. Create a vision for how online learning environments should look like, and how students and faculty can interact in these environments.

"The vision is the aspiration of the organization of what it would like to be in the future"

Examples:
"The [Insert name of University] aspires to become the world leading institution in distance learning".

"The [name of University] will be the world's preeminent comprehensive university, advancing education through technology-enhanced learning experiences".

Questions to consider in preparing a Vision statement

- ✓ What are the needs to be addressed?
- ✓ What are the strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ What are the resources available?
- ✓ What are the priorities?
- ✓ What would success look like?

Tips for Developing a Vision Statement

- ✓ What are the needs to be addressed?
- ✓ What are the strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ What are the resources available?
- ✓ What are the priorities?
- ✓ What would success look like?
- ✓ The vision is brief, clear and easily explained to others.
- ✓ Provides direction of the organization and paints a graphic mental picture for the next 5-10 years.
- ✓ Involve stakeholders in developing the vision.
- ✓ Use the present tense.
- ✓ Use clear, concise language.
- ✓ Not to be confused with the mission statement.
- ✓ Have a plan to communicate your vision statement to other stakeholders.
- ✓ Be prepared to commit time and resources to the vision you establish.

Table 2. Developing a Strategic Mission

Mission: To create an e-learning and teaching environment that promotes student success.

"*The mission is a realistic goal, indicating what the stakeholders would like the adult education sector to look like after the Strategy is implemented*"

Examples:
"The mission of [Insert name of University] is to contribute to digitalised society through the pursuit of education, learning, and research".

"The mission of [Insert name of University] is to equip students with enriched educational experiences through technological innovations and distance education opportunities".

Tips for Developing a Mission Statement

- ✓ A Mission Statement grounds the vision in a more practical way.
- ✓ The mission should describe what the organization will do and why.
- ✓ Mission statements are similar to vision statements; however, they are more specific about action.
- ✓ Use clear, concise language
- ✓ Clear regarding what is to be done and why
- ✓ Inclusive – reflects the voices of all people who are involved
- ✓ Involve target groups in developing the mission
- ✓ The mission statement might be referring to the current state of affairs and at the same time addressing questions such as:
    - – What needs to be done and for who and how its going to do that?

The Mission statement may include:

- ✓ The institution's purpose
- ✓ The outcomes and services being provided
- ✓ The institution's future focus

Define SMART objectives and Action Plan

SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic (also known as Relevant) and Time-bound. It was first introduced by Doran (1981) for designing effective management goals. SMART method is defined as the process for developing effective, measurable goals and objectives (Hofman & Hofman, 2011). These objectives are specific statements indicating what is expected to be completed in order for the vision and mission to be achieved. Despite the fact that SMART method was developed within management sector, it is widely used for program planning/evaluation purposes (Chen, 2015; Bjerke & Renger, 2017) and in education (Blumberg, 2009).

Precisely, the "Specific" element means that specific objectives are set and attempt to answer the five "W" questions: Who? What? Where? Which? Why? With regards to "Measurable" element certifies that clear indicators and concrete criteria are included for each objective. The "Attainable" component means that objectives are achievable within the scope of the strategy. Regarding "Realistic" element this states that the objectives need to be realistic, make sense, and be aligned with the vision and mission of the strategy. The fifth component states that the objectives need to have clearly defined timeframe and deadlines of what will be achieved by when and is labelled as "Time-bound".

In order to ensure that the e- learning strategy will be implemented, HEIs need to devise clear goals that must be SMART objectives for something that needs to be accomplished by a specific end date (Divjak & Redep, 2015). This section describes how to formulate and set SMART objectives as well as how to prepare an action plan with certain actions for achieving the objectives. The Goal which is often known as overall objective is a long-term objective. It is the aim to which a Strategy or Policy is focused. The Activities which are often called actions are the necessary actions for achieving an output. There can be one or several activities in order to achieve each output.

