
Strategic Planning of Distance Education in the Age of Teleinformatics

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Abstract

Teleinformatics is the transfer of information via technology. Teleinformatics in distance education poses a great challenge to secondary and tertiary educational institutions which use this communication network. The speed at which this technology evolves and the need for new and appropriate pedagogical strategies is reshaping distance education within a unique system of knowledge transmission. The arrival of the electronic highway, the creation of a world-wide classroom and, in the near future, a world-wide university and library are just a few manifestations of the accelerated evolution of teleinformatics in education (Knight, 1995; Rossman, 1992). The technology's capacity to meet expectations rapidly and in a flexible way brings about new demands for new service from non-traditional users while at the same time broadening the array of choices for the traditional clientele. This flexibility in reacting to ever-changing and varied demands requires an organization capable of reacting to the evolution of changing internal and external environments. Inclusion of technology in education, and its use to support study programs, creates a new paradigm: one that is orderly and pro-active; one that supports and preserves the establishment's mission; one that allows the system to evolve in accord with the changes. To make it possible, we propose a model of strategic planning adapted to the particular needs of distance education in a pro-active and technological environment.

Introduction

Teleinformatics technology favors a system of distance education that can no longer be simply an addition to traditional education systems, instead it must become a new method of knowledge transmission that is accessible to all (Rossman, 1992). The rapid speed at which this new technology is developing and the adoption of new pedagogical strategies suitable for use with this technology requires predicative and proactive planning (Henri & Kaye, 1985), whether or not one believes in technological determinism and strategic planning. A clear vision of the potential of this network is important for the implementation of an effective distance education leadership (Knox, 1993; Murgatroyd & Woudstra, 1990). To meet the ever-changing and varied needs of the customers, an organization is required that can react to internal and external changes, while maintaining the integrity of the institution's mission. This requirement also implies a respect for the values and experiences of all the stakeholders, professors, administrators, students and other people directly involved or interested in education. This extension of institutional practice, therefore, covers course and service quality, as well as the learning results. The study of both features and characteristics of distance education in a technological future is becoming even more urgent.

The author in no way claims to criticize this new educational technology or to analyze its impact on society; but simply to report on this powerful, almost irreversible trend. Criticisms of this new technology are not addressed here.

For this report we deal with strategic planning of distance education. We begin our discussion with a look at distance education from the institutional and systemic angle. In this context, research of excellence and efficiency demands, not only an inclusive institutional leadership, but also strategic and proactive planning. In the general framework of strategic planning, we are presenting a model adapted to the characteristics and features of distance education. This model is based on those currently in use in education. Next we describe the different steps of the process, including the demands and the difficulties of development and implementation of strategic planning.

Distance Education in a Socio-institutional Context

An analysis of distance education in its institutional and social context requires the study of the organizational structure of the distance network (Mark, 1990). However, the majority of existing networks have their own characteristics which distinguish them each from the other. This variety of organizational structures exists because distance education meets the needs of different customers and societies. Distance education networks, with a few exceptions, are dependent on a mother institution, university, college, board of education, or belong to a consortium of institutions which fall into three main categories. The first is a distance education network that provides the technology and means of communication to a consortium of education institutions without exercising control or calling into question the programs and courses offered by the participating institutions. Ontario's Contact North is an example. In the second category are education institutions that maintain their own distance education network as an extension of their on-campus programs and that issue diplomas. The third group includes institutions specifically mandated to offer programs and courses by correspondence. The Téléuniversité québécoise and Athabasca University, the Collège de l'Acadie in Canada and the Open University of Great Britain are some examples. A variety of structures exists, developed within the three categories just described (Apps, 1989; Keegan, 1990; Knox, 1993; Mark, 1990). It remains that, whatever the existing structure, the distance network is often competing with other

programs of traditional institutions or even with the mother institution with regard to obtaining the necessary resources and the recognition of degrees conferred.

Technical progress in recent years has led to a new method of offering distance education which has shifted the monopoly of traditional post-secondary institutions offering distance education. In fact, teleinformatics favours the arrival of new partners, corporate this time, onto the scene of distance education even to the point of threatening the monopoly of traditional institutions (Jennings, 1995). The technological intrusion and the social changes caused by globalization have underlined the potential of distance education and have called into question the effectiveness, and even the validity, of traditional methods of knowledge transmission (Duning, Van Kekerix, & Zaborowski, 1993; Verduin & Clark, 1991).

