

Maintaining the rage within the university net

Sohail Inayatullah sees the role of academia as civilising the state and inciting dissent

The modern university stands at a gateway of alternative futures. Globalism, multiculturalism, virtualisation and politicisation will transform its nature. New models of who teaches, who learns, and through what medium and what organisational structures are choices to be made.

While it often appears to academics that the university is stable, looking back in history and across other cultures, we see it as far more malleable. For example, at one time the university was student-led, the customer really was right. In Bologna, in the 13th century, lecturers were fined if they did not begin on time, or if they lectured too long.

In the last 200 years, universities have transformed from colleges emphasising philosophy and "moral sciences" to become the backbone of the science and technology revolution — large industrial research institutions. But their transformation is not yet about to stop, four accelerating trends promise to change the university in the next century, perhaps taking it to the student-run model many centuries ago, or perhaps in other directions. These four trends include: globalisation, virtualisation, multiculturalism and politicisation.

Globalisation reduces the funds available for the state to subsidise university and academics. Tenure has become less likely, workload has increased, and dissent has become even more difficult. In response, academics have focused on issues of money and not on the broader issues of course content, the role of the administration and academic freedom. Instead of looking outward to new structures of the university, they have tended to reflect with nostalgia on the good old days when a PhD meant secure work for life. The triangle of teaching, research and service has become dominated by the search for grant dollars; the university becoming ever closely linked to corporate concerns.

For instance, California State University is in the process of entering into a long-term partnership with Microsoft, GTE, Fujitsu and Hughes Electronics. This plan gives the university technology which the state is unable to fund. As Robert Corrigan, the President of San Francisco State says: "If I had my druthers, I think it's something the state should pay for, but as a president who can't get the money either from the students or from the state, I'm driven into working with the corporate sector." But, asks academic Lawrence Wiseman, once the university

becomes just another business, will it lose its "special character, some of its societal privilege, its moral authority and force — its link with civil society, as a repository of truth and knowledge?"

However, the long-term trend is the shift from state-centric to corporatised and globalised. The former reduces the power of the academy and the latter forces university outwards, seeking students from all over the world and jumping on the technology bandwagon, hoping to become uni-virtual.

The context of globalisation is the reality of a future with fewer and fewer jobs for intellectuals. This creates the possibility of a massive global movement of unemployed intellectuals. While this situation is already at a peak in the south — where intellectuals work in the social movements, nongovernmental organisations and the like — it is now beginning in the west. How global knowledge workers who are unable to be paid to work full-time or gain stable positions, act and react, and what future they create may be one of history's surprises. They could very easily cannibalise themselves in chasing the last jobs remaining or they could show solidarity and help create a new system.

A fellow at the International Management Centres, a web-based university, Paul Wildman

"The university must expand civil society, creating conditions where dissent is alive."

believes that the internet will fundamentally change who is student and who is teacher. It will virtualise the walls of the university, creating "elsewhere" learning. It will allow for new levels of interactivity. It will eliminate the temporal rigidity of office hours or class meeting times. Those who do not jump on the post-industrial knowledge bandwagon will, as Professor James Dator of the University of Hawaii, warns, become theme parks — places to visit emeritus professors (<http://www.soc.hawaii.edu/future/>). The last decade has been: globalise or die, the theme for the future of the universities will be: virtualise or disappear. Everyone has joined in, from California Virtual University to the World Bank's African Virtual University. The virtualisation of the university will not just be about the delivery of knowledge but also about its utility — the half-life of knowledge will shrink, even disappear, as "screenagers" begin to define learning. Tom Abeles, a former university professor and now consultant,

believes that the web will allow "bridges between generations where the wisdom from the past can be used to link the future with the present, youth with adults". Multi-skilling and other ways of learning will be far more important than the ability to concentrate on one task.

