

**RESPONSE TO *LEARNING FOR LIFE- REVIEW OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION FUNDING AND POLICY: A POLICY DISCUSSION  
PAPER***

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## **1. Background**

We present this response to *Learning for Life- Review of Higher Education Funding and Policy: A Policy Discussion Paper* (hereafter called *Learning for Life*) as a group who have been involved during 1997 in an Evaluation and Investigations Program (EIP) study commissioned by DEETYA to review the involvement of global media networks in higher education provision, and assess its possible impact on the higher education sector, including policy implications. The report, titled *New Media and Borderless Education: A Review of the Convergence between Global Media Networks and Higher Education Provision* (hereafter called *New Media and Borderless Education*), due to be released by DEETYA on December 22, 1997.

The report is the product of seven months of extensive research, involving interviews with 135 people from more than 100 organisations in Australia, North America, Europe and East Asia, representing media, computing and telecommunications companies, corporate education providers, the higher education sector, government, inter-government and industry consultancy organisations. The aim was to research the declared intentions of the major players in the field, to test these through interviews with senior representatives in relevant areas of business, government and education, and to draw out the short- to medium-term implications for Australian higher education.

The DEETYA EIP project was triggered in expectation of an imminent challenge to Australian higher education from global media networks, because of possible control by these corporations over convergent technologies which can be used for the delivery of educational content. In *New Media and Borderless Education*, we report that there are significant cultural and economic barriers to such an expansion of corporate involvement in higher education. While some training and continuing professional education courses had been developed for “global delivery”, such projects were still in an early stage of development, and limited in scope. Indeed, the term ‘global’ may be inappropriate and unhelpful in this context, as most activity is taking place at a local, national or regional level.

## 2. Assessing the Future Operating Environment

Chapter 2 of *Learning for Life* considers the forces for change in higher education, the most notable of which are the “digital revolution”, or developments in communications and information technologies (CITs) associated with digitisation and convergence, and the globalisation of higher education. *Learning for Life* indicates that the major changes arising from these developments will include:

- greater scope for location-independent interaction between teachers, students and educational institutions;
- greater ability for students to “mix and match” offerings from different higher educational service providers to “assemble the learning ‘packages’ that best fit their needs” (p. 9);
- scope for greater collaboration between universities, between universities and other providers of higher education, and with the private sector;
- ability of education providers to use the Internet and Web-based technologies to reduce costs of delivery of education through economies of scale, and for courses to “be increasingly designed for narrower segments of global markets” (p. 10);
- greater competition from other national universities, other educational service providers, international institutions, and corporations in adjacent media and communications industries.

Our study of these emerging models of higher education provision shares a similar assessment of the future operating environment. Where we have taken a different approach is in undertaking a more detailed assessment of what is the current “state of play” in these areas. We also consciously undertook a “reality check” on some projections, drawing attention to critical issues which we clustered around five core matters, termed the five “P’s”: practical issues, pedagogical issues, policy issues, philosophical considerations, and personal issues (See *New Media and Borderless Education*, Chapter 4).

In this submission, we have focused upon three issues: the likely nature of media involvement in higher education, which is far more likely to be in the areas of service delivery than content provision; the need for caution when assessing the economic costs and benefits associated with the use of CITs in higher education delivery; and the paucity of understanding which exists about the demand of different segments of the student population for flexible delivery and the use of CITs in higher education.

### 2.1 *Media Involvement: Content or Carriage?*

Our research suggests that the corporate sector, particularly in the growing areas of media and communications, remains unconvinced of the profitability of involvement in higher education, and the desirability of involvement in an area which is outside of their ‘core’ business. As one leading Australian respondent put it, “There is no ‘natural fit’ between commercial media and higher education” (Daniel Petre, PBL Online).

While there is interest in collaboration in new forms of educational delivery using CITs, a distinction is drawn between involvement in the *delivery* of programs and the

*development* of programs, with the latter being widely seen as still the proper preserve of the universities and other specialist providers, both because it is their core business, and because they are “branded” as institutions which provide programs which have student and employer acceptance. This is similar to the distinction made in the media and communications sector between involvement in the carriage of content, and involvement in development of the content itself. Where media have become involved with private educational providers, as in the case of Jones Education Company, it has been largely as carriers of content, or as consultants in the production of courseware.

