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New Media and Borderless Education: Towards the Virtual University?

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ABSTRACT

There is a strong and growing view that the impact of the new generation of digitised and converged communications and information technologies will have a profound impact upon the future of higher education, as captured in the term 'virtual university'. Associated with this has been the question of likely future involvement of media and communications corporations in higher education delivery, and implications for the traditional university sector. In 1997, an Australian research team was commissioned by the Australian Federal Government's Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) to assess this involvement and likely future trends. The study, titled New Media and Borderless Education, observed that while there are significant changes happening in higher education internationally, arising from the interaction of growth in the corporate training and lifelong learning markets, the emergence of new education providers and international expansion of degree programs, and the growing use of CITS in course delivery, the changes are incremental rather than epochal, and there is a need for some caution in accepting arguments claiming fundamental change in higher education. There are also a range of practical issues in the delivery of such programs which need further attention, as well as policy issues such as course accreditation and consumer protection.

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, with pervasive concern about the crisis of many of the institutions of the modern nation-state, it should not be surprising that the future of the University, is increasingly being put into question, at least in the form in which we are familiar. There is currently a great deal of scholarly, journalistic, governmental and institution-specific material emerging on the impact of communication and information
technologies, the globalised and information-based economy, and the future of higher education. Not surprisingly, in a period of rapid and ground-shifting technological change, there are those who act as eager advocates for the new technologies, whether out of material interests in its further advancement, or a genuine belief in the utopian possibilities of the new technologies. James Carey drew attention to the "rhetoric of the electronic sublime" in late 19th century American discourses about the impact of electricity, while Carolyn Marvin noted the constitution of electrical professionals into a "priestly caste" capable of generating a discourse of progress which the cultivation of a "textual community" wishing to promote the technology and its uses. In contemporary discourses of cyberculture, one can see such figures as Microsoft's Bill Gates and Nicholas Negroponte of MIT adopting such a standpoint, and their arguments are proving persuasive in considerations of the future of the university in the information society.

In such a context of change, communications and media researchers can bring two important considerations to bear upon policy processes in these areas. The first is some sort of historical perspective upon the relationship between changes in communications and information technologies (CITs) and changes in social, political and economic institutions, policies and practices. In discussing the implications of the extended use of CITs in higher education, for example, there are important parallels with recent debates about the impact of transborder satellite communications on national media systems, which are worth returning to. Second, there is the scope to undertake grounded empirical research into these questions, which understand the uptake of CITs

1 J. Carey and J. J. Quirk, "Rhetoric of the Electronic Sublime", in J. Carey, Communications as Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman 1989); C. Marvin, When Old Technologies Were New:
in an area such as higher education to be not simply driven by the nature of the technologies themselves - the standpoint of "technological determinism" - but by the interactions between technology suppliers, decision-making institutions and end-users. This is not to say that nothing will change, or that change is necessarily opposed. As contemporary interpreters of Marshall McLuhan, such as W. Lambert Gardiner, note, there is often debate about what socio-technological changes we want long after the changes have in fact happened, or to try and assimilate new technologies into existing paradigms of thought and action, what McLuhan termed "rearviewmirrorism". It is to recognize, however, that in such contexts of change, the menu of policy choices which are open as responses is broader, and more nationally and regionally-specific, than the discourses of technological utopianism allow for.

New Technologies and the Changing Higher Education Environment: The End of the Traditional University?

The "digital revolution", or developments in communications and information technologies (CITs) associated with digitisation and convergence, and the globalisation of higher education, are expected to have profound impacts upon higher education over the next few years. At their strongest, claims are made that we are witnessing the demise of the traditional, nationally-based, "bricks-and-mortar" university, and the rise of the globalised, networked and "virtual" university. Some believe that "universities won't survive", or that "the ultimate providers of an electronic curriculum will not be

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universities... but rather commercial firms”; others warn that we should “watch this space for a Rupert Murdoch-owned cable university”, or that a major challenge is immanent from an alliance of “the international giants of the communications industries” with “one of the great Ivy league institutions”. 3

These claims stem from assessments of the changing international higher education environment, the scope for CITs to be associated with new forms of education provision and international competition, and the problematic issues which face the higher education sector in the present situation.

