Introduction

How the political and societal landscapes in Australia changed during the twentieth century, and again in the early twenty-first century! They directly influenced the rise and decline of the type of distance education that was based, overtly, on the values of access and equity. Terry Evans and Peter Smith review the educational compromises underneath the New Right political agendas and the increasing commercialization of post-secondary education provision. Distance education was transformed, they write, “from a public good, serving those who were geographically or socially distanced from education, to a (quasi-)private enterprise geared to the engines of industry and commerce. This reconfiguration required turning public educational services into private or public educational enterprises and moving from supplier-driven services to consumer-driven products.” Add to this the confusions of changing terminology and you have to ask, how is all this unrest and fashionable discourse really helping adult learners?

Greville Rumble has very extensive experience in financial analyses of various forms of distance education. He begins his chapter unequivocally: “Flexible learning affects the cost of individual courses and may also seriously disrupt the cost structure of an institution, such that resources will need to be deployed in different ways.” From there, he lays out the cost-related factors that challenge institutional efforts toward labour-cost efficiencies and effective learning and teaching. The rise of online learning methods does not necessarily lead to reduced costs—indeed it may well increase them—so Greville points to the need for more attention, in cost terms, to Web 2.0 technologies as a way to “change the economics of online learning.” But the story does not end there. How do formalized institutional quality-assurance procedures fit with the informal collaborative activity that is buried inside individual online courses?

Melody Thompson and Laura Kearns use the image of “mastery” to frame their discussion of the ethical issues involved in making choices about who is served best by flexible-learning approaches and who,
ultimately, gains the most. “How do we decide,” they ask, “when deliberative compromise is appropriate and when, regardless of personal costs, we should stand firm and refuse to compromise?” They give no definitive answers but instead offer strategies (such as “clarify contextual ambiguities”) that we can use to interrogate workplace activities and develop appropriate ethical responses. Melody and Laura then examine six typical teaching practices and their ethical implications. However we choose to define ethical mastery, it certainly must be better than exerting power and control, however benign, over others.