
1 Can Organisational Vision Be Aligned to Management 2 Processes for Engaging with E-learning? A Case Study 3 for a Recasting Dialogue as Central to Infrastructure 4 Development

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7 ABSTRACT This article provides an account of how one manager considered the alignment of an
8 organisational vision with an implementation strategy for creating an effective organisational
9 infrastructure. The discussion reported in the article provides a manager's view, a case, of how one
10 institution introduced online learning initiatives. Critical to this case is the development of suitable and
11 sustainable organisational processes that were in alignment with the organisational vision. This
12 discussion could aid managers of virtual learning environments in higher education institutions by (a)
13 modelling an approach to linking institutional vision and Laurillard's Conversational Framework as an
14 implementation strategy for e-learning and, (b) improving managers' understanding of the processes of
15 and necessity of strategic alignment.

16 At the heart of a university is the iterative dialogue between teacher and learner ... as we imagine
17 the future forms of universities, that dialogue should remain the salient feature ... in this way,
18 universities preserve the ability to be reflective and adaptive to their students' learning needs: it is
19 not a business model that defines their aims, but the vision of a learning society.
20 (Laurillard, 2002, p. 241)

21 Introduction

22 This article is structured in the following manner. First, a brief background of the context is
23 described. Second the institutional vision and management processes are discussed. Third, the
24 challenges of e-learning and trends within flexible learning and the use of technology-based
25 solutions are briefly introduced. Finally, Laurillard's (2002) Conversational Framework is outlined
26 and examples are provided of how this was adapted and applied within the setting.

27 Contextual Background

28 Over the past 40 years Singapore has become a regional leader through its investment-led
29 economic strategy where previously there was a reliance on the manufacturing and services
30 industries. Recently a new strategic agenda has emerged with an increased focus on the health,
31 education and creative industries. These strategies aim to increase Singapore's involvement and
32 participation in the burgeoning globalisation of knowledge.

33 Few would disagree that the globalisation of knowledge is driving change and transforming
34 world economies at an extraordinary rate. All industries and sectors are affected and educational
35 organisations are being challenged to think globally. Notably, information technology and

36 communications industries have impacted on the distribution and access to information, and
37 economies like Singapore are increasingly active in this arena.

38 The realigning of the economy towards creating Singapore as the regional 'hub' for health,
39 education and the creative industries is also further evidence of the move towards globalisation. It
40 is likely that the focus will create many new economic benefits. In addition, it seems that
41 cooperation, alliances, information exchange and mutual dependency are critical to the new
42 marketplace (Sutherland, 2002; Ministry for Communication and the Arts [MICA], 2003). For
43 example, integral to Singapore's aim, not unlike other strong economies, is to encourage local and
44 international institutions to collaborate by providing considerable financial support and incentives
45 to establish, for example, new campuses and partnerships. A good example of this is the
46 development by an Australian university (University of New South Wales) of a new campus
47 located near Changi Airport.

48 The focus on building a regional 'hub' provides a vision for organisations to enter and
49 participate in the global knowledge economy. The new focus is indeed pertinent to this case
50 **WHAT 'CASE' AND INSTITUTION ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? SEE COMMENT AT THE**
51 **BEGINNING OF THE INTRODUCTION** as there are significant opportunities to benefit from
52 such incentives as this institutions **INSTITUTION'S?** strategic aim, educational and business foci
53 fall into two of these areas.

54 **The Institution**

55 Located in Singapore, this particular creative arts institution (hereafter referred to as the
56 Institution) strategically aims to become the preferred regional provider of arts education.
57 Government funded, but privately owned, the not-for-profit Institution competes for students with
58 a range of other universities, polytechnics and private providers of arts education across Singapore
59 and the wider South-East Asian region.