A recent Australian Federal Government report on the future of higher education identified major forces for change in the sector as including:

- 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;
- 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;

• greater competition from other national universities, other educational service providers, international institutions, and corporations in adjacent media and communications industries. 4

There has been concern that these trends, and particularly the trend toward greater competition, has the potential to undermine the traditional national universities unless they radically alter their methods of operation. Several interrelated scenarios have been postulated within media, academic and policy circles:

• major media corporations will enter the higher education market, either establishing their own universities or brokering access to the best university teachers and courses using advanced information technology;

• prestigious overseas universities will extend access to domestic students using advanced information technology, either under their own initiative or in partnership with media organisations as indicated above;

• new higher education organisations will develop, possibly franchised versions of overseas institutions, which operate flexibly and offer tailored education;

• existing or new vocational education providers, particularly some of the more aggressive private providers, will extend their activities into the university sphere.
The potential for these new competitors to undermine the traditional universities is seen as being related to change factors within the higher education sector, which include:

- reduced public funding for higher education in almost all Western national economies and, since the currency crises of 1997, new pressures on Asian governments to reduce public spending to comply with IMF agreements;
- changing demographics in student populations in developed countries, leading to an increase in part-time education and training as students increasingly become older, i.e. beyond the traditional school-leaver age of 18–24;
- rapid technological innovation, requiring constant updating of knowledge and skills for professionals in work (continuing, professional and corporate education/lifelong learning), and in many cases necessitating more flexible delivery of course materials;
- the potential of CITs (particularly satellite and cable TV and the Internet) for mass distribution from a central source and for interactive communication between 'receivers', which overlaps with the growing requirements for distance education, open learning, and flexible delivery of courses, particularly in multi-campus institutions;
- debates in educational philosophy which point to the value of independent self-directed student learning, and the potential to significantly increase access and

participation without a diminution of educational quality, by reconfiguring the role of the academic from a directive to a more interactive role;  

- introduction of the notion of 'contestability' and deregulation into public sector organisations such as higher education, with consequences for competitive behaviour between universities, domestic and international.

Agents of Change: A Regional Perspective

A simple summary of the state of play in the delivery of "borderless education" is that it looks a lot like international higher education more generally: the principal suppliers are the United States and Britain, with a lesser presence of other English-language countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and some Western European countries, and that the Asian region is looked upon as a big potential market. While that is in fact the "big picture", there is a need not to lose sight of some of the specificities of current developments in the area.

Two notable findings are the lack of involvement of the elite universities in the delivery of "borderless" programs, and the extent to which the plans of global media corporations for involvement in higher education are not extending beyond activities such as infrastructure provision, consortia brokerage and accreditation arrangements.

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Publishing Services 1997), Ch. 2.

It is not apparent, at this point in time, that involvement with converged media technologies translates into larger involvement in the higher education sector. From the point of view of media corporations such as News Corporation, Time-Warner and Disney, involvement in higher education is not obviously profitable, and is a long way from their core competencies. As one respondent from a global media corporation observed:

I think there are paranoid professors in their ivory towers everywhere worried about the possibility of major media networks starting to deliver education, but I don’t think we’ll ever see a Time Warner University—and if we did I don’t think I’d want to go.  

What has emerged, particularly in North America and parts of Europe, are four new forms of higher education involvement and program delivery:

1. The emergence of new providers, such as Jones International, National Technological University, and the University of Phoenix, which utilise the Internet and other media technologies to deliver specialist training programs or courses for adult learners, either as accredited degree programs or in a partnership with accredited institutions. These operate almost entirely within the United States and Canada at present, although there are international ambitions, as indicated by Jones’ expansion into Europe and its naming of its institution as the International University; 

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6 John Richards, General Manager, Turner Learning, quoted in *New Media and Borderless Education*, op. cit.,
2. Specialist corporate training providers, such as the Global Knowledge Network, and the "re-branding" of corporate training divisions of major corporations as institutes or universities, such as Microsoft On Line Institute, Deutsche Telekom's Global Learning Institute, and Motorola University. These providers do operate on an international basis, with programs accredited by major corporations and, in some cases, in a franchise arrangement with other higher education institutions, and are growing quickly in popularity, particularly in areas such as information technology, where just-in-time training and internationally transferable skills are especially important.

3. The development of courses which utilise CITs for international delivery, such as the customised global MBAs developed by Duke University and the University of Michigan, or the offerings of traditional open and distance education providers such as the Open University of the UK and Australian regional universities such as the University of Southern Queensland and Deakin University.

