

Digitalisation, Neoliberalism and Globalisation of Higher Education in the Australian Context

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Abstract

This article explores the rise of digitalisation in Australian higher education and its impact on learning and teaching, administration, and regulatory obligations. This digitalisation can be epitomised by the prevalence of learning management systems (LMS) which have reshaped the conduct and configuration of education. As universities have embraced the LMS, as forced by the pandemic, the confluence of disruptive digitalisation combined with globalisation, regulatory reforms, and shifts in government funding models have seen the Australian higher education sector in constant evolution. This article contextualises the impacts of digitalisation using the lens of neoliberalism and globalisation, with past, current, and future state considerations in the sector. It includes a case study from a large metropolitan Australian university with a signature pedagogy of industry-partnered and flexible learning to consider how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Australia must continue to evolve in identity and provision of learning to serve social interests for the future in digitalised contexts.

Keywords: Australia, digitalisation, globalisation, higher education, identity, LMS, neoliberalism

Introduction

The dominance of neoliberalism and globalisation in higher education has had significant impacts on the role of digitalisation in Australia. This has been evidenced in discussions and dissections of current and future perspectives on higher education, such as: Dede & Richard (2020) who discuss the “synergistic digital economy” which forces adaptation and change at a rapid pace, shifting labour market requirements, and informing the place for lifelong learning (2020). Similarly, Zajda outlines the commodification of higher education as a result of neo-liberal education policy that reduces education to an investment in human capital and resource development (2020, p. 156); and Popenici discusses the “...process of industrialisation, commercialisation, and trivialisation of higher education” (2022, p. 135) and a potential future of “...ongoing decline in quality, the vocationalisation, and oversimplification of higher education” (2022, p. 183). The disruptions of the global COVID pandemic have also seen a sharpened focus on the role of digitalisation, in particular raising questions about the physical and digital priorities for learning and teaching practice when defining the virtual university (Wheaton & Young, 2023). It is in this wider setting that tensions continue to exist between academics and administrators, contributing to ongoing concerns around institutional values and identity in the sector. This is characterised as “technologised governance,” often positioned as being in direct

support of a marketized institutional model, and thus an opposition to the aesthetic and intellectual values of higher education (Popenici, 2022). Nevertheless, there are opportunities emerging to successfully consider and utilise digitalisation within a neoliberal context. This is evidenced by Australian HEIs and sectorial discussions for implementing strategies that reassert institutional identity and serve not only economic but also broader social challenges.

Understanding the Australian Context

Australia has 43 HEIs in metropolitan and regional locations, with at least one university main campus based in each state capital city (Study Australia, 2023). Research is a legal requirement for achieving accredited university status. Nearly all these institutions have multiple campus locations, either within Australia or internationally. Both the 2023 QS world rankings and the Times Higher Education show seven Australian universities in their respective top 100 ranking (QS World Rankings, 2023; Times Higher Education, 2023). Like most countries, there are hierarchical divisions and categories within these universities, notably the larger prestigious ‘sandstone’ Group of Eight (Go8) and the Australian Technical Network (ATN) institutions. The former reflects eight leading research-intensive institutions while the latter reflects six focused on enterprise, impact, economic and social solutions. In addition to these two groupings of larger public institutions, there are six private institutions amongst the remaining 31 HEIs.

Admissions for study, except for several private universities, are based on the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores given to secondary school students. Other features of the sector include specialist metropolitan, regional, or remote universities that tailor to specific cohorts (e.g. lower socioeconomic status, first-in-family, remote) or distance education providers. There are also private online-only offshoots, such as Swinburne Online and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Online (RMITO). These entities have operated separately from their parent institutions of Swinburne and RMIT, benefitting from the intellectual property of their academics or industry connections, and are geared to the full-fee professional mid-career cohort seeking to upskill or transition. The privately funded Online Education Services (OES), a joint venture by SEEK (Australian HR company and online employment marketplace) and Swinburne University, offers online delivery partnerships with HEIs and is illustrative of the pivotal establishment of fully online programs and their platforms for the private and commercialised provision of education. Such examples indicate the increasing commercial influence of developing and delivering higher education to targeted cohorts and customers.

