Navigating Through Distance Teacher Education:

Taking Comparative Bearings

in Australia and China

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the approaches to course design and implementation for distance education students in two faculties of teacher education: one in an Australian regional university, the other in a Chinese metropolitan university. The comparison is predicated on the need for navigational tools to be deployed by staff members in both faculties to steer through the 'sea' of distance teacher education. The paper elaborates three fundamental influences on how those tools are selected and implemented: globalisation, de-differentiation and marketisation. The authors argue that international comparisons and research collaborations of this kind can facilitate effective navigation that promotes both student and staff satisfaction with distance teacher education. This is crucial if the professional and collegial agency of individuals and groups involved at all levels of distance teacher education is to receive the appropriate analytical recognition and political validation necessary for productive and mutually beneficial relationships between 'producers' and 'consumers' in this dynamic and sometimes turbulent 'sea'.

INTRODUCTION

The metaphor running through this paper is of distance teacher education as a sea requiring the deployment of appropriate tools if the sea is to be safely and effectively navigated. This metaphor derives from the observation that both distance education and teacher education – two distinct but interrelated fields – are highly complex and stressful enterprises, requiring practitioners to engage with a host pressures, some separate and others overlapping. Current change factors include deprofessionalisation and reprofessionalisation of teaching (Seddon, 1997, 1999), the management of information technology in open and distance education (Holt & Thompson, 1998) and the debate about whether the appropriate 'place' for teacher education programs is universities or workplaces. When these factors are joined by the more enduring concerns of distance educators – access and equity, motivation and drop out, cost effectiveness – there is no doubt that distance teacher educators live in 'interesting times'.

In Lepani's (1998) scenario of the challenges for education in the digital age, learners are positioned as knowledge navigators. They operate from an information technology platform while using many different resources, including people with expertise and a range of learning programs to perform particular tasks. She argued that the challenges for educators lie in how we design learning because knowledge based navigators are increasingly operating along different neural pathways from those dictated by linear print and thinking processes.

We see distance teacher educators as 'learning navigators' whose job is to read the signs around them and deploy appropriate navigational tools in response to those signs. In the sea of distance teacher education (distance understood in both spatial and temporal terms), we are navigators for our students' learning as well as our own. Furthermore, we contend that taking internationally comparative bearings on these signs makes a great deal of sense in a world in which globalisation holds such sway as a dominant discourse. We mean by this, not that we wish to demonstrate that one country is 'doing better' in its navigation than another, but rather that similarities and differences in navigational equipment and technique from country to country might conceivably assist every putative navigator, regardless of location.

Pendell (1997, p. 25) has emphasised the "need to understand the educational practices of the specific culture, including an in-depth, systematic examination of that culture, its assumptions and practices". Kwon and Danaher (1999) extended Pendell's analysis, partly by contesting the essentialism of her "dimensions of cultural variability", in their comparison of open and distance higher education in Korea and Australia. Here we compare university structures and delivery practices in distance teacher education in an Australian regional university and a Chinese metropolitan university. The focus is on some of the more significant influences on the ways in which teacher educators navigate through the sea of distance teacher education. We have selected three such influences: globalisation, de-differentiation (Campion, 1997) and marketisation. On the basis of this account, we argue that international comparisons and research collaborations of this kind can facilitate effective navigation that promotes both student and staff satisfaction engagement with distance teacher education.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Central Queensland University (CQU) is one of Australia's thirty-six public universities. Formerly the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education, it was for some time designated one of Australia's eight distance education universities, a classification that has been made obsolete as most if not all Australian higher education institutions move to a 'multi-mode' enrolment (a point that we elaborate below). CQU operate five regional campuses (Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone, Mackay and Rockhampton), three Australian campuses for the exclusive use of international students (Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne) and one offshore international campus (Fiji).

At the end of 1999, CQU had about 15,000 students enrolled in programs across its five faculties (Arts, Health and Sciences, Business and Law, Education and Creative Arts, Engineering and Physical Systems, and Informatics and Communication). Of those, about forty-three per cent were classified as 'distance education students'. Such students have for recent years constituted approximately one half of the university's total enrolments. As we elaborate below, responsibility for preparation of materials for these students is shared between academic staff in the faculties and instructional designers and support staff in the Distance and Flexible Learning Centre (DFLC).

