Internationalisation, Flexible Learning and Technology Policy, Strategies and Structures – the University of Melbourne Perspective

The VISION is of a University of Melbourne international in character and focus and would class in the staff and students it attracts, the research and scholarship it produces and the academic standards to which it adheres; a university adding immense intellectual, cultural and professional energy to the City of Melbourne, and serving Victoria and Australia by performing and being acknowledged as one of the finest Universities in the world.

One of the University’s 5 guiding values is:
"Working with other international universities to enrich intellectual discourse, educational quality and research activity in the international community."

The strategic plan of the University of Melbourne recognises that the world’s leading universities of the twenty-first century will be first and foremost international institutions. To do this we will need to recruit and retain staff of the highest quality from around the world and attract national and international students of exceptional ability, promote high levels of staff and student interaction with other leading universities, irrespective of location, and maintain curricula that are valid and relevant internationally. We will need to
systematically monitor standards and quality against the best that is thought and known and practiced in the world. The international recognition and engagement that universities operating in this way secure, will be the ultimate test of their institutional quality and competitiveness.

As I think it is well known Melbourne University has committed itself to remaining an essentially one campus institution. In other words it does not wish to further its internationalisation by developing off shore campuses in the way that Monash has so successfully done. It is also committed to the value of on campus teaching delivered face to face. On-line education is to be ancillary to its main goals. Melbourne is working on ways of internationalising every aspect of the on campus experience. Our aim is to take the best students from anywhere in the world to educate students for an employment market that is already genuinely global.

**The University’s strategic plan states:**
The internationalisation of higher education is being driven largely by a global revolution transforming the way information is stored, accessed, disseminated, analysed and presented. This "digital revolution" is the great contemporary challenge for higher education around the world. Even the best campus-based universities may in the near future expect significant competition from internationally franchised good quality higher education, backed on the Internet
by a major software and multimedia deliverer. The plan continues in this way stating ‘we should not doubt that ‘virtual’ university education-global, standardised, portable and respectable - supported in each country by skilled facilitators and quality infrastructure, will be part of the competitive environment in which major universities operate’. Indeed already the very successful Phoenix university has made its mark internationally. A university which successfully and profitability delivers education on-line, including all of the information requirements of its students, backed by weekly face to face tutorials held in centres throughout the U.S.

The Melbourne Strategic Plan argues that we will place our institution at considerable risk by not giving the utmost priority to developing advanced multimedia capability and making it integral to our undergraduate and postgraduate program design, development, delivery and support. It recognises that universities which fail to appropriate the educational benefits and research applications of the digital revolution effectively and quickly will be in serious danger of being rendered irrelevant by those who do. ‘Multimedia and related educational technologies must be integrated effectively into curriculum design and delivery, into all aspects of student learning, and into the establishment of a world-competitive information technology base for research and research training.’
It is clear from the university’s strategic and operational plans that the University of Melbourne is committed to maintaining and enhancing its status as primarily a great international campus-based university. This does not preclude some distance offerings in cases where on-campus delivery is not practicable or possible and providing that any such offerings are of a high standard, giving students a comparable educational experience offered by campus-based courses. It should be noted that a great deal of distance education is in place and a number of Faculties are offering subjects and in some cases substantial programs online. No one method is used entirely. Distance courses include sending packages of material, online resources and off campus delivery at an overseas or interstate site.

When offering distance courses Academic Programs Committee needs to consider-

- The quality of the program
- Availability of library resources
- Technical requirements and support
1. Quality of the Program

Because the university is committed to an on-campus undergraduate experience, distance delivery is more sympathetically considered for graduate and postgraduate programs but each to consider on its merits.

For online courses greater scrutiny is given to the actual pedagogy and ways in which the online mode ensures delivery of an academically excellent course apart from the standard questions about appropriate level of content, academic standards and monitoring.

If courses are being offered face to face at a distance there must be assurances that the same scrutiny is given to the qualifications of staff as though they were on campus.

Appraisal processes must be in place.