This situation confounds traditional institutions which offer distance education since the new technologies are changing it into an avant-garde practice with its own specific characteristics. With the growth, diversification and decrease in costs of interactive technologies, distance education is developing its own infrastructure to become the emerging educational network of the 21st century (Chute, Balthazar, & Poston, 1988; Romiszowski, 1990). Such a change is not being implemented without resistance from within the education world (Murgatroyd & Woudstra, 1990) since the innovations are redefining the role of professionals in education and the mission of traditional education institutions (Rossman, 1992; Thompson, Simonson, & Hargrave, 1996). Many of the latter are already demonstrating a slowness to evolve and to adapt to teleinformatics (Jennings, 1995; Taylor, 1994).

In short, there is a new paradigm (Apps, 1994; Keane, 1985) that demonstrates, unequivocally, the need for a strategic approach, namely:

1. the introduction of informatics and communication have created new demands on education following the creation of new methods of knowledge transmission;
 2. the social changes among the post-secondary student population are creating a demand for life long learning, which requires institutions to adapt their methods of offering programs and courses;
 3. the increase and rapid expansion of knowledge will now surpass the absorption capacity of humans, which requires a certain discrimination, flexibility and adaptability within the very programs and courses offered;
 4. the increasing cost of education and the decreasing financial resources engender a search for maximization of available resources.
- The introduction of marketing in student recruitment (Simerly and Associates, 1987) and the interest businesses are showing in education as a source of corporate profit reveal signs of a competitive, but profitable future environment in education.

The emergence of this new environment makes distance education attractive as a solution to some of the problems of the next millennium and as a tool for the current steps in seeking reforms that would foster effectiveness and excellence. Many studies and evaluations confirm that the well-planned distance education programs can be as efficient as, if not more so, than a traditional face to face approach, often at a lower cost (Braun, 1990; Duning, Van Kekerix, & Zaborowski, 1993; Henri & Kaye, 1985; Keegan, 1990; Knox, 1993; Rowntree, 1994; Thompson, Simonson, & Hargrave, 1996). On the other hand, Rumble (1993) and Perraton (1982) state that some methods of delivering distance education can be more expensive than the traditional approach.

Strategic Planning Applied to Distance Education

As part of current education reforms, teleinformatics have been identified as an important element of teaching and learning. It is important therefore, to strategically plan to assure the introduction and the utilization of technology as a support to teaching and learning and not the inverse (Cradler, 1996; Jennings, 1995; Means et al., 1993). Institutions must also seriously consider the factors of profit in pedagogical choices (Henri & Kaye, 1985). In such a context, it demands a restructuring of traditional institutions with regard to distance education, then a continuing evolution over a long period of time (Taylor, 1994). This is why strategic planning may become the designated method for the implementation of major changes within distance education institutions (Duning, Van Kekerix, & Zaborowski, 1993; Simerly and Associates, 1987). It is even more significant that distance education represents its own, new kind of organizational complexity that demands systematic planning, namely:

The organizational model generally foresees the use of an imposing logic to orchestrate the conception and production, course programming, sending out pedagogical material, transmission of audiovisual documents (by tv or other means) and the training of students. The layout of these numerous and complex operations must necessarily be subjected to systematic planning and strict management to attain maximum efficiency and effectiveness (Henri & Kaye, 1985, p. 17).

For Mintzberg (1994), strategic planning is not the miracle solution since the failures of recent decades have highlighted the difficulties and weaknesses. Having been a proponent of strategic planning for several years, he considers it necessary to reconceptualize strategic planning as a practice he now calls "strategic programming". This means that the organization involves a large number of people in a strategic thought rather than using only a few strategic planning specialists. It is therefore, necessary, in the application, "to try to make the process of developing the strategy more flexible rather than trying to make the process more strict by an arbitrary formalization (p. 414).

