Redefining Roles: university e-learning contributing to lifelong learning in a networked world?[^1]

NICKI HEDGE & LOUISE HAYWARD
University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT Distance education enabled by e-learning is at the forefront of university participation in an increasingly connected world. Physical, temporal, cultural and educational borders are becoming both less rigid and less predictable than ever before. The authors suggest, in this article, that university distance e-learning could and should allow universities to make a major contribution to lifelong learning in this networked world. However, just as lifelong learning and distance e-learning are subject to multiple interpretations and realisations, the role that universities might play in contributing to global lifelong learning is currently far from clear. Both distance education, as a mode of learning and teaching, and lifelong learning, as an aspiration and a policy, bring issues pertaining to the roles and values of universities into sharp focus. On the fluid, unpredictable landscape of global higher education are traced the imperatives driving distance e-learning and lifelong learning in order to discern the redrawing of borders that appears to be emerging. The parallels between unsettled territories and unresolved tensions in distance e-learning and lifelong learning will be highlighted. The authors suggest that distance e-learning could enable lifelong learning and that lifelong learning, broadly interpreted, should be a cornerstone of university strategy and activity in a world that is increasingly networked.

Introduction
This article considers the role of university distance e-learning and its contribution to lifelong learning in a networked world. Following a brief excursion into the current landscape of higher education (HE), we consider definitions and understandings of lifelong learning (LLL), a term that Daniel (2000, p. 4) suggests ‘... rolls easily from the lips of educators’ but requires
careful evaluation. We question the role of universities in lifelong learning and the ways in which technology-enabled distance education, distance e-learning, is currently playing a part in the enactment of this role. Similarities and differences in distance e-learning and lifelong learning are outlined and we highlight, in particular, the tension between regarding e-learning and lifelong learning as core or fringe in the missions and activities of universities in developed nations. We raise issues of values premised on equity, inclusion and globalisation in the arena of distance e-learning and lifelong learning and articulate the possibility of an alternative future. Finally, we ask how such a future might be realised on the changing landscape of a networked world in the knowledge age.

A Landscape in Flux?

In the rapidly changing world of HE, physical, temporal, cultural and, essentially, educational borders are becoming less rigid and less predictable than ever before. Traditional cornerstones of the academy, not least ideas of education, of learning and knowledge, and of the understandings of the roles that universities play in the wider world, are being questioned and contested by those within and outwith the walls of the academy itself. Some would have us believe that the university of today ‘is dissolving into the wider world’ (Barnett, 2000, p. 20) or that the university is in ruins (Readings, 1996). Bourgeois et al (1999, p. 15) suggest that universities are ‘paddling vigorously to stay afloat in the flood-tide of mass HE systems’, whilst Inglis et al (1999, p. 14) note that currently we are in ‘a period marked by restructures and transitions, in which social institutions, including education, are undergoing dynamic transformation’. Such transformations form the backdrop to this article and focus attention on ways in which universities are transforming themselves, or having transformation forced upon them, as they struggle to locate themselves on the evolving landscape.

According to Lash (2002, p. 26), the current era is one in which long-established principles are being displaced by ‘three new governing logics’: the displacement of the national by the global, of a manufacturing logic by one of information, and by a shift from the social to the cultural. Suggesting that the world is changing beyond recognition, Lash (2002, p. 26) stresses the role of technology that is both enabling and driving ‘today’s transition from a national, manufacturing society to a global information culture’. Technology has become, according to Feenberg (1992, p. 1), ‘one of the major sources of public power in modern societies’. The key question for us, here, is how universities are both reacting to and helping to create this apparently transformed, global information culture. As universities struggle to combine the enactment of their traditional roles whilst, to varying degrees, assuming new roles, we question their will to remain a site of public good and critical influence. Essentially, and as we have argued before (Hayward & Hedge, 2002), we question the will and the inclination of universities to retain a role as ‘critic and conscience of society’
(Peters & Roberts, 2000, p. 137). Suggesting that today’s universities are ‘deeply implicated in the processes of social and cultural change’, we agree with Filmer (1997, p. 57) that they have a social and cultural responsibility ‘to take a critical stance in relation to collective, societal purposes and plans’. That stance is as shaken and hence as indeterminate as the world universities inhabit and, as suggested by Readings (1996, p. 2), ‘the wider social role of the university is now up for grabs. It is no longer clear what the place of the university is within society or what the exact nature of that society is.’