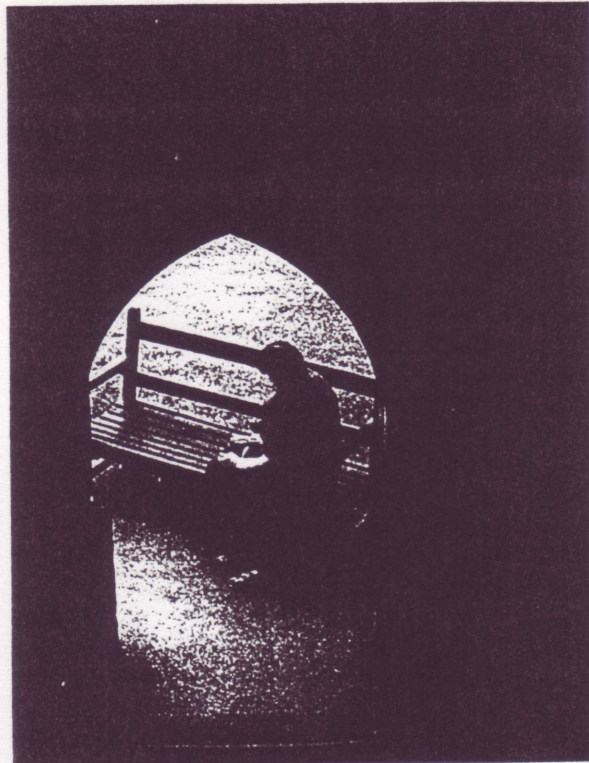
It is this issue of the half-life of knowledge that is crucial to Abeles. While the previous division of the academic's role was that of intellect-on-stage and mentor, it is the learning catalyst that could soon be the most important. The pace of technological and political change has reduced the half-life of knowledge such that the role of the old wise professor (mentor) has become less important. It is the ability to catalyse student's so they can discover their own learning processes that is crucial. The web helps in this process by taking over the information demands on lecturers. The lecturer can then play the more important role of asking questions, engaging the student at many different levels — both deconstructing his or her worldview but also reconstructing it, relating daily problems to the grand questions facing humanity.

The mentor who can communicate — that is listen to students and others, understand them, not just talk to them as an "expert" — will thus have a vital role in the future. But this will mean the humbling of the professor, from disciplinary authority, as the priest, to the shaman. With respect and knowledge coming from personal experience and example and not academic title or bureaucratic hierarchy. This will mean an ability to stand on the edges of personal and social knowledge and not hide within the closures of the rational intellect.

While this might be asking too much, certainly lecturers and professors can play an important role alongside the web as knowledge navigators. However, when universities attempt to come to terms with the internet, they do so in fetish ways. One university's idea of becoming more interactive through the net is to require lecturers to put their lecture notes on the web. The result: lectures become even more rigid and boring. Instead of using the net for passing information so that professors can concentrate on the more human needs in pedagogy, universities transform professors into information automatons. Instead of "intellect-on-stage" one gets information-retrieval system on stage.

Attempts to develop multiculturalism are made equally fetish; for example, in Queensland by encouraging university staff to wear coloured

Continued page 4



The theme of the future of universities is to virtualise or disappear?

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Maintaining the rage

From page 3

ribbons signifying their commitment to tolerance. The much more important task of rewriting history books so they reflect the grand thinkers, the historical frameworks, and the knowledge categories of other civilisations is not attempted. Yes, to workshops and courses on cultural sensitivity but no to grants that approach science from other perspectives — Islamic, Indic, feminist or indigenous science (what the philosopher of science Jeremy Ravetz has called Post-Normal Science), for example. While certainly workshops on cross-cultural communication, on misunderstandings, is a vital step forward, it is not enough to face the challenges of the future.

However, even if universities are slow at changing texts to reflect this transformation, students are not. They have made it clear that they want knowledge that is not just relevant to jobs but knowledge that is relevant to the multiplicity of identities that reflect the post-modern world. But still there is administrative and academic resistance. One northern NSW university still teaches a history of ideas course as if women, nature, non-western cultures do not exist, as if only European dynastic history is of import. The time-line of history thus becomes superficial, unable to create the conceptual boldness needed to develop the knowledge capacity for a post-industrial civilisation, for a Gaia of cultures (see www.others.com). And when universities do embrace difference, they do so in the relativism of post-modernism — seeing reality as socially constructed, history and knowledge as a narrative, a story. As Zia Sardar has argued in *Postmodernity and the Other*, post-modernism undoes the ways of knowing of other civilisations, trivialises their traumas and their experiences of transcendence, their lived experiences. While it does allow other voices to be heard — in the camp of cultural studies — it does so within the knowledge framework of conventional western-being. There are layers of reality, each leading to a deeper, more intuitive understanding of self, each more epistemologically complex. This classificatory system is very different to the current government documents, social science, humanities and science division most libraries use. It is no wonder ethnicity is such a global problem, the words and worlds of others is not legitimated in normal scholarship.

