

# Education, markets and the contradictions of Asia-Australia relations

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## Introduction

Over the past six years, the Commonwealth Government has actively encouraged Australian universities to 'market' educational services overseas. In a deregulatory political climate, most universities have seized the opportunities provided by this policy change, viewing the export of educational services as one way of overcoming some of the fiscal problems they confront. Their entrepreneurial efforts have been extensive, focussed largely on attracting full fee-paying overseas students, but also in selling information technologies and consultancy services. Together, these initiatives have become widely known as the 'export of educational services' policy, governed by a series of Federal Acts, a recent example of which is the Educational Services for Overseas Students (Registration and Providers and Financial Regulation) Act 1991.

As a result of the policy, the total number of overseas students in Australian universities has increased from 17,248 in 1987 to 39,490 in 1992, with full-fee paying overseas student numbers increasing in the same period from 1,019 to 30,296 (National Report on Australian Higher Education Sector 1993, p. 60). Of the full-fee paying students, 7,024 are from Hong Kong, 7833 from Malaysia and 4,392 from Singapore. Students from Asian countries thus represent almost 70 per cent of the full-fee paying student population in Australian universities.

This increase in full-fee paying students from Asian countries has occurred within a wider context of changes to the political rhetoric about the need for Australia "to become a part of Asia", to forge a new regional identity, and to become less Eurocentric and more sensitive to Asian cultures. The Garnaut Report (1990) suggests, for example, that Australia's economic links within the region require new cultural relationships with its Asian neighbours. Exactly how this emphasis on cultural exchange is linked to the marketing practices of Australian higher education is a complex issue, involving a range of social, economic, political and industrial concerns.

For Australian universities, the policy of the export of educational services has brought a number of new challenges. Universities now have to work in a competitive environment which has undermined some of their traditional educational values. They are now confronted with some serious questions about the changes they need to make in response to not only the new market-orientated policy environment but also the new demographics on the campuses. In administrative terms, the export of educational services policy has created pressures towards a more comprehensive deregulation of higher education, with universities now required to engage in a range of market practices. In curriculum terms, the policy has major implications for the manner in which universities deal with issues concerning the changing character of Australian perceptions of 'Asia', and of Australia's regional identity.

It would be true to claim, however, that the response of Australian universities to these issues has been a limited one. While every major university has found it necessary to establish an International Education Office, this administrative initiative has been concerned largely with commercial rewards. Issues of curriculum and pedagogy have not been seriously addressed.

Yet, the export of educational services policy is not culturally

neutral. It is centrally implicated in issues concerning not only the manner in which higher education is funded and organised but more widely with the way ethnic relations within Australia, and regional relations outside it, are structured. Yet most analyses of the policy have focussed on the economic aspects, especially on the patterns of costs and benefits and marketing strategies (see for example, Harris & Jarrott 1990). What has often been overlooked is the fact that, in an area as complex as this, economic issues cannot be so easily separated from political and cultural concerns.

The analyses that have actually focussed on non-economic issues have mostly been about the various adjustment problems overseas students experience in Australian universities (see, for example, Ballard 1987). But these analyses, too, often overlook issues concerning cultural formation and pedagogic relations. More seriously, they often assume an assimilationist perspective which seeks to suppress cultural differences. The changes required are presumed to be those that the students must make rather than those required of the institutional practices and structures. This reinforces the ideological practices of colonialism that define the manner in which most Australians continue to view 'Asia' and 'Asians'.

This paper seeks to raise a number of broader issues concerning the cultural politics of the export of educational services policy. In particular, it examines the tension that now exists between the persistent 'development' view (Fagerlind & Saha 1989) of the provision of education to overseas students and an emerging market ideology which sees education as a commodity. It explores the manner in which this tension is reflected in the debates concerning the formations of knowledge and curriculum in a cultural context widely referred to as 'postcolonial' (Turner 1993). Such a context is characterised by a number of unforeseen consequences of modernity and the historical contradictions of Asia-Australia relations.

## Reflexive modernity

The idea of unforeseen consequences arising from modernisation is a notion central to Beck's (1992) concept of 'reflexive modernity'. Beck argues that many of the social projects begun under the banner of 'modernisation' had consequences which could not have been predicted at the time of their beginnings. He describes modernisation as surges of 'technological rationalisation and changes in work and organisation'. As visible indicators, Beck cites the examples of the steam locomotive and the microchip, and the way they have served to structure social life. Modernisation is a process 'which comprises and shapes the entire social structure' (Beck 1992, p.50). Many instances of modernisation, introduced with benevolent intent, can now be shown to have had negative consequences. Technological development, for example, has brought a wealth of material goods to the industrialised nations, yet it has also induced a reduction in employment, an increased unpredictability of employment, a demise in job satisfaction and widespread social alienation.