Well rehearsed in academic discourses are views such as that propounded by Lankshear & Knobel (2003 p. 20), to the effect that the digital age ‘is throwing many of our educational practices and emphases and their underlying epistemological assumptions, beliefs, concepts and substantive theories into doubt’. Similar claims for radical change are voiced by Raschke’s suggestion that the digital age is:

radically reconstituting our intuitive, or common-sense, views of the ‘space’ in which education takes place ... Teaching and learning are not necessarily separate functions or professional activities, but points of co-ordination along the same spectrum. (Raschke, 2003, p. 6)

**Universities Responding to Change?**

In this landscape of flux and transformation, deliberation is exigent (Gergen, 1995). Universities are neither immune nor unresponsive to change. The development of e-learning, enabled by the technological advances underpinning and driving transformation in society, is one clear indicator of the university sector’s response to the changing landscape. Recent estimates suggest that the corporate e-learning market will exceed $23 billion in 2004 and that colleges and universities offering e-learning will more than double from 1999 to 2004 with a predicted 33% increase in student enrolment during that period (IDC figures, 2001). A recent survey of commonwealth universities undertaken by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE, 2002) noted that all respondents from the United Kingdom (UK) and developed commonwealth countries were involved in e-learning development of some sort. Yet as global e-learning becomes increasingly possible and attractive to universities there has been:

scant space between the polar options of boosterism and rejectionism, to argue seriously and realistically about the ways in which these new Information and Communications Technologies are becoming part of education’s business, and about how the business of higher education’s business should influence those decisions. (Burbules & Callister, 2000, p. 272)

This article seeks to ameliorate the relative lack of serious, realistic argument surrounding e-learning following Burbules and Callister’s view that the conflicted domain in which HE now resides provides us with an opportunity to
carve out spaces of innovation, freedom, and creativity’ if we ‘act assertively to shape them rather than passively responding to them’ (Burbules & Callister, 2000, p. 274). If e-learning has become an attractive response at the forefront of the university sector’s struggles to stay afloat in the tides of change (see Bourgeois et al., 1999), it remains neither attractive to some nor adequately scrutinised by many. Distance e-learning jostles, often uncomfortably, with other key agendas such as equity, access, notions of multicultural respect and, key for this article, liberal ideals of lifelong learning.

Key shifts, enabled by technological advances, in particular those facilitating networked communications across physical, temporal and cultural borders, have already resulted in some reconfiguration of old boundaries. We now inhabit an information age or, as Raschke (2003, p. 1) would have it, a new knowledge age, in which ‘the boundaries of everything from art to philosophy to literature to economics are rinsed out, when their historical hierarchies are flattened, when their very definitions become suspect’. Against this background, universities, hitherto the primordial creators and guardians of knowledge, can no longer rely upon an exclusive, or, even a leading role in the creation or communication of knowledge. Knowledge has become decentralised and disembodied, like a ‘body without organs’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), an amorphous body so easily dispersed and retrieved that universities are challenged to re-evaluate their position and role. Scrutiny of the role and shape of knowledge today is thus critical foregrounding for any considered discussion of the role of universities if the:

space of the post-modern university mirrors the space of knowledge within the digital society. This space of knowledge, in turn, reflects the topology of information flows in what increasingly we recognize as a networked world. (Raschke, 2003, p. 6)

The extent to which universities mirror, or think they might need to mirror, shifts in understandings, and the creation and dissemination of knowledge within an increasingly networked world, starts to emerge in speeches and papers from university leaders around the globe. Logan (1996, p. 1), Vice-Chancellor of Monash University in Australia, has cautioned that because students ‘no longer need to rely on the physical resources of a campus library’, then ‘the manner in which universities will fulfil their core functions will change fundamentally over the next decade’. Similarly, Bain (2001), Vice-Chancellor of Belfast’s Queen’s University notes that, ‘We see ourselves as an international university. We are not interested in being the best university in Northern Ireland – or on this island. We don’t think that in global terms that makes sense.’ Despite the prevalence of voices expressing views similar to those above, many continue to be critical of change in universities, welcoming a lack of radical change and holding firm to the perception that it is incumbent upon them to uphold the traditions and long-established standards of the university. Additionally, critics of globalisation might well look at current university initiatives within the so-called borderless world of education and
conclude that, for universities in the developed world, borderless simply means extended or that borderless simply means more of the same.