4. Specialist education courseware and services providers, most typically based in North America, which include new companies such as Digitalthink and the Apollo Group, international publishers such as McGraw-Hill, and the educational divisions of computing companies such as Microsoft, Apple and IBM.

The pattern is, as I noted, very much one of exporters from North America looking at the Asia-Pacific region as a market. One implication is that accreditation and consumer protection issues are going to become more important in order to avoid the phenomenon of large numbers enrolling in dubiously constituted "digital diploma
mills." But just as global television is not simply American television writ large, we can expect to see the emergence of regional sub-markets. Australian universities will aim to be exporters of online educational programs in the Asia-Pacific, and it is possible that universities in Hong Kong, Singapore and, to a lesser degree, Malaysia, will develop a reputation as providers of programs to other countries in the region. This will become particularly likely if education is successfully articulated to state-led information technology initiatives such as Singapore's IT2000 - Vision of an Intelligent Island, and Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor.

Debunking the Deathstar: Problems with Global Courses

One is struck by the similarities which the rhetoric of global reach, and multinational dominance based upon the control of "borderless" communications technologies, has to debates about the impact of satellites in Asia in the early 1990s, where both advocates and critics saw the implications as being the undermining of national sovereignty and distinctive regional values. Yet the 1990s have seen such regional or global services as STAR TV and CNN becoming "multi-local" and "going local" in their programming, in part because of the capacity of national governments in countries such as China, Malaysia and Singapore to continue to regulate flows of material to their respective populations, meaning that the amount of unencoded direct-to-home reception of regional services in Asia remains relatively small. Moreover, as Sinclair notes, it has become apparent to the would-be global media service providers

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such as News International, Time-Warner and Disney that "the political and cultural-linguistic realities of national markets in Asia requires a country-by-country approach", or, to quote an executive of STAR TV, "there's no money to be made in cultural imperialism." 10

If political and cultural-linguistic factors are so powerful in an area such as entertainment television, then one would suspect that such forces would be as great, if not greater, in education. At the same time, concern about 'cultural imperialism' may be more likely to be tempered by recognition of the need, in an era of multinational corporations and increasing international competition, for a workforce which possesses internationally recognised and transferable skills and qualifications. There is a tension between the political-economic and socio-cultural dimensions of education and training which create tendencies both toward and away from the notion of 'global courses'.

The prospect of global courses, let alone global universities, is tempered by concerns about the cultural appropriateness of 'global' (which was generally interpreted to mean North American) material, and by the likelihood that such materials would not be accepted by either teachers or students without significant adaptation to local conditions. At the same time, global education is not a new thing. Education has historically been a highly internationalised activity, from the traveling monks of early modern Europe, the pressures upon the elites of the colonised regions to be educated in the land of the coloniser, and the role played by education in post-WWII development plans for post-colonial states, such as Australia's Colombo Plan of the

1950s and 1960s. The concern about global courses is, in part, an acknowledgment of
the continuing appeal of elite western universities such as Harvard, MIT, Stanford and
Oxford throughout the world, overlaid with an explicit recognition of the potential for
greater reach enabled by the new generation of CITs.

One respondent to our study distinguished between three types of program area on the
basis of their suitability for globalisation, where (1) is seen to have high potential or
possibility and (3) represents disciplines which are more problematic in any move to
globalisation:

1. courses with internationally generic content, such as IT, Physics and Mathematics,
   where cultural concerns would be minimal;

2. courses such as engineering, where real differences exist in how the field is
   practiced between countries and regions; and

3. courses such as journalism, nursing and education, where there are real cultural
differences which limit the ability to take readily transferable skills and apply them
   in another country.  

Some respondents, particularly in Australia and Malaysia, distinguished between forms
of internationalisation based upon partnership, which were seen as being positive in
their impact, and forms of globalisation which were seen as forms of colonisation. A
crucial issue in such discussions is the question of course accreditation, and the
relationship between predominantly national systems of accreditation and
internationalising pressures in higher education. More generally, with the possible

10 Ibid., pp. 140, 146.
11 New Media and Borderless Education, op. cit., p. 125.
exception of areas such as IT education, English language training and MBAs, there needs to be much more consideration to issues of cross-cultural communication, as well as greater acknowledgment of the importance of context, than has been the case so far in discussions of the global course and the global university. Our study endorsed Mason’s argument that global universities cannot be said to exist at present, although that should not lead to a neglect of the factors promoting the internationalisation of higher education institutions and systems.  