Within the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at CQU, program offerings have diversified considerably from the earlier exclusive catering to primary and then secondary pre-service teachers and in-service teachers. These offerings now include early childhood education, vocational education and training, and postgraduate education. As we indicate below, constraints on these offerings include respective registration requirements.

The Beijing Normal University (BNU) is the leading university in China's teacher training sector. It grew out of the Faculty of Education of the Metropolitan University, founded in 1902. The Women's College of Education of Peking University and the Catholic University merged into BNU in 1931 and 1952 respectively. There are over 6, 000 undergraduates, over 1,730 postgraduates, over 7,000 students in continuing and distance education, and 600 foreign students.

Over the past century BNU has been dedicated to preparing students for teaching positions in elementary and middle schools. The university is now striving to establish itself as a socialist teacher training university with a focus on training high quality teaching personnel, to establish its place in the front rank of Chinese universities nationally, and to enhance its international position.

The College of Continuing Education at BNU is dedicated to in-service teacher training and adult education. During the past two years, following the rapid development of the Chinese economy, increasing numbers of in-service teachers have enrolled in distance education courses for certificates or degrees. Now 4,000 students are studying these distance education courses. The subjects available for

distance learning are increasing in number in order to meet the rapid growth in demand for in-service teacher training.

GLOBALISATION

We noted above globalisation's status as a dominant discourse in distance education. Certainly the proposition that communication technologies have been deployed in ways that erode the significance of national and regional boundaries has received sustained academic attention (see for example Edwards, 1995, Evans, 1995 and Field, 1995 on links between globalisation and post-Fordism, and Rowan, Bartlett and Evans, 1997 on globalisation and localisation).

With regard to the impact of globalisation on such crucial issues as equity of access to education, we take a generally optimistic view, encapsulated in Edwards' (1994, p. 11) assertion: "Thus, the integration of the globe reconfigures rather than supplants diversity". However, we are also conscious that globalisation can be construed as a disguise for unelected, unaccountable and largely invisible multinational companies and cultural elites pushing their own agendas, and that globalisation can potentially replicate rather than transform the existing socio-economic and political divides. Our ambivalence about the influence of globalisation in guiding the actions of distance teacher educators is neatly summed up in Bhabha's (1994, p. 216) reference to "the anxiety of enjoining the global and the local".

We regard localisation as the specific spatial and temporal sites where forces such

as globalisation are played out. This derives from the paradox that 'place' assumes greater, not less, importance in distance teacher education at the same time that communication technologies are supposedly decentring space and time. This paradox is encapsulated in Evans' (1997, pp. 21-22) comment:

> However, a sense of place, of home, of belonging, is important to me. In some ways I might be a 'global citizen' or a 'virtual invader', but I know where I belong, and it isn't in cyberspace or any other 'virtual reality'.

The point that we are emphasising here is that globalisation and localisation, and the interplay between these terms, constitute landmarks in the work of distance teacher educators. Each landmark simultaneously is perceived as potentially an opportunity towards which such educators might wish to steer or a threat that they might wish to avoid. Whether each landmark is an opportunity or a threat depends on how individual distance teacher educators, working within the specific contexts of the irrespective institutions, elect – or are pressured – to engage with that landmark, according to their intentions and the perceived consequences of such an engagement.

Perspectives from Australia

The forces of globalisation have steadily elided the conceptual and administrative distinctions among different student 'types'. At CQU, the enrolment designations of students as 'part-time' or 'full-time', 'internal' or 'external' are already redundant, even though they still appear on enrolment forms. Anecdotal evidence from the successful trialing of short, intensive, face-to-face seminars or workshops across a

variety of teacher education programs within the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts in late 1999 and early 2000 suggests that we will continue to use various combinations of synchronous and asynchronous communications in a multi-mode delivery of teacher education programs (Harreveld, 1999a).