The networked world enables far greater reach and universities can now communicate with global audiences in ways that used to be restricted to those who were local and usually on campus. There appear to have been, however, very few shifts in deeper conceptions of border crossing, let alone border dismantling, with respect to power structures or, even, pedagogies that could be underpinned by sensitivity to global learners and the creation of global communities of inquiry. Epitomising the critics of universities reluctant to change, Raschke (2003, p. 80) warns that, ‘There is a postmodern mindset that remains torturously confined within the adamantine dungeons of a pre-modern administrative system.’ Universities find themselves in uncharted waters as they struggle to meet the challenges of the knowledge age and many appear to be largely undecided on the question of technology as promise or threat. The real challenges of the knowledge age are themselves as unclear as the roles universities may have in the construction of ideas of the future. If universities are not to become institutions at the mercy of an uncertain landscape designed and dominated by others, it is time for them to reassert and to reconceptualise their roles: to decide what is worth retaining from tradition and what needs to be adopted and moulded from innovation. But before any such reassertion or reconceptualisation can occur, universities will have to re-establish their vision; to regain the confidence necessary to develop their own views of how they would wish the world to be, and to decide upon the role that they would wish to play in working towards that world-view. Without an overarching sense of purpose universities will be constantly reactive to policy and competition. Without grounding principles against which the role of universities can be argued and evaluated, the future for universities looks bleak.

**Distance E-learning in Universities**

Strong views on distance e-learning are frequently articulated. Global e-learning falls easy prey to criticisms of commodified knowledge, marketisation, commercialisation and cultural imperialism. Within the educational community of our own traditional UK university the discourses of rejection are commonly voiced. These voices are centred on three main themes: the possibility of lowered standards, fears that the fiscal not the educational will drive the e-learning agenda, and concern that technological capacity will be inadequate and that it will necessitate a degree of effort that, with the focus on research, is unjustifiable and/or beyond the realms of reasonable expectation. E-learning combined with distance education is a step too far for those believing that, using King et al’s (2001, p. 6) phrase, ‘… distance education is the weak stepchild of in-person education’. On the other hand, criticising those who inhabit the boosterism camp, Howcroft & Fitzgerald (1998, p. 51) note their tendency to regard the information superhighway as ‘the universal cure-all for the social ills that have plagued humanity’. Such techno-utopians would
have us believe that enhanced information and communications technologies herald solutions to age-old challenges in learning and teaching. Realising such solutions is frequently encapsulated by e-learning advocates in an insistence that the old will not do: it must be entirely replaced by the new. Flood (2002, p. 1) notes that e-learning gurus ‘suggest a massive paradigm shift that will sweep away conventional learning’ and, likening talk of a new paradigm to ‘... the search for the holy grail’, he suggests that advocates for such believe it ‘... will absolve us from the baggage of the past’. The space between technohype and technophobia has not only been scant but, we suggest, continues to suffer from a failure to find a voice to fill the vacuum. Potentially, distance e-learning could be transformative. It could afford more equitable and wider access and tackle existing dilemmas in pedagogy, curricular design and development. It provides affordances that could fulfil elements of a transformative agenda and, indeed, offers a significant lever into a lifelong learning agenda designed to transgress hitherto restrictive boundaries around learning and teaching in universities. E-learning, in common with adult learning, struggles to retain ideals of access and liberalism. Usher et al’s analysis resonates with the ‘scant space’ argument of Burbules & Callister (2000):

Between the theoretically possible stances of outrage and silence, it may be claimed that adult education has yet to find an appropriate language, consonant with the habitus of its practitioners, in which to authenticate the field. (Usher et al, 1997, p. 62)

There is a tendency for the discourse of the technologically sophisticated, ‘the digerati’, to fill the space of e-learning boosterism. There is a parallel tendency for the discourse of those who most readily describe themselves as upholders of educational standards and ideals to fill the space of e-learning rejectionism. The middle spaces, the positions between outrage and silence, hype and reality, threat and opportunity, may require not only a hybrid language but a fundamental reconsideration of disciplinary and ideological boundaries.

