

Facing the challenges of the virtual university

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In November 1996, I attended a symposium titled *The virtual university?* hosted by the University of Melbourne. Many Australian and international speakers at the symposium spoke of developments in their own institutions and tried to envisage the future form of universities.

The point was made on more than one occasion that as governments continue to withdraw from funding public institutions such as universities, the idea of instruction in an on-line environment becomes more attractive. It is clear the recent changes to funding of tertiary education are only the beginning of a complete revolution in the tertiary education sector. The apparent savings that can be achieved by abandoning the traditional notion of place centred education and 'credit for contact' in favour of net-centred systems of educational instruction are likely to become a driving factor and lead to the eclipse of the time honoured concept of the university — for all but the very privileged. Moreover, if globalisa-

tion and internationalisation of tertiary education are widely embraced, one is led to wonder what a local institution offering, for example, a course in management, can offer to compete with an on-line Harvard Business School!

As service providers to the staff and students of the universities, librarians have good cause to wonder about the future of libraries and librarians, not so much whether they will continue to exist, but whether scholars will continue to have a vital interest in developing the academic library nearest to them when they can access the collections of the greatest libraries in the world on-line. It seems to me that students and scholars may bypass the services offered at the local level in favour of the globally available 'world libraries'. The intellectual and cultural implications of this prospect are quite disturbing.

There is, however, considerable cause for optimism — a rational basis for looking forward to a challenging future.

At the symposium, I noted that the librarians and IT people were the most at ease with the concept of the virtual university, and amongst those most enthused about its possibilities. It is also true that the history of the last ten years in librarianship has been one of our embracing more and more technological and other change with increasing rapidity, yet with a remarkable degree of equanimity.

Though we may sigh over the potential that we cannot yet see fulfilled in our particular work environments, librarians are very well placed to face the challenges of the virtual university. It is also clear that librarians view accepting and adapting to new things as an integral part of the job. This was demonstrated for me by the excellent support that University College and Research Libraries Section programs such as 'Electronic shock' attract. For 1997, at least, and possibly for years after a major concern of the University, college and research libraries section will be to support and assist librarians to meet the challenge. ■

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Enquiries, expressions of interest, suggestions for papers and further details are available from:

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