

## **Influence of Neoliberal Perspective on Academics and Policy Circles**

Dr Vijay Kumar Badetia-  
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science  
Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the managerialist approach to developing and implementing systems for flexible delivery of educational systems in the Australian university sector. Rapid advances in communication technologies have enabled the education sector to provide greater flexibility and diversity in the traditional areas of mixed delivery and distance education. Notes that educational policy is being shaped by neoliberal ideology, leading to systems of flexible delivery in which a concern with economic worth and efficiency can override the purpose of such systems. Asserts that, in order to develop effective online flexible learning systems, universities need to plan for, and invest heavily in, adequate programs to train academics in all aspects of the delivery of courses in the online flexible learning systems and to provide incentives to academics to become moderators and managers of online flexible learning systems. Because of this, policy measures in respect to flexible learning tend to discount components of the system, such as proper training and recognition of academic moderators, which leads to further inefficiencies in this system.

This discussion is based on a Foucauldian perspective, which deconstructs the liberal discourse which holds that liberal freedoms are necessary to market mechanisms and competitive consumer behaviour. The discussion is also based on a brief practical example, which refers to the approach in delivering online learning systems at an Australian University.

Finally, and by way of early clarification of terminology, we generally refer to the term "flexible learning" (FL) to mean "online learning", since the latter is becoming the most important means through which flexible learning will be delivered within the university sector. This is not intended to discount the original meaning of the term, which included such notions as recognition of prior learning, elasticity in length of study and flexibility in assessment methodologies; rather, we want to focus on the major factor that presently influences the development of the system through which these aspects of FL will be universally implemented.

### **Introduction**

There is little doubt that, the Internet will, in the near future, connect just about every business and individual on the planet (Flint *et al.*, 2002). Hence, the uptake of the Internet-based technology is not a matter of choice for businesses and other organisations – rather,

it is more of a necessity if they are to remain competitive. The universities sector has also become interested in the Internet and in how it might contribute to a more flexible delivery of education systems, as demonstrated by the number of memberships in the peak industry body, NCODE-Flexible Learning Australasia, which claims to represent the e.learning activities of almost all Australian universities (Rich, 2002). However, this interest has come at a time when neo-liberal ideology reigns supreme within the national and organizational governance and policy-making. This phenomenon is transforming the primary purpose of educational institutions (to facilitate learning) into that of generating income, and in the process it is rendering the milieu of learning/teaching relationships into one of market- like relationships. Other than the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) no other institution has called learners “customers” and educational institutions “businesses”, and has declared in a recent report (Mitchell, 2003) that there can be large financial benefits obtained when applying business principles and processes to online learning.

How much of a business in higher education and online teaching has developed in Australia is also highlighted by a recent comparative study between two Scandinavian countries (Norway and Sweden) and Australia. This study (Paulsen, 2002) found that, when compared to the Scandinavian universities, Australian universities regard online education as a source of income.

This is apparently due to the Commonwealth Governments making the higher education sector an important component in its drive for greater economic productivity and rationality, which is apparent in statements such as, “Education in Australia is a multi-billion dollar export industry of vital importance to our economy” (DEST (2000) cited in Paulsen, 2002, online). By contrast, in Scandinavia viewing education as a type of commodity that could be packaged for export does not even seem to be an issue for public discussion.

### **Conceptual clarifications**

Since the late 1970s, Western societies have undergone some radical changes at the national and global levels. The advent of neo-liberalism (the ideology of the unfettered

market, the restricted state, and the calculative and “free” individual) began to replace the Keynesian governance approach which involved the state manipulating the economic cycle, and triggered the greatest economic globalisation the world has ever seen (contrary to some arguments, there were previous ones). In a neo-liberal context, knowledge is seen as valuable when it contributes to the “performance and efficiency of the economic and social system”, which has come to be called the “post modern condition of knowledge” (Lyotard, 1984; Nicoll, 1998, p. 299). In all this, individuals are expected to perceive their life as an “enterprise of oneself”: an activity in which the reproduction and reconstruction of one’s own human capital takes place (Gordon, 1991). Neo-liberal advocates hold that markets empower consumers because they imbue them with the ability to complain about or exit particular transactional arrangements[1] (O’Looney, 1993, p. 503).

Part of the self-regulating individual’s life is what has come to be labelled as “life-long learning”, which is a by-product of the popular notion that in order for society as a whole to be competitive in the increasingly “liberalised” world economy its members must become more productive and innovative, and hence more skilled and “clever”. But they must do this largely by themselves because in a neo-liberal society they are deemed to be not only calculative but also “free”. This is the essence of what Foucault has called “liberal power” – a power that is imposed through the behaviour of free people (Hindess, 1996). It is precisely this very power of freedom (Rose, 1999) which governs individuals, and hence learners, in a liberal democratic society.