Governance and regulation of HEIs

Various government bodies and legislation operate as governance and regulation in Australian higher education. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) functions as a national policy underpinning the design of all regulated qualifications and outlining pathways, awards and credit transfer guidelines (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2023). In 2019, an AQF Review provided recommendations for several new qualification models for the framework based on research, analysis and consultation conducted by the panel (Department of Education, 2019). These qualifications are indicative of expected future learning needs of the Australian population and pose disruptions to the sector including microcredentials and their use in credit towards formal qualifications, and a national credit point system to support universal entry (Department of Education, 2019). The Review states that the ongoing effect of new technology, such as artificial intelligence, and the transformation of workplaces mean that “...employers have strong and growing expectations that graduates will be work ready and productive” and that “...innovation... across industries, underpinned by workforce capability, will be essential to improved productivity and competitiveness” (Department of Education, 2019, p. 7). The features of the new qualification models cater specifically to workforce and social needs with the aim to increase participation in higher education. The qualification models also are responses to new technologies disrupting traditional authority sources for information, skills, and experience attainment (Department of Education, 2019). This points to the significance of digitalisation and rise of commodification in the sector.

Other significant governance bodies include the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA) and Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) which serve as national regulators for higher and vocational education sectors respectively. These bodies undertake regular audits of institutions that self-accredit and provide qualifications across tertiary and vocational levels of the AQF. Several HEIs are dual-sector, thus offering enhanced pathways and opportunities for students. In terms of legislation, the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) threshold standards provide the minimum acceptable requirements for Australian higher education providers and form the basis of audits conducted by TEQSA. These standards make explicit mention of anticipated forms of digitalisation for the learning environment and teaching delivery, calling out the provision of virtual or blended learning environments and the use of electronic learning management systems (Australian Government, 2021).

Government drivers, funding and policy

Key government drivers and public policies have had indirect influence for how universities have been digitally shaped in the period since 2000. Most notable is the 2003 Higher Education Support Act (HESA) that introduced a new government funding model whereby student caps on individual institutions were lifted (Davis, 2021). This resulted in an increase of offerings of full fee degrees and opened opportunities for HEIs to explore international and non-traditional markets, alongside government supported domestic student places, resulting in increased participation. Over time, government funding and subsidies have steadily decreased and policy statements increasingly focused on the economic benefits and intent of education for employment, pushing for higher participation through an equity lens (Davis, 2021).

In 2020, the pandemic occurred alongside the introduction of the higher education legislation package: Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). The government introduced priorities and frameworks for fee setting that had an aim to elevate Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines that supported a flourishing economy. At the same time, there were hiked fees for humanities and arts degrees as these disciplines were considered less essential for supporting the economy and thus received less public subsidy (Davis, 2021). This reform shifted government funding to align with disciplinary areas of national priority, promoting an explicit intention of higher education to address economic interests by aligning graduates to market needs. This activity reflects neoliberal globalization as expressed by Marginson (2022), the outcome of which is “...the rapid and stable expansion of international higher education and global science but on the basis of a singular language and a dominant institutional template and mix of disciplines. Potentials for the creative diversity of knowledge and approaches to higher education have been lost” (p. 25-26). The Federal Government has since committed to a higher education review in 2022-3, namely the Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2023). The Accord aims to determine a visionary plan for the sector, devising recommendations and performance targets to improve quality, accessibility and affordability for the next three decades.

The Universities Accord is specifically concerned with the negative impacts of the JRG for students, especially those from female, equity and First Nations groups, as this cohort is largely represented in fields of study where the highest increase in student contributions have occurred (Department of Education, 2023). While the Federal Government provides financial help to students through the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP), compulsory student contributions are still required. The National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) is another funding framework that explicitly provides block grants to universities based on their engagement with industry to produce appropriately ‘job-ready’ graduates (Department of Education, 2022). Conversely, Universities Australia, the university peak body, provides an independent sector voice that advocates for the value of HEIs beyond that of dominant government policy, along with the Indigenous Strategy 2022-25 that also represents a whole of sector approach to improving social justice and fairness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as staff and students in HEIs (Universities Australia, 2022). Therefore, the Accord and independent voices of the sector represent a critical awareness to shift the current political and policy landscape to align with more appropriate cultural and social needs.

