

IT Digest

Volume 2

Summary for March 2006

The Australian Thursday 2 March 2006

IT set for explosive growth in Asia

The IT sector in the Asia Pacific region is set to expand nearly twice as fast as its North American counterpart in the five years to 2009, driven by explosive growth in countries such as India. Asia's rising importance within the global technology industry and suggest more international companies will set up in the region to take advantage of the sector's superior growth.

The Australian Tuesday 7 March 2006

Tax to ponder offshore options

The Australian Taxation Office will consider using offshore programmers to overhauls its superannuation systems if workloads threaten it \$450 million Change Program deadlines. They may allow Change Program partner Accenture to use its offshore programming facilities for low-end "factory work" if demand spikes put pressure on work schedules. The decision would make the Tax Office the first Commonwealth department to use overseas programmers. Accenture's contract with the ATO does not allow it to send core programming work for the project offshore.

Centrelink gives vice to caller security issues

Centrelink is investigating the use of biometric speaker verification technology for identifying and managing its clients through call centres. Under a trial proposed by Centrelink, a pilot system will check the identity of clients calling into the agency using biometric voice verification technology. The caller will be asked a "secret question" as part of the authentication process, which then acts as a password. Apart from supplying the correct password, the system matches the client's voice against a record stored at Centrelink.

Digital mag for IT girls

A program has kicked off to encourage girls into IT and multimedia, and arrest the decline in their number studying IT at secondary school and university. The program, More bytes: Girls in IT, aims to engage girls from Year 8 to Year 10 in IT and multimedia by giving them the chance to network and use technology to express their culture. Project co-ordinator Helen McKernan said the program involved seven schools in Victoria and one in Western Australia. The project follows the fall in numbers of girls studying IT at tertiary and secondary level, said Ms McKernan, a senior research fellow in Swinburne University's institute for social research.

"There has been a decrease in the number of IT classes at school and at university," she said. Some schools that eight years back might have had two IT classes, might not have any now. Students just aren't choosing IT." Girls will work in groups to develop a project to be shared through an electronic magazine. They will create a brief documentary that they will digitally showcase at the Girls Multimedia Conference at Swinburne in May.

Slack corporate security opens security door to spyware

Up to a third of companies have adware or spyware taking information from their computer networks, according to a security audit by Fortinet. Most companies are ill equipped to deal with the increasing preference of virus writers for targeted attacks. Too many companies are more concerned about external risks when about 60 per cent of IT security incidents are perpetrated in-house. This can range from the innocent act of accidentally bringing a virus into the corporate network via a USB storage device or mobile phone to the vindictive one emailing sensitive internal data to a computer. Manufacturing and education also fare poorly. Education doesn't move very quickly. They have a security gateway but it is the students that create the risk. At one university recently his company found that students were conducting the latest phishing scam and had attacked the NASA site. At another university, which had three main mail servers, an audit found it to have 3500 mail servers.

The Australian Wednesday 8 March 2006



ARC gets tough on research rules

The Australian Research Council, which administers an annual \$540 million in grants, will begin the audits within three months after pilots at Monash and RMIT last year.

The reviews will assess whether universities and their researchers are complying with their ARC funding agreements, which stipulate how grants worth hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent.

The move comes as the University of Technology, Sydney investigates allegations of misconduct against three staff members in relation to ARC grants. "The university is treating the allegations seriously, and when the investigation is complete it will review recommendations and take necessary action," UTS said in a statement. Sydney's The Sunday Telegraph obtained internal audit documents that alleged three professors had falsified information to get research grants. Universities sign on to funding agreements with the ARC if they are successful in winning research grants. These stipulate how they use the funds and their obligations to inform the ARC if there are any changes to the way the money is spent. Research grants are partly covered by universities' own audit processes but this is the ARC's most concerted attempt yet to make sure institutions have proper systems to monitor grant spending.

"It's public money so I don't have a problem with having it [being] audited," said Margaret Sheil, deputy vice-chancellor, research at the University of Wollongong. Professor Sheil, who heads the group of deputy and pro vice-chancellors, research, said her university was told about the audits last year and that it was "not a major issue". The first audits are expected to begin in May or June, with four to six institutions to be reviewed this year. They include universities, research institutes, museums, CSIRO and any other recipients of ARC funds.

You've got mail and we want a reply now

EMAIL has brought down the ivory tower. No longer can academics exist on a higher, seemingly inaccessible plane, aloof from the day-to-day worries, real and imagined, of the student body. The electronic message system provides a direct conduit to an academic's office, and lecturers in particular are flooded with demands, questions and requests from their students at all times of the day and night.

As more fee-paying students populate the nation's campuses, teachers are becoming besieged by their so-called customers. And with lecturers' email addresses displayed prominently on web page biographies, they are seen as fair game.

"The expectation of students is that they be given the answers rather than to find them," says a senior maths lecturer from Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia who, like most academics contacted for this story, requests anonymity, citing confidentiality issues. "There is a demand to specify in great detail every item that needs to be done so they can make the decision: 'Do I need to do this for assessment?'"