60 **The Vision**

61 The vision of the Institution is closely aligned with the new national economic strategic agenda of
62 Singapore. Swift change over the past 24 months at the Institution has seen the appointment of a
63 new chief executive officer, a restructuring of the operational structure and recruitment of a
64 considerable number of new management-level personnel in response to becoming more
65 outwardly focused and competitive. An ambitious new organisational vision underpinned by
66 values such as quality, internationalisation and cultural leadership has also emerged, and reflects
67 external global and national directions. This vision is now embedded throughout the Institution
68 and is stated as:

69 enabling Art, Design and Performance through education, research, publication, performance
70 and exhibition of the highest quality from Diploma to PhD operating nationally and
71 internationally whilst contributing to the Cultural Wealth of Singapore as the leading regional
72 provider of Creativity. (Student Handbook, 2005, p .3) **SHOULD Cultural Wealth AND**
73 **Creativity HAVE CAPITAL LETTERS?**

74 The Institution's strategy for achieving its vision is multifarious and requires all stakeholders to be
75 drawn towards new perceptions and understandings of the vision in action (Collins & Porras, 1996;
76 Morden **MORDON IN REFS**, 1997; Senge et al, 1994; Tichy & Sherman, 1994). In looking at the
77 internal environment there is some evidence to suggest that the Institution is embarking on a
78 combined planning and entrepreneurial approach to management processes (Mintzberg et al,
79 1998).

80 **Management Processes within the Institution**

81 Consistent with a planning approach, as detailed by Mintzberg et al, the organisational culture is
82 strategically controlled, and formal planning includes the detailing of outcomes, objectives, and so
83 forth so that processes can be made explicit. Capital budgeting is embedded within the planning
84 process and section managers often provide bottom-up strategic planning and plans are assessed on

85 a cost-benefit basis. The chief executive officer is responsible for all management processes and
86 maintains ultimate strategic decision-making and control. Typically, divisions, faculties and other
87 operational centres then accept responsibility for putting plans into action and for being
88 accountable to their performance.

89 While the Institution currently measures performance through strategic control as detailed by
90 Goold & Quinn (1990), it is recognised that a broad understanding of strategic control is had **IT IS**
91 **RECOGNISED THAT THERE IS A BROAD UNDERSTANDING OF STRATEGIC**
92 **CONTROL?.** For example, the difference between planned and actual outcomes enables
93 questioning of the strategy itself. While planned strategies can and should be measured, there is
94 scope to include the emergent ideas. By measuring the overall performance of the Institution and
95 not just the performance of its planning there is scope for valuable strategic development.

96 The Institution recognises that strategic planning has a number of fallacies. Mintzberg et al
97 (1998) state that planning in this way assumes that an organisation is 'able to predict the course of
98 its environment, to control it, or simply to assume its stability' 'Otherwise, it makes no sense to set
99 the inflexible course of action that constitutes a strategic plan' **TWO OPENING QUOTES BUT**
100 **ONLY ONE CLOSING. IS PUNCTUATION MISSING TOO?** (pp. 66-67). Managers are also
101 aware that if they abstract themselves from the daily detail and rely on hard data such as formalised
102 institutional memoranda such as reports, accounting statements and business plans, that this may
103 impede their inability to form good strategies. There is recognition of the danger in relying on neat
104 and tidy numerical quantitative assessments on performance that are isolated to discrete business
105 units and initiatives, as they could discourage strategic thinking and disempower managers to see
106 the broader picture (Mintzberg, 1994).

107 Mintzberg et al state that 'effective strategy making connects acting to thinking which in turn
108 connects implementation to formulation. We try things, and the ones that work gradually
109 converge into patterns that become strategies' (pp. 71-72). They suggest that systems can become
110 control tools rather than facilitating tools for thinking and learning organisation. For the Institution
111 to be truly creative, it requires managers to be ready to explore and create new perspectives and
112 undertake a broader understanding of the value of both planned and unexpected initiatives that
113 could and may result in better outcomes.