Strategic planning is based on a theory and a preparation for the future separate from long-term planning (McCune, 1986). This approach is based on the belief that the future can be influenced and developed by present actions instead of taking it for granted that current trends will continue linearly into the future (Kaufman & Herman, 1991). An organization that plans strategically is not therefore preparing for the future, but preparing the future itself. This future while never a *fait accompli* can be not only anticipated but also designed according to the desires of the individuals and the organization. Current actions become guarantees of the evolution of what is planned to be implemented and are accomplished by the perception of the future according to the methods the organization uses to realize that perception. In such a perspective, strategic planning consists of all the means that an organization uses to constantly redefine itself to realize a set plan. Consequently, strategic planning is not defined by methodology, process or system but first of all by the context from which the action plans are drawn (Cook, 1990). It could be considered a concerted effort to achieve an ensemble of decisions and actions which form and guide an organization to be what it is, to do what it does and to know why it does it (Bean, 1993). By utilizing a future-looking approach, strategic planning emphasizes the future implications of decisions made in the present.

The process requires a clear vision of the intention and the future of the organization, the development of a mission filled with

corresponding objectives, the gathering of extensive information, the analysis and diagnosis of internal and external environments, the study of alternatives, the development of strategies and action plans as well as the evaluation and control of implementation. Thus, the process allows diverse interests and values to be accommodated by the participation of different stakeholders to achieve consensus and thus an effective decision (Bryson, 1990). In this way, a distance network in an open system is considered a continuously evolving, dynamic organization that integrates and digests the information of an external environment that is constantly changing. For its part, the analysis of the network's internal environment offers a diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization while the analysis of the external environment provides an overview of the possible difficulties and potential opportunities. This interface between the organization and its environment often leads to the development of a new paradigm, in other words, a metamorphosis of the organization and the determination of its own future (Cook, 1990). This radical and profound transformation is translated by the insertion of changes that are reflected in the organizational structure, by the allocation of resources required at various levels of the institution, and by the development of pertinent programs and courses that vary according to need.

In this framework, the leadership needs profound vision and understanding of social trends and changes as well as a familiarity with the dynamics of the education sector. The necessary leadership during strategic planning requires consensus by the variety of stakeholders who, at the outset, do not necessarily share the same values, aspirations or expectations. Their participation in the process also demands a strong commitment on their part for a long period of time. Stakeholders are also called upon to share the responsibilities, to participate in decisions and to exert their leadership during planning (Apps, 1994).

Strong leadership is necessary in order to favour changes generated by strategic planning and to ensure the necessary tenacity and perseverance to get the desired results. The wait may be long before final results are obtained and before a new organizational climate is accepted in the institution. The institutionalization of the entire process requires not only determination and consistency on the part of the administration but also the support of all the personnel. Planning becomes an integral part of the institutional leadership and organizational climate (Murgatroyd & Woudstra, 1990). This institutional trend is well illustrated by Simerly and Associates (1987):

Today's successful continuing education leader is a behavioral scientist who continually looks for new and effective ways to study the health and productivity of the organization. This, in turn, leads to appropriate action steps for achieving organizational goals. Thus, strategic planning becomes an integral part of our never ending struggle to find newer and more effective ways to strengthen leadership (p.11).