In practice, this means that as lecturers navigate appropriate learning pathways for the range of students enrolled in their courses, their categorisation as students 'internal' or 'external' to the university becomes irrelevant. If lecturers-as-navigators consider synchronous, interactive, face-to-face communication is needed, then they will choose from videoconferencing, videostreaming, audiographics, teleconferencing and intensive seminars/workshops, as well as the more traditional weekly lecture and tutorial. This may or may not be 'buddied' with email discussion lists and/or print-based study materials (electronic via the Internet or 'hard' copy paper via the post), plus audio or videocassettes, CDs or computer software programs specific to each course. CQU's current administration system links the functions of student admissions and enrolments with the Faculty's program advisors and registrar as well as DFLC. While this system requires continuous improvements, it is positioned to cater for all students as 'multi-mode' enrolments, thus reflecting the realities of course design and delivery in teacher education at CQU. In particular, those enrolments demonstrate conceptual and administrative changes that need to accompany ongoing globalised shifts in the university's clientele, focus and mission.

Perspectives from China

The central government's endorsement of the move from an 'industrial society' to an 'information society' (Chen, 1999, p. 39) appears to reconfigure rather than supplant diversity in teacher education. Since 1998, four universities have been selected to trial the use of synchronous information technologies such as International Services Digital Network (ISDN) and live satellite broadcasts. For the last forty years, China's distance teacher education has gone from a print-based correspondence delivery platform to radio and television broadcasts. These communications were asynchronous with local tutors on-site conducting the classes in each learning community. Changes to an information technology based delivery platform and subsequent organisational structures will inevitably erode the current signifiers of international, national and regional boundaries. In a country as geographically large and culturally and economically diverse as China, the navigational challenges for distance teacher educators are emerging.

Unlike Australian university students, Chinese distance education students are separated by "different courses, different administration methods and different entrance requests" (Chen, 1999, p. 35). This separateness (which can lead to marginalisation) of distance teacher education students will be eroded as more universities and schools are encouraged to offer open and distance education. To facilitate this, the Chinese Education and Research network (CERNET) and the satellite education network will be used to build a new technical infrastructure while also developing new learning software, administrative methods and legal frameworks (Chen, 1999, p. 39). If these developments continue as planned, we will see an "unsteady, problematic, profound process of change" (Moran & Myringer,

1999, p. 57) which may eventually transform the basic assumptions and practices of university teacher education in China. One of the catalysts of change that may function as an opportunity or a threat will be the interactivity of synchronous and asynchronous communications among local (and eventually global) learning sites. These are some of the ways in which distance teacher educators at Chinese universities such as BNU engage with the forces of globalisation.

We have argued in this section that distance teacher educators at CQU and BNU have engaged in multiple ways with the influences on their work exercised by globalisation. This engagement has differed from one site to the other, and also from one educator to another, demonstrating anew the point that globalisation's influence is mediated by, and played out at, localised sites. What we have highlighted is that globalisation is a crucial landmark guiding the navigational practices of distance teacher educators as they carry out program design and implementation. These practices are significant elements of each institution's response to the imperative to be among the 'global players' in the teacher education marketplace.

DE-DIFFERENTIATION

Another crucial influence on the work of distance teacher educators is de-differentiation. Campion (1997) related de-differentiation to the proposition that, despite claims of 'consumer sovereignty' in the education marketplace, producers exhibit – and exploit – a considerable capacity to reduce the number and range of products available for purchase. Campion cited Du Gay's (1994) explanation of de-

differentiation:

> … the story begins with the market. As a variety of social spheres have become increasingly 'market dependent' their different modes of operation and calculation have been subsumed under the overriding logic of one form of rationality: the 'economic'….The 'levelling function' this process performs ensures that formerly diverse institutions, practices, goods and so forth become subject to judgment and calculation almost exclusively in terms of market-based criteria; in other words, the process of de-differentiation or implosion involves increasing dominance of what Lyotard (1984) terms 'the performativity principle'. (Cited in Campion, 1997, p. 58)

Furthermore, Campion argued that "distance education has to accept some special responsibility for bringing some of these resources to bear across the education sector" (p. 59).

