

Chapter 5: Universities as Centres for Lifelong Learning: Opportunities and Threats at the Institutional Level

RUTH DUNKIN AND ALAN LINDSAY

INTRODUCTION

The changing nature of employment and careers is causing governments, enterprises, educational providers and individuals to take seriously the concept of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is a concept that has long been associated with the traditions of liberalism, highlighting the continuous development and growth of individuals within civilised societies. However, despite its potential to provide a broad integrating rationale for national educational policy, it is only in the past few years that the concept, with a new overlay of instrumentalism, has emerged as a practical policy for developed economies as they move into the Information Age. With the move of most developed countries into a post-industrial age, knowledge is seen as the primary resource for individuals and the economy overall. As both society's needs and knowledge itself undergo rapid change, the lifelong learning skills involved in reaching and remaining at the cutting edge of knowledge are becoming crucial employment skills. Those institutions that are successful in providing their graduates with a lifelong learning capacity will gain a significant competitive edge in the marketplace. Through considering case studies involving two Australian universities, Monash and RMIT Universities, this chapter canvasses the changes required to implement effective lifelong learning strategies in traditional universities. Such institutions face substantial barriers to the implementation of lifelong learning at all levels; that is, at the individual level, at the departmental and the faculty level, and the institution itself. In discussing these barriers, particular attention will be given to those orientations, or mindsets, prevailing within higher education institutions that must be changed if lifelong learning is to be embraced.

THE CONTEXT: THE AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AND THE NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

In contrast to many of their counterparts in other countries, Australian higher education institutions have long pursued a broad educational mission consistent with lifelong learning. The provision of part-time study options has been common and mature-age students have formed a sizeable part of the student population for many years. Many Australian universities offer distance education or open learning courses that have been developed with the goal of maintaining parity of esteem with on-campus courses.

The first major reference to 'lifelong learning' in an Australian Government Report occurs in a report on the development of technical education (Kangan 1974). This report drew heavily on the UNESCO Commission report *Learning to Be* (Faure 1972) in proposing a broad educational rationale and an emphasis on reducing barriers to access to the non-higher education sector of post-secondary education in Australia. The Report's vision underpinned a brief period of renewal and broad development in technical and further education in Australia, but was soon overshadowed by a drive for narrower vocational training. This brief government enthusiasm for lifelong learning in the 1970s made little impact on policies in the higher education sector.

The next major development with a lifelong learning theme was the Open Learning Initiative, which emerged as a response to unmet demand for university places in the early 1990s. A consortium of eight institutions, with substantial government support, provided an open entry pathway to university study through single subjects and degree structures drawing on several institutions and provided in innovative independent study modes. Most recently, the West Report (1998), *Learning for Life* became the first major report for the Australian Government to adopt lifelong learning as a central part of its rationale for higher education. The Report clearly articulates a vision for higher education based on its contribution to lifelong learning and the 'learning society'. It proposes a 'lifelong learning entitlement' for all school-leavers and mature age students seeking access to higher education for the first time (West 1998, p.115). Regrettably while this report presents a supportable philosophical position, it does not provide a well-articulated and consistent set of policy recommendations.

The increasing emphasis on lifelong learning in educational policy discussions is fostering a renewed interest within higher education institutions. However, changes in the broader environment for higher education are shaping institutional responses towards lifelong learning. One key driver has been the Australian Government's evolving stance on cooperation and competition. After World War II, the Australian federal government gradually replaced the States as the major source for funding and policy direction in Australian higher education. Until the late 1980s, the key Government administrative mechanism was some form of 'buffer agency' advisory commission, which went through several manifestations but retained a core role of advising the Government on financial allocations that would promote the 'balanced and coordinated development' of the system (Tertiary Education Commission 1977, p.1). The higher education institutions, mostly established originally by the State governments with varying degrees of autonomy, were gradually brought into a system serving national needs. This approach fostered a broad view of educational needs and institutional responsibilities to society including the provision of courses, skills and attitudes that were not mainly directed to meeting labour market needs and economic development. Coordination and cooperation between institutions was encouraged. The policy environment supported liberal education and the broad development and growth of individuals and their communities.

However, by the late 1980s, cooperation and a coordinated system were seen as major sources of inefficiency and stagnation. To overcome these, the Government proposed a radical restructuring of the higher education system and encouraged the adoption of more corporate and business-oriented management approaches. 'Competition' was explicitly used to drive efficiency and responsiveness (Dawkins 1988, pp. 28 and 83).

Present government policy for higher education, as with other public sector policy, is strongly influenced by the view that cost-effective service provision of public services is best achieved by governments specifying more clearly the services that are required, or the needs to be met and leaving it to a deregulated market to deliver to those specifications. 'Competitive neutrality' concepts in the *National Competition Policy Review* (Hilmer 1993) protect new entrants to the market and ensure that those who have historically been publicly funded must compete on the same basis as new entrants. Governments have been re-cast as purchasers of services, rather than providers of those services. Australian governments have been increasingly deregulating the higher education system as a means of moving the system towards a market model and exposing institutions to greater competition. Restrictions on international fee-paying students were eased in the late 1980s, the capacity for charging fees for postgraduate courses was introduced in the mid-1990s and most recently, institutions have been given approval to determine enrolment levels and admit a limited number of full-fee-paying Australian undergraduate students.

This trend towards greater competition has not just been driven by government policy. Other forces, including the growth in the number of universities, a levelling off in student demand, the globalisation of economies and communications, and the revolution in information technology, have also fostered an increase in competition between institutions.

