

# Illustrating “What’s in it for me?” in your ICT Strategy

David Lomas  
Lancaster University  
Lancaster, LA1 4YH, UK  
d.lomas@lancaster.ac.uk

## Keywords

ICT strategy development; Strategic scenarios.

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whilst strategies map out the future, your users live in the present. They live with the daily frustrations of being a user of ICT. They may be cynical of a strategy’s fine words and its even finer aspirations. What most users crave is an improvement in their daily experience of ICT services. They might not always be able to express how the service could be improved, they just know their experiences could and should be better.

In 2007, Lancaster University began the process of developing a new institutional ICT Strategy. From the beginning, we were determined to engage with and involve a representative cross-section of the University’s population in its development. This was to be an Institutional strategy and not one for the central ICT service alone. For the Strategy to succeed, and for its associated funding to be unlocked, it was vital that our users committed to the ICT strategy and its success. In a nutshell, they would have to readily recognise that the Strategy delivered to their needs and that they could readily answer the question: “What’s in it for me?”.

In order to deliver this, we realised that we needed to paint a picture of the future that our different user constituencies could readily relate to. These pictures were our scenarios. This approach has been successfully used before elsewhere in Higher Education.

This presentation will relate the ICT Strategy-forming process at Lancaster and its associated extensive consultation exercise, but it will concentrate on the development of the supporting scenarios. The characteristics of our scenarios will be identified and illustrated in the Lancaster context.

The aim of the presentation is illustrate a strategy development process that is inclusive and involving, with an outcome that is accessible and achievable.

## **2. ABOUT LANCASTER UNIVERSITY**

Lancaster University is highly ranked for both its research and teaching. The University was founded in 1964 and is now home to over 17,000 students, of which nearly 10,000 are full-time students plus 2,500 staff. Over 6,000 students live on a pleasant campus several miles outside the small city of Lancaster in North West England.

The University's central IT service is Information Systems Services (ISS). It is estimated that ISS is responsible for around two thirds of the IT on campus. ISS's activities are supplemented by faculty and departmental IT services. Over the past 5 years, some of these faculty IT staff have been assimilated into ISS, but remain located in their faculty to give a service that is centrally co-ordinated but locally delivered. This model of IT service delivery is seen as successful and one that will be formalised and further developed during the lifetime of the University's new ICT Strategic Plan.

## **3. EARLIER ICT STRATEGIES AND STRATEGIC PLANS**

The University and ISS had developed and worked to a succession of ICT Strategies for its central IT service. These strategies were aimed at delivering IT services to support the University's own strategy. Similarly, faculties and departments had their own ICT strategies to support the delivery of faculty and departmental-specific strategic goals. There was some coherence, but to date the University had lacked an overarching ICT Strategy that had oversight of IT at Lancaster.

By 2007, the issue of governance of IT services, alongside the issues of system security, their resilience and integration, were coming to the fore. It was time to act. The University needed to develop a framework that would harness the agility of local IT services and combine this with the quality controlled development of scalable services and systems that are associated with central IT services.

Prior to 2007, there was an Information Services Committee (ISC) where the Director of ISS and the Librarian met senior members of faculty to determine changes in regulation and policy along with reporting updates on their major work programmes. Over the years, attendance of ISC began to wane and the committee's business had ceased to engage with its members. Late in 2006, the committee was stood down and separate policy committees for the Library and IT were established. The University's IT Policy Committee (ITPC) was constituted to ensure that all the major IT stakeholders on campus were represented. Their first task was to establish an ICT Strategy for Lancaster University. The initial deliverable would be a three year ICT Strategic Plan for the University.

## **4. THE ICT STRATEGIC PLAN 2007 - 2010**

In March 2008, ITPC approved a new ICT Strategic Plan for Lancaster for formal adoption by the University. This Strategic Plan centres on seven themes which are listed below:

1. External Communication - with a strong focus on our web presence and supporting processes
2. Support for Learning and the Student Experience
3. Support for Teaching at Lancaster
4. Research and High End Computing
5. Core infrastructure and Support for Institutional Processes
6. Information Management and Communications
7. Regional, National and International Partnerships for Teaching, Research and Enterprise.

An eighth theme, Governance, was originally a distinct theme but during the development process it became apparent that Governance would be a thread that ran through all the other themes. Improved governance of the institutions ICT was selected as a strategic priority.

The Plan's 3-page introduction sets the scene with the objectives of the Plan and the external Strategic Drivers that inform the Plan.