Beck points out that modernisation has not only provided innovation and affluence, it has also been instrumental in bringing about greater social security. Social institutions inspired by modernisation have predictable structures in most enterprises from art to education. At the same time, however, modernisation tends to be dismissive of

human creativity and difference. Its commitment to growth and the expansion of a capitalist world market is unequivocal. Its definition of 'progress' is absolute, predicated on a linear universalist conception of history. In a manner similar to Beck, Featherstone (1990 p.6) has argued that modernisation refers to a stage of social development which is based on 'industrialisation, the growth of science and technology, the modern nation state, the capitalist world market, urbanisation and other infrastructural elements'.

Both Beck and Featherstone suggest that, within the so-called 'developed' nations, modernisation has been achieved through the use of various ideological techniques of management to ensure greater control over social relations. In Third World countries, this control has involved forms of colonisation, moving from what Jan Mohammad (1985, p.61) has referred to as its 'dominant' phase to its 'hegemonic' phase which utilises a form of humanism to ensure ideological subjugation of the colonised people. The rhetoric of 'development' is a good example of this humanism.

Just as the processes of modernisation are contradictory, so too are the practices of colonisation. These contradictory practices implicit in Beck's idea of reflexive modernity point to the emergence of new social expressions with their own disparate organising principles. No longer is colonialism so explicit. It now involves both an aspiration to postcoloniality as well as a tacit support for the hegemonic practices of control and exploitation of the colonised.

Many of the claims applicable to modernism apply also to colonialism. If modernism was about a linear 'structuring' of social life then we are now witnessing a 'restructuring' of every aspect of social life in directions that remain unclear and uncertain. Many of the practices of modernism have become distorted. Lash and Urry (1987) refer to this phenomenon as a shift from organised capitalism to disorganised capitalism. We now live in a political culture in which there is an unprecedented amount of uncertainty in civic life. Colonial practices are similarly uncertain and ambivalent, linked to earlier practices in a variety of complex ways. New forms of distortions and contradictions are continuously emerging, and it is in terms of these that the export of educational services policy must be understood.

## Marketing education to Asia

Students from Asia have attended Australian universities since at least 1950 when the Colombo Plan was established. Even during the days of the White Australia Policy, officially abolished only in 1973, Australia welcomed students from Asia, but viewed their education mostly in terms of a policy of aid. Education was seen to contribute to the development of a technological and administrative elite in selected Asian countries. The Colombo Plan was also designed to promote greater cooperation among Commonwealth countries. It remained therefore an arm of Australia's diplomatic policy. As Cleverly and Jones (1976, p.23) point out, Australia's educational aid was considered 'in the framework of our total foreign aid program which remains locked in the context of foreign affairs policy, its ends being evaluated primarily in political and diplomatic terms'.

Not surprisingly, therefore, educational aid had an instrumental self-interested purpose: it was an ethnocentric strategy for Australia to ensure political stability in the region. It was framed within a colonialist ideology based on a range of universalist western assumptions concerning the educational needs and interests of the 'developing' countries in the Asia-Pacific region. These assumptions were predicated upon a modernist concept of 'progress', which contained many of the contradictions endemic in Asian-Australian relations. Australian motivations for providing educational aid to students from Asian countries were based on an anxiety. On the one hand, they espoused sentiments that were altruistic, recognising the need to ameliorate regional inequalities. But, on the other hand, they expressed a range of racist and xenophobic views most Australians held about Asia, exemplified most clearly in the popular expressions about the 'yellow peril'. Given the modernist certainties of the 'aid perspective', education offered to Asian students made no concessions to cultural difference. It remained largely Eurocentric. Its assumptions

of universalism, impartiality and neutrality masked its colonialist complicity.

Some of the contradictions inherent in this 'aid perspective' had already become apparent in the 1970s. For one thing, it was argued that the needs of Asian students were not fully met by a Eurocentric curriculum. There were claims that Australian education contributed to a 'brain drain' of the skills most required in the developing countries. The aid programs also led to the creation of an elite: they contributed more to individual advancement rather than to any collective good. At the same time, a number of Asian economies were producing remarkable levels of economic growth, almost inversely proportional to the fiscal decline Australia was experiencing. The arguments concerning those countries still being classified as 'developing' in some respects were wearing thin.

