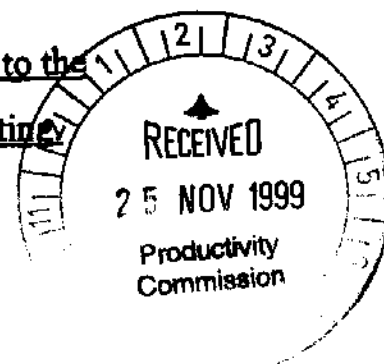


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Response by The University of Southern Queensland to the  
Productivity Commission's draft report on broadcasting



Subject: Introduction of Digital Television

Author: USQ Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Swannell

- [1] The right of all Australians to access education and convenient life-long learning opportunities that mesh with their lifestyles and work requirements will be tested by Federal Cabinet when it next meets to discuss the introduction of digital television and the standard of digital television Australian consumers will receive. Communications Minister, Senator Alston, says the Government remains flexible about the options but there are indications that the upper end of high definition TV is being favoured. At risk is the unique opportunity for Australians to use the full potential of digital TV to access not only entertainment but also a range of interactive services including 'cradle to grave' education ... all in the comfort of the family home.
- [2] It is no surprise that most of the existing television networks favour the high level HDTV standard which can deliver optimal wide-screen cinema quality that will enhance the viewing experience of entertainment-based programs of the kind currently broadcast on free to air and cable TV. However, HDTV television sets will be expensive and this standard of digital television is likely to lead to the limiting of uses other than traditional programming. The highest standard also requires most of the available digital broadcast spectrum be licensed to the existing TV stations and effectively rules out any new entrants.
- [3] On the other hand, if the Government does not move to set a single highest level HDTV standard but allows broadcasters and datacasters to use a variety of digital broadcasting standards, this would allow for multi-channelling including interactive datacasting, accessible through existing television sets. Australians would then be provided with a broad and inexpensive choice for news, entertainment and sports as well as the interactive delivery of education, training and government services. There is no other country that is moving to set a single highest level HDTV transmission standard for digital TV and mandating the high price tag that this carries for their citizens to receive such transmissions.

- [4] As the Vice Chancellor of a university that has recently received special recognition for its on-campus and distance education programs<sup>1</sup>, I declare my interest in favouring digital television as a means of delivering interactive learning experiences at a distance. I urge the Commonwealth Government not to limit the opportunities of digital TV, and to allow a variety of digital broadcasting standards which best provide for the delivery of education and training services. Anything less could be regarded as a disservice to the people, especially to those living in regional and remote Australia. Increasingly, people look towards technology to assist in breaking down the tyranny of distance and providing opportunities for personal development "in their place, in their time, and in their style".
- [5] The unintended consequences of legislative changes, through the tightening of definitions or settling for a single inappropriate digital TV transmission standard, are real and avoidable. Appropriate digital broadcasting and datacasting usher in the day of households installed with a device capable of receiving and storing large amounts of digital broadband transmissions, whatever the transmission standard or source, that can then be displayed and interacted with on existing TV or telephone or hi-fi speakers or PC. Householders will have the ability to choose what (content) they want, when (time) they want it, and where (location) they want it.
- [6] The convergence of computer, telecommunications and media technologies will shape Australian society in the years to come. We can already watch TV programs on the PC, download videos over a telephone line, access whole encyclopedias without the need for books. We can take photographs without film, sending them to anyone or everyone on the Internet. It is not possible completely to define the types of interactive digital services that might be produced over the next few years. Attempts to regulate what might, or might not, be datacasting must not be allowed to cause barriers to those providers wishing to use the digital spectrum, and especially those delivering education and training. Australia should avoid a regulatory framework that produces negative impacts on the education of Australians, especially for those living in rural and remote locations.
- [7] It is essential that Australia's leading international off-shore educators can secure an increasing share of the highly competitive and fast growing global education and training market that is

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estimated, today, to exceed US\$600 billion annually. If Australia goes it alone with the highest level HDTV standard, what unintended restrictions will this place on our competitiveness in the global marketplace for education? This is an opportunity for Australia to be at the forefront of world developments, and to create new industries and employment growth.

(8) Ira Magaziner, former Policy Adviser to the US President for Policy Development, in the keynote address to the Enabling Australia Summit in April 1998, urged the Australian Government to support a "hands-off" approach to regulating the Internet, telecommunications and broadcasting, an agenda for keeping these domains as free from regulation, taxes and government control as possible. This is very sound advice, indeed.

Vice Chancellor USQ

Professor Peter Swannell

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<sup>1</sup> In July 1999, USQ was awarded the Institutional Prize of Excellence as the Best Dual Mode University in the world by the UN recognised International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) with 130 members world wide.