114 **Challenges for E-Learning**

115 In the area of e-learning, this is certainly true. The current strategic model could present some
116 pragmatic difficulties for meeting educational and business imperatives of the institution. This is
117 also a reality for many in the higher education sector and not unique or unexpected to the
118 Institution. While the surplus attached to increased student numbers may be attractive, the
119 intangible value benefits of organisational efficiencies, enhancing reputation and what is considered
120 to be knowledge capital and how this, when defined, might contribute to the knowledge economy
121 of arts education, are also worthy considerations. Here the dilemma arises as there are few
122 examples of how these costs and benefits are attributed. What does exist highlights the high level of
123 uncertainty attributed to e-learning (Oslington **OSLINTON IN REFS**, 2004). Indeed, the challenge
124 to find sustainable e-solutions is full of risk when you move away from the balance sheet. Oslington
125 **OSLINTON IN REFS** states that many costs are:

126 compounded by the irreversibility of investment in online teaching. As irreversibility comes from
127 most of the costs of online teaching projects being sunk costs. For instance, computer hardware
128 has a very low resale value and software has none. Expenditures on setting up systems for
129 delivering online courses and expenditures on marketing courses are specific to the institution
130 and hence have no outside market value if a project is abandoned. (pp. 233-234)

131 Costing e-development is essential but extremely difficult. The lessons to be learned from others,
132 such as the recently failed E University in the United Kingdom, suggests that technologies have not
133 been the 'God' of surplus in the higher education marketplace. Careful and considered assessment
134 of how e-learning might impact on other aspects of institutional infrastructures and external
135 perceptions also need to be considered.

136 An assessment of the associated complementary stakeholders' benefits against the risk has led
137 to more realistic judgements about the potential or otherwise of e-learning at this institution. The

138 case described here, as all are, is unique to this context, and as Oslington **OSLINTON IN REFS**
139 (2004) highlights, no single model for costing, assessing the risks or benefits can be applied to all
140 situations. However, all higher education contexts have to be careful of high levels of
141 unsubstantiated investment and a balanced consideration of all aspects of the motives for 'getting
142 into' e-learning. Laurillard's (2002) Conversational Framework may well go some way to enable
143 such decision making; that is, for developing rationales that are considerate of both pedagogy and
144 strategic imperatives when it comes to cost and benefit analysis. Laurillard's Conversational
145 Framework will be discussed more fully later in this article. What now follows is an introduction to
146 developments in the area of e-learning that go in some part to provide background to this case.

147 **Flexible Learning and Technology**

148 There has been unprecedented growth in the area of e-learning (Bates, 1995; Taylor, 1995;
149 Ikenberry, 1999; Dede, 1999 **2000 IN REFS**; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Evans et al, 2004). Over
150 the past 10 years or so web-based information technologies have expanded education options for
151 learners the world over. This has created a considerable substantive field for investigation where
152 there is a paucity of information beyond case studies and personal descriptions for its use to
153 facilitate learning (Gilbert, 2000). However, Kirkup & Kirkwood (2005) point out in their analysis of
154 the higher education sector published learning and teaching strategies of 2000, that while 81%
155 declared information and communication technologies as the singularly most cited change
156 mechanism, their impact on learning and teaching was limited. They stated that

157 In campus-based contexts, teaching staff appropriate those technologies which they can
158 incorporate into their teaching activity mostly easily, that offer affordances for what they already
159 do, rather than those which radically change teaching and learning practices. (p. 188)

160 It comes as no surprise, then, that pedagogy and the dominance of technology-led development
161 remain in many instances at a mismatch as the economic imperatives of being part of a global
162 economy influence the sector. Indeed, it should be noted that the field of e-learning generally has
163 seen an expansion and proliferation of research-focused investigations in order to understand and
164 inform web-based learning development (Beetham, 2005).

