

MANAGEMENT AS VISIONARY PLANNING FOR DEALING WITH SYSTEMIC CHANGE: A CASE OF MALAYSIAN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION

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Abstract: Vision has been described as a major element in leadership and strategic planning for all organizations including education. Moreover, planning vision has been assumed as the leader's key task and responsibility. In managing the change process, working on vision not only means examining and re-examining the strategic planning for the organization but also making explicit to management the purpose for the change. Therefore, the importance of the vision and planning would be more essential when an organization is undergoing systemic changes. This paper is the result of a PhD research study. The purpose of this paper is to examine vision as one of the main components of systemic change management strategies for implementing e-learning innovation in an Open-Distance Learning (ODL) organization with management functions including planning, organizing, guiding, and monitoring. From the data analysis it was found that in the context of technology-based change or systemic change that affects all the levels and aspects of the organization, vision and strategic planning play as the two key prerequisites for the success of the change. The results of in-depth analysis of "vision" as the main theme of this study are presented in this paper.

Keywords: Visionary planning, Change management, Open Distance Learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Vision has been described as a major element in leadership and strategic planning for all organizations including education. Moreover, vision planning has been assumed as the

leader's key task and responsibility. The importance of vision and planning would be more essential when an organization is going through changes [1]. Due to the diversity and interaction characteristics of change, particularly in education systems, for successful implementation of its process the critical challenge is how to manage the change in a more strategic and planned manner. In this regard, the necessity for management to perform as a visionary and strategic planner has been highlighted [2], [3], [4].

However, in managing the change process, working on vision means not only examining and re-examining the strategic planning for educational organizations, but also making explicit to the management "what is the purpose of the change". Hence, in today's demanding environment the key challenge facing educational planners and management teams is related to their "ability" to identify a long-term vision, mission and strategies that can deal effectively with the changes systemically through the best practice of strategic management techniques [2],[5],[6],[7]. Therefore, the question is whether management functions include planning, organizing, guiding, and monitoring can help the leaders direct the change process to organizational improvement in line with the achievement of the desired goals.

It has been assumed that any change program characterized by diversity and interaction such as change in education system should be managed as a whole; thus it requires a clear vision and strategic planning with a system perspective as well as resource planning. The result of a systemic design methodology is a system with interrelated, inclusive, interdependent and internally consistent components. This is dissimilar to the conventional common

planning design [8]. Due to the complex and dynamic nature of systemic change that affects all the levels and aspect of the organization, management's vision planning is considered as a tool for improvement and development of the organization. Nonetheless, the recent technological changes such as e-learning innovation in education system, has a major systemic implication and need to be carefully planned and managed to make it more effective and efficient [9]. Thus, for the effective implementation of e-learning and other learning technologies clear vision and careful planning are the two main prerequisites. This is because in the vision and planning phase the desired goal of the organization which is the purpose of the change would be set up. The essential role of technology change in the Malaysian education system is a basis for competitive advantage of the ODL institutions in the country. Because of the issues and challenges related to learning technology use in Malaysia, preparing and managing e-learning is a complex process which requires a shift from change management to strategic planning [10].

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study a qualitative research methodology was used and data were collected through three different sources including open-ended interviews, direct observation, and official documents revision techniques at the Open University Malaysia (OUM). The interviewees were from two individual groups including top management, and deans of the five faculties. Apart from interviews, data were also collected through examination of official documents obtained including the university's published Annual and Monthly Reports, newspapers, public records, and research articles which have been presented in local and international seminars or conferences by officials of the open university.

However, data obtained in this study were analyzed using grounded theory approach as well as the Ladder of Analytical Abstraction [11]. In order to organize and manage the data more systematically, the raw data were analyzed using NVivo 8 computer software. Using this software helped the researcher to find in-depth and detailed data on management visionary strategies in dealing with the systemic changes in the Open-Distance Learning (ODL) institution. In addition, *vision* as the main theme of this study was coded and categorized based on the grounded theory methods of open, axial and selective coding in format of sub-themes.

The results of the emerging sub-themes are based on examination of the four functions of management including planning, organizing, guiding, and monitoring on vision. In addition more in-depth data emerged from the categorization of sub-sub-themes

using grounded theory approach and the ladder of analytical abstraction.

III. ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

A. Vision for Strategic Change

The data analysis suggested that the case university as an Open-Distance Learning (ODL) institution had propounded a clear and specific vision to guide the future progress of the institution and also to enable the top management to steer the university towards future growth and development. A clear and specific vision was necessary for the open university to achieve its aspirations and goals. Thus, organizational activities in all levels were directed based on the leadership's vision.