Against this fluid backdrop, distance e-learning is nevertheless at the forefront of university participation in a knowledge age that is increasingly connected, complex and unpredictable. The quickly expanding e-learning market cited earlier suggests that distance e-learning is now a firm feature on the map as a mode of learning, if it is not yet regarded as a truly respectable and respected means of affording quality global learning opportunities. Lifelong learning, described by the European Commission (2002, section 1.1) as ‘about much more than economics ... it promises a Europe in which citizens have the opportunity and the ability to realise their ambitions and to participate in building a better society’, is set firmly on that same map as an aspiration if not yet such a visible phenomenon as e-learning. What, then, is the relationship between the two? If distance e-learning continues to expand whilst remaining inadequately challenged and deliberated in terms of its underlying rationale, realisation and pedagogy, does it have a role to play in enabling lifelong learning? If, intuitively and often in the abstract, few educationalists would
deny the liberal, equitable principles of lifelong learning, will they be willing to look to distance e-learning to support the realisation of their ideals? When we begin to engage with the realisations and rationales of both distance e-learning and lifelong learning, are we able to discern adequate consonance such that the two might develop in closer alignment?

**Connecting Lifelong Learning and Distance E-learning**

There are certainly points of commonality across the fields of distance e-learning and lifelong learning. Whilst understandings of open, networked, distributed and flexible learning and distance education and e-learning are contested, there is a similar lack of consensus with regard to lifelong learning. Whilst European Commission research exploring LLL implications for universities (Kokosalakis & Kogan, 2000, section 1.10) acknowledges that there is no universally accepted definition of LLL, it uses the following, ‘Those novel forms of teaching and learning that equip students (learners, individuals) to encounter with competence and confidence, the full range of working, learning and life experiences. Whilst we question the novelty element in the definition above (see Hedge & Hayward, 2003), it resonates well with notions of e-learning as a ‘new paradigm’ requiring a ‘new pedagogy’ (as noted above and see, for example, Barr & Tagg, 1995; O’Banion, 1997; Privateer, 1999; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Moreover, the EC definition of LLL is not so different from that offered by the Scottish Executive in their five-year Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland (2003). According to that strategy, LLL is about ‘personal fulfilment and enterprise; employability and adaptability; active citizenship and social inclusion’. A UK government (United Kingdom Government Performance and Innovation Unit, 2001) definition of LLL states that it means ‘the continuous development of the skills, knowledge and understanding that are essential for employability and fulfilment’.

Just as distance e-learning is frequently criticised for being driven, predominantly, by fiscal imperatives, then, arguably, most LLL policy statements have economic issues at their core. References to learning as a lifelong endeavour contributing to the wealth of society that is more broadly defined and goes beyond the purely economic to include individual growth seem to border on tokenism. Focusing on the individual and concerned less with definition than an articulation of aims, Candy (1991, p. 15) suggests that LLL ‘… takes, as one of its principal aims, equipping people with skills and competencies to continue their own “self-education” beyond the end of formal schooling’. More general than any of the definitions above, though still stressing the import of individual agency, Hiemstra (2002) suggests that LLL is ‘… a process of learning that continues throughout one’s lifetime, depending on individual needs, interests and learning skills’. Whilst aware of the difficulties in and, perhaps, the futility of seeking definitions for LLL (see Chapman & Aspin, 1997), we concur with Griffin’s (2002, p. 5) suggestion that ‘… it is evident that an approach which reflects a range of meanings, rather
than definitions, is needed to understand the significance of lifelong learning in present-day society. Put thus, a range of meanings for LLL would allow us to move it away from the overtly political-economic instrumentalism that we would find restrictive. Introducing such a level of generality could, simultaneously, obfuscate the prevalent imperatives, those that are instrumental and economic, precisely those that we would want to question and critique.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001) suggests that LLL subsumes, ‘all purposeful learning activity, from the cradle to the grave, that aims to improve knowledge and competencies for all individuals who wish to participate in learning activities’. The OECD’s avowed approach to LLL is to offer a systematic view of learning; to emphasise the centrality of the learner; to offer motivation to learn; and to take a balanced view of multiple objectives of education policy. Still underlying the definitions and approaches thus far is the economic and/or political imperative that Medel-Anonuevo et al (2001) warn now dominates LLL interpretations. Suggesting that shifts away from more holistic LLL interpretations to such economic imperatives result from the increasing influence of regional and global institutions, such as the EC, the OECD and the World Bank, Medel-Anonuevo et al (2001) note that it may be useful to separate LLL from lifelong education. For them LLL would retain a focus on holistic learning intended to benefit individuals whereas lifelong education would refer to those initiatives directed more towards community benefit.