So de-differentiation, with or without distance education, has been claimed to inhibit cultural heterogeneity and promote the homogenising potential of globalisation. This possibility certainly exercises the minds of distance teacher educators when designing and implementing courses and when responding to student evaluation of teaching. Yet in examining this issue it is important to consider the 'logical other' to de-differentiation, cultural diversity. Given the enduring significance of place in distance education noted above, we contend that there is a corresponding continuity in the importance of cultural diversity. For us, cultural diversity consists of the multiple spatial and temporal sites where interacting forces coincide. We endorse a multidimensional approach to

international comparative distance education research that recognises and celebrates cultural differences at the same time that it identifies convergences. Here the political dimension of the debate is crucial. For example, we applaud Smith and Smith's (1999, p. 77) reference to

> ...the danger of being new colonialists who assume that the organisational, knowledge and belief structures that we develop in the English speaking West will transfer without adaptation to another culture.

Thus de-differentiation, which narrows the cultural options available to distance education students and staff members, and cultural diversity, which seeks out and celebrates instances of difference, are two more potential opportunities and threats with which distance teacher educators need to engage.

Perspectives from Australia and China

Professional continuing education for teachers is being fostered by central or federal governments and employing authorities through political legislation and financial support, with the concurrence of professional associations (Chen, 1999; Guiton, 1999; Harreveld, 1999b). Distance teacher educators mediate the learning needs of individuals and cohorts of teachers on the one hand, together with the workplace performances and competencies required by education systems funded from the public purse on the other. At both CQU and BNU, teachers have participated in professional development programs in which teacher educators have navigated learning pathways with teachers-as-students using a range of new information technologies (Chen & Chen, 1999; Harreveld, 1999b).

These programs have provided opportunities for continuing lifelong education for teachers which gives them options for further credentials, updating of current knowledge and skills or the ability to change direction into a different discipline area (Guiton, 1999; Harreveld, 1999a). In both programs, the needs of the learners and improvements in the technical and human support systems are paramount. It is here that our skills as navigators are needed. We have to understand the nature of the shoals waiting to shipwreck planned learning and teaching processes, yet also remain connected with concurrent, sometimes competing, individual learning needs and expected organisational learning outcomes.

A key issue in both CQU and BNU is the influence of perceived cost effectiveness on the tension between promoting cultural diversity and implicitly endorsing de-differentiation. That is, despite many distance teacher educators' best intentions, the pressures to narrow the range of educational products on offer to students is considerable. For example, CQU has certainly embraced the changes attendant on its previous exclusive focus on primary and secondary teachers having shifted to include the early childhood and vocational education sectors. Yet decisions about program offerings to different groups of students result from a complex interplay among such factors as genuinely held convictions about the mission to differentiate provision according to students' specialised circumstances and needs on the one hand and the financial implications of doing so on the other. Thus numbers of prospective students figure prominently as a consideration in deciding how broadly program offerings can be provided. This is financial prudence, but it can also potentially conflict with distance teacher educators' professional desires to design

and implement programs in ways that more precisely target specific student groups reflecting the broadest possible cultural diversity.

Similarly, at BNU there is continuing debate about how to balance cost effectiveness on the one hand and meeting the diversity of individual student needs on the other. According to the new learning theories, instructors should supply as wide a range as possible of learning materials and learning support technologies to students in order to address those needs. However, such a range is both expensive and very consuming of staff resources, particularly in distance education.

More fundamentally, this reinforces the need constantly to guard against distance teacher education's replication of existing power elites, and instead to work towards ensuring that prospective and practising teachers from across the socio-cultural spectrum are included routinely, rather than as 'special cases' when some extra funding is available, in program offerings. This point underscores our argument that the navigational skills required of distance teacher educators vary in complexity and context, and go to the heart of their professionalism and sense of vocation. Such skills include systematic instructional design, individualised tutorials through computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology and using technology to foster collaboration among students in different physical locations.