Below are some issues and questions (see **Error! Reference source not found.**) to consider while determining SMART Objectives:

- Build on information gathered from SWOT Analysis (output of WP1)
- Focus on the strategy goals
- Be aware of policy objectives in the Adult Education Sector
- Consult stakeholders regarding relative priority of SMART Objectives
- State SMART Objectives according to SMART principles
- Draft, review, redefine and redraft the objectives until they are SMART

Furthermore, the strategic institutional plan begins with statements of institutional mission, vision, and core values, followed by an articulation of key strategic issues. Both, the SMART objectives and the action plan need to be aligned with the institution's mission and vision and statements. Once mission, vision, and the objectives are defined an action plan needs to be developed including planned activities and strategies to ensure objectives are met. The Action Plan will focus on activities related to the goals of the Strategy. The Action plan supplements and defines all the main actions needed for a vision and objectives to become real.

Table 3. Defining SMART objectives

Questions to consider in preparing SMART objectives	
Specific	✓ What need to be achieved and how it will be achieved? ✓ Is the objective clear? ✓ Would anyone with basic understanding in the area understand the objective?
Measurable	✓ Is the expected standard clearly defined? ✓ Is the quantity clearly defined? ✓ Is the quality clearly defined?
Attainable	✓ Is the onjective realistic? ✓ Are the necessary resources avaiable to the members of the staff? ✓ Does the members of the staff have the knowledge to achieve the objective? ✓ Has sufficient time been allocated to the objective?
Relevant	✓ Does the onjective align to the insitituion's mission? ✓ Does the objective align to the institution's vision? ✓ Does the objective align to the institution's policy? ✓ Does the objective align to the institution's learning objectives? ✓ Does the objective add value to the university?
Timed	✓ Has a target date been set? ✓ Is the target date realistic?

Developing a Strategy for e-learning in Higher Education

The development of a learning strategy in HEI considers a vitally important omission of each institution. The integration of new technologies should become an integral element of each institution and need to be placed in the heart of institutions' strategies. Henceforth, this section describes the areas (as) of the strategic operations of the proposed framework for the development of e- learning strategy in HEI. This framework aims to assist HEI in the development of a dynamic, engaging, and effective model for e-learning as illustrated in Figure 1. The process for developing an e- learning strategy consists of four key strands: (1) conducting needs analysis using the SWOT Analysis method (output of WP1), (2) developing institutional vision and mission statements, (3) defining SMART objectives of the institution, and (4) preparing an action plan. Each strand has an associated set of targets and actions and a more detailed discussion is articulated in the related section of each key strand. In order for the monitoring and evaluation progress of strategy implementation to be meaningful, a continuous review cycle examination of

the effectiveness of the model process will take place until the maturity of the e-learning strategy is reached. The e-learning strategy will be supported by an annually updated institutional action plan. A truly effective e-learning strategy must comprehend and support digital pedagogies for on-campus students as well as for distance learners and help establish a "baseline" for best practices in online and hybrid courses. The proposed framework of e - learning would provide invaluable support for the university's efforts to implement truly innovative new approaches into the many and varied facets of digital learning.
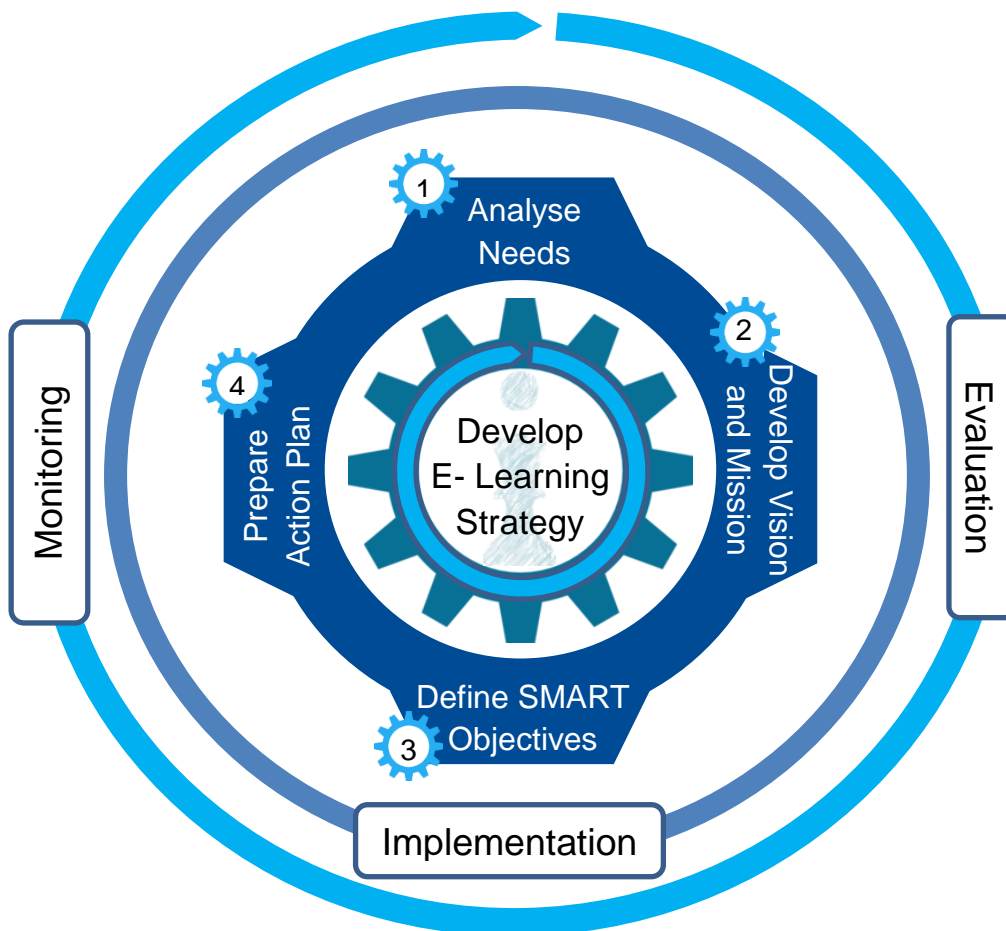

