

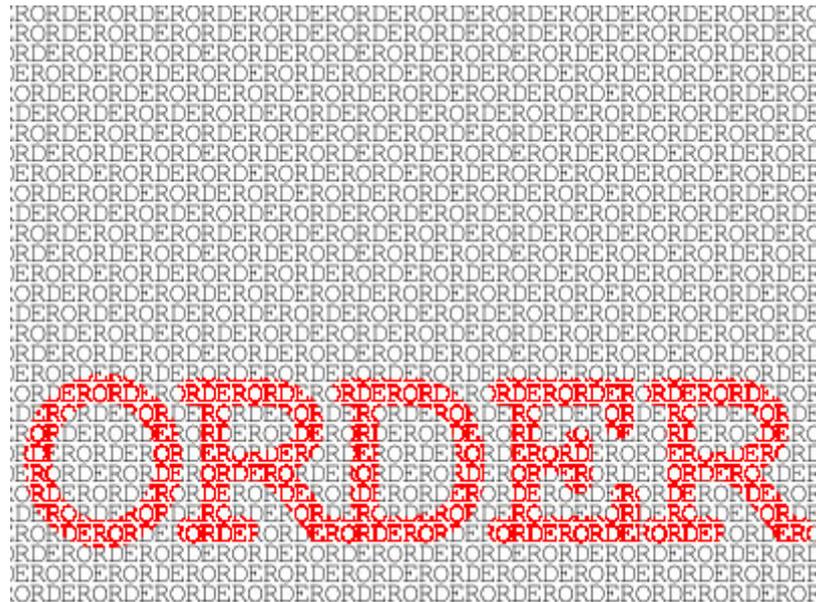
# Freedom from Choice

## Who Pays for Customer Service in the Knowledge Economy?

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Articles

On May 18, 2003, the Australian Minister for Education, Brendon Nelson, appeared on the Channel Nine *Sunday* programme. The Yoda of political journalism, Laurie Oakes, attacked him personally and professionally. He disclosed to viewers that the Minister for Education, Science and Training had suffered a false start in his education, enrolling in one semester of an economics degree that was never completed. The following year, he commenced a medical qualification and went on to become a practicing doctor. He did not pay fees for any of his University courses. When reminded of these events, Dr Nelson became agitated, and revealed information not included in the public presentation of the budget of that year, including a 'cap' on HECS-funded places of five years for each student. He justified such a decision with the cliché that Australia's taxpayers do not want "professional students completing degree after degree." The Minister confirmed that the primary – and perhaps the only – task for university academics was to 'train' young people for the workforce. The fact that nearly 50% of students in some Australian Universities are over the age of twenty five has not entered his vision. He wanted young people to complete a rapid degree and enter the workforce, to commence paying taxes and the debt or loan required to fund a full fee-paying place.

N... – nearly two years after this interview and with the Howard government blessed with a new  
 r. ↶ Date – it is time to ask how this administration will order education and value teaching and

learning. The curbing of the time available to complete undergraduate courses during their last term in office makes plain the Australian Liberal Government's stance on formal, publicly-funded lifelong learning. The notion that a student/worker can attain all required competencies, skills, attributes, motivations and ambitions from a single degree is an assumption of the new funding model. It is also significant to note that while attention is placed on the changing sources of income for universities, there have also been major shifts in the pattern of expenditure within universities, focusing on branding, marketing, recruitment, 'regional' campuses and off-shore courses. Similarly, the short-term funding goals of university research agendas encourage projects required by industry, rather than socially inflected concerns. There is little inevitable about teaching, research and education in Australia, except that the Federal Government will not create a fully-funded model for lifelong learning. The task for those of us involved in – and committed to – education in this environment is to probe the form and rationale for a (post) publicly funded University.

This short paper for the 'order' issue of *M/C* explores learning and teaching within our current political and economic order. Particularly, I place attention on the synergies to such an order via phrases like the knowledge economy and the creative industries. To move beyond the empty promises of just-in-time learning, on-the-job training, graduate attributes and generic skills, we must reorder our assumptions and ask difficult questions of those who frame the context in which education takes place.