With regard to this article, the key issues to be unravelled from this lifelong education scenario pertain to the stance taken on knowledge and information and how that is understood and translated into learning and teaching by universities apparently keen to include LLL, however defined, in their missions. Intuitively we seek a definition, understanding of and approach to learning that encourages and facilitates learning for all from cradle to grave. Whilst we do not argue that research-led universities could or should ever be the sole or even major providers of that learning, they have a key role to play. Without them LLL will always be perceived as learning for the proletariat or learning for those unsuitable for, or unable to benefit from, ‘higher’ university-led learning opportunities. We would make precisely the same arguments for distance e-learning.

As universities embrace the opportunities or respond to the threats of global e-learning by increasing their presence in the global education field, they are, by default, enacting a role in LLL. By default, however, is hardly good enough. Are universities continuing to exhibit what Smith & Webster (1997, p. 4) described as ‘… a marked reluctance to articulate a motivating purpose? Distance e-learning could enable lifelong learning and that lifelong learning, broadly interpreted, could be a cornerstone of university strategy and activity in a world that is increasingly networked. University-based learning, but not necessarily campus-based learning, is well suited to serving more than a rite of passage role for those between school and work. The flexibility offered by
distance e-learning lies not only in its associated modes of learning and
teaching, but also in the different opportunities it offers to wider communities
of learners than can be served by universities bound by physical bricks and
mortar. However, whilst distance e-learning can afford the dismantling of the
academy walls and meet the challenges of lifelong learning, the current reality
appears to push both distance e-learning and lifelong learning to the margins of
university activity. ‘Core business’ for many universities resides in research and
in face-to-face teaching and learning in research environments. Distance e-
learning continues to be regarded as a fringe activity although if quality is to be
assured it is, clearly, part and parcel of teaching and learning in a research
environment. In that respect it is as much core business as any other teaching
and learning. Lifelong learning is, overall, at the heart of university life and yet
can often be marginalised by its location in departments of adult and
continuing education, outreach or community education. If LLL encompasses
all learning from cradle to grave does it not find realisation in all that a
university offers: access, non-award bearing, undergraduate and postgraduate
programmes? If so, LLL, like distance e-learning, is core business for
universities.

Universities state their willingness to be key players in LLL. This is
evidenced in the recent response from Universities Scotland (the body
representing and including all Scottish higher education institutions) to the
Scottish Executive’s LLL Strategy. In its press release Universities Scotland
welcomed the Executive’s clear commitment to LLL with certain caveats:

While there is much in this strategy to support, we would have liked to
have seen more recognition of the role higher education has to play in
making a culture of lifelong learning a reality. The universities have put
forward imaginative and innovative ideas on how to expand both the
demand for and supply of learning opportunities. (Stevely, 2003)

