

Deakin University
Office of the Vice-Chancellor

AHISA Boarding Schools Conference, Saturday 7 July, 2007, 9.30 am –
10.30 am.

Keynote Address:

“They are” not “we were”: Realising the Full Potential of Generation Y

Acknowledgements

- Mr Geoffrey Ryan, National Chair, Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, and Principal, Westbourne Grammar School
- Mr Paul Sheehan, Headmaster, Melbourne Grammar School
- Mr Nick Bates, Chair, Conference Management Committee

Good morning everyone. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

I would like to begin with two quotations:

First,

“Students now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority and show disrespect for their elders.”

Secondly,

“The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for their parents. They talk as if they know everything.”

The first of those quotations is attributed to Socrates and the second to Peter the Hermit.

I mention these quotations to show that concern by older generations about younger generations is nothing new, even the themes seem to be the same.

I believe that, if we are to fulfil our responsibilities to the generation to whom, in the main, we are delivering our academic and other programs, schools and universities must have an understanding of that generation. Of course, most of our staff are Baby Boomers (born between the 1940s and the 1960s) or Generation X (born in the 1960s or the 1970s), but we teach and interact mainly with Generation Y students (those born in or after 1980). We need to understand the attributes and characteristics of Gen Y and we need to forge effective relationships with them if they are to realise their full potential through their educational experience. I must acknowledge that in thinking and writing about this I have been very influenced by the work of Dr Sally Nimon from the University of South Australia who is an expert about Generation Y.

I need to begin with some facts about Deakin so you can understand the background against which we are doing our planning. There are 38 publicly funded Australian universities; Deakin is the thirteenth largest of these with more than 32,000 students. Slightly more than two thirds of our students are undergraduate, one third postgraduate; 20% of our students are international students – of the international students, 75% are undergraduates. Ten percent of our domestic (Australian) students are fee-paying – two thirds of the domestic fee-payers are postgraduate and one third undergraduates. We have a large proportion of part time students – 39%. Most Australian universities are experiencing an increase in the number of students choosing to study part time, but, in Deakin's case, we have always had a large number of part time students.

Deakin University was established in 1974 as a distance education University with a particular mission to provide access to higher education for people who

missed out on university education in their youth. With the massification of higher education, that market really no longer exists, but the techniques Deakin developed to cater for those distance education students of the past – print and online teaching materials and the use of technology to communicate with students – are now proving valuable in catering for Gen Y students.

One third of our students chose to enrol as 'off campus' students. In the past, these would all have been students who lived a long distance from one of our campuses – this is still the case with some students, but increasingly students choose to study in this way, or partly in this way, even though they could attend a campus. There are obvious attractions to postgraduate students who are working full time and undertaking a postgraduate coursework program to 'upskill', but, increasingly, undergraduate students are taking some of their studies in this way.

At Deakin our planning is based on the thesis that the technological developments of the late twentieth century have had a significant impact on how Generation Y interact and how they view the world; technological developments have influenced their perspectives, their attitudes and their visions for the future. At Deakin we believe that we must be mindful of this and respond to it.

Some facts:

- 47 million laptops were delivered worldwide in 2006;
- More than 2.7 billion searches are performed on Google each month;
- The number of text messages sent each day exceeds the population of the planet;
- Third generation fibre optics are currently being tested by NEC and Alcatel which can push 10 trillion bits per second down one strand of fibre – equivalent to 1,900 CDs or 150 million simultaneous phone calls every second;

- One out of every 8 couples that married in the United States in 2006 met online.

Generation Y is the first generation for whom the world of the mobile phone and the internet does not represent a departure from a previous way of life. The capacity for instantaneous interaction locally and globally distinguishes Generation Y from other generations. This has had an impact on how members of Gen Y interact.

For universities, it means that providing contact details to students is seen as providing approval for contact at any time and raising the expectation of an immediate response. Generation Y expect to be able to send an email question to a member of staff at any time during the day or night and to get an immediate response. In the past, we put signs on our doors indicating when we would be available to interview students; now, we have to negotiate a clear understanding of the turn around time for email responses.

We need to be careful about marketing promises to Gen Y students and how these promises may be interpreted. To a Gen Y student, "24 hour access" means that computer laboratories, library materials, administrative services, web-sites and other electronic and physical resources are available on a 24/7, 365 days of the year basis.

Most of our students are very familiar with the use of technology before they come to university. As a recent article written by Beverley Head says,

"Undergraduates today arrive at university ... already technologically savvy and bristling with expectations. They have their own armoury of technology which they expect to seamlessly ... mesh with university systems."