The entry for each of the seven themes is structured into 4 subsections, namely:

1. Observations
2. A Theme Objective
3. Transformational Statements
4. Scenarios

The Observations set the context for the theme in terms of the University's recent history and current user experience.

For each theme an Objective is stated. The objective is aspirational and sets measures for success. These measures are typically benchmarking against the higher education sector and our peer institutions in particular. The benchmarking isn't always in terms of ICT, but in terms of its support for University activities such as research, teaching or administration. In this way we can identify the relevance and importance of ICT in supporting the University's own objectives.

There follow Transformational Statements that identify improvements both in IT services and their delivery that would support meeting a theme's objective. These statements will in turn lead to the formulation of work programmes, projects and plans. Through combining the observations and objectives with a knowledge of what changes needed to be enacted, a set of transformational statements is developed. Most of these statements are readily understood by the Lancaster community - both our service users and those that deliver services. However, the fragmentation of the objective into these statements also fragmented the user population, who could only see limited relevance to their use of ICT at Lancaster.

Finally, each theme was completed by a set of Scenarios. These illustrated one of the users' experiences that was anticipated when a theme's objectives is met.

## **5. THE INSTRUMENTS FOR DEVELOPING THIS ICT STRATEGIC PLAN**

### **5.1. Overview**

The new ICT Strategy is a strategy for the whole University with strong tie-ins to other institutional strategies; it would deliver a vision of ICT services at Lancaster; and it would be a framework for unlocking funding for major ICT projects on campus. The Strategy can also be described as what it was not. It wasn't a strategy for central IT services alone; nor was it an exercise to simply tick-the-box 'We have an ICT Strategy'; nor was it to be irrelevant to the end-users of ICT services at Lancaster.

In order to deliver to this brief, a multi-threaded approach to the development and final approval of the ICT Strategy was taken.

Before the process was formally underway, a number of key decisions about the Strategy were taken.

1. The Strategic Plan would take a user-centric view of ICT. There would be a focus on the end-user experience.
2. There would be minimal references to University departments and units in terms of who would deliver which service. This was an extension of the user-centric approach as most users are not interested in a service's owner; rather they are interested in the effectiveness of that service.
3. Finally, the strategy would be technology-agnostic and avoid presenting a particular technology as a solution to a problem. The arguments of open source, propriety solutions and 'software as a service' were set aside with an assurance in transformational statement that:

“In choosing particular solutions, we will adopt those that deliver process support most effectively and efficiently and which can objectively deliver the best institutional competitive advantage. ...”

These three points would make the Strategic Plan acceptable to all and would set aside any turf-wars until the implementation phase, where each case can be considered on its merits.

## **5.2. Formal Approval**

The University’s IT Policy Committee (ITPC) held its inaugural meeting in February 2007. Through its chair and membership, ITPC has links to most senior officers in the University and its governance structures.

Unlike its predecessor, ISC, the inaugural meeting of ITPC meeting enjoyed full attendance, engagement and active debate. The main agenda item for the first meeting was to determine the ‘Steps to establish an Institutional ICT Strategy’. The strategic goal set was to establish:

“A vibrant, IT-enabled institution that exploits the benefits of a well governed, effective, innovative and integrated information systems infrastructure”.

This first meeting also established an ICT Strategic Plan Steering Group. Eight strategic areas were initially identified, each underpinned by a working group. Each of these eight working groups would be chaired by a senior member of the University who also had stakeholder interest in the group’s theme. The engagement of senior staff in leading these working groups that led to shaping the Strategic Plan was seen as key to the Plan’s eventual success.

The ITPC met 3 more times over the following 12 months to review and finally to recommend the formal adoption of the ‘ICT Strategic Plan 2007-2010’. This progress may seem pedestrian, but because the committee was aware of activities between meetings, momentum and interest were retained and developed throughout the year. Each of ITPC’s meetings was scheduled to follow a phase of consultation and the incorporation of new viewpoints into the Strategic Plan.

## **5.3. Strategic Plan’s Steering Group**

The Strategic Plan’s Steering Group consisted of four senior members of the University, including the Director of ISS and chairman of ITPC. This group shaped the document and acted as an editorial board with a light touch. The Steering Group freely commented on drafts and ensured that this new Strategy would key into other University strategies. This Group ensured that the ICT Strategy would sit comfortably within the context of the University’s ambitions as well as inform other strategic planning at Lancaster.