165 This creates a problem for this institution, as everyone seems to be 'getting into' e-based
166 solutions but the costs are enormous and the benefits not always clearly identifiable. The
167 imperative to ensure cost effectiveness and come to grips with the potential of the technology to
168 transform educational transactions is at odds with the market-driven visions (Evans et al, n.d.
169 **PLEASE ADD TO REFS**). Laurillard (2002) states that the higher education sector

170 is being forced to change, and the pressures wrought upon it have nothing to do with traditions
171 and values. Instead the pressure is for reduced costs, for greater scale and scope, and for
172 innovation through technology ... we scurry about in response to the increasing external
173 pressures which exercise their own peculiar forms of change. Academics are going on courses on
174 management training and marketing methods. Reform of an education system might progress
175 faster if they went on courses on how to teach better. (p.3)

176 In building its strategic position in Singapore's further and higher education sector, the Institution
177 is pursuing and enhancing a range of new learning options. The role of e-learning in **IS?** expanding
178 the Institution's learning strategies in a time when there is increased pressure on academic staff to
179 teach more students. E-learning can strategically support the Institution's vision.

180 **Contextualising Future Aspirations**

181 The e-learning initiative is purposefully underpinned by the values that are stated by the Dearing
182 Report (1997). In compliance with an external stakeholder, this is essential for quality assurance.
183 The Institution accreditation body is a United Kingdom provider and compliance with UK policy
184 and awareness of initiatives and trends is essential for maintaining this. The values as **ARE?** stated
185 as:

- 186 • to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities;
- 187 • to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake;

- 188 • to serve the needs of a knowledge-based economy;
- 189 • to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society (Dearing, 1997, p. 72).

190 The challenge for the Institution will be in reconciling the high level of uncertainty with regard to
191 costs and benefits and desirable educational values. The Institution will need to carefully identify
192 and assess opportunities to meet the organisation's vision and corresponding aims and at the same
193 time bend to economic pressures and technological advances. To this end the Institution is
194 becoming more adaptive by becoming a learning organisation.

195 **Learning Organisations and Laurillard's Conversational Framework**

196 The concept of a learning organisation has been widely debated in the strategy literature since the
197 work of Lindale (1959 **PLEASE ADD TO REFS**) and others such as Quinn (1980) and Nelson &
198 Winter (1982). Laurillard (1999 **PLEASE ADD TO REFS**) states that learning organisations need to
199 be adaptive in the increasingly messy and altering landscape of higher education. Key to
200 Laurillard's thesis is the notion that an organisation can learn from experience and adapt to its
201 environment. This is critical for how the Institution e-learning policy, implementation strategy and
202 consequent change management processes are defined. Key to this concept is the notion that we
203 adapt to our environment through understanding and acting within the context. Laurillard's work
204 has a focus on mirroring organisational infrastructure similarly to how individuals learn. This is
205 attractive for higher education contexts where learning is central to the purpose and presage
206 **PRESTIGE?** of the institution. This is also consistent with Nonaka's (1994) work, which Laurillard
207 draws upon in marrying organisational theory and her own framework. She states that
208 'organisational knowledge creation is seen as a continual dynamic process of conversion between
209 the different levels of the individual, the group and the organisation' (p. 215). In a learning
210 organisation routines are challenged by new emergent situations (conflict), which cause the effect
211 of change and strategic learning.

212 If, according to Laurillard (2002), a 'learning organisation, therefore, is one that attempts to
213 conduct an internal learning conversation that allows it to learn from experience and to adapt to its
214 environment' (p. 215), then Institution conversations are going to be critical for ensuring an
215 effective implementation of e-learning. For the Institution, the conversations will be linked to all
216 levels of the institution, from student to chief executive officer, to inform the development of e-
217 learning systems. De Freitas & Oliver (2005) also argue that **IN?** the conversations that people have
218 'by negotiating practices and their meaning, forms of work are legitimated or de-legitimated and
219 lessons are learnt' (p. 86). Strategic learning in this way offers the Institution an opportunity to
220 inform actions in an ongoing, responsive and cyclic manner (Schon, 1983). The Conversational
221 Framework will provide the Institution with a systematic and purposeful tool to enable this.