This study found that having a clear and accessible vision was among the vital factors in managing the systemic change process. This is could be due to the fact that clear and strong vision is one of the main elements for encouraging the organizational members to participate in the change process. Thus, having an apparent picture from desired goals and results of the change plays an important role for guiding the success of change management.

The main focus of the open university leaders and management in setting the organizational vision and mission was to be a world class center of excellence in open- distance education. As pointed out by the open university's president [12], for more progress in the future, the university needs to be equipped with the appropriate capacity to sustain the e-learning system and ICT-based activities.

Data analysis showed that the main vision of the institution leaders and management for implementing the e-learning system in the organization was to achieve the desired goal of democratizing education. In the institutional context, e-learning system was meant "as a democratizing tool" [12]. This is because the e-learning system has enabled the university to live by its motto "University for all" [13]. From this specific vision, the leaders and top management of the open university had set the main objectives of the organization as follows:

- a) To meet higher education aspirations using flexible, accessible and affordable system
- b) To provide life long learning opportunities, and
- c) To help the government in the democratization of education [13].

Fig. 1 shows the overview of the sub-themes and sub-sub themes of this study which emerged from in-depth analysis on vision as one of the main components of systemic change with the management functions such as planning, organizing, guiding and monitoring. Analysis and categorizing concepts were made by employing the grounded theory approach in which the data could give rise to new possible conceptions and theoretical propositions.

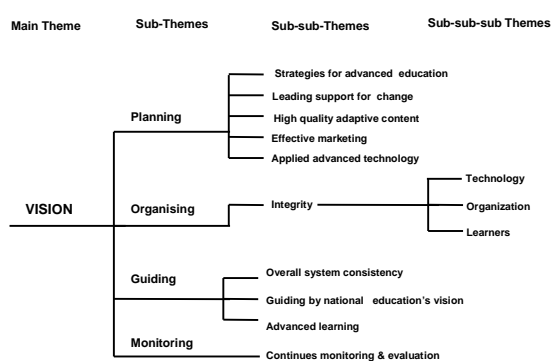


Fig 1 The overview of the main, sub, sub-sub, and sub-sub-sub-themes of vision as the key component of systemic change management

The ensuing sub-sections elaborate the above figure.

A.1 Vision Planning

In the process of systemic change management, vision analysis and strategic planning phase are the main prerequisites. Specifically for the effective implementation of technological innovations such as e-learning and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in education and training, building a long-term vision and strategic planning are the fundamental needs. While having clear vision can help the management of change to answer the question of what to change, strategic planning for change would guide the system in addressing the question of how to change. This is because, in the vision and planning phase, the desired goal of the organization which is the purpose of the change would be set up. The analysis suggested the prime importance of strategic planning, which would be more essential when an organization is undergoing technological changes for system improvement. It was found that in the ODL institution, management vision planning for systemic change comprises five strategies as follows:

A.1.1 Strategies for Advanced Education

In an ODL Institution, utilizing advanced technologies and methodologies for teaching-learning results in an advanced education system. Thus, a clear strategy for having an advanced education system was a necessity for managing systemic change in an open university.

From the data analysis it was found that the main reason for systemic change in the ODL institution was to improve the system by using technology in teaching-learning processes. Developing more e-content, using more technology and enhancing instructional technologies were among the vision planning of the top management to improve the institutional system. In this regard the main goal was to create a conducive learning environment by focusing on planning of strategies for advanced education. In line with the organizational main vision, being the leader in flexible learning and introducing self-managed learning were the main strategies that the top management considered in implementing the e-learning system.

The university's leaders had a strong commitment to make a purposeful and enlightened future for the university through their vision and mission planning. However, for being the leader in flexible and distance learning the university had to enhance its efforts in providing more information in order to broaden public acceptance and appreciation for open learning and lifelong learning culture in the Malaysian society.

A.1.2. Leading Support for Change

In managing the systemic change process, the next strategy considered for vision planning is leading the support for change. The top management strong leadership facilitated realization of the strategic planning for managing the change. Support and commitment of the leadership in implementing change process was another vital component in ensuring successful change management. In the open university, systemic change means not only improving the present situation but also enhancing the usage of e-learning technology in the form of e-content and online modules. Moreover, leadership and top management support were not only effective in the change of the whole system, but also were influential in any other small changes.

In the current ever changing environment, leadership and top management's change effort was not an optional task any more, but in order to direct the change process to success, it was an obligation.

Leading support for change was not limited to any specific time or phases of the change process, but it was an ongoing procedure that started from the

very beginning stage of planning for change to the end until achievement of the desired goals.