Figure 1. The Higher Education e-learning Strategy Development process for MIELES project.

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SMART Objectives Template

Use the following table to help you develop SMART objectives that will ensure you reach the goal set (main objective: development of e-learning strategy) of the institution. Add additional tables as needed.

Key Component	Objective
Specific - What is the specific task?	
Measurable - What are the standards or parameters?	
Achievable - Is the task feasible?	
Realistic - Are sufficient resources available?	
Time-Bound - What are the start and end dates?	

Mission and Vision Template

Define the strategic goals, vision and mission of your institution

Goal (main objective)
Vision Statement
Mission Statement

Appendix C

Action Plan Template

Use this Action Plan Template to identify specific steps in order to achieve each goal and objectives of your institution identified through the SWOT analysis process. Modify the form as needed, review and update regularly. Distribute copies of each work plan to the members of the committee.

Action Step (What Will Be Done?)	Resources What do you need to complete this step? (Financial, People, tools, etc.)	Deadline

Appendix D

Checklist for developing e-learning strategic plan

Checklist for the e-learning strategy Document				
Title	Description	Yes	No	Needs Revision
Environmental Scan of the Institution				
Advisory Board Commitment	Clearly stating the commitment of the advisory board for the e-learning strategy to be implemented.			
The partnership	An overview of the partners involved and their contribution to the e-learning strategy development.			
Team members and Responsibilities	An overview of the team members, roles and responsibilities. The responsibilities for each team member and partner are clearly defined.			
Current / past Strategies/ Policies	A brief environmental overview of relevant past and current strategies and policies.			
Needs analysis and report	Conduct needs analysis using SWOT method. Summary of the outputs are clearly described in the developed report.			
Gaps and Priorities	The gaps identified and the priorities defined are clearly stated.			
Institutional Vision, Mission, objectives and outputs				
Institutional Values, Vision and Mission	A detailed description of the Strategy/Policy Goals, Vision and Mission.			
Objectives	SMART objectives are defined.			
Outputs	The tangible outputs for achieving the objectives.			
Annual Plan				
Action Plan/ Activities	The action plan is prepared and the necessary actions for achieving each respective objective are defined.			
Timeframe	The timeframe within which each activity will take place.			
Monitoring, Reviewing and Evaluation	Processes for monitoring, reviewing, refining and plan evaluation are clearly defined.			
Budget	Overview of the budget and resources needed for activities to materialize.			