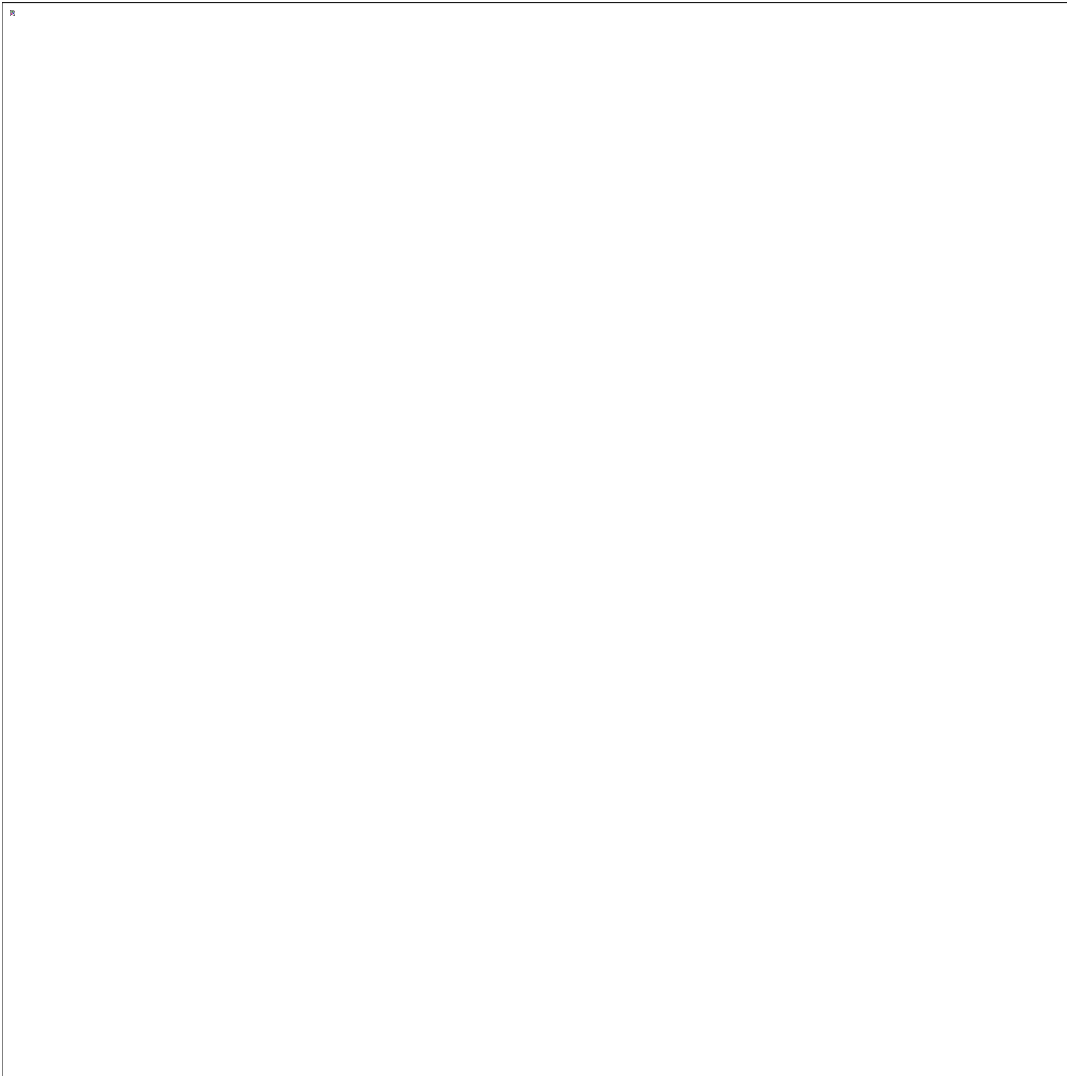
Currently there exists a multitude of strategic planning models that apply to business (Bean, 1993; Goodstein, Nolan & Pfeiffer, 1992; Jauch & Glueck, 1988; Porter, 1982; Rowe, Mason, Dickel, & Snyder, 1989), to public and parapublic sector organizations, to non-profit organizations (Bryson, 1990; Burkhart & Reuss, 1993; United Way of America, 1988;) and to education (Cafferella, 1994; Candoli, 1991; Cook, 1990; Kaufman, 1991; McCune, 1986; Simerly and Associates, 1987; Valentine, 1991). The majority of the models adapted to education are much more flexible and democratic than those of the corporate world. The choice of model is less important than the commitment to and conviction of those in charge of the project and the sincere acceptance of the strategic plan within everyday operations of the institution.

For our analysis, we have used the model in Figure 1, adapted especially for the specific characteristics of distance education from the

models used in education. The diagram presents a non-linear approach which illustrates the interaction and the dynamic between the various elements and decision-making bodies. This model has five main elements: (1) the preparatory steps to planning, (2) the gathering of information, analysis and systemic diagnosis, (3) the strategic choice, (4) the implementation, and (5) the evaluation and control of the implementation.

The model will be applied differently according to the different organizational structures of the distance education institutions previously mentioned.

Figure 1.





Preparatory Steps

The proposed process of strategic planning begins with a period of exploration and discussion between institutions regarding the validity and necessity of the exercise. The initiative often belongs to the leader who has an image or a vision of what the organization he heads could or should be. This vision, although expressed in unmeasurable terms, is a map for the organization. It has to be shared from the beginning with the members of the organization and they must all be prepared to accept a new organizational culture into their everyday reality. Consequently, the process of strategic planning requires an explicit commitment and a formal timeline proposed by the leader, the management team, and the participants in order to arrive at a consensus for a common vision and institutional mission.