Scale, the Australian Location and Digitalisation Infrastructure

Finally, geography and infrastructure directly impact the size, operation and digitalisation of Australian HEIs. The five largest Go8 universities educate an average of 64K students each with the ATN university RMIT showing 91K enrolments in 2021. These figures are significantly larger than equivalent universities in the UK and US where average enrolments are 18K and 39K respectively (Davis, 2022). Australia is also home to Perth, one of the most remote cities in comparable size in the world and setting to five HEIs. In addition, Australia has a unique placement to Asia and the Pacific, with HEIs considering their role as “in and of Asia” in servicing student, social and policy-based interests. Simultaneously the historical influence of colonialist origins from Europe shapes the identity of the nation historically and currently with 1.2 million United Kingdom migrants living in Australia as of June 2021 making it the largest migrant community (Department of Home Affairs, 2023). When it comes to infrastructure to support digitalisation, Australia lags in internet quality, being 65th in ranking, and dropping over the last decade (Purtill, 2022). The quality of infrastructure has implications for the ability to innovate and explore digital affordances without risking equity and inclusion for students and educators.

Pedagogical Impacts of Learning and Teaching

Like most HEIs across the developed world, the take-up for digitalisation in Australia for learning and teaching has been epitomised through the adoption of the LMS to varying degrees of sophistication since 1997 with the release of WebCT (Zawacki-Richter & Latchem, 2018). Despite the diversity of technologies now in use, the LMS is an inherent mechanism of any HEI, positioned in a young academic discipline of instructional and educational technology (Wheaton

& Young, 2023). One factor often overlooked is the potential for the ‘Americanisation’ of pedagogy from the extensive employment of US-based educational technologies (such as Canvas) in Australia HEIs. This ‘Americanisation’ is driven in some respects by technological determinism, whereby ‘edtech’ products like Canvas are dominant in the Australian sector, but their functionality developed based on their American origin. The customisation to the Australian-based context only occurs based on consumer advocacy by HEIs in the region facilitated by the product “Canvas Community” (Instructure, 2023). The development of educational technologies within American political and cultural ideologies of business models and institutional practices, translating to affordances offered by these systems that implicitly shape the way the Australian sector evolves in terms of standardisation, language, and collective development. The LMS as a widely foundational digitised tool is indicative of a business model templated hegemony, with its focus on managerialism, analytics, integrations to other dominant systems, and a standardised manner for packaging and sharing learning. While the LMS has been adopted at institutional levels for both informational infrastructure and pedagogical change, this has not necessarily translated to deep engagement for learning and teaching practice with academic staff (Wheaton & Young, 2023). New university processes and changes frequently fail to be broadly accepted and assimilated into the experience of learning and teaching in HEIs, and the pedagogical adoption of the LMS as a cornerstone of HEI digitalisation is a key example.

There are varied conceptions and approaches within Australian HEIs to digitalisation in learning and teaching and adoption of the social integration affordances of digital technologies. In 2013, universities were being forced to respond to the continued reduction of federal government support, declining student satisfaction with reduced staff to student ratios, along with intensifying global competition to rethink approaches and inherent identities as institutions for learning. This raised some debate and questions about delivery modes and the role of digitalisation, in particular the lecture, perceived as the traditional pinnacle for delivering university learning to large classes. Some universities publicly rebranded themselves by committing to smaller class sizes with ‘flipped’ digital resources as a more effective mode for supporting student learning (Bebbington, 2013). These shifts saw experimentation with alternative pedagogies prompted by questions about passivity and lack of collaborative learning opportunities for students in lecture settings. This experimentation sought to encourage higher learner engagement and activeness, consequently activating more fulsome implementation of LMS that supported independent and flexible engagement with digital resources and activities that was consolidated in face-to-face time on campus with teaching staff.