‘The 5 Ps’: Issues for Emerging Models of Higher Education Provision

In the course of our study, we found that recurring issues arising from the scope for global universities, virtual universities, or the entry of non-traditional providers into higher education, could be clustered around what we termed the ‘5 Ps’; practical issues, pedagogical issues, policy issues, philosophical issues, and personal issues. Of these five, the first two are attracting by far the largest discussion at present.

Practical Issues

The biggest practical issue in the likely involvement of new players, and particularly media institutions, in higher education, is the bottom line. Time after time, we heard a refrain similar to that of Cuba Gooding Jr. to Tom Cruise, in Jerry Maguire, “Show me the money!”. There is no shortage of extravagant predictions about the growth

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potential of the educational service and courseware market, which have acquired some influence among policy-makers, but major corporations are cautious about the economics of more extensive involvement in higher education, which is well outside of their core business, and where they are at a disadvantage as compared to the “branded” universities. There is a big issue in the development of partnerships between higher education and the corporate sector is the very different cultures of the two groups, with people in the media sector noting that educators “do not speak the same language as us,” while there is a strongly held view among academics that these trends involve the automation and commoditisation of education.

A further difficulty which arises is the inability to agree about costs and benefits associated with the introduction of CITs. While advocates of the change talk up the ability to use the technologies to do “more with less”, by lowering the labour input through the purchase or licensing of “learning packages”, higher education practitioners are largely convinced that technology-supported education can fulfill its earlier promise of reducing costs, and is not, ultimately, a cheaper option—on current funding arrangements. As one educator recently put it, “Resist the temptation to sell what you do as cost-efficient. We’re not doing this because it’s cheaper, but because it’s better”.

14 Helen O’Neil, News Corporation quoted in New Media and Borderless Education, op. cit., p. 143.
15 Eg. Noble op. cit.
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.

Pedagogical Issues

Two pedagogical issues stood out from our research. The first, which was most apparent in interviews conducted in Asia and North America, is that undergraduate education for the 18-24 cohort is not a prospective arena for “virtual” learning. While respondents recognised that CITs could and should be incorporated into contemporary teaching practices, and could and should be employed to encourage independent and lifelong learning skills in young students on campus, the campus experience itself is essential as part of the educative process of formative development. There is general agreement, both in the academic literature and in the interviews undertaken for the Report, that virtual/distance learning is appropriate pedagogically for older students, who are presumed: a) to need flexible, ‘at home/work’, non-classroom/campus-based delivery modes in order to access educational opportunities; and b) to possess the independent self-directed study skills and motivation required by distance learning. The

consensus is that distance learning at any level of technological sophistication is not a pedagogically or philosophically sound approach for 18–24 year old students, but that, with appropriately designed materials and strong support services, it is well-suited to the later-age or postgraduate student.

The second major pedagogical issue concerns the distinction between education and training, and the relation of both to virtual and/or global education. For global, international and regional corporations, borderless and standardised training programs are an imperative to ensure product and service consistency. Corporations differ in the degree of localisation their programs need, but core programs are generated centrally. Corporations primarily wanted training to be “Just In Time, Just Down the Hall, and Just Enough”, and this is the area in which new providers such as Jones Education Company, the National Technological University and the University of Phoenix, as well as the training divisions of major corporations like Microsoft, are tapping into a highly profitable niche market at the expense of traditional universities.

This attitude to education is anathema to most higher education staff who recognise that work-related learning relies on specific immediately applicable outcomes, while ‘education’ implies generalised, often more theoretical, longer-term and—it must be said—intangible goals. There was much muttering about the ‘Disneyfication’ of education, and the issue is again raised about the value of competency-based education and training as compared to the more broad-based approach to developing skills and attributes characteristic of the universities. Tensions exist, and will continue to exist, between curriculum decision makers in higher education and professional associations and industry leaders. Ira Plotkin of Regis University in the US, a
The traditional university which has extended its activities in "market education" in order to financially survive, observed that "There's a fine line between prostitution and education, and we walk it." 18

Policy Issues

The two major policy issues arising are accreditation and consumer protection. For potential new entrants, formal accreditation of institutions and programs is the condition for operation in new markets, and the accreditation of programs and units of study by established universities and colleges is critical to those who may choose to access new educational services. The many implications of borderless transmission in education have barely been considered by accreditation bodies, which are typically government-based and nationally-based. Moves toward global accreditation regimes, such as those being promoted by the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE), are at a very early stage. Movements toward regional accreditation systems may occur first, through supra-governmental bodies such as the European Commission, APEC and NAFTA.