The secretariat for the Strategic Plan was the Director of ISS supported by senior colleagues in his department. This is significant, since ISS would continue to act as the curator of ICT on campus, a role that had not been explicitly stated before. Additionally, ISS would be the senior service supplier of many of the services that would be delivered through the Strategy.

## **5.4. Consultation - Phase 1: The Working Groups**

The ICT Strategy was only going to be meaningful and relevant to the wider University if their views were sought and incorporated. As previously mentioned, in its first meeting ITPC had established eight Working Groups. Although these groups didn’t map perfectly into the final Strategic Plan, the roots of those themes can be discerned here. Eight Working Groups were assigned the following areas:

1. External Communication
2. Learning, Teaching and the Student Experience
3. IT in Research and for Business Links
4. High Performance Computing
5. Support for Key Institutional Processes
6. Electronic Information Management and Communications
7. Regional Aspects of ICT Strategy
8. IT Governance

Membership of these working groups was broad and representative of all stakeholders. Service providers took a back-seat, holding their tongues and listening to the frustrations and aspirations of their users. The purpose of the groups was not to offer instant solutions, but to listen and note the user perceptions, and at times misconceptions, of the ICT services at Lancaster. It was only through this non-intervention that a holistic view of IT services (past; present and future) at Lancaster could emerge.

The form and number of the meetings was left to the discretion the working group chairmen. The inclusiveness of the working groups raised both user awareness and expectation of the new ICT Strategic Plan. The obligation to deliver to the new Plan was real and was felt by all in ICT Services.

At this stage, scenarios only made fleeting and irregular appearances in the discussions and none survived to the reporting stage. Those scenarios that were played out were incomplete, but nevertheless illustrative of the user requirement. Some of the scenarios would be recalled and reappear later in the process.

The Working Groups submitted their reports to the Strategic Plan Steering Group during May and June. The findings of these Working Groups guided the first drafting of the Plan. The Groups' findings remained evident throughout the three drafts and final version of the Strategic Plan.

### **5.5. Consultation - Phase 2: One to one discussions with Senior Users**

The first draft of the Strategic Plan was presented to ITPC. The consensus was that it was a credible first draft. It was agreed that views of individual members of ITPC on the Strategic Plan would be solicited and collated. These views would be gathered through a series of meetings with members of ITPC conducted by the (unofficial) secretariat to review the relevance of the Plan to their functional areas.

These meetings were lead by senior staff in ISS. Scenarios in the first draft of the Plan were discussed. They were broadly welcomed, but simultaneously criticised for being over ambitious. Through active listening, everyday situations were described and subsequently encapsulated as scenarios. After the meeting, a short report was prepared to playback the key points of the discussion and then passed for the Strategic Plan's editors to consider.

Besides the report, new scenarios based on the discussion were drafted and submitted. These scenarios were much more realistic and succinct than those in the first draft of the Plan. The writing style became stronger and more confident, this was maybe because it is easier to capture the essence of someone else's thoughts than the writer's own. Whatever the cause, there's no denying that the scenarios were now more focussed and credible. Of this new batch there were no scenarios that were technology led, rather these were scenarios where the underlying technology was understated - it was user requirements that were shining through.

With the considerable input from this round of consultations a new draft of the Strategic Plan was produced for consideration by ITPC.

When the scenarios were discussed at ITPC, the opening statement was that 'they make the document come alive'. While the scenarios were welcomed as an innovation in a strategic document, there was some constructive criticism of their detail, omission and emphasis.

### **5.6. Consultation - Phase 3: Wider Consultation**

This phase was a staged process. Initially ITPC was given online access to the third version of the Strategic Plan. The invitation was then extended to IT staff across the University and finally all

University staff and student representatives. Feedback was invited from all. The central IT service, ISS, hosted a staff meeting to build and develop further scenarios. The colleagues rose to the occasion with scenarios that were witty, technology rich and in some cases could be classified as science fiction. Again the strength of scenarios for encapsulating a user experience was amply illustrated.

The online publication led to over 100 responses. Most were from individuals but several were collective responses from academic bodies, for example a Faculty Board. Some responses sparked more scenario writing, which were played back to the individual who'd commented. One or two responses included scenarios of their vision of the future. The Scenario had become an accepted and widely understood means of communicating the user experience.