Charting digitalisation of HEIs in Australia using the LMS as a key lens to assess ideological discussions can be dissected into pre and post COVID framings. Pre-COVID framing saw educational technology (or edtech) continually positioned as the transformer of education to a student-centred practice. However, concerns existed around whether pedagogy was driving technology or technology was driving pedagogy (Sankey et al, 2020). Zawacki-Richter and Latchem (2018) determined several trends in educational technology developments that show a shift “...from a focus on computers and technology for computer-based instruction to a view of computers as tools for collaborative learning and the adoption of student-centred approaches to instructional design and learning” (p. 140).

In addition to considering the role of technology in education, there has also been a focus on frameworks for assessing the impact of technology on pedagogy and the degree of digitalisation achieved in institutions (see Graham, 2005; Porter, Graham, Bodily & Sandberg, 2016; Mestan, 2019; Han, Wang & Jiang, 2019). In Australia this rise in digital models of instruction and delivery has led to the establishment of independent organisations such as the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE), Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) and Technology Enhanced Learning Accreditation Standards (TELAS). These bodies represent the emerging quality standards and governance associated with the digitalisation of learning and teaching, and a pedagogical focus on educational technology to improve student outcomes. In this context, concerns have been prompted around data and surveillance, methods of implementation, criticisms of standardised tools, and changes to practice that are perceived to constrain educational freedoms and neglect human value (Huang, Matthews & Lodge, 2021).

Prior to 2020, Australian universities were in varied states of developing their digitalisation identities and processes. In responding to the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns and border closures, HEIs were compelled to abruptly exploit the full potential of digitalised learning and teaching. These scenarios were universal and have also been clearly recounted by Bekele (2021) for the African higher education context. There was a clear economic imperative to respond urgently, given the extent to which Australian institutions relied on international students with education being the fourth most valuable export in 2019-20 (Department of Education, 2023). This reliance on international cohorts can be traced back to the early 1990s, resulting from a significant reduction in government funding, introduction of student fees and increased domestic enrolments (Davis, 2021). In 2003, the HESA funding model for higher education was introduced, primarily based on open market modelling with Commonwealth Supported Position (CSP) allocations for defined numbers of undergraduate and professional-oriented postgraduate programs, along with demand-driven openings for

any number of full-fee paying students (Watts, 2017). Government expectations set for higher education as a significant export contributor opened the competitive gates for the international student cohort as a lucrative consumer group (Davis, 2022; Watts, 2017). This shift in ideology served the Australian higher education industry most satisfactorily until it began to unravel through border closures in 2020, at which point the Victorian state government initiated the International Education Resilience Fund (IERF) to boost abilities of institutions in that jurisdiction to retain their international student cohorts (Victoria State Government, 2021).

The COVID response necessitated the recasting of HEIs as predominantly online providers, dispelling ideological positions on the nature of edtech to provide a durable mechanism for educators to remain working and connected to their students. TEQSA provided explicit guidance that was linked to existing threshold standards to define the ‘pivot to online teaching’ conditions (Australian Government, 2020a). These guidelines took full consideration of a broad range of conditions needed for managing the learning and teaching ecosystem including supporting students and staff, maintaining quality learning, and outlining requirements for governance and oversight of transition and changes from ‘normal’ to ‘pivot’ state. This guidance by TEQSA and necessary adjustments for online-only delivery necessitated by lockdowns and border closures, situated the COVID pivot as an external change agent. As Bekele (2021) describes for the African response to the pandemic, there was a similar dramatic increase in the engagement of Australian HEIs with digitalisation and its related online instruction modality, instigating responses of ‘panic-agogy’ or emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al, 2021). At the end of 2020, a TEQSA thematic analysis report on the COVID student experience (Australian Government, 2020b) captured insights across the Australian HEI sector that define opportunities for more purposeful design of digitalisation that builds on the wealth of personal and professional experiences across the sector.