Universities Scotland avow their role in LLL. In a country where over 50% of
Scots enter HE (compared with the UK average of 35% and England’s average
of 32%) and where 18% of students come from traditionally low participation
backgrounds, Scotland’s universities are contributing to the LLL agenda by
apparently seeking to provide learning opportunities for all. However,
Universities Scotland (and the figures above are drawn from their website [2])
note too that the wealthiest seventh of Scotland’s population are five times
more likely to go into HE than the poorest seventh. They also indicate that as
prospective HE participants from lower-income backgrounds are less willing to
incur debt then they may be less willing than wealthier students to consider HE
an option for learning. This data acknowledges the continuing challenge and
demonstrates limited success to date in that element of an LLL agenda that
seeks to be inclusive and socially just. The Universities Scotland website on
students and social inclusion continues by stating that the sector ‘... is
addressing social inclusion through flexible learning such as part-time courses,
modular courses, open and distance learning provision’. Policy makers seem to
be clear that universities have a role to play in lifelong learning and that distance education has a role to play in LLL, not least in closing the gap between the included and excluded.

We have argued elsewhere (Hedge & Hayward, 2001; Hayward & Hedge, 2002) that values such as social justice and inclusion are all too often absent from global distance e-learning initiatives. Located within LLL, however, and as evidenced from the references to flexible learning as part and parcel of a social inclusion agenda, such values may have an opportunity for both articulation and operationalisation. Whilst fiscal and competitive advantages frequently provide the drivers and the rationale for distance e-learning, they are often the antithesis of academic advocacy for both that mode of learning and teaching and for LLL. If technology-enabled distance education is education first, distance second and technology third and if distance educationalists are first and foremost educationalists, then we argue that exponents of and protagonists for LLL are subject to a similar configuration. The tensions evinced in general education discourses between the desirable and the expedient, between the educational and the economic, and between inclusion and exclusion, are exaggerated in distance e-learning (see Hedge & Hayward, 2001). If distance e-learning is used to achieve aspects of the LLL agenda then similar tensions in LLL will also be exaggerated both with respect to the mode of learning and, as alluded to above, with respect to the purpose of that learning.

**Tensions in Distance E-learning and Lifelong Learning**

Preece summarises the tension in LLL by noting that the requirement to:

maximise the nation’s wealth creating resources and minimise the demands from its loss-making dependency population has led to an increasing political interest in the causational relationship between education and the labour market. (Preece, 1999, p. 2)

The question remains: LLL for whom? To definitions such as the OECD’s that put a premium on purpose, we would ask ‘purposeful for whom?’ If LLL is focused on learning and if that learning is premised on inclusion rather than the reduction of exclusion, then the model begins to move from a deficit (‘this is all you can manage’) or charity model (‘this is what we will provide to help the poor [academically or economically]’) to a rights model (‘this is what you have a right to expect’). If, however, LLL continues to be part of an agenda masquerading under the guise of inclusion but designed largely to serve the needs of economic and political ends by ‘normalising people to contribute to the labour market, manifested through ideologies which aim to raise expectations of the excluded’ (Preece, 1999, p. 12), then it surely will disregard some and marginalise others.

In parallel with competing models of LLL, if distance e-learning is regarded as deficit, if it ‘will do’ if no other mode of delivery can render access
to learning opportunities possible, and if it is seen as but a delivery mode, then it, too, will disregard some and marginalise others. Realised thus it will fail to fulfil its transformative promise via its ‘multiplicative communication properties’ (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 115). These are not immediately obvious academic issues but they are fundamental to success and lack of attention to them may explain why some previous distance education and LLL initiatives have been rather less than successful or sustainable. Just as there are analogies to be drawn between Cole & Engeström’s (1993) notion of technology as a cultural amplifier and distance e-learning as a amplifier of tensions in the realisation of roles and values in HE today, LLL presents us with a further, related set of amplifiers. The discordant voices of those leading policy and those seeking to critique and/or to implement such policies in HE, LLL and distance e-learning expose a series of asymmetries and disjunctures that beg questions on the very idea of the university.

