

Editorial

The e-university—Imperialism Goes Digital

MARK T. THOMSON

Centre for Practice and Policy, School of Pharmacy, University of London, 29/39 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AX, UK

In theory, the e-university represents the great emancipator of higher education. There will be no question of class, gender, ethnicity or background influencing the admission process. The traditional pedagogical obstacles of geography and time will be rendered moot at the click of a mouse. Available to all, education is on the cusp of reaching its utopian zenith. In theory, that is.

In the UK, the e-university has been proposed in response to Mr Blair's call for the development of a knowledge-based economy driven by an educated workforce. On-line learning provides an opportunity for those whose time commitments preclude their involvement in traditional university lectures and tutorials. Completing web-based modules and querying tutors via email, students compile degree-level knowledge without the inconvenience of ever stepping into a lecture hall. The notion of the e-university serves to eliminate the barriers of access to education.

The pressures of both technological advancement and economic sustainability will make the advent of the e-university a reality. The truth of this reality, however, reduces the concept of education to the base transmission of knowledge. It strips away from the education process the development of social skills, the ability to recognize and address human issues. Emails, hyperlinks and video feeds are efficient

conveyors of facts, but lack the ability to facilitate dialogue and problem-solving skills, skills engendered by face to face learning.

There are other problems. The examination process poses a potential weakness, in the form of the administration of invigilation to distance learners. There is also the problem of intellectual property. There is little way of ensuring that the submitted work is indeed the student's own. Moreover, it has been proposed that students studying for on-line degrees could undertake the modules of various institutions, regardless of the e-university with which they have enrolled. This predicament will complicate the accreditation processes.

There is no denying that the educational capabilities of the internet are indeed powerful, and should, rightly, be used in the modern learning process. Coursework and lecture notes can be downloaded, and on-line support can aid research. A combination of traditional lectures and tutorials supplemented by segments of on-line learning offers the best of both worlds. But, is the proposition of the e-university really about education?

University costs in the UK depend heavily upon the injection of income provided by overseas students. There is no question that those who can afford to study in the UK (or

elsewhere) will continue to do so. But it has been recognized that there is a potentially lucrative sub-market of overseas students who, whilst being unable to afford to study abroad, nonetheless value a UK degree. Enter the e-university, the attractive alternative for less-privileged overseas students. Learning from abroad, the barriers of geography and expense are overcome, while the coveted seal of 'Oxford' or 'London' still features prominently on the degree certificate itself.

To erect the infrastructure upon which the e-university will rely obviously requires considerable investment. Considerable beyond the means of most institutions. A recent report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England by PricewaterhouseCoopers, "Business model for the e-university", predicts that, due to investment costs, Higher Education Institutions will form partnerships with for-profit companies in order to create the requisite platform for the e-university's implementation. This likelihood is clearly worrying, with the fundamental ideology

of education at stake. With universities becoming increasingly reliant for funding upon the corporate sector, the reduction of governmental investment in education will seem justified. As HEIs become less and less state-funded institutions, the prejudices of class will once more creep into the admission process. Universities will again become a playground for the elite. What should, in theory, level the playing field, the e-university threatens to create an educational environment of privilege, where the profit agenda is cleverly disguised as the cultivation of knowledge.

If you would like to respond to this editorial, please submit your comments to the Editor at E-mail: ian.bates@ulsop.ac.uk

References

Higher Education Funding Council for England. "Business model for the e-university: report to the HEFCE by PricewaterhouseCoopers." Report 00/441, October 2000.