The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the world to migrate to online environments, with differing degrees of difficulty and success. Lloyd George Waller of The University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, argues that success depends on HEIs’ digital readiness which is in turn an outcome of their digital transformation strategic framework. In a forthcoming book based on recent research, Prof Waller will look at what lessons can be learned from a decade of digital transformation by HEIs.

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Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are among those organisations who have been forced to reconfigure their activities as a result of the pandemic. Those who had already begun the process of digital transformation have found the transition easier than others. A forthcoming book by Prof Lloyd George Waller of The University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, looks at what lessons can be learned from a decade of digital transformation by HEIs. Based on new research, Prof Waller argues that the difference between HEIs’ success or otherwise in moving online depends on their digital readiness and resilience, which in turn depends on their digital transformation strategy.

Digital technologies are among the few winners in COVID-19 times. Restrictions on face-to-face contact have meant that many of us have retreated to the confines of our homes and moved our lives online. It should therefore be no surprise that forecasting company Research & Markets estimates that knowledge spend on digital transformation will double from almost half a trillion US dollars in 2020 to more than a trillion in 2025.

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Digital Transformation and HEIs
Prof Waller defines digital transformation theory as explaining “how, and in what ways, digital technologies can be used to transform an organisation’s business processes towards promoting positive outcomes”. It is an ongoing process which strategises digitalisation and digital technologies, helping organisations to stay competitive and enhancing consumer experience. A ‘destination rather than a journey’, it is “business-led and technology-enabled”.

Despite universities’ involvement in technology design and production as a subject discipline, Prof Waller finds that HEIs lag behind business in their uptake of digital technologies. The pandemic has accelerated their move to online teaching, and most HEIs have incorporated some elements of digital transformation into their current and planned processes, but far more could be done.

Prof Waller explains: “The reality today is that digital transformation strategies in HEIs can be scaled to include internal operations, strategic imperatives, outreach, research and innovation, finance and employment engagement.” He adds: “HEIs will need to implement a digital transformation strategy if they are to survive and compete in the brand new digital, post-COVID world.”

Prof Waller used document analysis methodology and purposive sampling technique to evaluate the academic literature on digital transformation and identify the lessons learned from 10 years of digital transformation implementation by HEIs. Three core themes emerged: the need to have a relevant and workable strategy, prioritising and empowering people, and the use of appropriate digital technologies and innovations.

Relevant Strategy
To make digital transformation a success, analysis revealed the importance of HEIs having a relevant and workable digital transformation strategy which is aligned to the institution’s vision, mission and goals. The strategy should be led by a coordinator who, in addition to appropriate digital knowledge, is also aware of the wider business, human relations, societal, political, and managerial implications of the institution’s digital agenda.

Prof Waller finds that the strategy must also be fully owned by senior leaders who should understand and be able to explain it. This is not least because of the costs involved and the fact that HEIs often struggle with financial resources, particularly in developing countries. HEIs should therefore set priorities and consider partnerships with technology companies. Prof Waller acknowledges that some HEIs may be wary, but stresses that technology companies can be natural partners. In exchange for financial support, HEIs can provide access to research teams and bodies of students who can help to refine products and services.

Time is also important. Digital transformation is a long process which comprises moving from physical to digital formats, then using technologies to improve processes, and finally leveraging all the opportunities digitalisation offers. Recognising that universities often work in silos, digital transformation strategies must be more inclusive and involve key players and stakeholders in “a culture of trust, understanding, agility, and safety.”

Prof Waller warns HEIs to be wary of “one-size-fits-all” approaches promoted by some technology suppliers. Not only do HEIs differ from each other, departments and even teams within an institution may vary. Prof Waller’s research suggests that the most successful strategies are based on customisation. In addition, they require monitoring, evaluation, and for organisations to be able to pivot when necessary.

Empowering People
Digital learning is one only way in which digital transformation can transform HEIs. For example, Prof Waller’s study finds that digital transformation can both provide students with knowledge and competencies for life and work, and also re-imagine processes such as students’ recruitment and engagement, either with clubs and societies while at university, or with post-graduation alumni groups.