It was in the context of these debates that the Commonwealth Government introduced, in 1979, an Overseas Students Charge set at one-third of course costs. This move did not however eliminate the demand for a more comprehensive examination of the issues, which was eventually provided by two major reports published in 1984. In a political climate increasingly dominated by rationalist ideas and by a concern about the deteriorating balance of payment figures, the Goldring and Jackson Reports adopted very different stances toward issues relating to overseas students in Australian universities. Resisting emerging ideas about 'user pays', the Goldring Report rejected the view that education was a commodity and could be commercially developed. It recommended that the overseas students' policy continue to be informed by considerations of aid. The Jackson Report, on the other hand, adopted a much more pragmatic approach. It saw education as continuing to play a central role in the economic development of developing countries, but argued that educational aid needed to be much more strategically focussed in terms of both equity and need. It insisted that an effective policy required aid to be targeted by country, sector and instrument of delivery, and that such aid was inappropriate for many Asian countries. It therefore saw no conflict with an expanded and more explicit program in tertiary educational aid, alongside a market-based export program of educational services.

Indeed, the Jackson Report was effusive about education's potential as a major source of income, not only for the cash-strapped universities, but also for the nation as a whole. It viewed education 'as a significant new industry for Australia'. In an emerging political culture dominated by market ideologies, economic rationalism and the corporate discourse of efficiency and effectiveness, it was hardly surprising that the Government preferred the Jackson analysis of the issues relating to overseas students over the Goldring recommendations. With the publication of the Green Paper on Higher Education in 1987, the idea that education could be viewed as a major export industry became institutionalised. The abolition of the binary system also created a new competitive environment which encouraged Australian universities to become much more commercially-minded in search of the export dollar. Almost every Australian university has now directed its glance towards the fast growing economies of many Asian countries.

Marketing has become the dominant metaphor for discussing issues concerning overseas students in Australian universities, replacing a philanthropic language that once defined the earlier educational aid programs. Today, most overseas students pay full fees, ranging from the cheapest yearly fee of \$7,000 (Arts Degree, University of Southern Queensland) to around \$30,000 (Veterinary Sciences Degree, Murdoch University). The business of selling tertiary education to Asia has become enormous. Over two years ago, its estimated contribution to Australia's Gross national Product was \$1.4 billion (Centre for International Economics, 1991, p.59). The current contribution is much greater, and starry-eyed marketeers see more growth in the future.

At the same time, however, educational aid programs have not disappeared. The number of students who are either subsidised or sponsored has not declined dramatically and continues to represent

around 25% of the total overseas student population (National Report on Australia's Higher Education Sector 1993, p.60). Exactly how this aid program relates to the now dominant emphasis on trade is an issue that remains problematic. On this issue, the Jackson Report is not helpful. It seems to assume that the same educational content is applicable to all students, no matter what their specific requirements. Indeed, this is an assumption which lies at the heart of the ideological discourse of marketing in education. Education is assumed to be a commodity which is neutral with respect to particular cultural or political interests.

The implications of this ideological discourse for developments in Australian higher education have been widely noted. It has been acknowledged, for example, that 'the effect of encouraging education to be a trade oriented sector ... places pressures on the domestic education sector to become customer-oriented, competitive and efficient' (Centre for International Economics 1991, p.59). The alleged market successes in Asia have led the Vice-Chancellors to suggest that Australian students should also have similar opportunities to enrol as full-fee paying students. We say 'alleged' because it is still not clear whether all universities are able to secure the kind of financial gains the export of educational services policy often promises. For the fees charged by universities vary greatly, with smaller less financially secure institutions barely able to cover the institutional costs of teaching, marketing and student support. A 'weeding out' may occur among providers, brought about by the ideologies they all appear to endorse.

The competition among Australian universities for overseas students has become intense. In the case of some smaller regional universities, the expansion of the export of education is seen as vital to growth and financial security. Not surprisingly, therefore, some very cavalier marketing practices have developed that display no awareness, or are dismissive, of the cultural sensitivities relevant to particular traditions. As *The Australian* has observed: 'it is time we accepted that the Australian higher education industry is widely perceived as mercenary in attitude, poorly organised and of dubious quality' (12 May 1993, p.14). And while the coordinating work of the International Development Program (IDP) has clearly been important in curtailing excesses, its dominant marketing ideology implies that its control over particular practices cannot be absolute.