The parallels between unsettled territories and unresolved tensions in distance e-learning and lifelong learning are evident. For Giroux (1999, p. ix), culture must be engaged as ‘… a crucial site and strategic force for productive social change’ through which educationalists might usefully move away from their reliance on ‘the narrow technocratic models that dominate mainstream reform efforts and structure education programs’ (Giroux, 1999, p. 230). This analysis is relevant to LLL and distance e-learning policy makers, advocates, theorists and practitioners. There is a time-limited opportunity to join forces to find a voice that resonates both with the imperatives of learning for all and a fiscally sustainable, socially just future for universities. Educationally and socially driven imperatives and fiscally driven imperatives are not, necessarily, mutually exclusive. If we acknowledge that we live in an age of hybrid realities between policy, research and practice and the accompanying forces of the political, the fiscal, the social and the educational, the imperatives must co-exist. However, if we accept that both LLL and distance e-learning amplify tensions in universities today, then the challenges posed above are neither insignificant nor amenable to quick, easy solutions.

**Challenges**

In the opening section of this article we outlined features of the unpredictable landscape upon which both LLL and distance e-learning initiatives are currently being developed. In some respects LLL is an intuitively attractive concept, rather akin to inclusion, and we might regard distance e-learning as merely the conduit for some LLL. Both LLL and distance e-learning are frequently underpinned by dominant notions of economic and political expediency that relegate social justice, inclusion and sometimes learning itself to the margins of idealism. Voices from those margins can be dismissed as the prerogative of those who have failed to appreciate the hard-edged realities of the condition of universities today. Reality for universities today does not lie exclusively in the domain of the fiscal. Universities are neither immune, nor do they apparently
seek immunity, from their location in the wider world. If that wider world is as unpredictable as suggested then universities are inevitably prone to risks of a type and variety hitherto unknown. The management of those risks needs to be built into strategy and its ensuing policy and implementation.

If learning and risk management can be more explicitly allied in the strategic thinking of universities today as they develop global distance LLL initiatives, then they will be playing a role in reducing the ‘pervasive poverty and inequality amongst plenty’ that Proenza (2002, p. 58) argues is the ‘major threat to prosperity, stability and peace at the dawn of the 21st century’. Critical of the predominant focus on economic imperatives in LLL, some (Edwards, 1997; Hake, 1998; Korsgaard, 1997) have cautioned against ignoring the critical thinking requirements of a risk society. Acting on economic imperatives alone will not meet the needs or risks of the early twenty-first century. Using and conceptualising e-learning as a mere delivery tool will not meet the educational needs of LLL in that knowledge society. Access to quality learning opportunities does remain a critical issue for LLL unless we are content to see it continue as a tool for the maintenance and increased economic growth of the developed world and of little consequence or but a luxury for the developing world. Access to the range of possibilities opened up by the use of e-learning for global LLL at a distance and face-to-face is not merely an issue of technological infrastructure and connectivity. The ‘… social, political and economic aspects of access’ require scrutiny (Colle & Roman, 2002, p. 51). Access to knowledge as part of an approach to LLL that is facilitated and supported by distance e-learning is a complicated matter. If it is to be equitable and to become democratic (see Feenberg, 1992), it will require academics to influence and intervene in policy formation as well as policy implementation.

There is a tension between accepting Melody’s (1997) view that ‘the university is firmly established as an institution whose primary mission is implementing public policies that bear on higher education’ and his admonition to academics to play a much greater role by ‘providing an increased emphasis on public interest and societal theories, practices and implications’ (p. 77). That tension will remain unresolved if we fail to acknowledge the disjunctures and complexities inherent in these views. In the context of this article it will mean that we must surely recognise and accept that whilst there are likely to be very different starting points for researchers, policy makers and practitioners in the fields of LLL and distance e-learning, each view will be held with equal passion. All views and concomitant discourses must seek some degree of mutual understanding if we are to achieve transformation. Finding common ground in envisioning a future will be an essential element in beginning to reconcile competing demands and competing priorities. If universities have as their sole vision a role as implementers of public policy then they will lose the very essence of their potential to influence and indeed contribute to society. If that role is lost then universities will have sacrificed what is distinctive about their mission. With that the breadth and
depth of research and learning that is at the heart of what it means to be a university will be in jeopardy. Universities will have become competitors in a marketplace with others better able to serve those functions. Similarly, while many policy documents confine discussion of LLL to the economic workforce, there are few policy makers who would fail to recognise the dangers to society of excluded classes and few today who would not acknowledge the need to work for a more constructive and inclusive society.