## For the term of your natural life

Learning is a big business. Whether discussing the University of the Third Age, personal development courses, self help bestsellers or hard-edged vocational qualifications, definitions of learning – let alone education – are expanding. Concurrent with this growth, governments are reducing centralized funding and promoting alternative revenue streams. The diversity of student interests – or to use the language of the time, client's learning goals – is transforming higher education into more than the provision of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The expansion of the student body beyond the 18-25 age group and the desire to 'service industry' has reordered the form and purpose of formal education. The number of potential students has expanded extraordinarily. As Lee Bash realized

Today, some estimates suggest that as many as 47 percent of all students enrolled in higher education are over 25 years old. In the future, as lifelong learning becomes more integrated into the fabric of our culture, the proportion of adult students is expected to increase. And while we may not yet realize it, the academy is already being transformed as a result. (35)

Lifelong learning is the major phrase and trope that initiates and justifies these changes. Such expansive economic opportunities trigger the entrepreneurial directives within universities. If lifelong learning is taken seriously, then the goals, entry standards, curriculum, information management policies and assessments need to be challenged and changed. Attention must be placed on words and phrases like 'access' and 'alternative entry.' Even more consideration must be placed on 'outcomes' and 'accountability.'

Lifelong learning is a catchphrase for a change in purpose and agenda. Courses are developed f  a wide range of education providers so that citizens can function in, or at least survive, the  agitation of the post-work world. Both neo-liberal and third way models of capitalism require the

labeling and development of an aspirational class, a group who desires to move 'above' their current context. Such an ambiguous economic and social goal always involves more than the vocational education and training sector or universities, with the aim being to seamlessly slot education into a 'lifestyle.' The difficulties with this discourse are two-fold. Firstly, how effectively can these aspirational notions be applied and translated into a real family and a real workplace? Secondly, does this scheme increase the information divide between rich and poor? There are many characteristics of an effective lifelong learner including great personal motivation, self esteem, confidence and intellectual curiosity. In a double shifting, change-fatigued population, the enthusiasm for perpetual learning may be difficult to summon.

With the casualization of the post-Fordist workplace, it is no surprise that policy makers and employers are placing the economic and personal responsibility for retraining on individual workers. Instead of funding a training scheme in the workplace, there has been a devolving of skill acquisition and personal development. Through the twentieth century, and particularly after 1945, education was the track to social mobility. The difficulty now – with degree inflation and the loss of stable, secure, long-term employment – is that new modes of exclusion and disempowerment are being perpetuated through the education system. Field recognized that "the new adult education has been embraced most enthusiastically by those who are already relatively well qualified." (105) This is a significant realization. Motivation, meta-learning skills and curiosity are increasingly being rewarded when found in the already credentialed, empowered workforce. Those already in work undertake lifelong learning. Adult education operates well for members of the middle class who are doing well and wish to do better. If success is individualized, then failure is also cast on the self, not the social system or policy. The disempowered are blamed for their own conditions and 'failures.' The concern, through the internationalization of the workforce, technological change and privatization of national assets, is that failure in formal education results in social exclusion and immobility.

Besides being forced into classrooms, there are few options for those who do not wish to learn, in a learning society. Those who 'choose' not be a part of the national project of individual improvement, increased market share, company competitiveness and international standards are not relevant to the economy. But there is a personal benefit – that may have long term political consequences – from being 'outside' society. Perhaps the best theorist of the excluded is not sourced from a University, but from the realm of fictional writing. Irvine Welsh, author of the landmark *Trainspotting*, has stated that

What we really need is freedom *from* choice ... People who are in work have no time for anything else but work. They have no mental space to accommodate anything else but work. Whereas people who are outside the system will always find ways of amusing themselves. Even if they are materially disadvantaged they'll still find ways of coping, getting by and making their own entertainment. (145-6)

A blurring of work and learning, and work and leisure, may seem to create a borderless education, a learning framework uninhibited by curriculum, assessment or power structures. But lifelong learning aims to place as many (national) citizens as possible in 'the system,' striving for success or at least a pay increase which will facilitate the purchase of more consumer goods. Through any discussion of work-place training and vocationalism, it is important to remember those who choose *not* to choose life, who choose something else, who will not follow orders.