But if competition and deregulation provide one set of forces affecting the way institutions are approaching lifelong learning, the changes in work for individuals and enterprises represent a second equally powerful set of demands upon them. Just as competition, globalisation and new technologies are impacting on universities, so too are these forces changing the face of entire sectors within developed economies. Enterprises are faced with new sources of competition, new players and new technologies are driving radical changes to the economic structures in which they must operate and the bases upon which they must compete (Porter 1985). In turn, the ways in which enterprises are adapting to these changes affects the ways in which individuals relate to employment. The widespread movements to de-layer, to downsize and to upgrade technological content of traditional production processes have led many to retrenchment. The decline of the manufacturing and commodity sectors and the parallel rise of the service sector have driven a demand for quite different profiles of skills. People in employment, as a result, face uncertain futures, multiple employers and a constant need to upgrade their technical and operational skills. Developed countries are seeking competitive advantage for both individuals and enterprises through continuous learning, innovation and creativity (Drucker 1992, Handy 1994). As a result, both individuals and enterprises are exerting demands for job-related skills education and training to underpin this enormous economic re-orientation. They look to governments, publicly funded institutions and new private providers to meet these demands.

This changing environment provides the context in which institutions are grappling with lifelong learning. The more instrumental and competitive era is less conducive to traditional notions of lifelong learning, and so it is no coincidence that universities, as well as governments, are adopting an instrumental approach to lifelong learning. Many

universities are thus seeking their own competitive advantage through providing their graduates with the lifelong learning skills to excel in this environment.

INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

However, responses to these changes in government policy and the broader environment are by no means uniform. Educational institutions have formulated their missions in different ways and they are responding differently to the challenges. There are those which see their mission as responding directly to changes within the economic structures of their communities. Some face pressures resulting from declining demand in traditional student/ school leaver groups and seek to find replacement markets such as lifelong learners. Others have always seen their mission as supporting lifelong learning in the broad sense of fostering the ongoing development of individuals through education. The people of these institutions tend to rue the economic instrumentalism associated with the most recent push to lifelong learning.

While most universities are engaging with the demand for lifelong learning in some way, they all share a common experience in finding that the implementation of lifelong learning policies meets substantial cultural and organisational barriers within their institutions. Institutional leaders face major challenges as they seek to re-orient their institutions to respond to the demand for lifelong learning in whatever form it is articulated. Two Australian universities, Monash and RMIT, exemplify those institutions wishing to combine the traditional and instrumental approaches to lifelong learning in ways that build and extend their market reach to potential students of all ages and study preferences, and to corporate as well as individual clients. Both institutions are implementing learning and teaching plans that place lifelong learning at the centre of their operations. In their quest to foster lifelong learning, they are adopting a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning and looking to the new interactive communication technologies to assist in providing education where and when the learner wants it.

Four common elements underpin the strategies of the two institutions: a focus on graduate attributes, greater flexibility in awards, greater flexibility in delivery, and using cooperative alliances to enhance competitiveness.

The focus on graduate attributes is aimed at shifting the emphasis in teaching from mastery of course content to defining, teaching for, and assessing specific student outcomes. Many Australian institutions are specifying desired attributes for their graduates, usually by drawing on standard formulations of generic skills such as: communication, enquiry and research, critical thought and analysis, problem-solving, teamwork, numeracy, information literacy and effective use of technology.

Flexibility in award structures is regarded as an important part of the strategy both to foster lifelong learning and to gain a competitive market advantage. Hence, in recent years, many Australian universities have expanded their award structures. The traditional broad degree structures in arts, science and business, have been complemented by more specialist 'tagged' degrees such as the Bachelor of Arts (Asian Studies) or specialist degree titles such as the Bachelor of Journalism. Postgraduate programs have proliferated through specialist certificates and diplomas as well as professionally

oriented masters courses. Articulation between awards and progression pathways have been more explicitly defined to allow for staged career development and choice of exit point.

Improving student control over the time and place of learning is critical to making lifelong learning a reality. Many adult learners have extensive family and work responsibilities to juggle with their study requirements. Many are also in paid employment. Conventional print-based distance education has made an important contribution to reducing the time, place and other constraints on students. However, the long feedback cycles between academic and learners and the relative isolation of many learners led historically to high drop-out rates. Advances in communications and information technology have now made possible more interactive and real-time distance learning experiences featuring convenient and immediate communication with staff and among students. New flexible learning strategies are being introduced into universities which incorporate multimedia learning materials and communication systems (both synchronous and asynchronous) alongside conventional print-based learning packages/ materials.

The boundaries between on-campus teaching and distance education are blurring as these more flexible teaching modes are being increasingly used to provide for effective and convenient learning for all types of learners. The reduction or removal of requirements for attendance or time schedules will provide the most powerful contribution to the implementation of lifelong learning.

However, the effective use of technology poses major challenges for university managers. So far most use has been small-scale and exploratory. While considerable experience has been accumulated, most educational technology projects have been too limited in scope to be strategic or to become a core component of major courses and the predominant strategy retains at its core a belief in the desirability of some face-to-face interaction. To enable more extensive use, institutional managers will need to develop institutional-wide plans for technology in teaching and learning and make more strategic investments in technology applications.

The cost of introducing flexible learning into universities' offerings is leading many to argue the need for inter-university collaboration. The scale of planning and investment in technology-assisted teaching inevitably means a shift from the local-level control of courses by individual academics or small course teams to a more corporate approach. The high development costs of independent learning packages require sound commercial decisions based on potential markets. The development of sophisticated, highly interactive learning packages often requires levels of investment that are beyond the resources of a single institution. Thus, despite the increasingly competitive environment, or indeed to meet its imperatives, institutions need to form cooperative alliances to develop and deliver high quality flexible learning. The main contribution of these alliances to the implementation of lifelong learning is in the provision of flexible programmes and learning packages suitable for a diverse range of student backgrounds and needs, and able to be used where and when the student chooses. An important by-product of this cooperation may well be greater levels of credit transfer among consortium members.

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