Digital transformation can help to configure and reconfigure the business processes of HEIs and bring them into the digital age.
Behind the Research

Prof Lloyd George Waller

Bio

Lloyd Waller is a Professor of Digital Transformation with the University of the West Indies, Jamaica with a focus on electronic commerce (e-commerce), as well as a PhD in Social Policy from the University of Waikato, New Zealand with a focus on electronic tourism (e-tourism). Currently, he is located at the University of the West Indies, (Monia Campus) Kingston, Jamaica. Professor Waller’s area of research include Digital Transformation Policies and Practices, Electronic Governance, Governance, Tourism Resilience, Advanced Research Methods and well as Development Studies. Professor Waller has managed several national level digital transformation projects and consulted on global and regional projects. He has published and taught on issues related to digital transformation generally and digital transformation for Higher Education Institutions more specifically. He has also worked with several international organisations on various ICT for development initiatives as well as those which focus on digital transformation.

Research Objectives

Prof Lloyd George Waller researches digital transformation within Higher Education Institutions.

Detail

Digital Transformation: A framework for Higher Education Institutions [Forthcoming on Amazon October 2021]

References

Digital Transformation: A framework for Higher Education Institutions

Personal Response

What inspired you to conduct this research?

Prof Waller argues that the best way for HEIs to approach digital transformation is to employ “human-centric design methodology” – a problem-solving methodology to help design interactive systems which focus on users’ behaviour and needs. He explains “human-centric design is therefore the identification and understanding of human desires, context, needs to facilitate the development of better concepts, interfaces, systems, tools and more importantly a better experience for users, whether these users are students, faculty, staff, and / or society.”

He warns that today’s students are digital natives who expect HEIs to have high digital standards and awareness of the importance of security and privacy. Prof Waller explains: “If an HEI wants to attract and retain students in a post-corona world, they will need to articulate and showcase their technological savviness, innovation capacity, and futuristic look-and-feel.” To succeed HEIs must also “align their organisational structure and culture to their digital transformation strategy”. He adds: “Digital transformation is a mindset. It is about thinking and acting digitally, accepting digitalisation, and creating an orientation towards digitalisation.”

The process involves profound changes in teaching methodologies, competencies, and assessment. Though some staff may resist, the research suggests that staff must be empowered by being given the right tools, technologies, and training. Post-pandemic, even if face-to-face teaching returns, most HEIs will continue to incorporate some degree of online learning. Prof Waller finds that digital transformation may demand a change management strategy which incorporates the need for changed behaviours.

HEIs also interact with society and, for example, the quality of a country’s workshops, HEIs can empower citizens in other countries to use digital technologies. Digital transformation can also enable faculties to engage with other faculties and organisations worldwide, allowing people to access information and collaborate.

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RECONFIGURING PROCESSES

Prof Waller’s research suggests that, though HEIs are at different stages on their digital transformation journeys, significant lessons can be learned from others’ experience of implementing digital transformation for higher education and becoming digital education institutions.

Digital technologies can support the general goals of HEIs, namely teaching, research and societal outreach, and provide them with the capabilities, knowledge and tools to meet students’ current and future expectations. They will also need to implement digital technologies can support the general goals of HEIs, namely teaching, research and societal outreach, and provide them with the capabilities, knowledge and tools to meet students’ current and future expectations. They will also need to implement digital transformation strategies if they are to survive. Prof Waller argues that business models of transformation are problematic when applied to HEIs, which need to find solutions appropriate to their needs and operations.

Prof Waller concludes: “Digital transformation can help to configure and reconfigure the business processes of HEIs and bring them into the digital age, once they have identified the right strategy.” He adds: “The right strategy can only manifest itself with an understanding of the configurations, elements, processes, challenges, antecedents and, among other things, the actors, tools, objects, and systems necessary for successfully implementing digital strategies in HEIs.”

Digital transformation is a mindset. It is about thinking and acting digitally, accepting digitalisation, and creating an orientation towards digitalisation.