### **Markets and flexible learning**

The predominant mechanism that is now being employed to “allow” for individual calculations and learning “choices” is the market. The market brings together learners and education institutions: competitive individuals must update their skills if they are to remain competitive in the labour market, and the educational and training institutions must be constantly attuned to the needs of learners and deliver well-targeted courses if they are to remain competitive in the educational and training market. This can render the education system into a factory-like process of production (McClintock, 1992), in which new

educational technologies are viewed as new opportunities that allow the commodification of instruction, and teachers are merely seen as production workers in a process that seeks to increase the production of “instructional commodities” (Noble, 1998: online).

When the new communication technologies became successful in the delivery of some areas of the vocational and applied-skills training (in Australia, this is known as the vocational education and training (VET) sector), the view that the market is an ideal mechanism for the delivery of educational products to consumers was further enhanced. This is because courses that are delivered through the VET system have become highly standardised after the introduction of the competency-based training (CBT). CBT is the system of training and assessment which requires that “...training outcomes could be expressed in relatively simple outcomes terms in statements of required competencies” (Smith, 2003, p. 35). The present hegemony of CBT in the Australian VET sector resulted in a vast number of qualification- based courses becoming standardised, with exactly the same component units and competency assessment criteria, wherever delivered. Because the product is essentially the same whatever be the mode of delivery, or whoever the producer is, it can be more easily commercialised. Market competition in the delivery of the product can then be realised because competition is not focused on content, but on price, efficiency, and (now) spatial and temporal flexibility in its delivery.

There is, however, a significant difference between vocational and other forms of study. Whilst the learners that engage in vocational study tend to view relevance of course to future career and worth/recognition of qualification, those studying in university settings are more concerned with the intellectual value of the material (often studying it “for its own sake”) and the context they engage with (for example, stimulating lectures) (Morgan, 1993). It is, thus, somewhat harder to standardise courses in the university sector, not only because of the complexity and critical content of the material but also because of what is seen as the sanctity of the independence of those producing this material (i.e. the academics).

There is also a difference between merely packaging a course into a commercial product

and then labelling its delivery online and consequent uptake by learners as “flexible learning”, and the actual capacity of an online educational system to enhance actual learner independence and teaching flexibility. Rather, flexible learning refers to a movement away from a situation in which key decisions about learning dimensions are made in advance by the instructor or institution, towards a situation where the learner has a range of options from which to choose with respect to these key dimensions (Collis and Moonen, 2001, p. 10).

Flexible learning is about the empowerment of learners, but more if they were simply economic actors embedded within a Web of market relationships that reacts to competitive environments. For a learner, an ideal flexible learning context is likely to consist of “.. .an information world which reacts to his or her own pace of learning” (Benjamin (1994) quoted in Salmon, 2000, p. 11).

### **A managerialist approach to delivering online teaching**

The example in the VET sector of how standardisation can help the commodification of instructional material, together with the neo-liberal ideology driving educational policy, has had various effects on universities when developing their own systems of online teaching. Before we discuss some of these effects, and to help define them, we outline a brief case example, in which we refer briefly to experiences with online delivery of courses at an Australian University.

As a major provider of distance and flexible education, this university has used the WebCT software package to deliver a variety of online courses for a number of years. The model used consists of:

- duplicating classroom material online;
- using the same assessment methods to those employed in the classroom mode (i.e. essay work and exams, although, in some courses, online quizzes are also used);
- a preference for the use of asynchronous online discussion forums;
- minimal training of academic staff in the use of WebCT and other software relevant to the delivery of online courses; and

- web and instructional design for each course is conducted by negotiation with a separate (and corporatised) arm of the University which charges the course's home department for the service, whilst simultaneously requiring the department to use only the particular software, systems and processes it has purchased or devised in the delivery of the course.

This model, in which costs for the delivery of courses are borne directly by academic departments, uses the managerialist approach and corporatises the activities of the various departments within the institution. This is neo-liberalism working at the microlevel – it is intended to set academic (and other) university departments “free” within some kind of an internal market (also sometimes referred to as a “quasi- market” (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993)) to find means for more efficiently managing their own funding. At the same time, these departments also compete in the wider educational and research markets – also largely the result of neo-liberal educational macro-policies.