222 **The Conversational Framework**

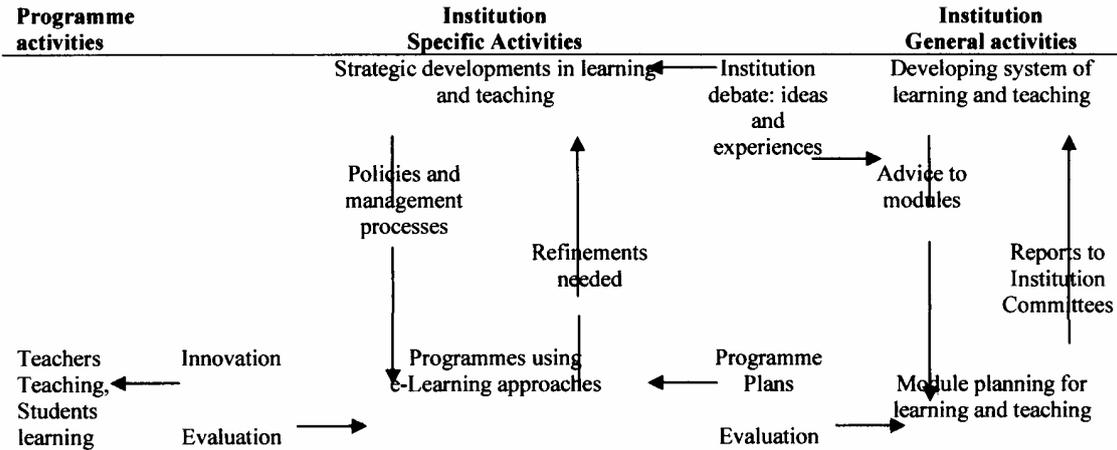
223 Laurillard (2002) suggests that one test of the Conversational Framework with regard to its
224 usefulness in designing an effective organisational infrastructure is to 'interpret each part, and use
225 that interpretation to challenge constructively the way we run our universities' (p. 215). Figure 1
226 provides detail of how the internal dialogue might look. It demonstrates the internal conversations
227 whereby events in one area feed into another, which in turn emerge at an institutional level to
228 inform the reconceptualisation of learning and teaching policy and so forth. For the Institution,
229 using this approach as an organising principle for developing an effective organisational structure
230 for e-learning has several benefits. First, the process is cyclic so there is continual improvement and
231 the scope to respond quickly to emergent ideas is available; second, systems can be put in place to
232 ensure adequate monitoring of the action cycle embedded in the Conversational Framework; and
233 third, the process is iterative and knowledge building at all levels. This is consistent with the
234 Institution vision, associated values and intentions. As an organising principle for management
235 processes Laurillard (2002) reiterates the opportunity for duality in focusing on both lower-level
236 operational aspects and reflecting on the strategic learning from the operation aspects at a higher
237 level. Critical to this process is the sameness of the Conversational Framework throughout the
238 various levels of the organisational structure. In this framework there is potential for staff to inform

239 each other and ‘for managers to value and incorporate the expertise of their academic leaders
 240 within their management practices’ (Yielder **YELDER IN REFS** & Codling, p. 320). In this way,
 241 when all participate in cyclic action research for enhancement, the e-learning development will be
 242 owned, sustainable and aligned with the strategic vision of the institution.
 243

244 Figure 1. The Institution Conversational Framework for the learning organisation.
 245 Adapted from Laurillard (2002), p. 215.