## **6. THE ROLE OF SCENARIOS IN THE STRATEGIC PLAN'S FORMULATION**

### **6.1. First Impressions**

During the working group discussions, a contributor would often reach for a real-life example of a service as received or perceived. These examples would then be embellished by others before finally being broken down to a user requirement. These sample experiences were never formally captured, but they were scenarios in waiting. Their ability to capture the user requirement was duly noted by the Plan's authors.

The preliminary draft of the Strategic Plan didn't have scenarios, but did assign them a role of agreeing a user requirement during the development of action plans. Their role would have been to translate a strategic objective into a service development, which in turn would have determined an ICT infrastructure requirement.

Whilst the preliminary draft was being completed a number of scenarios including the "The Flooded Lecture Theatre" and "Staying in touch with Family and Friends" were drafted and shared between the Plan's secretariat. The purpose of the exercise was to verify that scenarios could act as vehicles for capturing user requirements and then taking these forward into the development of work-plans. The scenarios audience was to be the project boards and project teams.

In the event, the preliminary draft Plan was abandoned. A new draft Plan was developed which adopted the structure of Observations; Objective; and Transformational Statements. To this structure, some scenarios were rapidly drafted and added.

The inspiration for this first batch of scenarios was multi-sourced. Some took their cue from the Working Party Reports and their meetings; others came from the daily experience of IT at Lancaster; whilst some were inspired by articles in the technical press. All in all, these scenarios were a mixed bunch of a user experiences that might and might not be delivered in the lifetime of this Strategy. It would not be unfair to say this set of scenarios were of variable quality in terms of their ambitions for the user and technologies, as well as the writing itself. (Writing very short stories that engage and explain was not the forte of the Strategic Plan's ghost writers.) In spite of these misgivings, a dozen scenarios were included in the first draft of the Strategy that was presented to the IT Policy Committee.

### **6.2. Capturing the Senior User Requirement**

As stated previously, when the Strategy was presented to ITPC the reaction to the inclusion of the scenarios was that 'they make the document come alive'. While the scenarios themselves attracted the same constructive criticism as the rest of the Plan of their detail, omission and emphasis they are a welcomed as an innovation in a strategic document.

During the series meetings with Senior Users, the Scenarios came in for heavier criticism. Some were thought to be too aspirational and unrealistic in that they were unlikely to be delivered within the lifetime of this Strategic Plan. This criticism was fair. During these meetings, the Senior User would describe a frustration with their current ICT provision and then describe a more idealised world. As part of reporting of these meetings, alongside proposals for revising a theme's Objective or

Transformational Statements, scenarios were drafted and offered back for comment. Through the ensuing interaction, a scenario that did capture the user requirement was development.

The characteristics of these scenarios were that they were less verbose, technologically-agnostic and more realistic than the original set. During this phase, scenarios such as the “Digital Lecture Theatre”, “The Student Login Experience” and “Website Creation” emerged and were included in the second draft of the ICT Strategic Plan that was reviewed by ITPC.

### 6.3. Capturing the User Requirement

During the final and third phase of the consultation process, users were proposing new scenarios. These proposals were either in outline or sometimes fully fledged in the style of those already in the Strategic Plan. The role of the Plan’s secretariat became easier, as they became editors of these scenarios, so that they fitted alongside existing text. During this phase scenarios such as “Feedback on Learning” and “The High Flying Academic” were included. Because of pressures on space in the Strategic Plan, earlier scenarios were discarded on the grounds of irrelevance or technology overkill. Other scenarios were trimmed and focussed as the Plan’s secretariat became more confident in expressing the user requirement in the form of scenarios.

### 6.4. Scenarios in the Strategic Plan

Firstly, there isn’t always a one-to-one relationship between the Transformational Statements and the Scenarios. Rather, a scenario will capture one of more Transformational Statements. Secondly, by their nature Scenarios are more verbose than the equivalent Transformational Statements, which in turn means that considerations of space restrict the number and length of Scenarios that can reasonably appear in the Strategic Plan. Nevertheless, 25 Scenarios appear in the Plan. A brief description of each Scenario is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Scenarios in the Strategic Plan

<i>No.</i>	<i>Scenario Title</i>	<i>Description</i>
1.	Targeted External Communication	Portal for student and her family
2.	Researcher Presentation in Schools	Two-way webcasting
3.	Converting Interest to Commitment	Tracking student enquiry to admission
4.	Accessibility	Web services for everyone
5.	Staying in touch with family and friends	Comprehensive e-communication for ResNet students
6.	The Student Login Experience	A near-utopian (yet achievable) view of login by a student
7.	Laptops for Learning	A laptop loan scheme
8.	Feedback on Learning	E-services for students to improve their key skills
9.	The Digital Lecture Theatre	Consistent experience in well equipped lecture theatre
10.	Support for Academic Staff PCs	Support for home users
11.	Home Accounts	Delivering University bandwidth capability to the home
12.	A Learning Space for Me	A Personalised Learning Environment

