WE STAND TODAY ON THE EDGE OF A NEW FRONTIER: ETEXTBOOKS AND THEIR

IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

"We stand today at the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfulfilled hopes and unfulfilled threats… The New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises; it is a set of challenges" (John F. Kennedy, 1960). In his presidential nomination acceptance speech Kennedy was referring to the new frontier of the 1960s; over 50 years later, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) has taken steps to avoid standing at the edge, but to step right into the new frontier of electronic textbooks.

CAUL recently commissioned a briefing paper to examine the current picture and evolving role of electronic textbooks (eTextbooks) and third party eLearning products in the academic arena. The aim of the research was to help library directors build a deeper understanding of the potential implications of the new products and delivery models for higher education in general and for university libraries in particular. The briefing paper places academic librarians in an informed position within their institutions to build relationships within and across the various stakeholder groups in order to confidently tackle the opportunities and perils of the next generation of academic publishing and access to digital learning resources.

The ways in which digital information is created, managed and accessed is changing rapidly. Over the past couple of years, consumer interest in eBooks has been growing steadily, with sales predicted to increase significantly as devices such as eReaders, iPads and tablet computers become ever more ubiquitous. In higher education, university libraries have successfully managed the move to online journals, while also driving the debate about scholarly communication and open access publishing. The emergent interest in eTextbooks now challenges the role of traditional textbooks in student learning. The many different eTextbook models reflect a myriad of digital formats which will inevitably have major consequences for the spectrum of library purchasing and licensing, academic content management, virtual learning environments, subject-specific and multi-disciplinary curriculum development, pedagogy and approaches to learning and teaching, as well as student assessment. The concept of 'integrated education publishing' opens up opportunities for teaching staff to repurpose digital resources and to blend them with their own materials to create innovative publications that are customised for specific learning contexts.

The CAUL study involved two separate, yet interconnected, research components: an environmental scan and a series of stakeholder interviews. The extensive environmental scan focused on the discussion and analysis of current eTextbook developments, industry trends and the anticipated future directions of digital learning in Australia and overseas.   The findings from the environmental scan fed into the development of the interview questions which sought to examine, at a deeper level, the diverse stakeholder perspectives on the adoption of eTextbooks. Interview subjects were drawn from academic publishing houses, campus bookstores, academic policy units, teaching staff, researchers, students, online learning support staff, ICT support units and university library staff. They represented a variety of academic institutions to cover the spectrum of metropolitan and regional universities in Australia. The proposed paper explores two specific challenges of the new frontier of eTextbooks: pedagogy and academic policy.

New educational technologies will inevitably have a significant impact on eTextbook adoption: students expect to be able to work, learn and study whenever and wherever they want and, increasingly, they want to use their own technology for learning. The rapid take-up of the iPad and tablets is likely to transform how learning materials are delivered. Educational publishers will be required to redesign their content so that it is delivered in small packages that can be aggregated, while adaptive learning programs will use learner analytics data to examine the students' precise level of knowledge and skills, thereby directing them to the exact material they need to study to achieve the desired learning outcomes. It is feasible that the learning content will adapt itself to an individual student's learning style, eg more pictures and video for the visual learner, and introduce interactive quizzes that reinforce the specific concepts that the student may find challenging.   New digital technologies will therefore challenge academic staff to change their methods of teaching to increase student engagement and promote active, collaborative learning. The development of new pedagogies will facilitate new literacies for students and offer opportunities for academic institutions to regenerate curriculum design.

However, the study revealed that there is currently considerable diversity of educational philosophy and practice across the different universities in Australia. The level of interest in and potential for the adoption of eTextbooks and eLearning solutions depends on where an individual institution sits along the continuum of face-to-face/blended/hybrid/virtual learning. In some universities, approaches to learning and teaching are driven by the fact that their students came to campus for the direct classroom interaction, while in others there is a strategic intent to maximise the

affordances of new technologies. The degree of importance of the learning management system (LMS) in the institution may also be a determinant: where the LMS is a key component of the academic program, it is likely that a stronger interest in digital resources will emerge.

At the institutional level, there is an appreciation that developments in the eTextbook field are happening haphazardly and with little coordination, and that many universities are not yet fully prepared to address the issues. A wide range of factors needs to be considered across the institution when considering the acquisition and implementation of eTextbooks, including the business models and price negotiation, contract negotiation, financial management, legislative requirements and ICT issues. Third party eLearning solutions may potentially not only supplement, but even replace some of the university's proprietary learning materials. Quality assurance becomes a critical concern not only for the academic staff at the local level, but for the university as a whole. The actual role of the academic as a 'teacher' may be questioned, and by extension, the institutional brand of the university itself may come under scrutiny. The situation may be even more complex when professional accreditation or Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) processes come to bear. The paper will consider the opportunities to develop a coordinated approach to managing third party learning solutions which will require practice to be guided by clear academic policy.

The new frontier of eTextbooks is indeed a challenging one, with many as yet unknown opportunities and perils, unfulfilled hopes and unfulfilled threats. There is a very strong sense that the time has arrived for a fundamental shift in learning and teaching, with the disruptions anticipated in the eTextbook paradigm representing a microcosm of the changes that are likely to occur across the higher education sector. There is considerable uncertainty surrounding the issues of content delivery, academic acceptance, student demand and institutional readiness for the transformations that have been forecast. The proposed paper therefore seeks to build a better understanding of the complex eTextbook environment and how it might fit into the rapidly changing context of educational technologies.