MARKETISATION

The third influence on the work of distance teacher educators to be considered here

– and one that is directly linked with both globalisation and de-differentiation – is marketisation. According to Marginson (1997), "institutional competitiveness has become the universal touchstone" (cited in Holt & Thompson, 1998, p. 223). Similarly we have already noted Du Gay's (1994) insistence that "the story begins with the market" (cited in Campion, 1997, p. 58). As we pointed out above in relation to de-differentiation, the rhetoric of marketisation emphasises consumer sovereignty and almost infinite choice of product. By contrast, the reality of marketisation is far more complex than this rosy picture conveys, and involves product standardisation, price fixing and the elision of non-economic dimensions of educational 'goods and services'. Yet, as with globalisation, we have no automatic assumption that marketisation is inherently 'good' or 'bad'. Instead, we propose a sharply focused ambivalence and an attentiveness to examples of marketisation reducing and/or increasing cultural diversity and social (in)equity as potentially productive responses to navigating around this particular opportunity or threat. Here Nunan's (1999) assertions that "predicting new structures and territories for distance education is best achieved by considering the operation of educational markets at the nexus" (p. 392), and that "Whatever the pathway it is clear that the processes and techniques of distance education will be employed in structures that are responsive to educational markets and competition" (p. 394), are relevant. In other words, marketisation is increasingly a 'given' or independent variable that distance teacher educators must include in their navigational plans.

There are several logically distinct possible navigational responses to the sighting of marketisation as a landmark on the horizon of distance teacher education. One possible approach is the enthusiastic embrace of marketisation of distance education

as making higher education institutions more efficient and more nationally and internationally competitive. This approach is represented by Katz's (1999, pp. 48-49) call to arms:

> U.S. higher education is the envy of the world....[Yet] U.S. colleges and universities must overcome the natural conservatism of their faculties regarding this opportunity. The potential exists to produce new revenues through technology-enriched extensions of our instructional programs....The global need and demand for higher learning is growing. Thoughtfully applied, new information technologies will make economically possible a new level of investment in collegiate instruction. Such investment can sustain our collective vigor and excellence–if we can rise to the challenge.

An alternative approach to marketisation and distance education is the conscious resistance of the perceived harm of marketisation to cultural diversities. This approach is represented by Roberts' (1998, p. 128) very different call to arms:

> Reflection will not on its own be sufficient to sustain the ideal of a scholarly mode of life. Political action – protests in the streets, strikes, collective refusals to undertake certain tasks in the workplace, the lobbying of MPs [Members of Parliament], involvement in union activities, and greater use of the popular media for conveying academic concerns – needs to be taken as a matter of considerable urgency.

Our preferred approach to the challenge of marketisation for distance teacher

education is that of critique using critically and reflectively the norms and values of scholarship to respond to and initiate action in relation to marketisation on a 'case by case' basis. What we have in mind here is something akin to Holt and Thompson's (1998, pp. 223-224) account of "the nexus between competition and collaboration" in managing information technologies in open and distance higher education. For example, we take their point that "Competition and collaboration in the IT field in higher education are not oppositional, mutually exclusive forces" (p. 224) – although we are less sanguine than they that these forces "will continue to interact in complex and, on balance, beneficial ways in the system overall" (p. 224). So once again marketisation and its critique constitute landmarks in distance teacher education with which practitioners must engage in order to establish such landmarks' status as opportunities or threats as the practitioners navigate their courses through the sea of distance teacher education.

Perspectives from Australia

There are currently conflicting demands and mixed messages in relation to the influence of marketisation and competition on distance teacher education. On the one hand, with seemingly shrinking government funding and moves towards national university 'league tables' based on research and teaching, workers in that field are constantly exhorted to achieve 'more with less', and moreover to find new sources of funding. Terms associated with this discourse include 'enterprise', 'innovation' and 'niche markets'. Often this discourse appears to work against the notion of collaboration across universities or even across faculties and divisions within the same university; certainly this applies in the area of program design and implementation. This seems to derive from the assumption that workers in other

sectors are automatically our competitors, and we must work faster and harder to ensure that our product is cheaper than, but of comparable quality to, theirs.

On the other hand, opposing forces constrain enormously the extent to which distance teacher educators can actually display 'enterprise' and 'innovation' in their working lives. It is almost as though those who want to see us working more efficiently and competitively are withholding from us the skills and tools necessary for such a task. For example, for teachers who will be working in secondary schools, technical and further education colleges and industry training environments, there is a marked de-differentiation in program design and implementation strategies which makes competitive marketisation a difficult goal to achieve. Two key influences are at work here.