Alternative Futures?

There are alternative scenarios for distance e-learning and LLL. Focusing exclusively on dystopic or utopic elements of the distance e-learning that enables LLL is probably no better than falling prey to Barnett’s (1997, p. 155) accusation that academics all too readily ‘... simply fall in with the dominant frameworks’. The alternative is an epistemological orientation that is essentially critical rather than techno-rational, techno-utopic or oppositional (see Gayol & Schied, 1997). That alternative avoids either uncritical acceptance of the status quo or what has been criticised as the dominant and ideologically neutral approach of distance educationists (and we could easily extend that to any educationalist). With particular regard to those in distance education, however, Gayol & Schied (1997, p. 2) suggest that an ideologically neutral approach ‘... focuses its highly specialised attention on technical issues and largely remains silent on societal and cultural issues’. Technology and, in particular, the information flows afforded by the Internet, are neither linear nor static, neither hierarchical nor neutral and, certainly, not societally passive. Arguing against either essentialist or determinist views of technology, Feenberg (2000, p. 24) suggests that ‘... technology is not a fate one must choose for or against, but a challenge to political and social creativity’. If universities choose to take up this challenge in the arena of distance e-learning as part of their contribution to global LLL then they may need to be less exclusively ‘... driven by a desire to achieve low cost solutions to complex social and economic problems’ in which ‘the quality of the provision appears often as a fragile afterthought rather than as fundamental to its development’ (Calder, 1999, p. 2). A decade ago, Apple (1993) stressed the import of coalitions between schools and communities in order to link schooling to learners’ political, cultural and economic lives. More recently, Calder (1999), citing Robinson (1999, p. 45), stresses the role of distance educationists building ‘bridges into and out of cultures of learning’.

Any use of technology in LLL and/or distance e-learning must acknowledge the plethora of choices available to us if we are prepared to accept the responsibilities associated with Feenberg’s (2000) view that technology is not a fate imposed upon us but that it provides us with choices. He continues, suggesting that it is those choices that:

establish the horizons of daily life ... At issue is becoming, not having. The goal is to define a way of life, an ideal abundance, and a human type, not
just to obtain more goods in the prevailing economic system. (Feenberg, 2000, pp. 23-24)

In the introduction to this article we suggested that physical, temporal, cultural and, essentially, educational borders are becoming both less rigid and less predictable than ever before. The key issue pertains to ways in which old borders are being reconfigured and replaced by new boundaries just as divisive and just as pernicious as the old. Class differentiation has not been removed across the globe so much as it has been reconfigured. Information and accessibility to information flows have become determinants of class differentiation but they remain controlled largely by a middle, or privileged, class (see Poster, 1990; Levy, 1996; Lash, 2002).

If we accept that knowledge creation and dissemination are no longer predominantly located within the confines of the academy’s walls then it is time for the academy to ensure that its role outwith those walls is consonant both with traditional values of educational opportunity, of quality research, learning and teaching and with the technological means at our disposal. Levy (1996) notes that, ‘A new anthropological space, the knowledge space, is being formed today, which could easily take precedence over the spaces of earth, territory and commerce that preceded it’ (p. 3). Playing a part in the formation of that space presents us with great opportunities for ‘… the technological future is by no means predetermined’ (Feenberg, 2000, p. 24).

It is time to ask hard questions in the field of LLL through distance e-learning and to endeavour to provide answers that afford learning for all. Whilst not ignoring the economic context, the focus should be returned to learning that capitalises on the very fluidity of the networked world. It is time to reject the easy dualisms of the local and the global, social or economic, individual or collective, and educational or fiscal. It is time to forge a future that unites lifelong learning with distance e-learning in the kind of connected world we would choose to inhabit. This is an issue of import not only for those concerned with LLL and distance e-learning, it is an issue of fundamental importance for the future of the university.

Notes

[1] A version of this article was presented at the 21st World ICDE (International Council for Open and Distance Education) Conference, ‘Lifelong Learning in the Networked World’, Hong Kong, February 2004.


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