The development of and adherence to this vision requires a plan for the future and active leadership on the part of the person in charge of the network in order to overcome resistance and to arrive at a common vision. This new vision usually implies a totally new direction, a change in the organizational culture, an adjustment of values, beliefs and norms; in short, the adoption of a new paradigm. By definition the world of traditional education, particularly at the post-secondary level, is slow to evolve and tends to preserve the status quo while distance education experiences the inverse. This change may be difficult for certain distance education networks that depend closely on a mother institution and who do not have an ideal opportunity to define a new direction in a time when traditional education needs to be redefined. It becomes therefore very important to initiate cooperation between institutions before undertaking the planning process, in order to guarantee the necessary support for the success of the exercise. This first step is both difficult and crucial since the mother institution or participating institutions must break away from the traditional approach of long-term planning and share with the other stakeholders, their authority and decision-making power. Furthermore, it is evident that the distance education institution which is autonomous is more easily able to implement this process.

This preparatory work can take several months, since the decision to adopt such a process of strategic planning launches the organization on a new trajectory towards a new organizational culture as well as towards a sharing of different values and beliefs

(Goodstein, Nolan, & Pfeiffer, 1992). In the framework of the proposed change, the first concept to be introduced is strategic planning and the meaning of this planning process in terms of concrete commitment within the organization. The preliminary step must therefore explicate an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the process, must inform the members of the organization of the intention of management and finally, must obtain the willing participation of staff members in the project. Only at this point and after any reluctance has been overcome can the commitment of the staff members and stakeholders be ensured. The scene is then set for the effective implementation of the strategic planning exercise. However it remains that the commitment could change and that intense scrutiny will be necessary with the evolution of the organizational culture.

Gathering of Information, Analysis and Systemic Diagnostic

The striking of the planning committee is the first formal step of the process itself. The choice of committee members is a determining factor in the success of the undertaking, since the committee is called upon to play a pivotal role not only from the beginning of the exercise, but also throughout the process. The members will have to put much time into the working sessions and into deliberation before seeing results and implementing a course of action. The committee members should be chosen from a list of volunteers. Representation is important since the committee must reflect the makeup of the organization, the community and the stakeholders. This committee would normally include representatives from different professional and paraprofessional sectors who work in education as well as representatives from different sectors of the community who have a stake in distance education, the stakeholders. It may also be wise to include any other individual or representative from a community organization that is interested in education or has an important educational role to play (Burkhart & Reuss, 1993).

Because of its composition, the committee becomes the point of convergence of the different values, beliefs and expectations which often diverge from or are contradictory to those of the organization, the community or the targeted customers. The initial work is stressful since the first meeting consists of clarifying the final vision and mission, and a necessity to achieve consensus regarding the values and beliefs that will legitimize the whole of the strategic plan. Arriving at a consensus on a common vision is a demanding task for the planning committee. The diversity and multiplicity of the stakeholders participating in the first step of the exercise may make it even more difficult. The concept of a vision for the future is not always easy for the participants to grasp since the pragmatic aspect of this first step is not evident at first sight. However, these values and beliefs should, subsequently, be reflected in the pedagogical planning of each program and course offered by the network.

One job of the planning committee is to define the values and beliefs that will be favoured and on which the mission statement will be based. The values and beliefs of the community and of the institution are often different or even contradictory and affect almost all sectors of both the social life and the educational activities. The discussion of values and beliefs is often very heated in the group since opinions and convictions are often very fixed. The committee must, however, arrive at a consensus regarding the values and beliefs to be recognized and accepted by all, as those are to be included in the planning process. These values and beliefs become the basis of the organizational culture of the distance education network.

The mission of the distance education network is a reflection of the vision the organization shares with its staff, its community and its stakeholders. This mission must determine future direction by clearly and concisely highlighting the reason for the existence of the institution, its service to clients and its contribution to society. In short, it is the social justification of its very existence. Stating the mission and clarifying the reasons for its existence reduces the risk of conflict and acts as a marker to the stakeholders and to members of the organization (Bryson, 1990). The mission statement, while being the written expression of the shared vision, is the base from which strategies and action plans are developed.