A.1.3 High Quality Adaptive Content

Another strategy in vision planning for systemic change is high quality adaptive content. Quality learning materials and leading the learning contents' provider, were among the main factors in vision planning for the case open university. Moreover, the ability to develop and use required contents, in response to market demand was one of the crucial features of such an organization.

This study found that the ability for developing high quality and adaptive contents was considered as one of the strategic tasks in vision planning for systemic change management. On the other hand, for leadership and management of the open university, the main focus was to create a conducive learning environment. A conducive learning environment actively supported the development and utilization of high quality adaptive contents; these high quality contents, learning process and environment should be organized in a way to achieve all learning objectives. All the objectives were in line with the university's vision to be a leading institution in flexible, open, and lifelong learning inside and outside the country.

A.1.4 Effective Marketing

In-depth analysis showed that effective marketing was also among the strategies in vision planning for systemic change. The effective marketing was to cultivate its designated market based upon the organizational vision planning in line with strategies to create awareness about organizational objectives. Therefore, when leaders of the ODL institution were planning for the change, they had to consider some strategies to help in attracting more learners. These strategies not only would affect the marketing point, but also will help to attract more students.

This study found that attracting learners from the domestic market as well as international market had been among the vision strategic planning of the open university's leadership. Filling the geographical gap through building a strong and professional academic reputation was among the main criteria for the university's leadership to set up the organizational vision planning.

The main reason for planning effective marketing strategies was to attract more students to the university not only from inside the country but also beyond national boundaries. The outcome of these strategies was the decision to open up learning centers in several countries in the region and the Middle East. This strategy was aligned with the

University's key objective to pursue more adult learners for higher education [14].

A.1.5 Applied Advanced Technology

This study found that the next strategy in vision planning for the ODL institution was to apply advanced technology for the purpose of teaching and learning. As mentioned before, advanced education comprised advanced technology and advanced methodology for teaching and learning. Therefore applying advanced technologies in various aspects of the educational system played a crucial role in supporting change management.

In the university, vision was based on the belief that using advanced technology in the current increasingly globalized economy would provide better educational opportunities for open and distance education. In this regard, developing more e-content and enhancing advanced instructional technologies was part of the vision for the leaders and top management.

However, analysis suggested that for the open university, a dynamic tool for value of continued lifelong learning was using advanced technologies in the teaching-learning processes. This was specifically more considerable in the current context of rapid technological advancement of global societies. Thus, being the leader in flexible learning and introducing self-learning by implementing advanced technologies such as e-learning in the learning environment, was part of the vision and mission of the university's management in planning for systemic change. This was due to the organizational desired goal of upgrading the learning environment to a more dynamic and proactive level. Moreover, technology change was part of the vision of the open university's management.

Nonetheless, utilizing new technologies has advantages and disadvantages. If the management decided to change the existing technology to the new, they had to be aware of this fact that applying new technology in the right manner will benefit the system achievement; otherwise the system may face failure. Therefore, the management understanding on the nature of technology was a crucial element for managing the changes.

A.2 Vision Organizing

This study found that, in managing change process after planning for vision, there was a need to consider the important role of organizing elements in the planned vision. Integrity was the main element in vision organizing for change management process in the ODL institution. The integrity in this context was including: technology integration, organizational integration and the learners' integration. Integration

requires harmony, collaboration, and coordination, between various elements of an education system in the light of vision organizing for systemic change management. In technology integration, providing the degree to human beings was the main objective. This was due to the vision of the university's management to be the leading provider of flexible lifelong learning. The organizational integrity was another element in vision organizing for the open university. This was in line with the organizational shared vision and values which consists of: Integrity, Professionalism, Caring, Teamwork, and Innovativeness.

From the data analysis it was found that these shared values were the common ground for all the organization's members. Moreover, they served as guidelines for how the open university's members should behave and conduct their daily activities in order to help the organization advance.

The analysis suggested that providing opportunities for adult learners to use their prior learning and knowledge was part of the vision organizing for learners' integrity in open distance education. Establishing the Center for Assessment of Prior Learning was in line with the strategic planning of the university's leaders to provide open entry for adult learners.