<i>No.</i>	<i>Scenario Title</i>	<i>Description</i>
13.	Flexible Developmental Support - for the Experienced Lecturer	On-line learning and support for VLEs
14.	HEC Resource Brokering	Effective use of shared High End Computing resources
15.	High End Computing Infrastructure Management	Combining research monies to achieve economies of scale.
16.	Website creation	Rapid development of web presence for new research centre
17.	Research Support for Programming	Illustrate support for parallelization of code
18.	Capabilities for all	A supported ICT toolbox for researchers
19.	IT facilities for Visitors	Rapid access for third parties to access the internet
20.	Induction for New Academic Staff	Inclusion after appointment but prior to her arrival
21.	Staying in Touch	Alumni community communications
22.	Modelled Organization	Guiding new staff through University process
23.	High Flying Academic	Maintaining contact when away on University business
24.	International Partnerships	Supporting partnerships in teaching and research
25.	Links with the Business Community	Developing relationships, supported by ICT.

## 7. ADVICE ON WRITING SCENARIOS - 8 GOLDEN RULES

The ICT Strategic Plan's secretariat didn't begin to understand the power of their scenarios until the Plan's initial publication. But as a vehicle for capturing a user experience they were ideal. They put flesh on the bones of Plan. They became a vehicle for defining 'how things should be' and described what the Plan might mean from a user's perspective.

Writing scenarios is a learning process, but can rapidly become a way of encapsulating a user requirement. The disciplines we evolved for writing our best scenarios are encapsulated in our 8 Golden Rules.

- a) **Rule 1: Keep it simple:** Our earlier scenarios suffered from over elaboration. By keeping a scenario simple, the message is unclouded and the greater the chance of the underlying message being understood and easier for a user to relate to.
- b) **Rule 2: Keep it short:** The reader will speed read and dwell on scenarios that interest them; space will be limited and it is better to include several short scenarios than one lengthy one.
- c) **Rule 3: Be user centric:** Tell the story from the angle of the user and their experience and not from the viewpoint of service delivery.
- d) **Rule 4: Make it personal:** Have a central character whose role and situation is described in the first sentence.
- e) **Rule 5: Make it real:** Use real-life experiences and envisage a more idealised experience in the scenario.
- f) **Rule 6: Be inclusive:** Use characters that represent your institution, mix male and female characters, academic disciplines, on and off campus situations - but avoid stereotyping although you can try some anti-stereotyping.
- g) **Rule 7: Keep the technology references to a minimum:** The scenarios are aimed at the broadest readership. Making them technical either restricts their relevance to the user

experience or switches the discussion to the technology - away from the user requirement.

- h) **Rule 8: Have one eye on the implementation:** Whilst setting out how you see the user experience developing, have an inkling of how this experience might be delivered by IT.

## 8. CURRENT STATUS OF THE ICT STRATEGY AT LANCASTER

This paper has been written ahead of the implementation of the Strategic Plan. At the time of writing, the ICT Strategic Plan is still being deconstructed into action plans, projects and programmes. Simultaneously, a précis of Plan has been submitted to form 'The ICT Strategy for Lancaster University' and is completing its journey through the senior committees of the University as part of its formal adoption.

The process of developing the Strategic Plan is unparalleled at Lancaster in terms of its communication and involvement of its stakeholders. The use of scenarios has been fundamental to encapsulating user requirements into the Plan and making it accessible to the widest possible audience.

## 9. REFERENCES

Oxford University website. *ICT Strategy Programme; Work Task K Scenarios*: [http://www.ict.ox.ac.uk/strategy/worktasks/k/SG-WT-K-05\\_scenarios\\_2.xml](http://www.ict.ox.ac.uk/strategy/worktasks/k/SG-WT-K-05_scenarios_2.xml) Retrieved 24th January 2008

Lancaster University website. *Vice Chancellor's welcome - Lancaster University*. Retrieved 11th May, 2008, from: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/vc/vcwelcome.htm> .

Lancaster University website. *Annual Report 2007 - Lancaster University*. Retrieved 11th May, 2008, from: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/facilities/annualreport.htm> .