But there are positives. UTS faculty of education lecturer Anne Bartlett-Bragg says many students in her classes are from non-English-speaking backgrounds and they struggle to make a point in class. "A lot of young Australian kids are pretty boisterous and that's very intimidating and [foreign students] are not going to ask me in class," she says. "They're shy; they're not going to stay back after class, but they send me an email and that gives me an opportunity to look after them and know if they're OK." Shy students who do not have confidence to speak out in class [will use email]," he says. "Such students often do not believe they can express themselves adequately or [think] that their questions are stupid. "Students are now our clients," one teacher says, "and they are frequently expecting increasing service and quick responses."

The Australian Monday 13 March 2006

Graduates lacking job skills

Universities and TAFE colleges are turning out graduates who are not job ready and have skills better suited to academic pursuits, warn leading Australian business groups. The Business Council of Australia accuses universities of stifling the "culture of entrepreneurship", producing graduates without adequate problem solving skills. The group, which represents the nation's 100 biggest companies, says this failure is choking creativity and limiting Australia's competitiveness in the global market. Courses and programs needed to be practice-based, relevant and appropriate for business innovation needs-rather than suiting particular academic interests and pursuits.

The Australian Tuesday 14 March 2006

\$1.3m for cheap RAM project

Griffith University has secured \$1.3 million from Australian venture capitalist Starfish Ventures to fund a spin off company with a view to commercialising next generation silicon carbide microchips. The University's patented non-volatile (NVRAM) technology will be further developed with the formation of the new company, Qs Semiconductor. The company's non-volatile memory will be high-density and low-cost, and will not wear out, making it suitable for a range of applications in the computer, handheld and electronic market.

Visas being rorted say ACS, ACTU

Workers from overseas have had a devastating effect on graduate employment in the IT sector. The long-stay work visas, know as 457 visas were being rorted by employers to reduce wages. According to a report commissioned by the ACS last year, 12,000 457 visa holders were working in the hi-tech sector in 2004- roughly equal to the number of ICT graduates trying to find work.

Joint effort on wheels of future

Telematics is shaping as a rapid growth industry. Telematics essentially combines computing and wireless technologies to send data over networks, but early GPS and other wireless devices are evolving into more sophisticated automated intelligence systems, including dynamic navigation. Local developers are hoping to jump into the global vehicle telematics market-expected to be worth \$US48 billion in 2010. Uniquely a prototype car linked into both external information systems supplying traffic, fuel and weather data, and the connected home network- allowing the driver to remotely turnoff house lights, turn up the heating or open the garage door.

Memory puzzle wins older players to games

Old-timers are keeping their brains sharp with a smash hit brain teaser from Nintendo. The ailing maker of Mario and Pokemon games has scored a smash hit by courting Japan's growing grey market with Brain Training for Adults: a number and puzzles game that Nintendo says stimulates the brain and wards off dementia. The brain training game has sold 3.34 million copies since its May 2005 launch.

The Australian Wednesday 15 March 2006

Deputies in new power play

A new layer of management is being introduced to universities with DVCs getting greater responsibility. A reshuffle at the top at the University of Sydney confirms a shift to US-style business managerialism at Australian universities in which a new layer of management, deputy vice-chancellors, wield unprecedented executive power. Sydney vice-chancellor Gavin Brown has appointed a layer of six deputies to handle the day to day running of the university. He is just one of 38 vice-chancellors now forced to focus on "visioning", "positioning" and getting money through the door in the highly competitive market environment created by the Nelson reforms. From next month Sydney will have deputy vice-chancellors in six portfolios: provost, chief financial officer, international, infrastructure, research and community.

Failures offered a repeat for free

Central Queensland University has offered students who failed a postgraduate exam the opportunity to repeat the course free of charge, after it was revealed those who marked the paper were less qualified than the students sitting the test. The offer came after a group of overseas postgraduate students for CQU's Melbourne and Sydney campuses threatened to go on a hunger strike when they failed a taxation law exam on material they said was not covered in their lecture notes.

Alarm over bogus degrees

Australia needs to be more vigilant against fake degrees following reports of "an exponential rise" in fraud in our No.2 student market, India. The global demand for credentials in digital technology and internet marketing have created more degree mills and an increase in fake, replica qualifications. Australia's top two markets for overseas students has worrying scores on corruption perceptions index published by Transparency International, an anti-corruption organisation. China and India both scored less than five out of a clean score of ten, suggesting serious levels of corruption.

The Australian Tuesday 21 March 2006

Canberra allows ATO to offshore

The government will not stop Australian Tax Office plans to send millions of dollars worth of programming work offshore. The Tax Office is expected to decide this week whether to let its technology partner Accenture send a large portion of programming work in its \$450 million Change Program to offshore facilities. The work was the equivalent of about 70 full-time programmers working for a year, although Accenture was proposing to use far more programmers over a shorter period to speed up the process. If the plan goes ahead the Tax department will become the first federal department to send hi-tech work to cheaper labour markets.