There is often a presumption, particularly in a country such as Australia, that there will be a weakening over time of accreditation requirements over time as a result of the globalisation of higher education, as part of a move away from the model of the strongly regulated "government-guaranteed" university (eg. quality assurance criteria administered by relevant government agencies), which has been effective at the

18 New Media and Borderless Education, op. cit., p. 143.
national level in ensuring well-regarded degree qualifications. Hong Kong is interesting in this regard as a counter-example, where accreditation criteria have been strengthened as competition from overseas providers increases. While *caveat emptor* ("let the buyer beware") might have been the *modus operandi* in Hong Kong in the past, Hong Kong respondents indicated that rapid expansion of the local university system, as well as a plethora of ‘imported’ courses, and associated debates about declining quality of graduates, have led to more rigorous monitoring of all courses by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation.

Strongly associated with accreditation, from the student point of view, is consumer protection. Current consumer protection laws are nationally-based, and their applicability to the international delivery of educational services is unclear. The model of the “government-guaranteed” university, which has been reasonably effective in various countries at the national level, 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. An issue which will have to be addressed in national higher education systems is the potential, particularly in the areas of vocational and competency-based education and training, that global corporations will usurp the process, as certification requirements in the professions and the need for internationally standardised programs drives a situation where “private industry will have materials for the subject there, which universities will either buy off the shelf, or invite their students to partake in.” 19

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19 Professor Tony Adams, RMIT, quoted in *New Media and Borderless Education*, op. cit., p.159.
Philosophical Issues

The biggest philosophical issue arising in the research was that of access and equity, followed by debates about the idea of the university and questions of cultural appropriateness of course materials. While many believed that new CIT technologies have the ability to democratise education, and access to information more generally, the danger was recognised of a growing gap between the CIT ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, a problem accentuated by course design which presumes access not only to personal computers, but to the range of technologies required in on-line and virtual learning, including broadband cable access, high speed computers, CD-ROMs, good Internet connections etc. As one open learning provider noted, “you have to be very careful about what the requirements are in order to access it. Otherwise you block off access ... for people, if they don’t have the appropriate hardware.”

There are strong differences about the extent to which these trends toward greater use of CITs and the rise of the “entrepreneurial university” undermine the values traditionally associated with the university. There is considerable resentment in the academic community about the notion of their disciplinary knowledge being ‘packaged’ into a ‘product’ which could be traded between institutions and to industry. This is undoubtedly related to their estimation of the pedagogic quality of much existing curriculum software, especially US-based software, which has been criticised for its “unduly narrow, incremental, “mastery-learning,” approach.” A deeper concern, both inside and outside academia, stems from beliefs about the nature of the

20 Elaine Atkinson, Open Learning Australia, quoted in New Media and Borderless Education, op. cit., p. 161.
university, and the erosion of the core university values of disinterested inquiry and critical thinking if business begins to influence curricula. There is also a concern that an instrumentalist approach to education as susceptible to business notions of efficiency and productivity distorts the complex cultural, social and process dimensions of education.

A recurrent issue, which had practical, pedagogical, policy and philosophical dimensions, was the cultural appropriateness of imported, 'global' materials, in national higher education systems. Asian respondents indicated a strong preference for partnerships with overseas institutions which were based upon long-term considerations and mutuality, in a manner consistent with approaches taken to foreign investment in IT with projects such Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor and Singapore's IT2000. Cultural differences in learning styles was an issue where opinions varied, with some industry providers confident that the same material can be delivered anywhere, and others, principally academics, highly concerned about the "Americanisation of education", and the potential for a loss of links to local identity and culture. As with the case of satellite television discussed earlier, the question of cultural barriers to globalisation is a central one, which will be returned to below.