**Everybody wants to work**

The great imponderable for complex economic systems is how to manage fluctuations in labour and the market. The unstable relationship between need and supply necessitates flexibility in staffing solutions, and short-term supplementary labour options. When productivity and profit are the primary variables through which to judge successful management, then the alignments of education and employment are viewed and skewed through specific ideological imperatives. The library profession is an obvious occupation that has confronted these contradictions. It is ironic that the occupation that *orders* knowledge is experiencing a volatile and *disordered* workplace. In the past, it had been assumed that librarians hold a degree while technicians do not, and that technicians would not be asked to perform – unsupervised – the same duties as librarians. Obviously, such distinctions are increasingly redundant. Training packages, structured through competency-based training principles, have ensured technicians and librarians share knowledge systems which are taught through incremental stages. Mary Carroll recognized the primary questions raised through this change.

If it is now the case that these distinctions have disappeared do we need to continue to draw them between professional and para-professional education? Does this mean that all sectors of the education community are in fact learning/teaching the same skills but at different levels so that no unique set of skills exist? (122)

With education reduced to skills, thereby discrediting generalist degrees, the needs of industry have corroded the professional standards and stature of librarians. Certainly, the abilities of library technicians are finally being valued, but it is too convenient that one of the few professions dominated by women has suffered a demeaning of knowledge into competency. Lifelong learning, in this context, has collapsed high level abilities in information management into bite sized chunks of 'skills.' The ideology of lifelong learning – which is rarely discussed – is that it serves to devalue prior abilities and knowledges into an ever-expanding imperative for 'new' skills and software competencies. For example, ponder the consequences of Hitendra Pillay and Robert Elliott's words:

The expectations inherent in new roles, confounded by uncertainty of the environment and the explosion of information technology, now challenge us to reconceptualise human cognition and develop education and training in a way that resonates with current knowledge and skills. (95)

Neophilliacal urges jut from their prose. The stress on 'new roles,' and 'uncertain environments,' the 'explosion of information technology,' 'challenges,' 'reconceptualisations,' and 'current knowledge' all affirms the present, the contemporary, and the now. Knowledge and expertise that have taken years to develop, nurture and apply are not validated through this educational brief. The demands of family, work, leisure, lifestyle, class and sexuality stretch the skin taut over economic and social contradictions. To ease these paradoxes, lifelong learning should stress pedagogy rather than applications, and context rather than content. Put another way, instead of stressing the link between (gee wizz) technological change and (inevitable) workplace restructuring and redundancies, emphasis needs to be placed on the relationship between professional development and verifiable technological outcomes, rather than spruiks and promises.

Short term vocationalism in educational policy speaks to the ordering of our public culture, rring immediate profits and a tight dialogue between education and work. Furthering this

logic, if education 'creates' employment, then it also 'creates' unemployment. Ironically, in an environment that focuses on the multiple identities and roles of citizens, students are reduced to one label – 'future workers.' Obviously education has always been marinated in the political directives of the day. The industrial revolution introduced a range of technical complexities to the workforce. Fordism necessitated that a worker complete a task with precision and speed, requiring a high tolerance of stress and boredom. Now, more skills are 'assumed' by employers at the time that workplaces are off-loading their training expectations to the post-compulsory education sector. Therefore 'lifelong learning' is a political mask to empower the already empowered and create a low-level skill base for low paid workers, with the promise of competency-based training. Such ideologies never need to be stated overtly. A celebration of 'the new' masks this task. Not surprisingly therefore, lifelong learning has a rich new life in ordering creative industries strategies and frameworks.