Consent dispute in health project

Mounting privacy and consent issues threaten to derail NSW Health's long awaited electronic Health records pilot due to start in the Hunter region.

Microsoft turns flamethrower on Sony at Xbox launch

Microsoft had used its early entry into the next-generation games console race to put the boot into rival Sony, saying it doesn't expect to see the Play Station 3 until March next year at the earliest- a claim hotly denied by Sony. Sony joined the war of words, saying Microsoft has made a mistake by overemphasizing the Xbox 360,s ability to link to a PC. When you look at what you have to do to maximize the Xbox it's very costly. A lot of people wouldn't have that kind of stuff set up at home. The lack of a Blu-ray DVD player would also hurt Xbox 360.

Housing slump is bad news for tech

The bursting of the housing bubble in most capital cities, together with economic uncertainties brought about by terrorism and natural disasters, will have a big impact on technology spending in the next five years. Consumer goods companies, retailers and banks may be forced to cut back IT spending.

The Australian Wednesday 22 March 2006

Missing students blow uni budgets

A drop-off in undergraduate demand has pitched another two regional universities into multimillion-dollar budget black holes. Stringent belt tightening measures, including job cuts, are almost certain to follow. Edith Cowan and James Cook this week are the latest universities to concede they cannot fill their student quotas and will have to hand back commonwealth funded places. Edith Cowan has abandoned its forecast of 8 per cent revenue growth while James Cook has had to hand back more than 500 places it could not fill, at a cost of \$5 million to \$10 million. At Edith Cowan, funding to faculties and service centres had been quarantined in an effort

Research council peer review process gets minister's nod

Federal Education, Science and Training Minister Julie Bishop has expressed strong support for the Australian Research Council and the system of peer review it uses to distribute \$540 million in research funds each year. She has also signaled she will not pursue the same controversial practice as her predecessor Brendan Nelson. Her view is that if the peer review process has the independence and integrity to ensure that it's robust, then she would see no need to second guess that process.

Men come second on attendance

Just turning up gives female students an edge over the men. Attendance has emerged as the best predictor of academic performance – better than more commonly studied influences such as intelligence and personality- in a pioneering British study. Among absent males, those with higher intelligence were the worst offenders, at odds with the theory that fear of academic demands keeps students away from seminars and workshops.

The Australian Tuesday 28 March 2006

Experts team up to streamline health standards

Standards Australia is forming a 'partnership subsidiary' to work with the National e-Health Transition Authority to fast-track new e-health standards. The peak health informatics committee IT-014 will now fit within a new division established to partner with industry and government to deliver relevant standards and customised, consensus based solutions through accelerated processes. IT-014 subcommittees and working groups include a wide range of health and informatics experts who volunteer their time to develop technical standards that will underpin new medical messaging and e-commerce transactions, tele-health, electronic health records and related security and authentication technologies.

The Australian Wednesday 29 March 2006

Bishop stalls on framework

The plan to introduce a national assessment system for research quality has stalled after federal Education Minister Julie Bishop announced yesterday she was setting up another advisory group to consider it. By delaying the introduction of the research quality framework following vigorous lobbying by interest groups including the Group Eight universities, Ms Bishop appears to have acknowledged that the path to suitable model will be long and difficult. Yesterday the Minister released the final advice of the RQF expert advisory group, which wound up in December after handing its final report to the Government. But she did not accept its advice to set up an RQF implementation group, opting instead to establish another advisory group to be led by chief scientist Jim Peacock. The group will provide advice on the next phase of the RQF process, particularly how the model, if adopted by the Government, could be most effectively implemented.

Bidding war for stars

Aggressive poaching to top researchers and bidding wars to retain them have begun ahead of the first national assessment of research, the research quality framework. Universities are trying to lure leading researchers with offers of expensive facilities, their own research centres, support staff and favorable work conditions where they do little or no teaching. One university had to match another institutions offer of \$200,000 in equipment when it tried to recruit a top academic.

Science redundancies hit UNSW

Staff in the University of NSW School of Chemistry and Physics were reeling yesterday as some lost their jobs and others waited to learn about their fates in a round of redundancies. Six of eighteen positions (four academic and two general) in chemistry were marked for closure.

The Australian Thursday 30 March 2006

Unis seen as entry factories

Many overseas students believe Australian universities are little more than “factories” producing permanent residency visas by offering cheap courses tailored to meet migration requirements. IT, accounting and engineering courses were among the most popular degrees for Indian students hoping to stay in Australia after their studies. “These factories were considered to be places that had little to do with education and much to do with migration”, the study, to be published in the Monash University journal *People and Place*, says. Those institutions with the highest quota of Indians were known as “PR factories”, where students could gain permanent residency after graduation. The study comes as the Howard Government considers changes to the skilled migration program that could result in new strict visa conditions for overseas students.