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Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Theme Issue: Strategic Enterprises Down Under

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Background and Rationale

Like all fields and forms of education, open and distance learning is complex, contextualized, and contingent (Harreveld and Danaher, in press; Nouwens, Erdinc and Danaher, 2004) – and is attended by a particular and peculiar ambivalence (see also Stronach and MacLure, 1997). On the one hand, open and distance learning is often accompanied by commentaries about access, equity, and social justice, whereby the empowering and libratory potential of learning in one's own place/ space and at one's own pace/ timescale is highlighted and lauded. On the other hand, open and distance learning is as subject as any other form of educational provision to the influence of forces associated with late capitalism and globalization, at least some of which are linked with the potential destruction of family, workplace, and community relationships and social capital (Rowan, Bartlett and Evans, 1997).

This enduring complexity and ambivalence are represented starkly in this first theme issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* to be devoted to a single country, Australia. *Strategic Enterprises Down Under: Engaging Drivers of Change in Australian Universities' Open and Distance Learning Provision* presents six research-based and refereed studies of key issues pertaining to open and distance learning as it is enacted through a number of 'pressure points' in Australian contemporary universities. As we elaborate below, these pressure points resonate far beyond the geographical space of 'the land down under;' they are associated integrally with the reconfiguration and transformation throughout the Western world of the welfare state into an uncertain amalgam of corporate managerialism and economic rationalism, characterized by the principle of 'user pays,' post compulsory educational pathways, and the construction of learning as a good to be bought and sold (Danaher, Gale and Erben, 2000).

Within this broader context, this theme issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* focuses on a topic in Australian universities' open and distance learning provision that is also of concern in most other countries. This topic is the multiple forms of engagement with the drivers of change underpinning such provision. These drivers are many and varied, and include concerns with benchmarking and standards; assuring and ensuring quality; the internationalization of both curriculum and competition; the commodification of knowledge; the massification of higher education; and the increasing reliance on non-government funding sources.

In many respects, the field of open and distance learning provides a lightning rod or a litmus test for the impact and implications of these drivers of change in the Australian university system.

This field is subject to ongoing redefinitions as 'flexible learning' and 'online learning' enter the equation and push the boundaries between 'on-campus' and 'off-campus' learning and teaching. Competing – and ambivalent – claims are made about open and distance learning as widening equity of access to higher education and as replicating existing socio-cultural elites – as well as being more cost effective and more expensive than the face-to-face mode (Hülsmann, 2004, p. 3-4).

Managing these and other debates and tensions is no easy business. One potentially instructive approach to mapping the diversity and effectiveness of the management of open and distance learning in Australian contemporary universities is through the conceptual lens of the enterprise system. Enterprise systems "are packages of computer applications that support many, even most, aspects of a company's information needs" (McConachie, 2001, p. 194). Given the centrality of these enterprises to any university's sustainability – even survival – the challenges and opportunities involved in their efficient and strategic management might be argued to encapsulate the broader risks and potentialities of administering Australian universities' open and distance learning provision. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the interplays between these challenges and opportunities and these risks and potentialities evoke tensions between centralized and decentralized decision-making, questions about which groups constitute universities' legitimate stakeholders, and debates about what universities in the early 21st century should be.

Within this framework, the authors of the articles in this issue address three key questions currently confronting open and distance learning in Australian universities:

1. What is the current 'state of play' of open and distance learning provision in Australian contemporary universities?

2. In what ways does that 'state of play' reflect and represent broader drivers of change in Australian higher education?

3. To what extent does the strategic management in Australian contemporary universities provide effective and efficient engagements with those drivers of change?

In seeking to address these questions, the issue is directed also at considering some of the wider implications of enterprise systems and drivers of change that extend beyond the Australian higher education sector. That is, these systems and drivers might well help to identify and articulate with equivalent principles, policies, and practices in open and distance learning in universities in other countries, where the strategic engagements with contemporary developments take on particular forms and specialized significance.

Process and Structure

Agreement 'in principle' to this theme issue having been garnered from the journal's Editor, the issue guest editors contacted a number of open and distance learning researchers in Australian universities, representing as many different states as possible. (In Australia, responsibility for higher education lies with the federal government, but state governments have input into particular higher education policies and programs.) The six refereed articles in this issue represent five universities in four states, with the respondents representing a sixth university in a fifth state.

In the first article, Rick Cummings, Rob Phillips, Rhondda Tilbrook, and Kate Lowe, all from the Teaching and Learning Centre at Murdoch University in Western Australia, advocate what they call a 'middle-out' approach to university decision-making and change management, an approach

that they argue has important strengths in comparison with the more conventional 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches. They illustrate this argument in terms of three cases of change management at Murdoch University:

- The Murdoch Online Mainstreaming project

- A new approach to the development of flexible learning units (courses)

- Mapping the alignment between unit (course) outcomes and graduate attributes

On the basis of these three cases, the authors analyze the three change management approaches in relation to six characteristics: leadership; champions; planning; purpose; institutional culture; and support. They contend that, while the 'middle-out' approach has several advantages, its long-term effectiveness depends on its eventual adoption into universities' formal and/or informal decision-making procedures.

In the second article, Ted Nunan from the Flexible Learning Centre at the University of South Australia examines the implications for open and distance learning provision of Australian higher education being constructed by the federal governments in terms of a (de)regulated market and competition for student places and funding. His analysis is framed around five specific features of markets:

- A defined field of production and consumption

- Competition among producers

- Consumers seeking identifiable products

- Price determination and monetary exchange between producers and consumers

- Providers and consumers operating according to how they perceive the market

Nunan concludes his examination by making a number of predictions about future forms of open and distance learning provision, particularly if Australian higher education markets become deregulated.