## Codifying the creative

The last twenty years have witnessed an expanding jurisdiction and justification of the market. As part of Tony Blair's third way, the creative industries and the knowledge economy became catchwords to demonstrate that cultural concerns are not only economically viable but a necessity in the digital, post-Fordist, information age. Concerns with intellectual property rights, copyright, patents, and ownership of creative productions predominate in such a discourse. Described by Charles Leadbeater as *Living on Thin Air*, this new economy is "driven by new actors of production and sources of competitive advantage – innovation, design, branding, know-how – which are at work on all industries." (10) Such market imperatives offer both challenges and opportunity for educationalists and students.

Lifelong learning is a necessary accoutrement to the creative industries project. Learning cities and communities are the foundations for design, music, architecture and journalism. In British policy, and increasingly in Queensland, attention is placed on industry-based research funding to address this changing environment. In 2000, Stuart Cunningham and others listed the eight trends that order education, teaching and learning in this new environment.

### The Changes to the Provision of Education

Globalization

The arrival of new information and communication technologies

The development of a knowledge economy, shortening the time between the development of new ideas and their application.

The formation of learning organizations

User-pays education

The distribution of knowledge through interactive communication technologies (ICT)

Increasing demand for education and training

Scarcity of an experienced and trained workforce

Source: S. Cunningham, Y. Ryan, L. Stedman, S. Tapsall, K. Bagdon, T. Flew and P. Coaldrake. *The Business of Borderless Education*. Canberra: DETYA Evaluation and Investigations Program [EIP], 2000.

This table reverberates with the current challenges confronting education. Mobilizing such changes requires the lubrication of lifelong learning tropes in university mission statements and the promotion of a learning culture, while also acknowledging the limited financial conditions in which the educational sector is placed. For university scholars facilitating the creative industries approach, education is "supplying high value-added inputs to other enterprises," (Hartley and

Cunningham 5) rather than having value or purpose beyond the immediately and applicably economic. The assumption behind this table is that the areas of expansion in the workforce are the creative and service industries. In fact, the creative industries *are* the new service sector. This new economy makes specific demands of education.

## Education in the 'old economy' and the 'new economy'

Old Economy	New Economy
Four-year degree	Forty-year degree
Training as a cost	Training as a source of competitive advantage
Learner mobility	Content mobility
Distance education	Distributed learning
Correspondence materials with video	Multimedia centre
Fordist training – one size fits all	Tailored programmes
Geographically fixed institutions	Brand named universities and celebrity professors
Just-in-case	Just-in-time
Isolated learners	Virtual learning communities

Source: T. Flew. "Educational Media in Transition: Broadcasting, Digital Media and Lifelong Learning in the Knowledge Economy." *International Journal of Instructional Media* 29.1 (2002): 20.

There are myriad assumptions lurking in Flew's fascinating table. The imperative is short courses on the web, servicing the needs of industry. He described the product of this system as a "learner-earner." (50) This 'forty year degree' is based on lifelong learning ideologies. However Flew's ideas are undermined by the current government higher education agenda, through the capping – through time – of courses. The effect on the 'learner-earner' in having to earn more to privately fund a continuance of learning – to ensure that they keep on earning – needs to be addressed. There will be consequences to the housing market, family structures and leisure time. The costs of education will impact on other sectors of the economy and private lives. Also, there is little attention to the groups who are outside this taken-for-granted commitment to learning. Flew noted that

barriers to greater participation in education and training at all levels, which is a fundamental requirement of lifelong learning in the knowledge economy, arise in part out of the lack of provision of quality technology-mediated learning, and also from inequalities of access to ICTs, or the 'digital divide.' (51)

In such a statement, there is a misreading of teaching and learning. Such confusion is fuelled by the untheorised gap between 'student' and 'consumer.' The notion that technology (which in this context too often means computer-mediated platforms) is a barrier to education does not explain why conventional distance education courses, utilizing paper, ink and postage, were also unable to welcome or encourage groups disengaged from formal learning. Flew and others do not confront the issue of motivation, or the reason why citizens choose to add or remove the label of 'student' from their bag of identity labels. The stress on technology as both a panacea and problem for lifelong learning may justify theories of convergence and the integration of financial, retail, community, health and education provision into a services sector, but does not explain why students desire to learn, beyond economic necessity and employer expectations.