What is evident is that the language in which marketing practices are couched is predominantly economic, and largely divorced from cultural and educational concerns. Consider, for example, what the chair of the IDP, Professor Mal Logan, said recently: '...I am very keen to keep it (IDP) private, a private company where we are judged on performance. We're fully owned by the AVCC (Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee), we report regularly to the shareholders (universities), and that's the way a company should operate' (*The Age*, 27 April 1993, p.20). Aside from the obvious point that competition among universities occurs through the use of public money, what this statement reveals is the assumption, now widely held, that there is no qualitative difference between educational administration and the management of other business activities. Education is a product to be marketed in much the same way as other products are marketed.

What this belief obscures is the fact that education is a cultural activity which, in the context of international education, does not only express Australia's historical relations with its Asian neighbours, but also defines the possibilities of Australia's desired integration into Asia. The way Australian universities market education, the way they cater for cultural differences, and the way they organise their curriculum and pedagogy are matters that help to define the cultural markers of the complex politics of Asia-Australia relations. Too often the marketing of education to Asia is assumed to be merely about marketing strategies and support services, such as counselling, language assistance and accommodation. But export of education policy is much more than this, and needs to be understood within the wider historical context of the changing character of the contradictions of Asia-Australia relations.

## Postcolonialism and Asia-Australia relations

Australia's relationship with its Asian neighbours has always involved a major contradiction. Australia is a nation whose foundation involved an unjust act by an imperial power; and as a number of historians have pointed out, Australians have always been conscious of their status as a European colony, subjected to similar forms of controls and cultural oppression as other colonies in Asia and Africa. And yet in defining itself as an outpost of Britain, Australia has also been complicit with a colonialist enterprise with respect to its relations with Asian countries. Australia itself has been a colonial power in the region, implicated in subverting the national aspirations of a number of Asian countries. However, it now finds itself attempting to forge a new relationship with Asia, one in which Australia is keen to denounce imperialism and racism, and also the political residues of its former White Australia Policy.

The contradictions generated by these historical processes have in recent years been identified as 'postcolonialism'. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin (1989) provide a working definition for understanding this complex phenomenon. They use the term 'postcolonial' to 'cover all the culture affected by the imperial processes from the moment of colonisation to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression'. Postcolonialism thus represents an ideological project which seeks to reconcile historical contradictions brought about by the rejection of colonialism with a reassertion of hegemonic dominance over Third World countries through means which are much more covert and express newer forms of representation. The means now utilised include a range of globalised information technologies to construct images of a universal culture.

An earlier period of colonialism has been described by Edward Said (1985) as 'orientalist'. For Said, orientalism is a hegemonic device by which the West understands the East, though the manner in which the East is discursively described, explained, managed and controlled varies considerably. Said (1978) maintains that in order to understand how the West has constructed knowledge about other cultures, we must begin with the question of representation, of how the orient has been constituted through a set of discursive practices. Using Foucault's (1972) insights about the complicity of forms of knowledge with institutions of power, Said argues that any body of knowledge and beliefs, made manifest in scholarly texts as well as in the web of popular culture, constitutes a discourse that can be analysed in terms of style, figures of speech, recurrent themes, and narrative devices. The orientalist discourse, as it has been developed and institutionalised, unmistakably betrays a will to cultural hegemony and repression. The grammar of orientalism corresponds to a system of ideas that structures epistemic authority in such a fashion as to dominate and appropriate the orient as 'the Other'.

To what extent then does the Orientalism argument apply to Australian representations of Asia? Social theorists writing on Australia-Asia relations remain divided on the applicability of Said's general thesis to Australian representations of Asia. When his book was published more than a decade ago, *Asian Studies Review* carried a number of articles which debated Said, taking positions that ranged from total agreement to total rejection, marked by a defensive logic intended to protect traditional disciplinary boundaries within the academy. The debate is far from settled, and, in many ways, contemporary explorations of 'postcolonialism' can be said to have been inspired by Said's work.

