Chapter VI

Falling Behind: 
A Case Study in Uncritical Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the major findings of case study research investigating uncritical assessment of an institution-wide learning management system in an Australian university. Suburban University illustrates the ways in which a range of social and institutional influences, operating internally and externally to an organization, can affect managerial decision making. Many of the parties involved were unaware of the influence of some of these factors upon them at the time of assessment. When these parties also lacked a background in the areas they sought to manage (i.e., the educational enterprise of the university), critical assessment was made even more difficult. Therefore, universities that teach skills in critical assessment to their students can sometimes be uncritical in their own decision making, particularly when the vice chancellor fears “falling behind” other adopting universities and key organizational decision makers lack relevant theoretical frameworks to inform decision making in the areas they manage.

INTRODUCTION

I was talking to him the other day and I said you were coming out and I said, “how honest do you think we should be?” Because, I said “it’s a really intriguing topic that someone is actually going to ask the question, you know, how were these decisions [made] and against, how were these decisions evaluated basically”. And the short answer is “they’re not”. And I think you know that. And from a management perspective, I was interested because there’s a lot of research in management
that tells you how you could go about these things, 
and who should be the stakeholders you know. But 
this place avoided doing all that, because, well, 
for whatever reasons. I don’t know why we’ve 
got WebCT as opposed to Blackboard. But once 
you’ve got it you know, you’ve got it for life. The 
cost for anyone in management to contemplate 
changing tools now, it’s just impossible. And that’s 
a shame because it’s not like it’s being used, it’s 
just expensive (An anonymous respondent from 
Suburban University).

This chapter discusses the major findings of 
case study research investigating the process of 
examination and assessment of an institution-wide 
learning management system in an Australian 
university. The case explores the operation of 
a range of internal and external influences on 
the organizational decision making process, 
ultimately leading to uncritical assessment and 
underwhelming organizational outcomes.

Readers of this chapter will have the op-
portunity to see the ways in which a range of 
social and institutional factors interact to shape 
the assessment and decision making process in 
organizations. This chapter will thus provide an 
illustrative case study of the challenges involved 
in evaluating pervasive technologies, particularly 
when organizational leaders believe they are 
‘falling behind’. It will also provide a number of 
recommendations for organizational leaders and 
decision makers.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT 
SYSTEMS AS PERVERSIVE 
TECHNOLOGIES

During the mid to late 1990s, a number of alter-
native strategies for delivering higher education 
utilizing new educational technologies became 
more accessible to universities. In March 2002, 
the first national attempt to assess the extent of 
online learning among Australian universities 
was published, based on a survey of 40 out of 
43 Australian universities between August and 
September 2001 (2002). Online learning, accord-
ing to these authors, comprised

Subjects or course components, in which at least 
some of the content is delivered and/or some of 
the interaction is conducted via the Internet. 
This may be optional or compulsory. (Bell et al., 
2002, p. x)

In this study, the authors found that there 
were 207 fully online university award courses 
(comprising of multiple subjects or units) with no 
facing component offered by 23 (58 percent) 
out of 40 responding Australian universities (Bell 
et al., 2002, pp. ix-x). These fully online course 
offerings were not, however, the most common 
form of course delivery among Australian higher 
education providers. The prevalent form of online 
delivery involved optional student participation 
on the World Wide Web (herein referred to as 
the Web) in 46 percent of units (whole subjects 
or course components), with all universities em-
ploying the Web to some extent for teaching and 
learning purposes (Bell et al., 2002, pp. ix-x).

Assisting this online delivery of teaching and 
learning were a number of commercial and in-
house learning management systems, of which 
there were sometimes several systems within 
the same institution. The most popular of these 
learning management systems were WebCT (29 
universities), in-house systems (20 universities), 
and Blackboard (17 universities), with institutions 
preferring WebCT and then Blackboard as institution-
wide systems (Bell et al., 2002, pp. 22-23).

Bell et al. noted that there was little information 
available on the extent of online course delivery 
in other parts of the world at that time (Bell et al., 
2002, p. 3). The exception was Canada where in 
1999/2000, 57 percent of the 134 higher educa-
tion institutions that participated in this research 
project claimed that they ran subjects that were 
delivered with no traditional face-to-face teach-