Based on these assumptions of expanding creative industries and lifelong learning, the shape of education is warping. An ageing population requires educational expenditure to be reallocated from primary and secondary schooling and towards post-compulsory learning and training. This cost will also be privatized. When coupled with immigration flows, technological changes and alterations to market and labour structures, lifelong learning presents a profound and personal cost. An instrument for economic and social progress has been individualized, customized and privatized. The consequence of the ageing population in many nations including Australia is that there will be fewer young people in schools or employment. Such a shift will have consequences for the workplace and the taxation system. Similarly, those young workers who remain will be far more entrepreneurial and less loyal to their employers.

Public education is now publically-assisted education. Jane Jenson and Denis Saint-Martin realized the impact of this change.

The 1980s ideological shift in economic and social policy thinking towards policies and programmes inspired by neo-liberalism provoked serious social strains, especially income polarization and persistent poverty. An increasing reliance on market forces and the family for generating life-chances, a discourse of 'responsibility,' an enthusiasm for off-loading to the voluntary sector and other altered visions of the welfare architecture inspired by neo-liberalism have prompted a reaction. There has been a wide-ranging conversation in the 1990s and the first years of the new century in policy communities in Europe as in Canada, among policy makers who fear the high political, social and economic costs of failing to tend to social cohesion. (78)

There are dense social reorderings initiated by neo-liberalism and changing the notions of learning, teaching and education. There are yet to be tracked costs to citizenship. The legacy of the 1980s and 1990s is that all organizations must behave like businesses. In such an environment, there are problems establishing social cohesion, let alone social justice. To stress the product – and not the process – of education contradicts the point of lifelong learning. Compliance and complicity replace critique.

(Post) learning

The Cold War has ended. The great ideological battle between communism and Western liberal democracy is over. Most countries believe both in markets and in a necessary role for Government. There will be thunderous debates inside nations about the balance, but the struggle for world hegemony by political ideology is gone. What preoccupies decision-makers now is a different danger. It is extremism driven by fanaticism, personified either in terrorist groups or rogue states.

Tony Blair (<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page6535.asp>)

Tony Blair, summoning his best Francis Fukuyama impersonation, signaled the triumph of liberal democracy over other political and economic systems. His third way is unrecognizable from the Labour party ideals of Clement Attlee. Probably his policies need to be. Yet in his second term, he is not focused on probing the specificities of the market-orientation of education, health and social welfare. Instead, decision makers are preoccupied with a war on terror. Such a conflict seemingly justifies large defense budgets which must be at the expense of social programmes. There is no recognition by Prime Ministers Blair or Howard that 'high-tech' armory and warfare is  rally impotent to the terrorist's weaponry of cars, bodies and bombs. This obvious lesson is

present for them to see. After the rapid and successful 'shock and awe' tactics of Iraq War II, terrorism was neither annihilated nor slowed by the Coalition's victory. Instead, suicide bombers in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Indonesia and Israel snuck have through defenses, requiring little more than a car and explosives. More Americans have been killed since the war ended than during the conflict.

Wars are useful when establishing a political order. They sort out good and evil, the just and the unjust. Education policy will never provide the 'big win' or the visible success of toppling Saddam Hussein's statue. The victories of retraining, literacy, competency and knowledge can never succeed on this scale. As Blair offered, "these are new times. New threats need new measures." (<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page6535.asp>) These new measures include – by default – a user pays education system. In such an environment, lifelong learning cannot succeed. It requires a dense financial commitment in the long term. A learning society requires a new sort of war, using ideas not bullets.

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