A significant obstacle to effective and efficient online learning is the pervasive notion that this form of learning will not replace traditional teaching and training practices, but will merely complement them (Brennan *et al.*, 2001). By not actually treating online education as a very different approach to course design and delivery to the “conventional” distance and classroom approaches, and viewing it as an “add-on” mode, the university in this example applies what Sjogren and Fay (2002, pp. 53-4) refer to as the “continuing-education model”. In this approach, the costs of online courses are treated as simply just some additional costs associated with the development and delivery of “normal” courses, and which can be thus “piggybacked” onto the existing course programs. This model thus immediately creates two problems, which we will discuss in the following sub-sections.

The obstruction of good instructional design The model does not properly acknowledge that online teaching is, in a significant way, the realm of digital instructional design. Effective instructional design for the online educational environment allows courses “. . . to move well beyond the digitising of material used in a conventional classroom – it exploits the potential of highly integrated, technically sophisticated, interactive multimedia forms

of online teaching and learning” (Sjogren and Fay, 2002, p. 54). This type of instruction is costly (creating Web sites on which there is the digitised version of the classroom material and the discussion and chat rooms – all wrapped up in “eye candy” – is not sufficient, the Web site must offer highly interactive, professionally moderated, and learner-controlled and driven learning and assessment environments). It is also recognised that passive and lack of motivators (more so than educational software) in online teaching prevent effective and efficient teaching (Yellen, 2000).

### **Poor and inadequate skills base**

The university does not require academic staff to acquire e.moderating skills as part of its policy on staff professional development. At the organizational level it does not appear to acknowledge the significance of good moderating to the effective and efficient delivery of online courses, and thus fails to properly address some of the typical needs of online learners. For example, few skills are apparent in the online activities of course e.moderators in how to implement and moderate chat sessions to prevent chaos and add learning value to what, at first glance, might seem as “idle chat”. The latter requires very different skills from the instructor/ moderator when compared to classroom teaching. As Salmon (2000, p. 55, and Chpt. 4) notes, even where there is strong technical support and good software systems available, in the absence of adequate planning and costing to training of e.moderators, the likelihood of online courses being delivered successfully and cost-efficiently is greatly diminished in the longer run.

Rather than looking more intensely at institutional policies on training of e.moderators, some point to other possibilities as to why academics are often reluctant to become more skilled in online teaching. Johnson (1996, p. 100) argues that attempts to rationalise the universities’ distance education sector are often resisted, as it is sometimes “impossible to persuade academics to use materials prepared by others”. There is also an argument that a potential loss of work will occur if teacherless classrooms become more of a reality, and that the new pedagogies of online education force current educational systems and teaching practitioners to examine and justify their existences (Brennan *et al.*, 2001). Perhaps, it is due to this apparent “threat” that online teaching is still perceived as a somewhat trivial

and “easy” occupation, which poorly trained (in e.moderating and academic teaching) and mostly casual academic staff are increasingly expected “to do” it with ease.

To summarise, what Nicoll (1998, p. 291) calls “technologization, marketization and managerialism” have driven universities to reshape course delivery in the age of new technologies.

However, this tends to lead more to a kind of flexibility that is responsive to the market because (at least in part) the universities need to survive financially. Market-driven delivery of higher education quite possibly represents an oxymoron when higher education is viewed merely as a stock of commercial products.

However, incentives can be used to encourage academics to deliver courses that are both flexible and profitable – whilst preserving the unique form of critical and avant-garde scholarship that is at the centre of university education. This can be achieved through the separation of those institutional controls that are posed on academics from the actual delivery of courses. This is not to say that the (now popular) managerialist approach to force organizational change through the introduction of economic rewards and competition that was originally proposed by Osborne and Gaebler (1993) should be adopted.

Rather, a recognition and encouragement of academic teachers who acquire necessary skills to design, develop and deliver flexible learning systems which are relevant to the context of their own disciplines would be the first significant step in ensuring an effective and vibrant “industry” of flexible learning. In the example discussed above, this would mean giving academics a viable choice for acquiring the specialist skills necessary not only for working in an online flexible learning environment, but also for controlling this environment. This means not simply inviting academics to attend one or two short workshops to introduce them to the use of WebCT, but also providing other incentives to complete specialist courses in e.moderating, instructional design and Web design (including the use of HTML, and Java and Pearl scripting). This would allow academics to take full control of most of the technical factors that facilitate the actual delivery of an online course, which then serves to empower them within the new world of market-driven



flexible education. Also, this approach is likely to fit well with the tradition of scholarship and teaching within the university sector because the sanctity of independent scholarship is more likely to be respected in a context in which academics retain control of their own teaching and learning environments.