There is much about Australian representations of Asia, and in particular those which were current before the Second World War, that can aptly be called orientalist. Before the War, most of these representations were grounded in a colonial discourse inherited from Britain at the height of its power. Australia was aptly described by Humphrey McQueen (1986) as a 'New Britannia'. Alison Broinowski (1992) has argued that the contemporary discourse about Asia is at best 'neo-orientalist', since it continues to express its colonialist origins. At the same time, the orientalist thesis has been shown to be based on a too hegemonic and deterministic a view of the relation

between the First and Third World. Many Asian countries in the region can no longer be called 'Third World', even though they share a colonial history. Likewise, the term 'First World' applies only ambivalently to Australia. The relations between various Asian countries and Australia are changing rapidly, but not in any uniform way. Thus, the totalising talk that constitutes popular representations of 'Asia' is indeed misleading.

What needs to be recognised is that there is in Said's work an untenable dualism between 'West' and 'East'. Homi Bhabha (1983) has argued that the problem of ambivalence between universalism and particularism lies at the heart of postcoloniality. He has suggested that postcolonialism is not a single homogenising discourse, but is constituted by a polarity of positions, which involve both the exercise of hegemonic power as well as of fantasy and fear of the Other. According to Homi Bhabha, postcolonialism cannot be regarded as a static, monolithic and hegemonic project, but a discourse that is constituted ambivalently. It does not have a single originating intention; rather, it is marked by a profound ambivalence towards 'Otherness, which is at once an object of desire and derision' (Homi Bhabha 1983a p.19). And as Young (1990 p. 142) argues, this equivocation suggests that both the colonial and postcolonial discourses are founded on an anxiety, and are continuous with each other. Power is always subject to the effects of new cultural economies developed within the existing frameworks. Postcolonialist discourse is thus constantly changing as people encounter a new dialectic between power and powerlessness, new patterns of resistances and social formations, and new economic orders.

In our view, the notions of ambivalence and contradiction are very helpful in exploring contemporary Australian representations of Asia, as expressed both in popular discourse and in the language of marketing education to Asia. While such representations show a degree of continuity with the earlier explicitly colonialist images of Asia, they are also discontinuous, and searching for new settlements. What we have witnessed over the past decade in Australia are expressions of a postcolonial discourse, which trade on their indeterminacy. These expressions recognise Asia as inextricably linked to our economic and political objectives, but they are unable to secure sufficient distance from the past racial stereotyping that involved viewing Asians as a homogenised mass who posed a constant threat to Australia's national identity, and to its economic well-being.

The representations of Asia have become ever more complex, ambiguous and contradictory, as more Australians travel to Asian countries, trade with them and learn Asian languages. The economic context has also changed, with Japan emerging as an economic giant, and with the Australian economy becoming increasingly tied to the region. During (1992) has shown how the expressions of postcoloniality are inextricably tied to the phenomenon of the globalisation of economic markets. The point is particularly relevant to the export of educational services policy which assumes education to be a globalised commodity, a package of knowledge and skills recognisable in the market as a product for sale. How this package is assembled and marketed by Australian universities, and why it is bought, is an issue that lies at the centre of our inquiry.

## Education as a globalised commodity

That education in most countries is now dominated by a market-driven discourse is an idea that is widely recognised. In Asian countries, there are now a number of players seeking to attract the same group of students. What they are offering however is remarkably similar, with each making references to the imperatives of a global market. In this way, the notion of the 'market' has become reified, providing a common medium for those wanting to exchange goods and services. Such reification has a number of serious implications for education.

Most significantly, the reification of markets creates pressures for the creation of uniform products for consumption. When education is viewed in much the same way as a McDonalds' hamburger, it runs the risk of becoming standardised, divorced from particular cultural

concerns. We have already noted how the treatment of education as a globalised commodity has encroached upon aspects of discrete cultures which were once differentiated by local traditions and activities. Markets are no longer linked exclusively to local cultural concerns but respond to global requirements. And, in so far as the export of educational services policy treats education as a global commodity, it risks compromising local knowledge and community values that had once been regarded as central to the processes of education.

As McCracken (1990) has argued, international marketing of cultural products has a range of invidious consequences. When practices acquire international characteristics, they inevitably undermine local traditions and practices. Many of the distinctions which typify nations and cultures still prevail, but they acquire a major rival in the form of globalisation, which has a tendency to standardise many attitudes and behaviours throughout the world (Robertson 1992). For example, materialism as an attitude towards measuring success is now found globally, and teenage behaviours in the shopping malls throughout the world are becoming remarkably similar.