However, when others are consulted it is done in the same superficial way, with Africans and Asians becoming otherness machines whose role, as Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, "is to mediate it to our fellows", since we are late to modern knowledge. While western intellectuals produce general universal knowledge, non-westerners merely write on what it means to not be part of that enterprise, becoming the official Other. This is true for women also.

This does not mean that all cultural perspectives are equally

true, indeed, the challenge for textbooks is to sort out the dogma — the politics of exclusion — from the "facts". A multiperspective approach allows new voices but it does not theorise dissent — it does not ensure that the excesses of any civilisation are challenged.

But in Asian and African nations, these are not the issues. Instead it is the role of the state in determining not only content but who gets to teach, who gets promoted, and ultimately in some universities, determining who lives and dies.

In the case of the Kurds, when, at the onset of the Iranian revolution, they attempted to set up their own university in Iran, the result was elimination of the physical site and many of the professors. Becoming tenured means not challenging the status quo. This lesson Chandra Muzaffar recently learned when he was let go from the University of Malaya for his critical comments against Mahathir Muhammed (see <http://www.jarling.my/just>). The hard fought battle of autonomy is thus being eroded by state intervention in the South and by

it is crucial to modernise Third World universities in accordance with liberal enlightenment values and not to be overly charmed by indigenous models or pressures from globalism.

Professor Shahrzad Mojab from Iran agrees, writing that the most pressing issue is to civilise the state. It is the university that can best do that. The university must expand civil society, creating conditions where dissent is alive, and moreover, a process that does not lead to violence but the reasonable debate over differences.

It is precisely this vision of the autonomous student-led responsive university that the internet may help us create. Courseware may become authentically interactive, with the editors and authors email address at the end of the article. Moreover, CD-ROM technology allows not only the facts of the article, but the personal context, the stories and photos to be presented (see www.powerup.com/au/pwildman), so that students are not bored to death. Ideally, in web and CD-ROM designed courses,

issue is that public space has changed. Traditionally public space has been associated with state space. However, a whole new range of spaces have opened up — cyberspace, local space, global space as well as the alternative spaces created by the ecological, spiritual, womanist and non-governmental organisations. The issue is not that the public intellectual in Australia has disappeared but that new spaces have been created.

But one can rightly ask: what is the future of public intellectuals if universities are increasingly creating alliances with large multinational news and entertainment companies?

This is Rob Burke's mission. Former CEO of Car Lovers, and director of ACLAIM, he hopes to transform corporate Australia from within using the methods of anticipatory action learning. The model is one where workplace learning is mixed with academic learning.

While public space expands, for the university the most likely

designer shaping knowledge delivery through the net. The Harvard/Oxford stamp will be the seal of approval, allowing their net courses to flourish, giving some discipline to "wild west chaos" that is the net.

However, if elite institutions do not do this, believing that they will retain their marketshare irrespective of the virtualisation and the impacts of globalisation, new low-cost players like the convenience University of Phoenix will step in. Yet if they do dilute their brand name, the elitence of such institutions will disappear. The elite universities will also lose staff as courseware developers develop their own links, becoming knowledge creators and brokers.

While large-scale convenience (largely virtual) universities will prosper, smaller niche universities such as Southern Cross University in Australia will prosper as well. While one can make friends in virtual space, it is still physical space where relationships are forged. For students, relationship or connection with others is equally important to getting a job. Universities are not only sites of information they are also places where partners are discovered, life-long friends are created and relationships are forged. This is the feminist, ecological and spiritual argument — that it is connection with the other.