## **Conclusion**

Rapid advances in communication technologies enables the education sector to provide greater flexibility and diversity in the traditional areas of mixed delivery and distance education. However, the take up and use of these technologies can become subject to an ideological driver – the liberalisation of markets (labour and education) and the reduction of public funding for higher education institutions. In the socio-economic milieuX that are subject to neo-liberalism, new communication technologies are increasingly viewed as means to enhance economic efficiency and competitiveness, and thus to produce education at lower costs while also ensuring that it becomes a significant income source for universities.

However, the meaning and original purpose of flexible learning becomes somewhat blurred when online education systems are perceived to simply be complementary to conventional (class room and distance) educational systems. The complexity of learner-driven and controlled educational system (which is what a flexible system is) does not permit such an approach to more readily succeed. This complexity will also impede attempts to standardise university teaching in a manner that transforms it into a commodity that is tradeable under free market conditions. It is rather the case that, in order to develop effective online flexible learning systems, universities need to plan for, and invest heavily in, adequate programs to: train academic staff in all aspects of the delivery of courses in the online flexible learning systems; provide incentives to academics to become e.moderators and managers of online flexible learning systems; and, allow academic e.moderators to have a recognised status as specialist educators within the university sector.

## References

- Brennan,R.,McFadden,M.andLaw,E.(2001),“Review of research :all that glitters is not gold: online delivery of education and training”, A Research Report: Australian National Training Authority(ANTA), availableat:[www.flexiblelearning.net.au](http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au).
- Collis, B. And Moonen,J .(2001),Flexible Learning in a Digital World, Kogan Page ,London and Stylus Publishing,Sterling.
- Flint,J.A.,Herbert,R.D.and Leeves,G.D.(2002),“Regional small business perceptions of the Internet: the case of WyongS hire”,Australasian Journal of Regional Studies,Vol. 8 No. 1,pp.67-81.
- Gordon,C.(1991),“Governmentalrationality:anintroduction”,inBurchell,G.,Gordon, C.andMiller,P.(Eds),The Foucault Effect: Studies in Government ality, Harvester Wheatshef, Hemel Hemstead.
- Hindess, B. (1996), Discourses of Power:From Hobbesto Foucault, Blackwell, London.
- Hirschman, A. (1970),Exit,Voice,andLoyalty,HarvardUniversityPress, Boston,MA.
- Johnson, R. (1996), “To wishandtowill:reflectionson policy formation and implementation in Australi and istancee ducation”,in Evans,T.D. and Nation,D.E.(Eds),Opening Education: Policies and Practices From Open and Distance.

- Lyotard, J. (1984), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- McClintock, R. (1992), *The Educators Manifesto: Renewing the Progressive Bond with Posterity through the Social Construction of Digital Learning Communities*, Institute for Learning Technologies, Teachers College, New York, NY, available at: [www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/manifesto/contents.html](http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/manifesto/contents.html) (accessed 30 May 2003)
- Mitchell, J. (2003), "E-business and online learning: connections and opportunities for vocational education and training", A Research Report: Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), available at: [www.flexiblelearning.net.au](http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au)
- Morgan, A.R. (1993), *Improving your Student's Learning: Reflections on the Experience of Study*, Kogan Page, London.
- Nicoll, K. (1998), "'Fixing' the 'f' acts': flexible learning as policy intervention", *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 291-304.
- Noble, D.F. (1998), "Digital diploma mills: the automation of higher education", *First Monday*, Vol. 3 No. 1, available at: [www.firstmonday.dk/](http://www.firstmonday.dk/) (accessed 30 May 2003).
- O'Looney, J. (1993), "Beyond privatisation and service integration: organizational models for service delivery", *Social Service eReview*, Vol. 67 No. 4, pp. 501-34.
- Osborne, D. and Gaebler, T. (1993), *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, Plume, NY.

- Paulsen, M.F. (2002), "Online education systems in Scandinavian and Australian Universities : a comparative study" , International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, available at: [www.irrodl.org/content/v3.2/bios.html#](http://www.irrodl.org/content/v3.2/bios.html#) Paulsen (accessed 20 June 2003).
- Rich, D. (2002), NCODE – Flexible Learning Australasia : Submission to the Higher Education Review Secretariat, available at: <http://ncode.mq.edu.au/>
- Rose, N. (1999), Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Salmon, G. (2000), E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online , Kogan Page, London and Stylus Publishing, Sterling.
- Sjogren, J. and Fay, J. (2002), "Online learning : using co-opetition to advantage", *Change* (New Rochelle), Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 52-8.
- Smith, P. (2003), "Flexible delivery ", EXE735: Foundations of Flexible, Online and Distance Education Study, Deakin University, Geelong.
- Yellen, R.E. (2000), "Reaching the future information system workers with distance learning" , *Journal of End-User Computing* , Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 29-30.