

Institutional Isomorphism and Online Learning in Australian Higher Education

ABSTRACT

Why did so many Australian universities embrace online learning technologies during the 1990s when there was such contested evaluation evidence to support their adoption? This paper will critically assess this important question by examining the nature of online learning in Australian higher education, discuss the international and national context, and propose an explanation that accounts for the non-rational nature of this adoption decision using a Neo-Institutional framework.

ONLINE LEARNING AND AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Online learning is a relatively new technology that has been adopted in Australian higher education since the early 1990s. This technology was accompanied by promises of increased competitiveness in overseas markets (Hesketh et al., 1996, Katz, 1999, Yetton et al., 1997), enhanced world leadership in terms of innovation, enhanced quality of teaching and research (Lundin, 1993, Yetton et al., 1997, McCann et al., 1998), more flexible learning, greater cost effectiveness (Lundin, 1993, Yetton et al., 1997, McCann et al., 1998), as well as access to an international market in web-based training estimated to rise to \$5.5 billion in 2002 (Scott and Alexander, 2000). Many reports however, encouraged a more cautious attitude towards much of this early evidence, especially the extent to which rhetoric was matched by substantiated evidence (Caladine, 1993, Scott and Alexander, 2000, Cochrane et al., 1993, Phipps and Merisotis, 1999, Alexander, 1995, James and Beattie, 1995, Brabazon, 2002a).

The consequences of universities failing to properly investigate new proposed functions involving innovative technology are enormous. In the United States, Columbia University spent \$25 million on online learning technologies and now offers the courses it developed for this purpose for free as samples. The University of Carolina shut down its online divisions. The London School of Economics does not charge for its E-Learning program but uses it to promote the traditional environment. NYUOnline closed after \$25 million was invested (Brabazon, 2002b). Australian universities have also experienced problems in initiatives using innovative technology. The University of Melbourne invested \$5million of public funds into a private for profit speculative online venture, Universitas 21 (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001). However early negotiations with potential partner News Ltd failed (Centre for Studies in Higher Education, 2001), 6 universities dropped out of the network, including founding member the University of Toronto (Young, 2001), and many unresolved issues of intellectual property, governance and the

speed of planning continue to frustrate the project (Centre for Studies in Higher Education, 2001). By June 2003, Universitas 21 made its first subject in its postgraduate program available, despite the fact that it still did not have any enrolled students (Maslen, 2003a). RMIT has also experienced great difficulty implementing its Academic Administration system, costing the university approximately \$100 million in total, an Australian first in terms of cost and time (Maslen, 2003b).

Despite the shortcomings of the supporting research and the associated high potential costs of failure, many Australian universities embraced online learning technology with vigour. In March 2002, the first national attempt to assess the extent of online learning technologies in Australian universities was released (Bell et al., 2002). In this study, the authors found that there were 207 fully online courses offered by 23 Australian universities.

These facts raise the important question of why so many Australian universities invested in online learning technology when the research literature supporting related proposals was so problematic? At the present time, there are limited empirical research and theoretical explanations addressing this question. There are several partial explanations for such adoption, including explanations from the theoretical traditions of decision making (Pratt, 2003) and power (Pratt and Johnston, 2003). This paper will focus on this adoption from an industry and institutional perspective using a Neo-Institutional framework.

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Neo-Institutional Theory is a body of knowledge in organisation studies that attempts to explain the creation, maintenance and diffusion of institutions, “consisting of cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and give meaning to social behaviour” (Scott, 1995: 33). These institutions may be transported by various carriers such as cultures, structures and routines (Scott, 1995: 33) and may operate and affect world systems and broader society, organisational fields and their organisational populations, individual organisations and actors (Scott, 1995: 59). The spread of these institutions can lead to homogenic organisational responses, also known as isomorphism (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). It has been argued that as a result of organizations being embedded in networks of social relations (Granovetter, 1985), strong isomorphic pressures towards conformity (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) can lead organisations to adopt structures that are sometimes against the interests of efficiency (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and rationality (Selznick, 1996: 275). The advantage of conforming however, are that these decisions can often lead to increased legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Suchman, 1995). These isomorphic pressures may flow from a number of different social sources:

- Coercive pressures from the state (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Scott, 1987);

- The structure of the labour force (Zysman, 2002/1994);
- The financial system (Zysman, 2002/1994);
- Market-like control tactics or incentives (Scott, 1987);
- Normative pressure from the professions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Powell, 1991);
- Pressures to follow or mimic other organisations (mimetic pressures) in times of uncertainty or new technology (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Scott, 1987);
- Historical structures set in place at the commencement of the organisation that persist over time as taken-for-granted assumptions (Scott, 1987); and
- Incorporation of structures by unplanned, adaptive, historically dependent processes (Selznick, 1996, Scott, 1987).