Leaning into Bekele’s (2021) learning from the African context, the importance of Internet infrastructure and connectivity has been crucial, along with committed institutional leadership to resource and support the successful integration of technology in learning and teaching that factors in human, pedagogical and curriculum perspectives. This is increasingly evident as global markets and travel have revived conversations about the “new normal” and discussion on when the “physical” returns to learning. Defined as a post-COVID world, physical learning environments are being re-evaluated as a seamless space of digital and physical learning with a focus on collaboration, specialist space designs and shifted considerations of how space and place intersect to embody learning and connection.

A Case Study of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)

Anchoring the impacts of digitalisation in Australian HEIs, inclusive of COVID disruption, it is useful to focus on a specific case study. RMIT is a metropolitan, multi-campus international university founded in 1887 with a combined staff and student number of approximately 100,000. RMIT has four Colleges, namely Business & Law, Design & Social Context, STEM, and Vocational Education. These Colleges are of considerable size with most being larger than UK HEIs, e.g. Business & Law had 26.4K enrolments in 2021. RMIT’s urban campus in the Melbourne CBD and international presence in Vietnam, Singapore and Europe when combined with its dual-sector offerings create an ecosystem of geographies, social and industry engagement. The case study is split into pre and post COVID responses, with the pandemic offering a reflective point for the values and limitations of digitalisation for the institution.

RMIT’s journey of digital transformation has encompassed the initial transition, implementation, and ongoing quality assurance process for Canvas, the new LMS selected in 2015, as well as its reliance and use during the COVID pivot. This transformation has been documented in various conference presentations and publications (Wheaton & Mastro, 2018; Wheaton & Young, 2019; Wheaton & Young, 2023) and articulated in the vendor-published case study of Canvas LMS implementation (Instructure, n.d.). The implementation of Canvas represented a desire to provide greater support services and integrated resources to students, using learning dashboards to streamline assessment submission, library access, communications, important policies and procedures, and other tools such as portfolios. A significant institutional commitment, both financially and culturally, was made to this process of digitalisation. Advocacy and a clear rationale for this investment was clearly articulated with strategic and collective leadership from the Vice-Chancellor (VC) and Deputy Vice Chancellor Education (DVCE), and leadership at operational and tactical levels. To support the rollout, change champions and existing staff across RMIT also served to drive capability and engagement outcomes. A microcredentials strategy was established, originating as a pilot project prior to integration into the LMS ecosystem and a longer-term intention to embed into program curriculum. Such digital investments do not receive specific Federal Government plans, funds or directives to support digitalisation transformation as it is up to institutions to determine funding allocations for their own efforts in alignment with operation and strategic priorities. For RMIT the investment in digitalisation was anchored in the benefits of sustainability, scalability and consistency, alongside pedagogically improved learning and teaching practice intended to deliver improvements in the student experience.

The impact of COVID operated as a significant pause, reflect, and continue mechanism for various initiatives across the institution. To capitalise on the digitalisation efforts and to utilise long-term opportunities for creating responsive and relevant curriculum for programs, RMIT undertook a redesign of its curriculum architecture. This involved the structural design of formal qualifications and non-formal learning to enhance pathways and the interfaces between qualifications and disciplines. This work was initiated in response to the previously mentioned AQF Review, an emerging National Microcredentials Framework (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022) and insights gained from the experiences of the pandemic. In addition to the fundamental reshaping of curriculum, digital transformation continues with the implementation of a curriculum mapping and management tool that will provide essential administrative, governance and learning and teaching functionality in tandem with the LMS.