## **2.2. Practical Issues in Online Education**

There is also a need for caution in associating the online delivery of courses with lower-cost provision of higher education. The *Learning for Life* Discussion Paper argues that Web-based technologies can lower the variable costs of educational provision, presumably by lowering the labour input through the purchase or licensing of “learning packages” (p. 10). Many practitioners in higher education are convinced, however, that technology-supported education is not ultimately a cheaper option, with one US commentator advising online and distance educators, “Resist the temptation to sell what you do as cost-efficient. We’re not doing this because its cheaper, but because it’s better.” (Munitz, Cal State, ICDE 18<sup>th</sup> World Conference, June 1997).

There is also considerable disagreement about the sorts of cost/benefit analysis which has been associated with the introduction of CITs in higher education (Cukier 1997). On the cost side, one difficulty is that the costs associated with the preparation of new materials by staff are often at best notionally accounted for, while the concept of “benefits” runs into the problem of how to measure intangibles, such as cultural change among academic and administrative staff. One danger with studies of the cost-effectiveness of enhanced CIT usage is that the extent to which costs are passed on to students or staff are neglected in the “above the line” calculations, yet are critical to evaluations of improved educational outcomes, as well as being crucial to equitable access to higher education.

## **2.3. A Student-Centred Approach?**

Most current discussion of the use of CITs in higher education pays little attention to pedagogical issues associated with teaching and learning. This is consistent with the extent to which the debate has been driven by issues other than those related to teaching and learning, as pointed out by Professor Diana Laurillard of UK Open University:

*The development of educational media has an odd mix of engines driving it- technological pull, commercial empire-building, financial drag, logistical imperatives, pedagogical pleas- and between them they generate a strange assortment of equipment and systems from which the educational technologist must fashion something respectable. None... was developed as a response to a pedagogical imperative- and it shows. (Laurillard 1993: 99)*

It is our contention that failure to place teaching and learning issues at the centre of considerations about the introduction of CITs could lead to a fragmented and *ad hoc* approach being taken to developing flexible learning options and technology-enhanced approaches in Australian higher education. Given that the West Committee has stressed the possibility of a decade of managed change toward “a policy framework which places the student and the quality of his or her learning experiences at its core” (p.6), it is essential that pedagogical issues are at the centre of thinking at the beginnings of a process of transformation. As Tom Reeves of the University of Georgia has observed:

*Many faculty assume that the WWW is a ‘magic box’, and that simply putting a course on the Web guarantees better learning... The World Wide Web does not guarantee learning any more than the presence of a library on campus guarantees learning. (Reeves 1996: 3)*

It became apparent in our research that there are major differences within the student population which affect the likelihood of effective take-up of virtual/distance learning options. It appears to be a more appropriate pedagogical model for mature-age or postgraduate students, who (a) are more likely to need flexible delivery options, and (b) are typically more motivated toward independent self-directed learning. There is general agreement that, for the undergraduate 18-24 student cohort, face-to-face teaching and the on-campus experience are essential both to formal education and to formative development.

This is one indicator of the necessity for greater research to be undertaken into what actual student demand for flexible delivery is likely to be, before committing to major infrastructural investments in CITs which may prove to be inappropriate. If a student-centred approach to Australian higher education is to be more than mere rhetoric, there must be greater consultation with students themselves.

CIT-enhanced teaching and learning also requires significant reskilling of teachers, which is not simply about the ability to use technologies, but also about developing higher-order pedagogical and cognitive skills, in order to ensure that teaching is enhanced by the use of CITs, and is not simply the discredited practice of “teaching/learning from a box.” Close attention will also need to be paid to the technical and support staff implications of these changes, as the greater use of CITs in on-campus as well as off-campus course delivery has significantly increased the demands upon technical and support staff in Australian universities over the last decade.

### **3. Accreditation and Consumer Protection: Threshold Issues**

We share with *Learning for Life* the view that issues of accreditation, forms of government support, and questions of consumer protection will become more important with diversification in the number and type of higher education providers, and as international competition increases. Accreditation in the formal sense has two distinctive dimensions:

- certification of programs of study and institutions by regulatory bodies

- crediting of units/modules of study, and of prior workplace learning, by established universities, colleges and the VET sector

Accreditation also has an informal as well as a formal dimension, with the informal element being that of recognition of programs by employers and the general community.