Isomorphism is capable of operating across both international and national industry boundaries. For example, one of the major influences on the Australian higher education system in contemporary analysis is the impact of globalisation (Pratt and Poole, 1998). Economic Rationalism, or the domination of social policy by the language and logic of economics (Welch, 1996), was inspired by the rise of global competition and led national policy makers in Australia, the US and UK to reduce growth rates in state expenditure on discretionary programs, putting more into direct technological innovation and economic competitiveness (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). A shift in ideological priorities from welfare to competitive nation state thus occurred in a number of western countries (Welch, 1996). Pratt and Poole (1998), citing the work of Lingard and Rizvi (1998), claimed that the OECD as a supranational institution is an “institutionalising mechanism for global ideologies, including market liberalisation and new managerialism”.

In Australian higher education, the Labor Government set in train the creation of a quasi-market for education with competition for students, industry and public funding (Marginson, 1997) through the coercive influence (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Scott, 1987) of the Dawkins Reforms (Dawkins, 1988). The strategies of Australian governments, both Labor and Coalition (Welch, 1996), used a range of market-like control tactics, incentives and sanctions (Scott, 1987) to shape the behaviour of public sector managers as agents of modernisation and marketisation (Marginson, 1997). This occurred in an environment of fiscal scarcity (Welch, 1996).

It has been argued that governments encourage isomorphism across the sector through data requirements, relative funding models, research quantum and standardised quality rankings (Marginson and Considine, 2001: 177). Yet at the same time, differential institutional capacities to compete lead to the emergence of a hierarchical arrangement (vertical diversity within the higher education system) (Marginson and Considine, 2001). The oldest universities accumulate significant political power and social status creating significant ‘positional’ advantage that increases over time. Academic standards at these oldest institutions become universal standards that produce academic and managerial norms (Marginson and Considine, 2001, DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Powell, 1991). Less prestigious

institutions seek legitimation by copying, or mimicking (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Scott, 1987), the more successful institutions while minimising the risks of uncertainty (Marginson and Considine, 2001).

In a market, emulation, rather than originality, is the quicker route to legitimacy and to a limited kind of success...the need for short term returns renders problematic those institutional experiments that require a longer time to come to fruition (Marginson and Considine, 2001: 217)

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND ONLINE LEARNING

An account of the diffusion of online learning technologies in higher education might begin by recognising that institutionalisation is a system wide-process that begins with either a technological change, market forces or legislation that leads to an innovation (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). Without the influence of isomorphic pressures, the number of institutions that might respond to the influence of economic, technical and political internal arrangements would be much less (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996, Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). The then University College of Southern Queensland and Queensland University of Technology were both early innovators in the development and adoption of alternative modes of delivery. They appeared to be driven by economic (Taylor and White, 1991, Cochrane et al., 1993: 59), technological and institutional identity imperatives (Cochrane et al., 1993: 59). Many of the “New Universities” and “Regional Universities” were particularly suited to online learning technology, given their distance education, expertise and identities (Marginson and Considine, 2001: 225, Tapsall and Ryan, 1999).

The Australian Government also played a significant role in shaping the higher education environment. The Baldwin Policy Statement (Baldwin, 1991) set out its belief in the capacity of new communications and information technologies to improve both the quality and efficiency of higher education provision. A committee was set up to review these technologies, resulting in several very favourable reviews (National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1992, Lundin, 1993, Hamer, 1993, Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1994, Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1995). Only a minority of these reports were critical of the limitations of the research and technology (e.g. Caladine (1993)). Based on the recommendations of these reports, and other later reports, the Government sought the adoption of online learning technologies across the sector by:

- Funding further research in this area (Baldwin, 1991, National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1992, Caladine, 1993, Lundin, 1993, McCann et al., 1998);
- Funding the application and dissemination of best practice research through the Committee for Advancement of University Teaching (Baldwin, 1991, Caladine, 1993, Lundin, 1993, Cochrane et al., 1993,

Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1994, Alexander and McKenzie, 1998, McCann et al., 1998);

- Funding capital outlays in information technology infrastructure and the training of academic staff at an institutional level through special operating grants from the National Priority Reserve Fund (Baldwin, 1991, National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1992, Caladine, 1993, James and Beattie, 1995, Tinkler et al., 1996, McCann et al., 1998);
- Instituting new governmental policies that encouraged adoption of this technology across all institutions and education sectors (National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1992, Lundin, 1993, Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1995); and
- Assisting universities in their strategic planning through their Institutional Profiles (National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1992, Hesketh et al., 1996).

Universities may therefore have been further encouraged to adopt new online learning technologies as a result of a range of governmental influences. Market-like influences and incentives (Scott, 1987), provided to universities at a time of fiscal crisis, normative pressure from the Federal government (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Powell, 1991) and enhanced reputation for adopting institutions (Alexander and McKenzie, 1998: 59) may have all contributed to this decision.