The third and fourth articles focus on different aspects of quality assurance and Australian university open and distance learning provision. In the third article, Ian Reid from the Flexible Learning Centre at the University of South Australia deploys critical discourse analysis to interrogate the submissions to the Australian Universities Quality Agency by two Australian universities: the University of Southern Queensland, a regional university with a transnational education focus; and the University of Adelaide, one of the traditional and prestigious 'sandstone' universities. Reid asserts that each institution's construction of the relationship between quality and open and distance learning reflects its respective decision-makers' assumptions about its particular location in the higher education marketplace.

In the fourth article, Alistair Inglis from the Centre for Staff Learning and Educational Development at Victoria University compares two frameworks for conceptualizing the quality of open and distance learning provision in Australian universities: the Quality Framework; and the Benchmarking Framework. The comparison is conducted in terms of four criteria: scope; institution type; framework structure; and intended applications. Inglis contends that the Benchmarking Framework is likely to be useful in comparing different universities' approaches

to open and distance learning, while the Quality Framework is more helpful in assisting operational decision-making at the level of an individual organizational unit.

The fifth and sixth articles evaluate enterprise systems and open and distance learning provision at two Queensland regional universities with national and international outreach. In the fifth article, Alan Smith from the Distance and e-Learning Centre at the University of Southern Queensland reflects on a number of initiatives carried out by the university to engage proactively with sectoral imperatives for change. Focusing on change management processes associated with enterprise systems, Smith considers several examples of initiatives deploying such systems, including the e-University Project, the Generic Online Offline Delivery (GOOD) Project, and USQAssist. He argues that enterprise systems can articulate with a fifth generation model of distance education to facilitate effective and efficient change management.

In the sixth article, Jeanne McConachie, Patrick Alan Danaher, Jo Luck, and David Jones from the Division of Teaching and Learning Services and the Faculty of Informatics and Communication at Central Queensland University present a different view of enterprise systems. They use the distinction between teleological (centralized, purpose driven, and problem solving in orientation) and a teleological (decentralized, locally adopted, and flexible) approaches to systems development to analyze the results of an online survey completed by university staff members and students, particularly in relation to *Blackboard* as the university's officially designated course management system. This analysis is used in turn to identify broader tensions and struggles around institutional identity, and multiple possible approaches to linking such identity to engagements with change.

The respondents' text has been written by Michael Singh and Jinghe Han from the School of Education and Early Childhood Studies at the University of Western Sydney in New South Wales. Their response is presented in terms of the possible implications of the six articles for understanding the new labor relationships and technologies of Australian universities exporting degrees to meet the rapidly increasing international demand for higher education. One crucial corollary of universities operating in the higher education global marketplace is relentless pressures to cut costs and to boost profits, in order to ensure competitive market share and institutional survival. These pressures are met generally through a combination of deploying technological enterprise systems and intensifying work expectations of individuals and groups, with important implications for both quality assurance and university administration. Singh and Han conclude on a hopeful note, by observing the counter narratives to educational marketization and technological determinism that are evident in different sites and spaces in the higher education terrain.

Implications and Significance

Despite the focus in this issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* on one country – Australia – and one sector – higher education – we hope that readers of the articles in the issue will observe many resonances and similarities with their own countries, sectors, and institutions. Such an outcome is important if the issue is to achieve one of its goals: to use the Australian context as a springboard for reflecting on broader questions about open and distance learning provision, enterprise systems, and drivers of change.

One index of these broader questions is the terms that were cross referenced across two or more of the articles. Some of these terms were as follows:

- Benchmarking

- *Blackboard* and *WebCT* as specific course or learning management systems

- Drivers of change

- Markets

- Quality assurance

- Quality improvement

In themselves, each of these terms is likely to be relevant and significant to individual readers. What they have in common – the ongoing tension between government underfunding and surveillance, or between universities as sites of scholarship and as market competitors – is of concern to everyone with an interest in open and distance learning provision and with a commitment to maximizing the effectiveness, efficiency, and equity of such provision.

Another index of the broader international relevance of the articles in this issue is the responses that they provide to the three questions outlined earlier in this introduction:

1. What is the current 'state of play' of open and distance learning provision in Australian contemporary universities?

2. In what ways does that 'state of play' reflect and represent broader drivers of change in Australian higher education?

3. To what extent does the strategic management in Australian contemporary universities provide effective and efficient engagements with those drivers of change?

The articles demonstrate that, despite common pedagogical possibilities arising from current technological developments, those possibilities are enacted in different ways according to the particular institution in which they occur. Thus open and distance learning provision in Australian contemporary universities is as complex, diverse, and subject to multiple international, national, provincial or state, and local influences as in universities in any other country. This same point applies to the universities' engagements with the drivers of change: while many such drivers are common across universities and countries (for example, the massification of higher education, the commodification of knowledge, and the demise of the welfare state; see also Cookson, 2002, p. 1), individual universities' engagements with those drivers are as much localized as they are globalized in character.

So we end this guest editors' introduction to this special theme issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* as we began it: on a note of ambivalence. The drivers of change identified above, and the strategic engagements with those drivers enacted by Australian contemporary universities, are in many cases positive and encouraging: for example, the massification of higher education is providing access to job opportunities and personal and professional development for many more individuals than was previously the case. At the same time, despite the diversity of localized engagements by individual universities, there is a worrying trend toward homogenization and standardization as those universities respond to demands to count, measure, and quantify such processes as quality assurance. It remains to be seen whether the challenges and opportunities highlighted in the articles in this issue, and the tensions and struggles that frame and constrain them, create strategic enterprises – whether 'down under' or elsewhere – that are empowering and liberatory or controlling and restrictive.

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