This presents challenges for university information technology divisions. How does our IT division deal with the technologies students bring to university with an expectation that their systems will be able to interact with university systems? How can we balance IT security and providing access for students? And how do we help those students who do not have the advantages to which Head refers ?

Deakin is the largest Victorian provider of higher education to Indigenous students and one of the largest providers in Australia. We make lap top computers available to a large number of these students and provide them with training.

A group of Melbourne University researchers have found that the use of new technologies is not consistent across all students, and that there are differences, as you might expect, between disciplines – engineering and architecture students being the highest users of new technologies and arts students the lowest. They also found differences between international and domestic students; international students were found to use a wider range of technologies than their local counterparts.

Universities must assess which of the technologies can realistically and reliably be provided, which are appropriate for teaching and learning, and which are appropriate for our interactions with our students. Then they must provide the training to ensure that all students can use that technology.

Deakin Studies Online (DSO) is Deakin University's online teaching and learning environment which aims to enhance both on and off-campus learning. DSO uses online technologies to teach, administer and deliver course material. Every

subject has some DSO presence and in many cases subjects can be undertaken in what is referred to as “wholly on line” mode.

Generation Y expect to be able to seek answers from their fellow students. This is facilitated and moderated via DSO, but, again, lecturers need to negotiate a clear understanding of the parameters of their roles as moderators in relation to this.

For Generation Y, the mobile phone and the internet are not simply tools that aid daily lives; for Gen Y these are seamlessly woven into the fabric of their lives. DSO includes features such as “Respondus” which is a quiz development package that allows lecturers to create quizzes that can be published directly to students in their subjects and “Studymate” which is a study assistance activity development package that allows lecturers to create activities and games to support learning.

Members of Generation Y are able to sift large amounts of complex electronic information and they undertake much of their research ‘on-line’. Because of this, we have had to pay more attention to educating our students about plagiarism. Easy access to information on the internet makes the option of downloading unreferenced material almost irresistible. We have had to pay more attention to educating our students about the integrity of the material they access in this way. Consider the extraordinary rise in popularity of the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. For those from my generation, its very nature - which is characterised by the openness and ease of posting material to the Wikipedia site - makes it a less than accurate and reliable source of authoritative material. But it is the characteristics of openness and interactivity that make the site popular with Gen Y. It provides easy, accessible, short, sharp grabs of information that may not always be entirely accurate, but are usually very easy to understand.

Students at some universities have been said to have asserted that using the internet has meant completing assignments without ever having to visit the library. Interestingly, there has been no decrease in the use of our library at Deakin, but I suspect that this may be because, as we have a distance education background, we are willing to post books to our off-campus students.

The impact of being born into this wave of technological growth has not only had an impact on how members of Gen Y interact, it has also influenced the way they see the world.

This is the first generation to grow up perceiving itself as a part of a global whole – through email, the world wide web, and saturation of satellite television. Images of disasters, discoveries and youth culture from around the world are as familiar to them from television shows and music videos as if the events occurred in their own backyard. Whereas Baby Boomers and Generation X need to be told that they are part of the global world, Generation Y take this for granted. On the other hand, the things that most Baby Boomers and Generation X take for granted – lifelong relationships, continual employment and owning our own homes - have faded for Gen Y; this generation has grown accustomed to a world of uncertainty and impermanence.

You can see the influence of this in advertising. The ABC news commences with a picture of the globe – a globe is invariably an indication that the product is directed at Baby Boomers and Generation X. In contrast, the advertising methodology most likely to appeal to Generation Y is unstructured, graffiti like writing and material that appeals to them, now.

Generation Y do not like rigid rules; they do not like being told that we know what is best for them. Sally Nimon, who I mentioned earlier, has said that Generation Y:

“... is used to being catered to ... They will want – and indeed expect – to have input into their own educational decisions and are unlikely to accept that a situation is a given, simply because those older and wiser have deemed it so. At the very least it is likely that students will need to understand the point of what they are being asked to do, if they are to perceive it as being worth their while to invest the time and effort that is required. However this alone is unlikely to be perceived as sufficient and they may still feel the need to be able to exert their own influence. It is likely that solutions to this problem will lie in compromise.”

At Deakin we are very conscious of this in our course design; without compromising quality, we try to allow for flexibility in terms of moving from one degree program to another, we want to allow students to undertake a professional degree straight from school, but also to have access to a more general Science or Arts degree if they are not sure what they want to do. I was talking recently to one of our undergraduates who started Biomedical Science, after one year she moved to Nursing and she is now completing a Teaching degree.