Decision makers in other universities may have arrived at some consensus on the value of these technologies, either on the basis of evidence from primary or published sources or they may have had regard to the decisions of other universities on the same matter. In this second scenario, universities may rely less on their independent judgement and more on the judgements of others.

The more organizations that have adopted the structure, the more likely will decision-makers perceive the relative balance of costs and benefits to be favourable...the more widespread a choice becomes, the more likely are individuals to view it as an optimal choice, and the less influential will be the decision maker's independent judgements of the value of the choice
(Tolbert and Zucker, 1996: 183)

In a competitive higher education industry, the pressure to mimic the decisions of others is exacerbated, particularly under conditions of goal ambiguity, financial instability and uncertainty about prevailing technologies (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Marginson and Considine, 2001, Scott, 1987). There is evidence to suggest that these same pressures were at work in Australian universities (James and Beattie, 1995, Brabazon, 2002a). For example, it has been alleged that since the election of the Howard Coalition Government in 1996, over \$3 billion has been taken out of Australia's higher education sector (Carr, 2002), based on cuts to the Forward Estimates (Carr, 2002: 11). The Senate Employment Workplace Relations and Small Business and Education References Committee (2001) also concluded that "government funding are inadequate to sustain the quality and diversity of core teaching and research functions". Marginson and Considine (2001) further argued that modern 'enterprise universities' were suffering a crisis

of purpose in addition to a crisis of funding, as their academic cultures were undermined by managerialist approaches. Online learning, introduced into this environment of funding and identity crisis, was itself accompanied by a degree of uncertainty.

The extraordinary hype surrounding electronic communication technologies makes it extremely difficult to separate speculations from reality, to sort what is imagined from what is feasible (James and Beattie, 1995: 4)

This stage may be accompanied by the emergence of various interest groups (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996), including strong advocates for (e.g. Katz (1999)) and against (e.g. Noble (1997)) adoption. Online learning may become diffused over time and variance in form reduced with greater theorization. The process ends when the technology spreads to all organisations and perpetuates itself over time (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). Online learning thus can become institutionalised.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Drawing together the above work, two theoretical propositions are formulated to help direct further research in this area.

1. That the Australian Federal Government influenced Australian university adoption decisions by various direct and indirect market, funding, policy and regulatory mechanisms.
2. That Australian higher education providers influenced each other by mimicking the decisions of more successful institutions and by having regard to the number of universities adopting online learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Australian universities facing pressure to adopt new organisational practices, such as online learning in the 1990s, could consider the following recommendations to avoid costly mistakes:

1. Demand high quality evaluations of programs before they are adopted (Slavin, 1989: 757, Birnbaum, 2000)
One of the most important reasons for the continuing existence of the educational pendulum is that educators rarely wait for or demand hard evidence before adopting new practices on a wide scale. Of course, every innovator claims research support for his or her methods; at a minimum, there is usually a "gee whiz" story or two about a school or district that was "turned around" by the innovation. Alternatively, a developer may claim that, while the program itself has not been formally evaluated, the

principles on which it is based are supported by research (Slavin, 1989: 753).

Slavin (1989) claimed that educational institutions should ask the following three questions when evaluating new innovations:

- a) *Has the group using the program been compared to a comparable control group?*
- b) *Did the post test assess objectives that were being pursued equally by experiment and control classes?*
- c) *Was the program evaluated under realistic conditions over realistic time periods? (Slavin, 1989: 757).*

2. Staff could be trained to appreciate the faddish nature of many management innovations (Abrahamson, 1996: 279) while staff development should shift from a focus on what is new to what works in practice (Slavin, 1989: 757).
3. Controlled pilot programs could be used to test new innovations on a small scale before full implementation across the wider university (Slavin, 1989: 757, Birnbaum, 2000).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The introduction of online learning in Australian higher education has been accompanied by poor evaluation evidence, leading some universities to commit expensive mistakes. Australian universities' non-rational response to problematic research on online learning can be explained through a Neo-Institutional framework. Some universities may adopt online learning technologies without regard to a critical evaluation of the research evidence. This adoption would depend upon the university's sense of mission, place within the hierarchy of universities and the nature and timing of its exposure to online learning relative to adoption across the international and national marketplace. This tendency is likely to increase in the presence of various regulative and normative pressures exerted from the government of the day.

Non-rational mimicking of innovation such as the adoption of online learning technology will be influenced by a number of factors. These are likely to include circumstances of goal ambiguity, financial instability and uncertainty about prevailing technologies, including advocacy groups commanding industry opinion, as occurred in the Australian higher education sector.

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