246 **Impact of the Conversational Framework on the Institution**

247 The impact of the Conversational Framework on management processes falls into a number of
 248 categories. This is consistent with Nonaka’s ideas regarding organisational knowledge as
 249 represented by Laurillard (2002) to consist of several iterative processes that create dialogue



250 between theory and practice at all layers of the organisation. For the Institution this could be
 251 viewed as a succession of activities: Expanding knowledge, Sharing, Innovating, Evaluating,
 252 Implementing, Validating (Laurillard, 2003, p. 220 **2003 NOT IN REFS**). In Table I, these are
 253 defined and applied in relation to the Institution context. They provide examples of the iterative
 254 processes required to operate within a Conversational Framework.
 255

Activities	Enactment and application
Expanding knowledge	Create an Institution database of learning materials, learning objects and associated content Develop an institutional knowledge management policy Enable staff to add to existing ideas and construct new ones Provide access to national and international databases of arts resources Ensure access to funding for attending conferences and other related events Promote discipline-specific responsibility for developments and ideas in e-learning and ICT developments Expect and demonstrate excellence in teaching in all appointments Analyse market needs in relation to discipline areas to ensure cost-effective development and the potential for sharing of knowledge, as ICT content development is costly Content development needs to add to existing resources Ensure ICT developments are led by discipline demands and students’ academic interests and demands, e.g. to be more flexible with regard to access The library to provide access to suitable journals and resources for discipline developments Respond to themes across the examiners’ reports and student evaluations to provide new solutions to students’ learning needs
Sharing knowledge	Create opportunities for the sharing of tacit knowledge of staff Develop a plan for determining deployment of staff and other resources such as teaching spaces Develop discipline-based staff development plans in response to ICT developments to ensure adequate skill for implementation Optimise cross-disciplinary foundation courses for more efficient block-teaching. Seek agreement

across faculties and academic administration at the Institution for areas such as research methodology, English language support, etc.
 Encourage the selection and assessment of software by staff whereby standards mean development is interoperable
 Establish an Institution staff development programme for implementing ICT that is relevant to the various disciplines
 Develop Institution policy that ensures prerequisite qualifications and/or experience in ICT to ensure quality in design, implementation and teaching with ICT
 Establish Institution forums to share ideas amongst staff and new development in the research literature
 Establish multi-skilled community of practice development teams to learning and teaching using ICT
SENSE?

Innovating	<p>Agree limits of resources and funding at the Institution for innovation using ICT</p> <p>Establish learning and teaching committees to develop strategic business, analysis, costs and development plans at faculty and managerial levels</p> <p>Develop staff deployment policy using ICT alongside current Institution workload policies.</p> <p>Development time is critical to innovation</p> <p>Ensure quality monitoring processes are in place</p> <p>Develop policy on reversioning, copyright and standards for development</p> <p>Ensure validity and justification of ICT innovation for promoting effective/better learning outcomes</p> <p>Act on and respond to evaluations of innovation</p>
Evaluating	<p>Establish refereeing process for evaluating ICT developments</p> <p>Ensure pilot/beta testing of all ICT innovations during development and prior to launch</p> <p>Use evaluation reports to inform ICT developments</p>
Implementing	<p>Exploit innovation for competitive advantage</p> <p>Ensure associated infrastructure and management teams have established policy and management processes</p> <p>Provide opportunities to communicate needs and issues</p> <p>Market reputation and innovation to ensure competitive advantage</p> <p>Establish support teams for management of ICT learning and content systems</p> <p>Assess and calculate costs of innovation alongside traditional courses and programmes to inform future management resourcing</p> <p>Link appraisal and promotion to teaching excellence using ICT</p> <p>Provide suitable guidance for ongoing learning and teaching of staff and students using ICT</p> <p>Define quality of service to students and staff to ensure quality assurance with introducing ICT innovations</p>
Validating	<p>Reflect on all reports and evaluations of the ICT innovation</p> <p>Review and act on reports and evaluations of ICT innovation</p> <p>Monitor implementation with regard to efficiency of the Institution management processes and procedures</p> <p>Disseminate reports</p>

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Table I. Activities for an effective organisational structure at the Institution.

