

# STILL DANCING WITH THE DEVIL?

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## ABSTRACT

New technology and increasing competition are essential drivers in the changes in HEI. The changes are highly dependent on strategic management and a dynamic learning culture in and across the institutions. This short paper gives 5 examples to illustrate the importance of a strategic framework, which seeks to be a coherent and dynamic foundation for a new knowledge driven HEI.

## KEYWORDS

Technology drivers, strategic management, work based learning, partnership, learning culture

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“The motion picture is the great educator of the poorer people (...).Books will soon be obsolete in the public schools. Scholars will be instructed through the eye (...).Our school system will be completely changed inside of ten years” (Thomas Edison, 1913 in Keegan, 1996 p. 145)

“President Rutherford B. Hayes’s comment on seeing a demonstration of the telephone in 1876: “That’s an amazing invention, but who would ever want to use one of them?” (Katz, 1998, p. 54)

The title refers to the book “Dancing with the Devil” (Katz, 1998). It addresses some of the strategic issues HEI faced back then because of new technology, diminishing resources and increased competition. My question is then thirteen years later: Are we still dancing with the devil? Are we dancing with the devil or is it the devil who is dancing with us? In other words, have we managed to turn these challenges into advantages in the development of higher education? The answer, which I present here, is of course only partial. I can only present the story of my own organization as I interpret it. Today, I work at the strategic level with institutional development. For more than ten years (1995-2006), I have worked as a consultant within further education with focus on development of flexible teacher’s training as well as support to institutional changes, often in combination. I therefore claim to have the benefit of being both an insider and an outsider. Thereby, I have been able to make observations from different perspectives. It is up to others, then, to judge about the interpretations I have made.

## 2. THE CONTEXT

First of all: Information technology and competition in higher education are still very important strategic challenges within education. This article points out some of the strategic choices that have been made in order to enhance the learning experiences and the learning culture within an institution of higher education. University College Lillebaelt(UCL) is one of the new university colleges of applied science (UAS), which were established in Denmark in 2008 as part of the political answers to the new competition, which was described a decade ago as: “A complex array of forces – new delivery technologies, changing demographics, the emergence of corporate universities, and a complex global economy – is creating a new competitive landscape” (Katz,1998, p. 51-52).

UCL is the result of the merge of 9 former HEI. This paper is about some of the strategic choices which were made to develop and support a culture of learning in UCL. The paper focuses in particular on the impact of technology on this cultural development.

UCL is a knowledge-driven HEI which seeks to work systematically with the triple helix model of innovation in both urban and remote areas. Since UCL is located on 13 different campuses in a region in one of the peripheral areas in Denmark, there are many reasons why UCL has focused on the professional use of technologies for communication, cooperation and for the generation of new knowledge in-house as well as in partnerships with stakeholders.

The strategic directions heading for 2015 are:

- Partnership with private and public enterprises and institutions – developing learning platforms close to practise
- Flexibility and easy access for new target groups
- Cross disciplinary, experiential and horizontal learning processes

UCL seeks to develop an innovative learning culture in and cross the educational traditions in dialogue with students, teachers, researchers, partners and customers.

UCL is placed in a semi-urban environment (Odense and Vejle) and in remote areas (Svendborg and Jelling). The national and the local political forces have clear formulated visions for higher education in remote areas. But at the same time, the politicians are reducing the financial grants which make it impossible to finance campuses in remote areas. The students are looking for education on campuses which give them urban experience. The use of technology is one of the answers to this challenge, but it is especially the adult learners and the enterprises, which show strong interest in this solution. The young students move to the urban or suburban places to get access to different student activities, new identity and the atmosphere of modern life. The sources of competitive advantages defined by Blustain et al. (Katz, 1998 p. 55-57) are similar to the region where UCL is located. Young people are interested especially in the reputation of the institution, the local curriculum, the location and the student activities while the adult learners and enterprises focus on access, partnership, customized curriculum, flexible course structure and the use of modern technology. This makes, of course, the strategic work difficult especially because the number of adults who seek education is increasing.

So the challenges of change in higher education have, from a UCL point of view, been very well covered by Duderstadt's (Katz, 1998) description of the major challenges, which pointed at the following factors :

- Financial imperatives
- Societal needs
- Technology drivers

### **2.1.1. Some In-House Perspectives**

In the internal organizational communication and cooperation, technology is essential. First of all, the implementation of a web based LMS, Fronter, was the backbone of communication. Fronter seeks to integrate a web based videoconference program, Elluminate, with access from everywhere for all students and employees. With the web access Fronter supports flexibility and it gives all the users free access to tools for e.g. testing, portfolio, whiteboard and video. The most important part is the various dialogue tools which are supporting e.g. debate, discussion and brainstorm. This array of communication tools corresponds with the Scandinavian tradition for dialogue based teaching and learning. Because of Fronter's accessibility and usability, it has already proven its quality in research and development activities with external partners.

To ensure the impact of the technology, UCL has in 2010 and 2011 invested 250.000 EU in the development of the teachers' and researchers' ICT-competencies primarily related to the use of Fronter. The program has been designed as a work based learning program where the participants define their learning goals and work with professional support to achieve them.