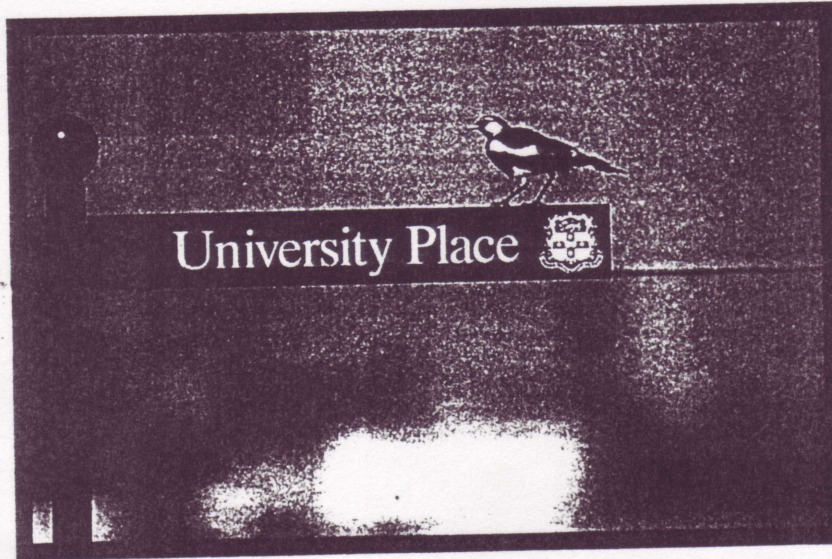
Thus the challenge to the elite university and the convenience university, might not come from the virtual or the globally elite university, but the transdisciplinary university that approaches in cross-cultural ways issues of meaning, and provides methods in which to explore these issues from body, mind and spirit. William Irwin Thompson's Lindesfarne, the Schumaker College, Sarkar's Gurukul all experiment with knowledge that is both practical but is approached with critical lenses in the context of self and social transformation. Thus, while the net is important, it is transformed consciousness, either in terms of gender awareness of wisdom or cosmic consciousness that is far more significant. It is these niche players that can keep dissent alive. Dissent means reducing the excesses of any system, whether it is too much bureaucracy, too much ideology or too much globalism. It is the university that can ideally keep this tradition alive.

The web and globalism will end the monopoly of the university and paradoxically place the university simultaneously at the centre of society. But, of course, it would be a very different university without the division of heart and mind or private and public as well as other segmentations.

It would be a university for all of us and the many selves and cultures within us. It would, indeed, be a pleasant surprise. And, of course, let us hope that even in this ideal scenario, the university will be pluralistic enough to continue to dissent, to challenge all forms of doxa, including its own.

Sohail Inayatullah is associated with a variety of universities in Australia and abroad. This essay is based on a special issue of the journal Futures titled The University — Alternative Futures, and The University in Transformation (Praeger, 1999, in press).

Sinayattullah@hotmail.com



The challenge to the elite and the convenience universities might come from the transdisciplinary university. Photo: BELINDA PRATTEN

globalisation in the West.

What should non-western universities do then? In response to the domination of western knowledge, there has been a creative wellspring of alternative universities. These include Islamic universities intent on developing curriculum based on the Islamic paradigm as well as alternative gurukuls in India. The latter intends to integrate practical participatory economic and social development with spiritual practices; philosophy with engineering, for example (www.gurukul.edu).

However, in the Pakistan case, among others, Professor Tariq Rahman warns that Islamic universities do not present a local alternative to state-supported universities. Islamic universities disseminate a particular view of Islam and repress other interpretations of what it means to be muslim. Exclusion instead of tolerance towards others and their ways of knowing is taught. On the other hand, private universities only teach courses that can lead to immediate wealth. They are not concerned with profound questions of the nature of the good society.

Most importantly they are reserved for the wealthy. Thus, for Rahman,

student papers can be included in next semester courses, creating interactive loops.

What then is the future of the university? Will it more and more resemble, in administrative structure as well as academic content and policy, a large business, which to survive must remember that the student is always right, that the student is the customer? Or will it become a virtual university where those who create the most interactive courseware will be leaders, wherein loyalty to a particular university will no longer be important? Or will universities genuinely become multicultural, international, creating curriculum and hiring individuals that can speak to the students of the future? Or will the university remain at the behest of the state, either beholden through grant schemes (DEETYA research points) or through fear of sacking, or in the most extreme case, fear of violence.

This, of course, begs the question, what is the role of the academic? Is it lecturer-on-stage? Mentor? Communicator? Learning catalyst? Or some other variant? And where in this is the public intellectual? While many decry the end of the public intellectual, perhaps the,

configuration is the division of universities into three spaces.

The elite brand name universities, which expand outward spurred on by globalisation and virtualisation. Convenience mega universities which through flexible delivery capture the majority of the world's students, and smaller niche universities that focus on multiculturalism, action learning or regional and local concerns.

In the long run, Harvard/Oxford and other elite universities will buy up leading universities across the world — the victory of the multinational corporatist vision of the university. There will thus be a slow but decisive shift in the political-economy of the university. While elite American and British universities already define what is to be researched and what is legitimate knowledge, what is significant for the future is that soon they will — and, of course, this will be franchised — write courseware for universities all over the world. This is more than having dominating textbooks, it is about making a cleavage between professor/teacher and content designer — with the professor/teacher more and more the soft/fuzzy facilitator, and the content