Core concepts included in the new curriculum architecture are stackability, unbundling, and disaggregation of curriculum to form new types of learning as referred to in various international commentaries for meeting new learner markets (see Craig & Williams, 2015; Dede & Richards, 2020). Thus, not only has digitalisation led to segmented configuration strategies for curricula, but the dominance of neoliberalism in the socioeconomic status quo has influenced the emergence of these formations of learning for upskilling. However, RMIT, in looking beyond the market to the broader social and cultural importance of HEIs, has defined new graduate capabilities, replacing existing generic learning outcomes otherwise known as graduate attributes, to inform the design, delivery and content of our curriculum. The capabilities reflect the University's strategy of "Knowledge in Action", that focuses on learning through life and work, research and innovation, and serving our communities (RMIT, 2022, p. 8). In the context of digitisation, the capability of "Digitally Adept", emphasizes the ability to create and utilise a blend of digital and human skills, tools and emerging technologies to solve problems, innovate, communicate and bring about change. Similarly, the capability of "Critically Engaged" places contextual focus on employing intellectual independence and judgement to engage critically with information, make sound evidence-based decisions, actively challenge assumptions and undertake research. The set of six capabilities anchor the value and unique identity of the institution, leveraging our research expertise, our academic and institutional capital, in informing not only training for job readiness but also of the individual graduate to be an active agent of social, environmental and political change.

Neoliberalism, Digitalisation and Commodification of Higher Education

As we consider the broader Australian context and RMIT as an HEI case study, we have an opportunity to contemplate the influences of commodification on higher education that neoliberalism has imposed at macro and micro scales. There are specific national contexts as well as institutional-specific contexts that inform how a commodified value of HEIs is assessed, which is intimately tied to the journey of digitalisation. This influence of neoliberalism and globalisation on the higher education sector is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon, but it should be understood in the context of our nation-specific elements (Turner, 2020, p. 142).

When stating that higher education is increasingly commodified, this can be understood as the abstraction of the intrinsic value of learning, identified through qualifications that indicate the human capital of graduates in terms of their ability to be producing economic agents. In this context, qualifications operate as indexical substitutes for the outcome of learning, pointing not only to the graduate but the institution which operates in a market economy in which value is determined by metrics and ranking systems. The value of a HEI award can therefore, increase or decrease, thus qualifying these operations as functioning in a 'quasi-market' (Watts, 2017). Additionally, this abstraction has shifted the intrinsic value of education from being a process of experience to that of 'exchange value' offered for employment. Thus, when placed in the broader context where there exists competitiveness for value and status of product and key operations of economic transaction and profit, these are subtle signs of educational capitalism present in HEIs (Watts, 2017).

Linking this concept of commodification to the digitalisation of higher education, Selwyn and Facer (2014) identified that: "...we can therefore say with some confidence that sociological research is now ably showing that digital technologies in education are not neutral but political; that they are carriers for assumptions and ideas about the future of society; that their design, promotion and use are all sites in which struggles over power are conducted (p. 491)."

This is exemplified in HEIs in our global context of market-driven societies. The rise of the LMS and broader technologies has been perceived to shift power from academics into the hands of administration and governance (Popenici, 2022). Considering that digitalisation was epitomised as online-only delivery for international students caught offshore during the COVID crisis in Australia, the power struggle can be felt not only within institutional ideologies around pedagogy, but also nationally and internationally within the Australian government and China that banned recognition of online degrees post-COVID (D'Agostino, 2023). Further instances of power imbalance shaped by neoliberalism include the growth of casual academic staff in line with increasing international students in Australia (Department of Education, 2023). Funding allocations in service of international markets (e.g. IERF), abrupt strategic

and operational shifts from online delivery to refocus on campus presence and delivery, and foreign dictations of quality influencing agency of institutions (D'Agostino, 2023).

Microcredentials similarly represent another shift in neoliberal commodification. This educational technology demonstrates the shared potential for designing learning and unbundling HEI products in closer synergy with industry, using digitalisation as the enabler for securing a new market group in lifelong learning (Lang, 2023). The MOOC was previously considered the unbundler of education, when conceptualised as providing flexibly delivered equitable and personalised learning opportunities, but has increasingly moved into commercialised domains (Lambert, 2021). It is clear that microcredentials are the future investment for providing modularised learning in the uncredentialed space of workforce upskilling and lifelong learning. The Australian government has already sought to establish a National Microcredentials Framework (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022) that aligns with needs outlined in the AQF Review (Department of Education, 2019). The framework certifies industry defined competencies that generate specific short-term return and benefits for human capital in a competitive marketplace. However, as Lang (2023) proposes, HEI products can be developed through a co-design process with industry and similarly quantified and unbundled in a marketplace, but with the mindset shift of market to educational construct, to explicitly serve industry demand.