A.3 Vision Guiding

After vision organizing, the next step in setting the vision in an ODL institution was vision guiding. This is because in managing the systemic change process there was a need to have guidance for organizational vision to achieve desired goals. In this context, continued awareness about vision and its impact on various activities for managing the educational system was the subject of vision guiding. In-depth analysis shows that in an ODL institution vision guiding for change management processes comprises three strategies as follows:

A.3.1 Overall system consistency

This study found that, in an ODL institution in order to prevent any conflict during the change management phases, one of the important aspects of the system integrity was to maintain consistency between all actions, procedures and processes. In such an organization, because of the interrelationship and interdependencies among the various levels and aspects of the system, all the action and initiatives were guided by the organizational vision, mission and the shared values. In other words, in managing systemic change, the best direction was to have consistency of the overall system which was guided by the leadership's planned vision.

A.3.2 Guiding by National Education Vision

The data analysis showed that in an ODL institution, guiding organizational vision by the National Education Vision and the National Education Needs were essential for success of the change process. Since enhancing teachers' proficiency to improve the status quo of the country's education was among the main elements in the national education vision, thus, for the open university's leaders, upgrading teacher education was one of the guidelines in setting the organizational vision for the benefit of the national education. Cooperating with the Ministry of Education was a useful guide in planning for teachers' training.

A.3.3 Advanced Learning Approach

From the data analysis in this study it was found that advanced learning approach was to provide flexible and quality learning environment for the students. This was guided by the organizational vision statement. A quality learning environment required guidelines in providing services and maintaining the quality of learning and teaching approach using advanced Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). However, the interviewees agreed that leading flexible learning through new technologies was possible only if the advanced technology was being used in a proper way with respect to the nature of all system requirements. According to the analysis, the main vision and mission of the university's management was to integrate present technologies in their learning mode to enhance learning performance. In addition, one of the most important features of the leadership was to be eager to employ new technologies for the benefit of the organization as an ODL institution.

A.4 Vision Monitoring

The data analysis suggested that in an education system such as the case university anything related to the organizational main vision was the task that happens mostly from the top level leaders and management. In case of monitoring vision, analysis revealed that since the establishment of the university, leaders and the top management of the university continued to monitor the main organizational vision and mission from time to time. The reason was to upgrade the initial vision to make it more appropriate and comprehensive. From this specific vision, the leaders and top management of the open university had set the main strategies to include evaluation of the system's performance.

The interviewees from the top management group agreed that monitoring the university vision and mission would help to enhance innovativeness and

changes in line with system improvement. In this regard providing flexible support and services specifically advanced flexible ICT and e-learning systems was among the main criteria to enhance improvement of the system.

IV. CONCLUSION

In managing the change process, the first step is creating a clear *vision* and realistic *strategic plan*. In case of educational change, specifically at Open - Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, management's vision and strategic planning are considered as the two prerequisites for systemic change regarding the implementation of e-learning systems [9]. In this regard, a clear vision and effective strategic planning should be able to include main elements as well as address the key issues relating to technology implementation in the entire system. These issues include the process of systemic change that emerges from management's key functions consisting of planning, organizing, guiding, and monitoring.

This study on the management's vision in planning for implementation of technology-based change has proved valuable for reminding us that for the success of the change process, there is a need for prioritizing of the organization's appropriate needs and requirements through strategic planning.

As examined at the first open university in Malaysia, the crucial factors in implementing technology-based changes such as e-learning system include:

(a) *Vision planning* for the most probable use of advanced technologies in order to achieve the goal of high quality adaptive learning content. Hence vision planning needs to consider management's strategies to lead the support for systemic change.

(b) *Vision organizing* for the determination of the technology integration [as] a whole system including all the aspects and levels of the organization. The other two elements that need to be considered in this systemic integration of technology are including the organization itself and the learners. However, with the help of vision organizing, management would be able to set the strategic plan to identify the needed resources and assets.

(c) *Vision guiding* for ensuring the system's consistency and approaches to achieve advanced learning. In this regard, the country's national education vision could be considered as a guideline for the future progress of the institution and also to enable the top management to steer the university towards future growth and development. On the other hand it could be an objective estimate of expected benefits in applying the strategic plan for the technology. These benefits consist of cost, time, and human capital.

(d) *Vision monitoring* for the continued evaluation of the organizational activities as well as the system's performances. Because technology implementation will affect everybody in all the levels and aspects of the organization, regular upgrading of the initial vision and strategic planning is a necessary task for the change management team.

However, from these specific aspects of vision and strategic planning, the leaders and top management of the open university had set the main objectives of the organization to meet higher education aspirations using flexible, accessible and affordable systems, as well as providing lifelong learning opportunities for the working-adult learners, and to help the government in the democratization of education.

The general findings of this study on vision and strategic planning in dealing with systemic change from implementation of e-learning innovation at the Malaysian open university may be transferable to the contexts of technology- based changes in other open-distance universities.

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