Firstly, there are the federally controlled government funding profiles that ensure parity of funding per whole or fractional enrolment across universities. In practice, this has meant that funding for innovative design and delivery options has to be found from other sources. Secondly, universities are answerable to professional associations (such as the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration), teacher unions (both public and private sectors) and industry training advisory boards (ITABs). Taken together, these two influences have worked towards a reduction in difference in program design and implementation.

Perspectives from China

Previously the government supplied most of the funds for pre-service teacher training through face-to-face instruction. Now, following the trend of lifelong learning being embraced by an increasing proportion of Chinese citizens, it is necessary to develop more and more high quality distance education courses for in-service teacher training. The government is unable to meet all these demands, with the result that it is concentrating on funding the construction of high speed electronic infrastructure throughout China. At the same time, the government is encouraging universities to obtain investment from other sources to start or enlarge their distance education offerings. Since 1998, a growing number of universities has collaborated with large companies, both Chinese and international, to deliver their courses through the new communication technologies.

Simultaneously with these developments, the Chinese government has steadily decreased the constraints on universities supplying distance education courses. Consequently, students have benefited from having access to an increasingly

flexible and responsive set of options. They can more readily select their preferred courses and the accompanying technologies. Many Chinese students have enrolled in courses such as MBAs from other countries. Indeed, some foreign governments (including Australia) have identified China as a huge potential distance education market. This helps to explain why so many large firms are interested in distance education at present, with many such companies using distance education as the most cost effective means of staff development.

Thus marketisation has meant that Chinese distance education is no longer the preserve of educators. They have been joined by large companies and private providers. Sometimes this has caused difficulties in implementation, with educators' emphasis on meeting students' needs not always sitting harmoniously beside companies' concerns with maximising revenue. Achieving the appropriate balance between educational effectiveness and cost efficiency is a very important issue in contemporary Chinese distance education, with significant potential implications for the relationship between universities and the broader society.

In this scenario, marketisation of distance teacher education programs in both Australia and China becomes an even greater challenge. If essentially the same 'product' with similar delivery strategies and outcomes is being offered in an educational market place, there is little real choice for purchasers of this product, that is, students. For people working within the field of distance teacher education, the factors restricting such choice are not of their making and often leave very little room for manoeuvre. At the same time, many distance teacher educators are doing their utmost to position their respective programs as competitively attractive

without infringing their professional sense of the integrity of such programs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has interrogated the influence of three forces – globalisation, de-differentiation and marketisation – on the work of distance teacher educators in two institutions: Central Queensland University in Australia and the Beijing Normal University in China. We have conceptualised these forces, not as inherently positive or negative, but rather as landmarks in the sea of distance teacher education around which workers in that field need to navigate. In doing so, we have emphasised the agency of such workers as they search for ways to maximise the learning benefits of distance education for their students and thereby enhance their own professional satisfaction with the work that they are doing.

For us, one of the keys to maximising such satisfaction lies in engaging in the kind of international comparative bearings that we have pursued on a preliminary basis in this paper. That is, we contend that mapping the diversity, as well as the commonalities, of responses to influences such as those interrogated here can assist in evaluating existing options and identifying new ones as all universities seek to come to grips with the changing scenario in higher education around the world.

One crucial outcome of this approach is likely to be a greater array of navigational tools at the disposal of distance teacher educators. Here we endorse the position of Rowan, Evans and Bartlett (1997, p. 138):

[In engaging with globalisation, localisation and open and distance education] Remaining aware of the differences between each territory encountered on a particular line of flight is one way to minimise the risk of an accidental invasion. Reflecting on the impact that one has on a landscape that one traverses is another. In both instances, it is an ability to think consciously about where one has been, to plan carefully where one is going, and to remain sensitive to who and what will be (en)countered on the way which may make for productive journeys.

From our perspective, "productive journeys" need to be guided by a wide range of navigational tools capable of deployment in settings as varied as CQU and BNU, and in engagement with influences as complex and dynamic as globalisation, de-differentiation and marketisation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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