This globalisation means that Australian universities feel perfectly justified in providing the same range of subjects to all students. They also regard teaching styles to be neutral with respect to particular cultural backgrounds. This assumption of neutrality, however, conflicts with what we now know of the processes of pedagogy and curriculum. Feminist scholars have, for example, shown curriculum to be gendered in ways that are not arbitrary. Similarly, the literature on multiculturalism has suggested that curriculum needs to incorporate a concern for cultural diversity. However, despite these pressures the Australian higher education curriculum has remained highly durable. And while it has accommodated a greater emphasis on the teaching of Asian languages, it has continued to be largely ethnocentric.

Universities have not been eager to examine their curriculum for the cultural biases it might contain. Those universities which have looked at these issues have treated cultural difference as a fact to be taken into account but not as constitutive of curricular and pedagogic relations. They have often assumed a position of neutrality in the formation of Asia-Australia relations, as somehow external to the more general processes of cultural articulation. What is clear then, is that new market-based approaches to overseas students, have so far not had any significant impact on the way universities consider issues of curriculum and pedagogy.

In view of these observations, the question arises as to why students from Asia are still willing to continue to "purchase" Australian education in such large numbers. The answer to this question is complex and suggests a variety of factors. Some of these factors include: the lack of opportunities in home countries; the desire to study overseas; the proximity to Asian countries; the fact that Australian universities are still not as expensive as North American and European universities; and perhaps even the persistence of hegemonic colonial thinking among some Asian parents. Many students who study in Australian universities recognise curriculum here to be incongruent with their own cultural traditions, but choose to overlook the biases in favour of the attraction of receiving an education that masks itself as global.

At the heart of the export of educational services policy is a major contradiction. Education is increasingly viewed by both the students from Asia and Australian universities as global, yet we know the Australian curriculum to be ethnocentric. Individual students view their needs in global terms, yet we are witnessing in many Asian countries a resurgence of new forms of nationalism, and a confidence that is an outcome of both their economic progress and their postcolonial aspirations. In such a context, Australia may not be able to enjoy its current advantage unless its higher education takes drastic steps. Not only does it need to examine its marketing practices, but it also needs to express a concern for cultural sensitivities within its curriculum and teaching methods.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the export of educational services policy is a site where many of the cultural contradictions of postcolonialism, of culture and globalisation, of education and the market ideology, of educational aid and trade, and residual and emergent representations of Asia are played out. It is a site central to the reconstruction of Australia's relationship with Asia and to the reformation of an Australian identity in and through education.

Reflexive modernity and postcolonialism, together, provide a theoretical explanation for Australia's current position on selling education to overseas students. Basically, conditions have changed, but Australia still seeks a position of dominance in the Asian region. The lingering colonialist quest for suzerainty over neighbouring countries, especially where racial distinctions prevail, remains influential in Australian policies toward Asian relations, but the rising prominence of economic concerns is distorting the direction of these relations. As Australia's once robust and relatively independent economy declines, and the economies of many Asian countries grow, the realities of a globalised economy will require more collaboration and cooperation among trading partners. This, in turn, will generate new perceptions of Asia, not as a totalised entity, but as a geographical region with cultural, political and economic differences.

The ethnocentric conception of the curriculum in Australia's tertiary institutions is remarkable for its durability. It has gone largely unchallenged by both those who provide and those who partake. Rising economic strengths and the cultural confidence visible in Asian countries are putting new demands on the production, consumption and use-value of Australian knowledge. The imposition of its language, history and values by the modern colonialist state as if these were universals (Tiryakian 1991, p.167) is no longer tenable. Neglect of pluralities, and of the issues concerning the relations between knowledge and power, currently found in Australia's modernist tertiary curriculum, simply cannot persist in a postcolonial context.

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# That's edutainment: Restructuring universities and the Open Learning Initiative

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## Introduction

In 1992, the appearance of the TV Open Learning Project (TVOLP) on the higher education landscape signalled that changed economic, technological and political circumstances in Australia were to have effect in something as sheltered as tertiary education. What began as a small project to trial the use of broadcast television was transformed in six months<sup>1</sup> to a much expanded Open Learning Initiative (OLI). These initiatives typify Canberra's recent approaches to tertiary education reform: high speed policy making and implementation, and an unswerving belief in the need for technology-based, microeconomic reform. The interpretations of these developments have been limited, local and predictable, reflecting the interests and agendas of the scholars concerned. In most cases the OLI is seen as a more or less 'logical' development that can be understood in terms of a tertiary education sector in a new policy context constructed in terms of the logic of 'the market'.