For online programs not only is the appropriateness of the method considered, the time commitment required but also how academic support will be provided using appropriate technologies such as email, teleconferencing.
2. Library Support

Distance students need access to Web based library materials. The University of Melbourne library is not set up to post physical items to distance students. Its role is to assess the availability of online items or to broker with another library in the area to provide services. A library impact statement is evidence of requirement and action to be taken.

3. Technical Support

In relation to technical support students need to be clear about where they go for assistance, Faculty, ITS, ISP? Students are also advised of their technical requirements when they wish to enrol in a distance or flexible mode course. Each subject must specify any additional software or hardware needed beyond the base level required. This will be found in the Handbook.

There is a statement which relates to basic computer skills required -

One of the most important aspects of flexible and distance learning is managing expectations. A study undertaken by the library by Susan Bray and Dorothea Rowse in 1999 showed that many academic staff were unaware of online options which could be provided to students learning in distance and flexible mode. Many students had a low level of awareness of the Internet and potential online services. In fact the survey itself raised the level of awareness and the potential of online services among the students surveyed. The survey found that
a number of students are resistant to the use of computer technology and some did not have access to the Internet. It is clear that both the library and the academic staff need to raise the profile of these services. There is also a need to familiarise students with the Internet and online services.

‘Increasingly quantities of material are available in electronic form. It is therefore time for our libraries to look to the future and bring about changes in their management structure and how librarians and information specialists will ultimately manage, display and disseminate information in an integrated way. This requires skills to make full use of current technology to service the needs of distance/online education students.’ *

The role of library staff is changing to become information specialists working in partnership with academic staff to provide online content to flexible learning and to broker information to library users in a way which is best customised to their requirements.

A model library service might include -

- Electronic document delivery
- Electronic help desk
- Electronic reference desk
- Electronic publishing
- Electronic availability of teaching material for students;

and
Opportunities for resource sharing


This leads me to the issue of international (and national) positioning. As part of the University of Melbourne’s international agenda one of the key strategies is encouraging and initiating international engagement and inter-operability with kindred universities around the world, and in particular exercising leadership in the development of an international organisation of teaching and research universities, known as Universitas 21, to -

- Establish a systematic, stable basis on which long term internationalisation strategies may be developed and implemented
- Develop common approaches to international quality benchmarking and quality assurance
- Promote international ‘best practice’
- Provide a structured environment that facilitates high levels of international mobility for staff and students, and
- Promote effective international interoperability across a broad range of functions and programs

Already Deans from Economics and Commerce and other faculties have met across the twenty universities represented by Universitas 21. Some flexible programs will be developed which can be used by Universitas 21 partners. The University of Melbourne is trialing how students from member universities can
access the intranet to use online courseware and information content.

Underpinning the use of technology for flexible learning and flexible approaches to internationalisation is the university’s internationalisation policy.

**What is Internationalisation?**
Most universities say they are committed to internationalisation. For some this is no more than a commitment to the recruitment of international students. Some others give priority to language or regional studies. Some have developed specialist diplomas or postgraduate qualifications which signify that a student has reached a level of 'internationalised competence'. At Melbourne we are working towards an understanding of internationalisation which will inform every aspect of the University's life.

Two definitions from a recent book on internationalisation* capture something of what Melbourne University is attempting to do: internationalisation is 'a distinct commitment, attitudes, global awareness, and orientation and dimension which transcends the entire institution and shapes its ethos'. Perhaps a more precise definition is the one that is accepted by a number of people who work in this field: 'internationalisation of higher education is the process of integrating an international / intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service of the institution'.

**The Structure**
The new structure of the university is designed to ensure that all of the
university’s strategies are addressed in an holistic way. Vice Principals in charge of Information Corporate Services, Administration and work collaboratively across portfolios.

The Information Division integrates the strengths of IT Services, the Library and the Multimedia Education Unit to ensure that the nexus between academic content and the infrastructure for its delivery becomes and remains a central focus of the university. For the teaching programs, the Information Division must help improve the student experience by combining the best educational technology with the best of lecture-delivered education available to the university students.