NOIE-topia

Terry Flew, lecturer in Media Studies at the Queensland University of Technology, reviews the National Office of the Information Economy's policy document "Towards an Australian Strategy for the Information Economy"

This policy document from the National Office of the Information Economy in Canberra is a penultimate statement of the current Federal Government on information policy strategy, or, in the revised post-1996 terminology of Australian Federal politics, a strategy for the "information economy". The strategy statement aims to articulate a mission for Australia in the information economy, the principles which govern its approach, its vision, its strategic priorities, and a series of proposed actions which would achieve these strategic priorities and overall goals. It draws upon a series of recent statements on the information economy, which include the Goldsworthy and Mortimer reports, the December 1997 "Investing for Growth" policy statement, and various statements from the Information Policy Advisory Council (IPAC), and its successor, the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE).

"Towards an Australian Strategy for the Information Economy" begins with a discussion of context. Arguing that "in the global information economy, no one, no market, no information - nothing we may need or want- is beyond reach", it points not only to the growth in use of the Internet and projected growth of electronic commerce, but also to a series of competitive advantages which it argues Australia possesses. Among the competitive advantages are:

- a safe and supportive commercial environment;

- breadth of broadband cable rollout;

- a history of high uptake of new technologies;

- proximity to Asian markets;

- different timezone to Europe and North America;

- number of household and business users of online services;

- cultural and linguistic diversity;

- level of skills and education;

- attractive climate and "way of life"; and

- "creativity and openness" of the people.

The guiding principles governing this strategy are shaped more by the principles of facilitating electronic commerce and global integration than with those of universal access. While the strategy does propose that all Australians - wherever they live and work, and whatever their economic circumstances - need to be able to access the information economy at sufficient bandwidth and affordable cost, this is qualified by the stress upon the need for private sector leadership and industry self-regulation, and by an approach which goes with the grain of systems of international governance for online activities and electronic commerce. In such a context, it is argued, the role of government is to "show the way" as a user, supplier, regulator and trainer of users of electronic services, a statement which sits in some tension to the stress upon the "leading role" of the private sector.

"Towards an Australian Strategy" then elaborates upon the actions seen as necessary to achieve strategic priorities. The major strategies centre around developing high bandwidth, low-cost infrastructure to all regions of Australia, and developing skills in the IT area by encouraging greater availability of courses in this area, and courses and training packages delivered online by educational institutions to homes, workplaces and conventional places of learning, such as schools, TAFEs and universities. There is also a lot of emphasis placed upon raising awareness of opportunities in the online environment, or what the NOIE has elsewhere termed "thought leadership".

Many of the issues raised here, around deregulating telecommunications, adoption of pro-competitive regulatory strategies, and establishing government as a leader in putting information online, have been discussed in other government reports, and have similarities to proposals such as those of the U.S. National Information Infrastructure (NII) initiatives, the European Community's Bangemann Report or, closer to home, the Singapore government's IT2000 program or Malaysia's Multimedia Supercorridor. One distinctive feature of this report, and one worth exploring in more detail, is its recommendations in the area of education and training.

"Towards an Australian Strategy" rightly sees education as a focal point

for raising IT awareness as well as skills across a broad spectrum of the community, pointing to the need for IT literacy as a condition for effective participation in the information economy, as well as the likelihood of growing demand for using IT to deliver specialist training by more flexible means, to homes, workplaces and outside the catchment areas of traditional, "bricks-and-mortar" universities. But difficulties arise in the assumption that the benefits of greater use of IT in the delivery of post secondary education will be more cost-efficient, of better quality, and more tailored to the needs of specific client groups. Greater use of IT can achieve all three; but it is unlikely that the same courses are achieving all three simultaneously.

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In this sense, "Towards an Australian Strategy" carries the baggage of technological utopianism which marks out the West Committee's Learning for Life report, completed in early 1998, as a flawed basis for planning the future of Australian higher education. A forthcoming issue of Australian Universities Review (Vol. 41 No. 2, 1998) explores these issues in far more detail, but the main points can be stated as:

- Cost-benefit analyses of the efficiencies of online delivery of courses are notoriously difficult, but the evidence seems to suggest that courses which are more effectively delivered through the enhanced use of IT involve more, not less, money being spent on infrastructure, teaching staff and support services than conventional modes of delivery. The scope to realise these upfront costs through economies of scale by onselling learning packages has so far been limited, for the same reasons as distance learning materials are notoriously difficult to value add: it is a market where everyone is a seller, and there are few buyers.

- Information on student demand suggests that the campus experience continues to be highly valued, particularly among the 18-24 age cohort, so a distinction needs to be made between programs which effectively integrate use of IT with face-to-face models of teaching, which will become increas-

ingly important and valued by learners of all sorts, and the low-cost, high-volume virtual university, which has a distinct element of second best education in terms of student demand.

- This suggests that strategies to promote online education as a strategy for the export of education and training services, particularly into Asia, need to work with local providers and government authorities to maximise the benefits of on- and off-campus delivery, rather than simply assuming that online education and training packages can simply be exported into the Asian region.

These points about the limits of "Towards an Australian Strategy's" projections in relation to higher education are another way of saying that the supply of online services will never run far ahead of their demand. In this sense, "Towards an Australian Strategy for the Information Economy" is correct to point to the necessity of enabling broader access, skills, and awareness through the community towards IT. Though in some areas, such as higher education, its commitment to thought leadership and futurology cause it to lose sight of what a closer sectoral analysis would make apparent.

Ministerial Council for the Information Economy policy document, "Towards an Australian Strategy for the Information Economy", National Office of the Information Economy, Canberra, July 1998, 28pp.

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