Secondly, since 2008 a strong R&D alliance has been developed across UCL since every educational program at all locations has their R&D-consultant, who links to the central R&D-unit. It means that 1-3

consultants from each educational program are working together across the organization on various R&D-activities and with the central R&D-unit, which consists of 10 persons. This makes a group of about 40 people, who work together from different perspectives, disciplines and professional traditions. It costs UCL 350.000 EU a year. This group plays a special role in the organisational development in order to connect research and development with both teachers and local management. During a year, the 40 people meet 4-5 times in face-to-face in working sessions. The rest of the time, the group communicates and cooperates in Fronter, via e-mail, videoconference or in smaller group meetings. In this way, the boundaries of the unit are fluid, the participants are changing from time to time, and there is no fixed membership.

The inspiration for the development of the R&D-alliance across the organization comes especially from Nonaka et al (2008). Therefore the participating consultants have to be involved and rise above the traditions and perspectives they are representing. In Japanese this is called *ba*. “*Ba* as a shared context means that individual, subjective views are understood and shared so that one can see oneself in relation to others and accept others’ views and values (...) To participate in a *ba* is to get involved and transcend one’s own limited perspective” (ibid, p. 57). One of the results of the shared research process is the development of a dynamic, web-based work-tool, which focuses on 11 dimensions of the strategic framework in the R&D projects: <http://web-uv.acu-vejle.dk/Maalkompas/>. (An English version is developed in February 2011). It is a tool which can show the emergence and dynamics of a R&D project, and which points out different indicators for the most important strategic goals in the specific project. This tool will be applied on all projects in 2011 and be part of the in-house quality assurance of all R&D projects.

Finally, it is part of the organizational history that work based learning has been essential in the management’s work. Since 2008, the entire management group has been working with the learning culture in 3 different work based programs supported by external consultants. The participants in the group have changed several times during this period according to the continuing adaptations of the organizational structure to match the challenges of a new organization. How to engage everybody in the vision and the strategies has been one of the issues. The goal has been to develop a culture of learning starting with the management level of the organization. One of the topics in the first program was knowledge sharing and at the moment the group is working with radical innovation. The programs have been based on the concept of action learning and the elements have been:

- face-to-face meetings for all the groups
- sessions in small working groups and cross functional networks
- facilitation of the groups from consultants

Video conference and e-mail has been crucial to support the coordination and cooperation in the small groups. It has been essential to share the vision of the new organization and to work with the strategic perspectives both on the management level and in local network groups: “Leadership in a knowledge-creating company is not about fixed administrative control. It is a flexible and distributed leadership, where the leader is determined by the context” (ibid, p. 64). The result in UCL is a strong and flexible network and platform in a new and relatively large management group, which are connected with each other no matter which campus and education they represent.

The above three examples from the inside of a new organization show how the development of a learning culture focuses on new technology, capacity building at work, balance between local and central units and the competences and networks in and cross the management. All the initiatives are supposed to illustrate how UCL has chosen to focus on the development of capacity for change.

### **2.1.2 Some External Perspectives**

In the following, this paper gives some examples from outside the organization, which show how the market and the political situation have impact on the possibilities in the strategic work in a world of change. Firstly the *Trainee-model* will be described. The Trainee-model represents one of the solutions, UCL has chosen in remote areas in which it is difficult to attract students to higher education and employees to the enterprises. The result is the development and testing of a work based curriculum for the campus located in Jelling. This development link to the public enterprises, which share the same problems, because the young

employees are heading for the urban areas too. So by developing customized curriculum combined with studies about a profession and working in a profession, UCL and the enterprises working in an active partnership, have solved problems for both the students, UCL and the market. This Trainee-model is one example, which shows how the geographical location, the demographic changes, the new expectations and challenges have forced a higher education institution to make radical changes, to tear down boundaries and inviting customers to be co-designers in a shared curriculum development. In the delivery Frontier has been important in the support of the students' learning processes, the communication within the education and between education and enterprises.

Secondly, the R&D-project "*Move further with higher education*" (MOHE) shows how vertical and horizontal cooperation in the field of higher education has been an answer to support the strategic challenges in UCL. Through the partnership consisting of UCL, The University of Southern Denmark (SDU), The International Business College (IBC), the 2 regional Study Guidance Centres linking to the other UAS' and Business Colleges in the region three paths have been developed, tested, followed and evaluated over a period of two years (January 2009-November 2010): 1. Role models 2. Sports events. 3. Social network. MOHE was financed by the participants and the region. It was the main goal to develop new ways to make higher education in the region more attractive and interesting to high school students – and of course to attract and educate more students in higher education in the region and in a longer perspective to get them to stay and work in the region.

UCL was responsible for the development of a new interactive social network <http://www.usite.dk/> where students cross educational contexts can upload profiles and videos, blog and participate in forum discussions. Furthermore, UCL has evaluated the processes in the project and described the results in three short publications to inspire other higher education institutions and guidance centres in the work of how to recruit new potential students.

Both examples above illustrate how UCL has developed skills in managing partnerships with other institutions and public enterprises to support new curriculum strategies and new ways of communication and interaction with potential students.

### **3. FINAL BUT NOT YET CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The two quotations at the top of the text is a historical reminder of the view on the impact of technology. There is always the pessimistic view and the optimistic view. Working with R&D from a strategic perspective is to balance and to be aware of both viewpoints on technology as drivers for change without losing the courage to experiment and try out radical new ways. The strategic framework is about innovative planning and risk taking to enable emerging results. Technology can change the world of education. But if we want to use technology to our advantage, we should look at how we can change structures, roles and processes within education. Technology within learning is not about adding something to established systems, it is about changing practice. Strategic choices are about scaffolding and enabling these changes. Then we can be dancing with the devil not the other way round.

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