Australia is well regarded internationally for its the strongly regulated “government-guaranteed” university quality assurances (eg. quality assurance criteria administered by DEETYA), which has also been effective at the national level in ensuring well-regarded degree qualifications. This is unlikely to be sufficient, however, if moves toward the borderless delivery of education using CITs and the emergence of corporate universities and non-traditional providers gathers pace. In the absence of effective international accreditation procedures, there is a need for a coordinated approach to registration and accreditation of new and emerging post-secondary education and training programs, as well as a robust framework for consumer protection in what is likely to be an increasingly user-pays environment.

Moves to relax accreditation procedures would be at odds with trends in the East Asian region toward closer scrutiny of international programs undertaken by local students. This is seen in the active role of the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation and its moves to charge overseas providers for formal accreditation, as well as in moves in Singapore and Malaysia to more carefully evaluate the offerings of overseas providers, particularly in distance and “virtual” learning modes. If Australian universities are to extend course offerings in the Asian region, there is a strong expectation in the host countries that these will be based on long-term strategic alliances rather than the “poaching” of students through low-cost, low-quality programs.

#### **4. The Pitfalls of Futurology**

The *Learning for Life* Policy Discussion Paper undertakes an assessment of the strategic issues facing Australian higher education in the context of significant forces for change. In such times of change, there can be a tendency to engage in unsubstantiated and potentially misleading arguments about future trajectories.

One instance of potentially misleading futurology is to be found in Appendix 11 of the *Learning for Life* Policy Discussion Paper, titled “Australian Higher Education in the Era of Mass Customisation”, prepared for the West Committee by Global Alliance Limited. While we recognise that this Report is intended to provoke debate rather than be a definitive overview of higher education, we believe it is important to note areas where its projections may be positively misleading for the future planning of development of Australian higher education.

One problem with the study is a tendency at some points to emphasise one aspect of a development without considering its counter-side. An example of this is the study of the cost effectiveness of “mega-universities” (p. 21) ignores issues of educational quality. For example, it notes that the Korea National Open University provides courses at 5% of other Korean universities, but does not acknowledge its high failure

rates, estimated at 70-90%. This problem is not only widely known in Korea, and seen by the KNOU as needing urgent attention, but is pointed out in the source which the GAL study references (Daniel 1996).

More generally, there is a tendency to presume too much from developments which are at an early stage. One such area is courseware development, where it is simply presumed that localised adaptation of “global programs” is relatively straightforward across countries, institutions and courses. We would, by contrast, argue that levels of adaptability are highly variable, with the most adaptable areas being those characterised by:

- skills and concepts which are readily translatable across countries and cultures;
- a strongly vocational emphasis;
- high student and/or industry demand for tailored and flexibly delivered programs;
- strong industry pressure for standardisation of content across institutions.

There is also a tendency to conflate national and global markets as alternative scenarios to a university system which has been predominantly oriented to local markets in the recent past. What our studies observed was that while many new education providers which utilised CITs presented their potential reach as global, they in fact catered largely to student populations which were local or national. This was certainly the case with some of the best known “virtual universities”, such as the University of Phoenix and the Western Governors’ University initiative.

This is part of a larger problem with the study of neglecting the variety of markets and of modes of provision which can be presumed to characterise increasingly segmented educational markets. If studies such as Global Alliance’s are correct in observing that we are at the early stages of what will be a period of profound transformation in higher education worldwide, we would argue that it is more appropriate for policy makers in Australia to seek to broaden and deepen their understanding of the characteristics of the emerging markets, rather than base policy upon highly speculative scenario-building.

We would thus emphasise the importance of studies being commissioned into student preferences for flexible delivery and emerging models of education, across different student cohorts, such as “traditional” undergraduates (18-24 age), international students, postgraduate students, open and distance learning students, recreational adult learners, and continuing and professional education students.

We would also caution against a precipitate response to the potential of CITs to reduce the labour component of university education. Our case studies of best practice programs, such as Duke University’s Global Executive MBA, indicates the opposite, if quality is to be a consideration.

We urge you to pay close attention to the EIP study, *New Media and Borderless Education*, particularly to the discussion of some limits to globalisation (Chapter 1), issues to be considered in technologically-mediated educational systems (Chapter 4), and the analysis undertaken of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

facing Australian higher education in the future operating environment (Chapter 6), as well as to the Report's recommendations.

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