Personal Issues

As well as access and equity issues, there are issues related to "learning from a box" and "teaching from a box". We found that in some countries, most notably Korea,
distance education struggles against a perception that it is inferior to face-to-face teaching, and research in a number of countries has found higher student drop-out rates in distance education programs. There is also the danger that if teachers are not taken seriously as stakeholders in the development of CIT-based educational programs, there will be an experience similar to the rejection of "teacher-proof curriculum packages" which were developed in the 1960s. Even in areas where standardised curricula exist, the customising and localising of such material is considered by teachers to be an important part of their pedagogical mission.

Future Scenarios

An important part of testing likely future developments was the exercise of presenting scenarios to respondents and evaluating their various responses. It was noted earlier that the likely pattern of flow of CIT-based programs in global higher education sees North America as the principal exporter of such programs and materials, with Asian countries being largely importers, and some countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Hong Kong, being possible importers and exporters.

The most commonly discussed scenario is what we called "Harvard-Murdoch University", where an internationally recognised university links up with a global media network to utilise CITs to deliver a program internationally which can be accessed from the home. It was noted that this is the scenario "often presented to faculty at

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institutions other than Harvard as the frightening future,” 23 and there was a sense from Asian respondents that such a program would be highly competitive, particularly in specialist areas such as MBAs. An issue which was widely raised was whether it would be in Harvard’s interests to make its program more accessible in such a fashion, as the value of a Harvard degree is in part that of exclusivity value. This related to a concern that involvement in distance course delivery would devalue the program, with respondents observing that “sending it that far dilutes the glamour that Harvard carries”, or that “they would provide a Volkswagen rather than a Mercedes-Benz model” of higher education. 24 In the Korean context, it could be subject to the general devaluing of off-campus education, with Professor Il-Ju Rha of Seoul National University observing that “If you receive a normal Harvard graduation record, there is nothing written on it saying distance education, then maybe we would go for it.” 25

Other scenarios which we sought responses to included “Big Mac-Disney- Real Thing U” (corporations strong in their core businesses team up with a global media network to provide education and training on a global scale); “Virtual U” (higher education offered in a completely non-campus format); then Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor Model of government-led promotion of CITs throughout the economy, including education and training; and “World U”, where a central agency would pool

23 Professor Tom Reeves, University of Georgia, quoted in New Media and Borderless Education, op. cit., p. 170.

24 Professor Joseph Man Chan, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Ravi Sharma, Deutsche Telekom Asia, quoted in New Media and Borderless Education, op. cit., p. 172.

25 Professor Il-Ju Rha, Seoul National University, quoted in New Media and Borderless Education, op. cit., p. 172.
units and courses from a number of countries, to generate "best of the best"-type degree programs.

None of these were seen as posing as great a threat to national higher education systems in Asia as the "Harvard-Murdoch" model, and some, such as "World U" were seen as offering something potentially exciting, if logistical problems can be dealt with.

It was generally believed that the "virtual university" model will develop, but that its status will be similar to that of existing distance education and open university programs—appropriate for adult learners, work-related short courses and 'second chance' education—but a 'second-best' option to on-campus face-to-face teaching, especially for undergraduate students. They distinguish this from the development of flexible learning options in traditional campus-based universities, which are seen as highly desirable but it also noted that developments in this area are at an early stage and subject to change over time.

Conclusions

There are substantial changes happening in higher education worldwide, related to the twin trends of internationalisation and digitisation of course content and delivery, which policy-makers will need to be responsive to. These do not, however, constitute the "deathstar" for the traditional university sector, any more than satellite-delivered television meant the end of national broadcasting in the Asian region. Three sets of issues will, however, require more urgent responses. The first is the possibility of attrition for traditional universities in profitable niche markets, as CITs are used, by
new providers as well as by universities internationalising forms of distance education, to deliver lower-cost and more flexibly delivered programs in the vocational training and lifelong learning markets. Second, there are a range of practical issues relating to pedagogy, assessment of costs, course content, and equitable access, in the use of CITs in higher education, which policy-makers will need to take seriously, as they are unlikely to be at the centre of concern for new for-profit education providers. Third, a growth in the number of educational providers, and the further internationalisation of higher education, will make issues of accreditation and consumer protection increasingly important priorities for policy-makers. In turn, these issues will require a response that is more international, or at least regionally-focused, than has been the case in the heyday of the planned national higher education system and the "government-guaranteed" university structure.

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Radio : Due For Another Renaissance?

P S Sundaram
Roland K C Tan