In this paper we will offer a brief account of the development of the TVOLP and the OLI. We then describe some of the restricted 'readings' of these developments as a preliminary to our analysis which draws upon new kinds of logic that derive from the 'logic of globalisation' that is being experienced in many aspects of Australian society. In particular we are concerned to locate the OLI initiatives in a framework constituted by the intersection of the market, education and the new information media. This work is part of an ARC funded research project, *Marketing Education in the Information Age*, in which we are investigating new emergent kinds of educational practice (Bigum, et al. 1993; Fitzclarence, et al. 1993).

Developments in 'distance' education have always been described and analysed as a radical shift in the nature of the university<sup>2</sup>. Predictably, conservative analyses are largely nostalgic, even mythical and hark back to the days when university life simply involved the reflective practice of intellectuals inside ivy-covered walls. In other words, 'real' university learning concerned itself with the book, the face to face lecture, small tutorials and the quiet hum of a library at 'peak hour'. Mathews points to a deeper logic that is invoked in the conservation of universities:

*Indeed there are deep ideological links between the present defence of the universities and the defence of the natural environment. The environmental movement seeks to preserve the natural world - our natural heritage - at least for its own sake, as an end in itself. The defender of the universities seeks to preserve our intellectual heritage for the same kind of reason. In this sense both these 'movements' are conservative - both are striving to protect a fundamental source or locus of value not analysable in instrumental terms. ... (Mathews 1990, p. 19)*

On the other hand, the more radical response acknowledges and even celebrates the diversity of styles and new forms of interaction in institutes of higher education. Such a response is captured in comments like that offered by Evans and Nation (Evans and Nation 1989), who note:

*Distance education has proved to be a mutating virus within the bodies of education systems. It has been able to rise to new challenges, to reshape itself to meet social changes and to trans-*

*form itself for adoption to new contexts (Evans and Nation 1989, p. 7).*

The use of a biological metaphor should act as a warning to the reader. Such metaphors are often used when a more developed or elaborated cultural analysis is not available. What inevitably occurs with analyses which are derived from nature-based assumptions is an effective screening from view of the complex forms of social interactions associated with change (see Fitzclarence 1993).

The following analysis will, as noted above, foreground cultural change as the basis for an adequate interpretation of the OLI developments. In doing so a particular form of cultural analysis will be employed, one that offers a critique of the 'ideology of instrumentalism' (Mathews 1990, p. 19) by taking a different path to the sorts of conservative analyses noted above. In this paper we aim to better understand the complexity of new cultural arrangements made possible by the linking of the local and global via the new information and communication technologies. The analysis draws on an approach which recognises a need to travel on a path between 'objectivism and relativism' (Bernstein 1983). As such it draws on an assumption that not all 'readings' of a situation can be considered equally significant.

## Distance education and the Open Learning Initiative

The sweeping changes to higher education in 1987 initiated by John Dawkins, the Minister of Employment Education and Training, have been experienced and described as something of a revolution in administration and policy. Indeed the initial response from higher education was one of stunned silence to the mooted changes, giving credence to the claim that these were indeed revolutionary times. Put bluntly, the recognition that higher education was involved in a process of more general industrial reform came as a shock to many inside the tertiary education system. A more sober analysis, however, indicates that the industrialisation of higher education has been underway for a period that long precedes the Dawkins' plans. Indeed the Martin Report (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia 1964-5) specifically made claim to the notion of 'human capital' as a necessary feature of the emerging tertiary education sector of the time<sup>3</sup>. The Report foreshadowed developments that more directly involved universities within the ambit of economic and political life. In describing this process Sharp (1988, p. 121) notes that: 'It has been left to Mr Dawkins to publicly render unmistakable the process which has been at work for forty years; the rise of the higher education system within the husk of the modern university'. In the period of expansion in higher education in the 1960s, the Professional Board Chairman at the University of New England claimed:

*Within Australia and beyond its shores, the ten years 1955-64 have seen under constant attack those who cling to the unique formula of traditional university patterns of education. Colleges of advanced technology, University of the air, and new university academic organisations are but a few of the methods devised to expand the opportunities for the tens of thousands previously denied all chance of a tertiary education. Few now decry such innovations for it is almost platitudinous to say that a nation that*