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Complexity and Future

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The complexity of any organisation cannot be grounded in one brief discussion; while this case has pointed out that a planning approach to strategy may well be in place, it is the vision and values enacted by the entrepreneurial leadership that perhaps contrast, complement and contextualise this approach to e-learning developments. This is important for understanding how e-learning will be located in this context and how and why the Conversational Framework was applied. There is no doubt that information technology has changed the way in which information and knowledge is accessed (Yielder **YELDER IN REFS** & Codling, 2004).

This climate calls for both entrepreneurial leadership and concrete planning strategies. Conceptually this may seem impossible, as both are at the ends of a spectrum but nonetheless

268 critical in the repositioning of the Institution on a number of levels. For example, key decisions are
269 centralised so there is scope for flexibility and responsiveness even with the best-made plans. While
270 the overall strategy is held in the vision of the leadership, the process of the strategy is known
271 through experience and intuition of all staff at the Institution. So, the best conceived plans can be
272 dismissed and new responsive ones developed. Careful personal control by managers is maintained
273 to ensure that swift changes can be made; in this way the vision is both deliberate and also
274 emergent. This is consistent with Mintzberg et al, who state that

275 the organisation is likewise malleable, a simple structure responsive to the leaders **LEADERS’?**
276 directives, whether an actual start-up, a company owned by an individual, or a turnaround in a
277 large established organisation many of whose procedures and power relationships are suspended
278 to allow the visionary leader considerable latitude for manoeuvre. (p. 143)

279 This is very much evident in the Institution’s market positioning and the development of the e-
280 learning initiative.

281 The danger, which Stacey (1992) points out, is that this places an enormous responsibility on
282 the visionary who perhaps relies on a few lieutenants while the organisation beneath enacts as
283 required. This seems to be consistent with a managerial form of governance that has become the
284 norm in many higher education institutions, where:

285 leadership tends to exist as a consequence of hierarchy, and is ascribed to the individual (or a
286 small group) at the apex of the hierarchy. This individual (or group) is assumed to set the tone of
287 the organisation and to establish its official objectives. (Yielder **YELDER IN REFS** & Codling,
288 2004, p. 319)

289 This could create a culture of dependency and conformity as members may not be open to new
290 ideas or able to express them, and learning opportunities which are the catalysts for innovative
291 action are lost. Further, staff are increasingly required to conform to externally driven expectations
292 from stakeholders who compound the situation. The stakeholders here include validating and
293 accreditation organisations, the Institution Board, government education authorities and industry
294 regulators, for example.

295 This will create an enormous challenge for managing the change required in meeting internal
296 and external stakeholder expectations. In relation to e-learning development generally, De Freitas
297 & Oliver (2005) add: ‘organisations would benefit from top-down and bottom-up policy, strategy
298 and activities, interacting and informing one another’ (p. 86). In order to manage internal
299 stakeholder perspectives there will be scope for the Conversational Framework (Laurillard, 2003
300 **2003 NOT IN REFS**) to ensure academic leadership is not ‘subsumed by corporate management
301 practices on the basis of an unchallenged assumption that leadership automatically goes with
302 position in a management hierarchy’ (Yielder **YELDER IN REFS** & Codling, p. 319). This will be
303 important and an additional challenge for the Institution as it develops appropriate management
304 processes and an organisational infrastructure that is considerate and cognisant of both academic
305 and management expectations and realities.

306 **Conclusion**

307 This discussion has provided a case that has outlined the adaptation of Laurillard’s (2002)
308 Conversational Framework for the alignment of one institutions vision to the implementation of e-
309 learning. It has provided description of the context and the opportunities and challenges that exist
310 for the development of e-learning. Stakeholder perspectives have been considered in selecting and
311 applying the framework, with a range of strategies identified for implementation. The Institution
312 has begun the process. For managers implementing e-learning, this case may demonstrate the
313 effective linking of theory to practice and the development of appropriate management processes
314 for allaying fears about the uncertainty of web-based solutions in the current higher education
315 environment.

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