The politics of open learning

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Delegates at the *Access Through Open Learning* conference organised by UNE Northern Rivers at Byron Bay in early September this year participated in a survey aimed a prioritising the major issues in open learning. The conference took on a strongly political flavour, with the presence of Senator John Tierney speaking on behalf of the Federal Liberal Party, and Dr Di Bolton representing DEET.

Conference sessions dealt with a wide range of aspects of open learning, including the TV Open Learning Project, recognition of prior learning, use of technology to solve issues of access and equity, using national computer "networks to provide student access to tutors and information, and the establishment of open access centres by local councils. It was the political issues, however, that emerged from the survey as being dominant in the minds of most respondents.

As can be seen from the summary, delegates were asked to rank their priorities for both 1993 and 1996 on a number of issues. The first priority identified by the respondents was to:

> Elect a group of up to five people to lobby politicians on identified issues in Open Learning in the lead up to the 1993 election.

A lobby group was duly elected during the final plenary of the conference. It is worth considering what the lobby group will be lobbying for. Presumably, the other items with a high ranking on the survey. In order, these are:

2. All educational providers to be encouraged to expand and diversify flexibility of access to their programs, instructional design and delivery.
3. Develop a national system of accreditation and articulation to facilitate student entry, exit and portability of qualifications, together with a national system of Recognition of Prior Learning.
4. Maximise student choice through Federal funding arrangements including student support, 008 numbers and non-aligned open learning support centres at community level.
5. Undertake a major effort to develop Australia-wide cross-sectoral approach to Open Learning in the post-compulsory education sectors (Senior Colleges, TAFE, Adult and Community Ed., Higher Ed.)

When we examine the current situation, these priorities seem interesting. In relation to open learning, item 2 seems like a motherhood statement at first glance. It is what all open learning enthusiasts see as an ideal, but without any indication of how it is to come about the statement doesn't mean much. How do you lobby for that? The answer could relate to the political nature of the agenda, but more on this point later.

Priorities 3, 4, and 5 are also interesting. Given the government's current level of interest in the Open Learning Initiative with the Monash led TV Open Learning consortium, it seems to me that a lobby group asking for these things will be knocking on the government's door, asking them to do what they are already doing or intend to do. Even the issue of credit transfer has been receiving attention. Just recently, a working party of the AVCC has reported that 29 out of 33 universities agreed to credit transfer on principle. Effectively, the government is leading the charge on many of these issues, and other more fundamental ones as seen by the recent offer to waive up-front fees in favour of a HECS type payment later for school leavers who enrol in the Open University. With the frequently quoted 50,000 eligible students unable to gain admission to university open learning is seen as an important part of the solution to providing additional places.

Presumably, the lobby group will be lobbying the opposition too. Senator Tierney gave a clear indication as to which of the priorities the Liberal Party will be receptive to. His view is that the monopolisation of the Open Learning Initiative by a large consortium such as that formed by Monash is not the way to go, and that every institution should be encouraged to provide its own open learning program in any way it wishes to do so. He is also keen on the regional community open learning support centre idea. More freedom and flexibility in a nutshell.

Prioritising Major Issues in Open Learning

1992 Access through Open Learning Conference -- Byron Bay

Participants were asked to recommend their priorities for 1993 and for 1996 by allocating, in each column, a token $100 over one or more of the issues listed below. The amounts were totalled for the 51 people who responded and the rankings are given in bold type.

