

Book Review – Higher Education in an Era of Digital Competition: Choices and Challenges

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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Review: Higher Education in an Era of Digital Competition: Choices and Challenges

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Donald Hanna describes his book as a framework for viewing digital technologies in the global higher education sector rather than a book about technology. This is how it must be considered, as it focuses primarily on the changes required of traditional American universities as they respond to the possibilities provided by new digital technologies, rather than detailing these technological innovations. The book develops five main themes which Hanna describes as the emergence of a global learning society, the possibilities and challenges of new technologies and the response to this change in the higher education sector, with attention to issues such as changing patterns of learning and leadership in this global environment. The term “global” is limited here in its application mainly to the North American scene with a few additional comparative perspectives added from British writers. However, as many of the issues covered in the book are being dealt with in other countries, it has appeal for a wider audience. It will make a good text for programs that focus on learning in the tertiary sector and will be a useful compendium for institutional administrators and policy makers in North America who are not familiar with the history and very current issues of adapting to a digital age.

It begins with a comprehensive overview of the changes that universities in the United States are facing, as economic and demographic changes to society combine with the potential of new technologies to provide a demand for a more flexible and technologically mediated mode of lifelong learning. Issues are discussed within a useful review of research and writing in this field though again from an American perspective only. In the first chapters Hanna sets the university context well and gives a good discussion of the changes in university pedagogy that have been encouraged and facilitated by the digital medium of the Internet, such as collaborative and cooperative learning and problem-based learning. Chris Dede, writing next about technological possibilities in the next decade and providing futuristic scenarios, supports Hanna’s stance on the need for pedagogical change, claiming lecture-based traditional universities won’t satisfy a generation raised on computer mediated learning. His message about knowledge networking and distributed learning moving beyond an information superhighway concept of the Internet, is one administrators should heed as he concludes that it will not be the technical development of new technologies that will make the most difference in the changing university, but the professional development of educators and learners.

Hanna goes on to discuss a range of new models of university organization to

meet changing demands and, as he does in each of his chapters, provides a brief historical context. He reviews the model of extended traditional universities and analyses varying strategies for market response which they have developed, from program and institutional replication through remote campuses, to program diversification and niche marketing, giving examples of each response. He cites comparison of the costs of on campus lecture models of teaching to technology mediated programs and identifies the need for leadership which embraces change to be developed at the faculty level rather than centrally in the institution for it have most effect.

In his discussion of distance education and technology-based universities Hanna looks beyond the United States for the first time and provides a useful discussion of some larger distance universities from the UK Open University and Asian distance providers to a recent and well informed analysis of Athabasca University's programs. He also provides case studies of alternative institutional models already in existence, from profit making institutions to corporate universities, while also discussing the move to university-corporation partnerships. Though Hanna finds no examples of truly global universities he sees these case studies as future possibilities for a global model.

Hanna's associate authors take up the many issues that a new university model must address. Janet Poley discusses characteristics of effective leaders who utilize information technology in an age of knowledge as well as superficially addressing the issues of access and equity both in developing nations with limited technological capability and in the role of women in this field. John Tallman clarifies the issues of intellectual property and copyright and Donald Olcott, Jr. discusses "technoethic" issues from privacy and quality issues in learning online to designing culturally sensitive content and providing truthful advertising. He also writes with Kathy Schmidt on redefining faculty policies and processes to fit academics who must learn to design programs for a digital age, and they provide an integrated technology systems design which analyses appropriate technologies for relevant purposes. Gary Brown considers the way the Web should expand assessment of learning and Donald Hanna concludes by summarizing the main considerations that institutions must face as they make choices about change. His final list of strategic challenges is a good checklist for institutions entering the era of digital competition (familiar strategies to many Australian universities which makes me hopeful that we're already ahead of the competition).

This book gives a substantial overview of the new university from an American perspective but, given its title, it seems surprising that it hasn't considered the global competition already available digitally. It is unfortunate that the book has ignored some substantial work including Diana Laurillard's, *Rethinking University Teaching: A Framework for the Effective use of Educational Technology*, a book that has influenced university thinking worldwide since it was published in 1993 (New York: Routledge). It leaves the reader with a need to balance their perspectives by consulting recent comparative texts such as the edited

collection from Terry Evans and Daryl Nation, *Changing University Teaching: Reflections on Creating Educational Technologies* (2000, London: Kogan Page) which gathers writers from many countries to look at similar issues from a more global perspective.

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