The immediacy of communication through instant messaging and Google searches on the web gives rise to the impression that Gen Y have short attention spans and show a lack of interest in long term planning. These attributes coupled with Gen Y's strong preference for mobility has led some to suggest that members of this generation are unlikely to stay with any one employer for very long, particularly if they feel that employer is not meeting, or is unresponsive to, their immediate needs. This has implications for higher education, for what we need to do to ensure that Gen Y students commit to 3 or 4 years of undergraduate study and be prepared to continue on to further study. We need to consider how we structure our courses, how often we review their content and

how we are to provide advice and information to students wanting change and flexibility and expecting an instant response.

We need to spend time promulgating the immediate benefits of higher education, rather than concentrating on the benefits of a well paid career after study.

Indications are that if members of Gen Y believe they will gain personal fulfilment and satisfaction from their choice of a course of study, they are more inclined to continue. This is irrespective of the long term outcome. We are now emphasising the experiences that can be had along the way in a course of study – opportunities for travel, especially overseas, opportunities for work experience, opportunities to form networking groups and small teams, opportunities to access the latest laboratories or new technologies, opportunities to work or undertake research with high profile academics, or other incentives designed with Gen Y in mind.

The contention that Generation Y is not interested in long term planning is supported by their attitude to the contribution they make to the cost of their own education. The evidence suggests that young people are not price sensitive, at least as long as we have in place the HECS-Help and FEE-Help system, which provides loans which do not have to be repaid until the student reaches a certain income level.

The desire for, and expectation of, Gen Y students to have input into their own educational decisions is further reinforced by the increasing reliance many of our institutions place on seeking student feedback via surveys. At Deakin we survey students regularly, but we know that we must be vigilant in providing easily accessible and easily understood feedback to our students on any improvements to teaching or services that have been undertaken as a result of obtaining the

feedback. Our Gen Y students will not waste time providing input if they think their views are not being seriously taken into account.

Technological advances can be of great assistance here, in gaining both speedy feedback and in improving our engagement with Gen Y.

Associate Professor Roy Tasker at the University of Western Sydney is trialling the use of a small wireless device called a Student Response Unit – an SRU.

SRUs are essentially small wireless keypads, issued to each student at the beginning of a class. They are commonly referred to as “clickers” in the US and “zappers” in the UK. During the class, when a lecturer asks a question, each student presses the number or letter on their keypad that they believe corresponds to the correct answer. Their choice is detected by a USB receiver in the lecturer’s laptop using wireless technology. The information is automatically aggregated using a software plug-in within PowerPoint and then displayed as a histogram on a projector screen.

SRUs are said to increase levels of interaction and engagement in class. They also help lecturers get away from a situation in which a handful of students answer all of the questions, all of the time.

When students have been shown the distribution of answers via the histogram, they then undertake a period of peer learning where they are asked to turn to the person sitting next to them and convince them their answer is the right one; the same question is asked again and the new distribution of results, via the histogram, is displayed.

The key points I have raised about how members of Gen Y interact and the way they see the world have an impact on the way we deliver academic, administrative and student support services. The student experience must be:

- personalised;
- involve interactivity and experiential learning (in the broadest meaning of these words);
- provide greater accessibility to services and learning opportunities; and
- provide a sense of personal involvement and connectedness with other students and staff in the university community.

The services we provide must be:

- flexible;
- accessible;
- of high quality; and
- responsive to feedback on how to improve them.

We must give more consideration to:

- how and what we communicate to students – we need to adapt what we write to students to make it short, sharp and relevant and make them feel that it is personalised – it must speak to them, individually;
- how we embed technology in a way that is attractive to our students rather than the way we think it should be done; and
- how to customise our services – not one size fits all – within the stringent cost constraints most of us face.

Finally, let me say that this is not all negative.

While much of what I have said suggests that Gen Y is a very demanding group, a recent report of a survey of young Australians entitled - "What Young People are Thinking", found that 95 per cent of young people are satisfied with their life overall; half feel very satisfied; 88 per cent are confident that everything will "work out OK" for them in their working life and career in the years ahead; 86 per cent are confident they will be financially secure in the future and believe that they will achieve a standard of living as good as, or better than their parents. Overall these young people express very high levels of satisfaction with study, the value of their study to their working lives and high levels of satisfaction overall with their lecturers and teachers.

So I am pleased to say that we need to add "optimism" and "confidence in a bright future" to the hallmarks of Gen Y. I am sure that, like me, you have found that this makes it a pleasure to work in partnership with them.

Thank you.