

# *Technology Strategies for Higher Education: Advice to Vice-Chancellors*

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## *VIDEO PRESENTATION*

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Technology Strategies for Higher Education: Advice to  
Vice-Chancellors*

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## **Transcript**

The Chinese ideogram for crisis combines the ideograms for danger and for opportunity. That nicely expresses the situation today in higher education in most countries. Higher education must evolve in a fast-changing environment. Such an environment presents dangers but also offers opportunities. Your task as university leaders is to minimise the dangers and maximise the opportunities for your institutions.

Do not think of this crisis as a temporary aberration; simply a hill to be climbed before your university emerges once again onto the sunlit uplands of stability. Leading a university today requires you constantly to navigate a course between danger and opportunity. The crisis will be continuous. Creating the university of the future will always be a work in progress. Your task is to create the systems that will enable your university to cope with continuous crisis, which basically means inspiring all your staff to see the future as an unfolding set of opportunities.

Three key trends, which you feel strongly in India are: first, an increase in private provision; second the development of cross border provision and third the growing use of distance learning, often using ICTs (information and communications technology). I shall focus on the challenge of technology but remember that these trends are interwoven.

A series of technological developments holds the promise of making the dramatic reduction in educational costs that a radical widening of access requires.

New methods of education have always attracted private providers. When Britain introduced the penny post in 1840, Isaac Pitman almost immediately started offering a correspondence course in shorthand, and private providers subsequently dominated the correspondence education industry.

The next wave of distance education, led by the large multi-media open universities, was dominated by the public sector. In addition to widening access dramatically, some of these institutions also showed that

distance learning can be of higher quality, as well as less expensive, than conventional higher education because it has to be developed and delivered in a much more systematic way.

The current wave of distance learning, often called eLearning because of its extensive online components, seems once again to have a special appeal to the private sector. This is partly because it has a cost structure in which a higher upfront investment is rewarded by lower marginal costs when volume is achieved. The access that for-profit institutions have to capital markets allows them to make those investments.

Very importantly, a growing number of teachers and institutions around the world are creating and sharing learning materials and courses, known as open educational resources for use on eLearning platforms. The combination of expanding connectivity and the growing reservoir of open educational resources is potentially revolutionary.

Such forms of higher education require access to technological infrastructure. Internet connectivity is particularly important yet the proportion of people online is only 4% in India. But that is changing very fast. Communication links are already altering the way that Indian villages function.

Your challenge as Vice-Chancellors is to lead and manage your institutions through these transitions: to avoid the dangers and seize the opportunities.

15 years ago I wrote a book called *Mega-universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*. I believe that much of it is still very relevant, including the comments about strategy that I shall make now.

My first point is that leadership makes a difference to universities.

Research shows that a key determinant of the quality and impact of educational institutions is the quality of their leaders: vice-chancellors, college principals and school heads. This finding is gradually being reflected in the processes by which vice-chancellors are chosen. Governments are realising that in an era when the health of universities is particularly important to the knowledge economy, naming individuals as vice-chancellors for political reasons without regard to their skills and experience as leaders and managers is not an intelligent policy – especially if their term of office is short.

You already occupy such senior positions. What advice can we give you? I offer just two recommendations.

Your main task is to create a sense of common purpose in your university. This is called a strategy. Developing a good strategy means paying attention to both content and process.

I find this simple quadrant helpful for illustrating this.

You can have good strategies and poor strategies. It is also vital that the people in the university feel that they own strategy because they helped to develop it.

Your aim is to create a strategy for the university that fits into the first box: it is a good strategy which the university community owns. You want to avoid box 4: a poor strategy with low ownership.

The real danger in a university is finding yourself in either boxes 2 or 3. Box 2 is sometimes called a consultant's strategy; meaning that it may be a good strategy but it has been developed without the involvement of the university community.

Box 3 is an internally developed strategy that has high ownership but is a poor strategy – probably because hard choices have been fudged by horse trading and compromises to avoid inconveniencing anyone.

Your job as a vice-chancellor is to create a strategy in box 1 by a combination of top down and bottom up planning.

From the top you must inspire the university with a vision of its future that fits the changing environment I have described. But you must also create a widely participative planning process that allows the university community to build a structure on the foundation of your vision. This can be done.

When I was vice-chancellor of the UK Open University I was fortunate to have a brilliant pro-vice-chancellor, Geoff Peters, a Professor of Systems, who organised a highly successful bottom-up planning process in which the whole university, faculty, students and staff could take part. I am sure that the success of the UK Open University in the 1990s, during which enrolments doubled from 100,000 to 200,000, it became one of the financially strongest universities in the UK, and led higher education into the world of the Internet, owed much to the quality of our planning. Such a process also allows the staff and faculty associations and unions to be a constructive force rather than machines for generating complaints.

But it requires leadership from the top, otherwise you can easily end up in Box 4 with everyone feeling comfortable but no useful strategy.

My second recommendation is that this type of bottom-up process is also the only way of creating a culture of quality within the institution. Such a process gives people pride in doing things well, so that visits by the NAAC and other quality assurance bodies are occasions for showing off the good work of the university rather than exercises in compliance with external requirements.

My final advice is that, in these two areas as in other, you lead by example.

Use technology yourself and ensure that everything coming from the VC's office is of quality.