According to Kotler and Fox (1985), the mission statement of the institution must take into account the five basic elements. First of all, the history must be reflected in the statement since the institution cannot forget its past and its achievements. Secondly, the institution must take into account the clients it has to serve as well as the stakeholders within the community. Third, the institution must be sensitive to the changing context in which it is evolving in order to better meet the changing needs of its clientele. Fourth, the mission statement must be feasible, motivating, and realistic. To do this, the mission must correspond with the available resources of the institution without which the mission becomes impossible. And finally, the institution must concentrate its energy on what it does best, its own particular strengths.

The use of internal and external facilitators trained in strategic planning eases the task and increases the possibility of success for the project. Specialized consultant firms offer this service and train facilitators who will play an active role throughout the implementation of the project. In particular, the role of the external facilitator is to serve as an impartial consultant at the frequently arduous beginning of the planning exercise. The internal facilitator on the other hand, acts as a permanent consultant or, often, as an activity coordinator: he participates in all the activities linked to the planning project such as focus groups and working groups. The statement, by the planning committee, of a clear and succinct vision and mission as well as an ensemble of values and beliefs also gives the basics of a cooperative democracy to the institution. This *modus operandi* opens the door to cooperation where the convergent interests win out over the divergent and individual interests which does not eliminate however the existence of internal conflicts that must be productively managed within the defined framework (Trusty, 1987).

The systemic approach as the basis of the process assumes that the organization is in constant osmosis with its external environment and that to survive and evolve, it must change and adapt to this constantly changing environment (de Rosnay, 1975; Kaufman, Herman, & Watters, 1996; Lesourne, 1976; von Bertalanffy, 1973). This dynamic and flexibility allow the organization to attain growing pertinence and efficiency. Distance education is especially sensitive to changes and modifications in the external environment in which it evolves. Furthermore, this environment is far from being univocal, it is made up of a multitude of interactive and often interdependent factors that influence, each in its own way, the fate and existence of the institution. The social, economic, political, demographical and technological factors are the main elements of the external environment of distance education and have an influence on the future and the development of the institution. It is therefore essential to always know the importance and the impact of each factor in the environment in order to discern the threat and the opportunities (McCune, 1986; Rachal, 1989). The plotting of the external environment becomes a continuous exercise for the institution that devotes itself to strategic planning.

A deeper understanding of certain threats can allow their transformation into opportunities for the institution. Such an opportunity often presents itself only once. In fact, with the speed of environmental changes, the future fast becomes the present and has soon

made the past disappear. This is one more reason for the institution to know as much as possible about what will happen in the future and what is going on in the present. The former captive markets of education no longer exist. The distance education institution must direct its resources to better serve its clients and the public. It is important for the institution to know how it is seen by its clients and the general public without betraying the primacy of knowledge which will always remain its distinct objective, compared to other sectors of communication such as the media. The organizational culture must therefore direct itself towards a more active marketing in order to better fulfill the mission of the institution (Kottler & Fox, 1985). The marketing of an educational institution does not consist of selling and promoting the services offered, but rather informing and motivating a customer base (Duning, Van Kekerix, & Zaborowski, 1993; Knox, 1993; Kotler & Fox, 1985; Mauriel, 1989).

The segmentation and targeting a population of potential students allows an institution to better establish its niche in the population and the market (Mauriel, 1989) taking into account that technology currently used in distance education has, for the most part, eliminated the geographic and social barriers to education and has allowed access to educational services to meet the demand. This increasing accessibility is especially beneficial to the students of isolated regions far away from knowledge centers as well as to certain disadvantaged social classes. This is why distance education can carve out its place in the education system, in particular because of its technological characteristics, its institutional partners, and its diversified client base. The strategic fields that must be considered at this point are: types of programs, learning situations, range of services, locations of receivers, geography of the students, technology used and costs (Duning, Van Kekerix, & Zaborowski, 1993). In short, the information gathered and the analysis of the environment delineates the strategies needed to develop action plans for the transmission of predetermined knowledge linked to the background and needs of the targeted clientele. This process is in itself a democratization of knowledge.

Continual analysis of the internal and external environments is an integral part of the decision making process throughout the year. The gathered information from this analysis may be qualitative and quantitative and should come from various sources (Bryson, 1990; Burkhart & Reuss, 1993; Cook, 1990; Kaufman & Herman, 1991; Knox, 1993). We will later discuss both tools and methods currently available for analyzing the environment.