There are also factors that contribute to the influence of neoliberalism and digitalisation within individual HEIs, most notably the unique context of institutions and potentially competing ideologies held by their staff. We are living through the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) where digital technologies have disrupted life and our organisations, challenging HEIs to be more innovative, competitive and relevant in offering services and processes (Subic, 2021). Universities have not been immune to this disruption, but there are considerations about the speed and nature of response. As complex and large organisations, HEIs are typically seen as slow in adaptation to change (Davis, 2021) which can be influenced by not only the adoption of technology but the need to understand its implications (Veletsianos, Kimmons & Bondah, 2023). Thus the implications of rapid technological advancement in digitalisation of higher education collectively puts HEIs at a frequent disadvantage, challenged by our institutional scale and logics, funding mechanisms, and imperative to deliver skilled workforce responses while simultaneously offering a critical lens to maintain the public good. Considering these contexts collectively, Turner's (2020) caution on relying simply on neoliberalism and globalisation to understand higher education is valid. To this, we must consider national and local considerations unique to HEIs as well as the influence of digitalisation.

Outlooks for Digitalisation in Australia

It may appear to be a bleak perspective for the current trajectory of digitalisation in the HEIs of Australia given the evidence put forth in this article. Charting digitalisation within Australia using the LMS as a key asset and considering the inevitable disruption and after-effects of the pandemic, as well as considering a unique case study of RMIT, we can see the complexities of value, optimism, and criticism shaping the sectorial debate. There is increased awareness of the value of digitalisation, but also an awareness of what is lost when HEIs are required to transition to be entirely online providers. Despite criticisms and cautionary warnings as shared by Popenici (2022) on the potentially "...dangerous path when we simplify all to fit the function of computing algorithms" (p. 97), we must be mindful of path dependence as articulated by Turner (2020) and reflect on our Australian perspective, disruptors, national systems, and individual HEI identities and strategy. The Australian context presents a range of influencing factors and if we consider technology alone, the case of academic integrity gives cause for optimism. Australian universities and academic researchers in the discipline of assessment are committed to an educative approach for engendering academic integrity (Australian Government, 2022), rather than only informed by surveillance using digital technologies. This stands in stark contrast to the view posed by Popenici whereby integrity is a focus on punishments and institutional consequences (2022, p. 173). In this context, ChatGPT is yet another digital disruptor, but Australian perspectives have seen a call for engagement rather than avoidance, advocating for renewed discussion on the need to improve assessment practices and revisit the value of learning as a process. Here, graduate capabilities that drive curiosity and expand understanding, function to facilitate meaningful engagement with disruptive technology to reflect and evolve our methods of learning. Technology also continues to provide legitimate opportunities for equity and inclusion, through online offerings, recordings and access to materials and technologies for improving accessibility.

The JRG evidences the influence of neoliberalism in strategy, policy, and funding frameworks that shape how HEIs operate. There is no doubt that neoliberalism presents a critical view of education and relies on digitalisation, but we see that with attitudes around international students there is a human centred concern emerging amongst financial and geopolitical interests surfacing in the Universities Accord. As we mobilise the potential that is emerging to visibly shift from an export to knowledge economy, we are also reaffirming a unique social good for Australian society and beyond. University graduate capabilities provide a tangible mechanism to create curriculum aligned to this need as they

reinvigorate the opportunity for generalist humanities programs addressing the broader social issues and worldviews of society (Coleborne, 2023). The Universities Accord also captures the visions and views of the sector, indicating that we are collectively aware of our precarious position to either enter a period of growth or lose our identity (Department of Education, 2023).

In summary, Australian HEIs are embracing digitalisation in keeping with the socioeconomic factors of globalised neoliberalist markets while also navigating the unique contexts of the individual institution. Despite these various pressures, HEIs are also reasserting their role to wield digitalisation as a tool to improve education beyond the realm of jobs – asserting the individual virtues of lifelong learning, social good, and semi-permeable barriers between the University and society, both online and in-place within our urban and rural environments.

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