Priority for 1993	Priority for 1996	Issues
Lobbying and Representation		
370 **8th**	310	Encourage existing professional organisations -- HERDSA, ASET, ASPESA, AOLIN, AAACE etc. -- to take a lead in Open Learning nationally and / or
160 **12th**	140	Establish an Open Learning professional / consumers' association
625 **1st**	75	Elect a group of up to five people to lobby politicians on identified issues in Open Learning in the lead up to the 1993 election
National Policy and Resource Network		
445 **5th**	660 **2nd**	Undertake a major effort to develop Australia-wide cross-sectoral approach to Open Learning in the post compulsory education sectors (Senior Colleges, TAFE, Adult and Community Ed., Higher Ed.)
215 **10th**	310	Reinforce Open Learning / independent learning concepts and practices in the school system
570 **3rd**	700 **1st**	Develop a national system of accreditation and articulation to facilitate student entry, exit and portability of qualifications, together with a national system of Recognition of Prior Learning
535 **4th**	550 **6th**	Maximise student choice through Federal funding arrangements including student support, 008 numbers and non-aligned student support centres at community level
410 **7th**	585 **5th**	Integrated approach to development and provision of technological support for Open Learning which maximises flexibility of access (time, location) at a minimum cost to students. Note: the Open Learning Technology Corporation to monitor the effectiveness of technology use and provide standards / support for expansion of the most effective delivery technologies.
180 **11th**	185	Technology development priorities include standardised national e-mail system interactive television broadcast television

		Institutional Responses
580 **2nd**	590 **4th**	All education providers to be encouraged to expand and diversify flexibility of access to their programs, instructional design and delivery
320 **9th**	280	Identify and address institutional barriers to Open Learning
420 **6th**	620 **3rd**	Increase investment in Library / learning resources particularly via CD-ROM
		One 'Write-in' Issue
	25	Industrial issues for staff involved, if not solved

This sheds new light on priority 2. What seems like the proverbial motherhood statement is, in effect, in line with Liberal Party policy. In practice, however, it may be less of a 'Good Thing' when we take into account the Liberal Party policy of allowing universities to charge full fees for the provision of additional places to students who fail to win a place by the normal means. At present, some universities are not ready to participate in the open learning initiative because there is not sufficient funding attached to be of interest, leaving mostly the designated Distance Education Centres to run with it to maintain their student numbers. Is greater freedom in the provision of open learning likely to be equivalent to the marketing of open learning? We will have to wait and see on that issue. Between the government's indecent haste to promote open learning, and the opposition's enthusiasm for providing education at a cost, it appears that open learning is moving rapidly from a neglected issue to a vexed one.

Which leads me to refer to priority 8. It was my suggestion at the conference to spread the word to other organisations about the views of conference participants and the intention to carry out some political lobbying. This stems from my memory of the discussion at the 1988 Ed Tech conference at which this same proposal was discussed. It has been clear for some time that there are many organisations with similar interests in relation to open learning and the application of technology to instruction, however there is no real political front that can speak out on these issues at a national level, and carry weight by representing a wide cross section of the educational community. Instead, a wide range of groups with narrow interests, sometimes organised on a state basis, work effectively in their own way but with no national voice. In 1988 we were all unequivocally told by Garth Boomer, who was invited to the conference to act as moderator and to provide some top level insight, that the goals of ASET could never be realised without wider representation and an effective political organisation. There was support for the idea at the time. Perhaps the lobby group from the Open Learning conference can provide an example of what can be done.

Senator Tierney had some advice to offer along the same lines. Conference delegates were told how effective lobby groups operated in a way that would attract the government's attention. If, as a result of advice from the 1988 ASET conference an effective lobby group had been formed, the potential to influence the direction of government policy would have been there. The question now is whether ASET as a group has a political agenda. More particularly, is there a will to do anything about it, and is this shared by other organisations? When you are thinking about this question, ask yourself if you share the priorities identified at Byron Bay.

I feel that organisations such as ASET, ASPESA (soon to be the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australasia), HERDSA, AOLIN, AAACE, ASCILITE may have a considerable degree of common cause at a political level, and jointly would represent a considerable cross section of the education community. While these organisations all have a different membership who have their own particular interests, a common lobby group at a political level, if it could be effectively organised, may have a useful degree of influence much more than any of these groups could expect on their own. Perhaps some political savvy would be a useful focus for united future action at a national level.