An analysis of the internal environment of the institution demands a thorough examination of the capabilities and limits of the organization that limit, stop or assist in the realization of the mission and the achievement of goals. The achievement of excellence cannot be realized unless the institution calls on its strengths and on what it does best while attempting to overcome or minimize its weaknesses and shortcomings. For example, credibility, reputation, respect, image and the history of the institution within the community and as it relates to its clients are strengths which it can count on to realize its mission and obtain its goals. The availability or limitation of its human and financial resources are also factors that may be considered either threats or opportunities for the institution. The skills, expertise, capability, loyalty, enthusiasm, as well as, the spirit of service and the devotion of the staff to the clients may be strengths or weaknesses for the institution.

Identifying strengths and weaknesses of the institution can be done in different ways. The perceptions held by the staff, the stakeholders, the whole community and the university community in particular are important indicators of these strengths and weaknesses. The use of quantitative data and qualitative analysis tools enables a study of the internal environment and helps to establish a diagnosis of the known organizational health including both the capabilities and limits of the institution.

Most of the quantitative analysis tools were developed for the world of business and private enterprise whereas a good number of the qualitative analysis tools were developed by university departments in human sciences (Burkhart & Reuss, 1993; Cook, 1990; Goodstein, Nolan, & Pfeiffer, 1992; Kaufman, 1988; Kaufman & Herman, 1991; Kent & Wilkinson, 1991; Levin, 1983; Rowe et al., 1989). These differing analysis tools must be used, not only during the analysis of the internal and external environments, but also when choosing strategies. For example, the techniques for identifying problems use organizational charts, verification records, brainstorming sessions, focus groups and nominal groups. In the analysis of the problem, the histogram, dispersion diagram, control table and areas of strength analysis are used. The diagrams of Pareto, of cause-effect, frequency-time as well as the techniques of stratification are used to identify and to solve problems (Brassard, 1990). In the economic sector, analysis is done of cost-efficiency, cost-effectiveness and cost benefit (Henri & Kaye, 1985; Levin, 1983) as well as a wide variety of tools and analysis methods used commonly in corporate strategic planning and project management (Genest & Nguyen, 1990, 1992; Rowe, Mason, Dickel, & Snyder, 1989; Rowe, Snyder, & Seshan, 1989).

The use of certain tools is effective to optimize not only administrative decisions but also pedagogical directions in the whole range of distance education. They are useful in the mega and macro levels of strategic and pedagogical planning for the distance network, especially as related to program profile.

At this stage, the institution has a brief and clear diagnosis of its internal and external environments. This stage of planning is often demanding for the institution since it is necessary to decide the strategic stakes in order to act. Internal conflicts can easily arise since the decisions made will have repercussions on the institution and the staff (Simerly and Associates, 1987). For example, positions taken and their consequences relative to the means and approaches to use, the adjacent theories, the planning of activities and more particularly those of people affected by these decisions are all sources of internal conflict which may appear at this stage (Bryson, 1990; Trusty, 1987).

Strategic Choice

In order to avoid paralysis, it is important that the gaps must be closed before examination of the strategic stakes. Identifying the gaps (Goodstein, Nolan, & Pfeiffer, 1992) between the ideal future as projected in the vision developed during planning and current reality indicates feasibility. If no gap appears or if very few gaps are identified during the exercise, it must be concluded that the vision of the future is too restricted. In a reverse situation, it may be necessary to restrict any vision that is too utopic as related to the current reality. These strategic stakes affect the fundamental aspects of policies of the institution, such as the mission, the objectives, the values, the clientele, the structure and the management. The planning committee must, therefore, identify these strategic stakes and evaluate the seriousness of the consequences for the institution, since that will allow the committee to concentrate time, energy and resources on what is really important for its continuation.

The exchanges that normally take place at this stage allow retrospection and questioning of certain elements. This retrospection favours a revisiting of the vision, the mission, the values and the beliefs previously established. Once this stage is finished, the planning committee and the institution have a number of strategic stakes which they can pursue. The conflicts and agreements between

previously stated needs and current capabilities including financial and human resources can then be examined.

Implementation of the Strategy

Once the choice of strategies has been made, the planning committee and the institution's administration are ready to begin writing the strategic plan and preparing for its implementation. The choice of strategies and objectives must then be relayed to all the staff to inform them of proposed changes.

The strategy consists of all goals, policies, programs, actions, decisions and allocation of resources that define the institution, what it accomplishes and why it does what it does (Knox, 1993). The resulting objectives put the strategies into measurable and qualitative terms; they are the basis for the development of action plans.

An institution can develop as many action plans as necessary and is appropriate for the implementation of the chosen strategies and the pursuit of the corresponding objectives (Murgatroyd & Woudstra, 1990). An action plan serves to determine the tasks, activities, responsibilities and timeline; these aspects are necessary for the realization of the strategies and the fixed objectives. The activities to be completed are clearly and briefly described in sequential order and by priority. The responsibility for their implementation is given to a group of people or a particular individual. A specific activity may consist of an individualized action plan: the course outline or syllabus is one example.

Usually, various units of the institution have to develop an action plan for the year. These plans must guarantee the implementation of strategies and the pursuit of objectives ensuing from the work of the planning committee. The preparation and choice of different action plans remains the responsibility of the unit, or decision making body, who must however present it to the planning committee to be legitimized before being undertaken. Teaching is no longer an individual activity and is not separate from the mission of the institution and the aspirations and needs of the community as it was in the past. This practice need not be an obstacle to the principle of academic freedom, although some may see it as an intrusion since teaching can be subjected to productivity and economic profitability quotas (Henri & Kaye, 1985).

Allocating the necessary financial and human resources to realize the strategies, objectives and plans that emerged from the strategic planning process may bring about upheaval and changes within the institution. An organizational structure must also be formed according to the new demands of the plan as well as the allocation of staff and tasks to be completed. The redefinition of responsibilities and the delegation of authority within the departments and sections often becomes necessary and affects many people. The same is also true for the development of new operational policies as well as for the use of performance evaluation tools which are also part of the implementation.

With regard to these changes, the institution must take care to prepare the managers and the affected employees by instituting an information and staff training program. The distribution of pertinent information and the undertaking of staff training provide for better preparation and less resistance.

The allocation of resources should be done according to established priorities and by strategies and objectives already agreed to. The budgetary process must also be integrated into the strategic planning process. Contrary to the traditional planning approach, it is not the budget that controls the process, but the opposite. The process of planning precedes, controls and dictates the budgetary decisions within reason (Kent & Wilkinson, 1991).

We have described strategic planning as a proactive and dynamic process, directed toward the culture of change working in osmosis with its environment. It goes without saying that the process includes a determined and effective implementation.

Evaluation and Control of the Strategy

The evaluation and control of the implementation requires a commitment from the beginning and continuous action by the institution to follow each step and to identify the gaps between the fixed objectives and the current achievements (Kaufman & Gris , 1995; Rowntree, 1994). When the achievements stray from the objectives, the institution can make the necessary corrections without waiting for the next step of the operation. The continuous follow-up during implementation facilitates the immediate recognition of deviating situations and gives the opportunity for corrective action. The information gathered during program and staff evaluations can also serve as a reference point for subsequent phases (Holmes & Rawitsch, 1993). It is also possible, when the gap is inevitable, to return to original strategies and objectives to make the necessary changes and adjustments as the plan is being implemented.

Conclusion

Distance education is currently at a turning point in its evolution due to new technologies that are reforming the concept of education and knowledge transmission at a distance. The new technologies have significantly accelerated the changes in education and have also given rise to a new cohort of stakeholders and technocrat-technicians turned educators. Education is no longer the protected realm of traditional teaching professionals since they must now include the technocrat-technicians who have already carved out their own place and even for some, earned a name for themselves in the knowledge-seeking society. Distance education is the target of high-tech businesses in their effort to penetrate the education market and their attempt to create what they call "the education industry." The arrival of teleinformatics and the pressure from high-tech transnationals are creating a situation that calls into question the workings of traditional distance education. Faced with such a threat, distance education as an institution must keep its future in its own hands even if it means adopting the corporate model without worrying too much about the social, even academic, consequences of such a step. Should the responsibility for distance education be given to the technocrat-technicians? Should it unquestioningly adopt the corporate model? The institution is forced to ask these questions during the development of a strategic plan. In this perspective the process becomes a tool for vitality and growth which will integrate technology into teaching and learning without having to sacrifice the foundations of public education.

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