

## **Preface**

Following the success of the first ‘Virtual Learning and Higher Education’ conference held at Mansfield College Oxford in 2002 and the subsequent edited volume, it was felt that the specific theme of Virtuality and Education was of such import that there was need for a conference focussing singularly on it. As a result a conference was held the following year at the same venue. A highly intellectual debate around the presented papers ensued at the Conference supplemented afterwards by an on-going debate amongst delegates. Indeed these communications continued late into 2004. I believe this edited book gives the reader an accurate summary both of the 2003 conference and the subsequent communications which resulted in refinements of the papers. Perhaps my abiding memory will be how delegates from so many different backgrounds and institutions clearly had very similar experiences of Virtuality and Education. In particular it was universal that whilst virtuality was already a significant factor in our institutions there was a surprisingly lack of thought going into what these systems look like or rather what type of education virtual systems most suits and how to gain a well integrated and efficacious structures. This consistency is reflected across the chapters of this book.

In Chapter One of this volume, our keynote speaker Mark Stiles examines the issues of ‘embedding’ E-learning in a UK University. He considers E-learning to be embedded into an institution when all policies, procedures, roles and responsibilities pertaining to its use are fully integrated within it. Dr Stiles argues that E-learning is part of the culture of the institution and both management and administrative practice needs to be aligned to its use.

In Chapter Two Adrian Bromage analyses data from a UK University to explore the relationship between how they use a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and the perceived benefits. Dr Bromage considers his data from deep, strategic and surface forms of learning and produces some very persuasive conclusions.

In Chapter Three Simon Bates and Judy Hardy provide a general evaluation of a particular E-learning strategy. It utilises data from E-learning courseware from a UK University. The chapter uses the concept of a learner profile based on students' previous usage of the online resources together with a range of other data.

In Chapter Four Justin Macklin and Audrey Blenkarn examine a distance learning programme based in a UK University. The chapter provides insights into the educational, professional and technical issues arising as a result of developing distance learning development and implementation. They explore the background issues surrounding intensive care nursing education: the difficulties in delivering a hands-on clinical

course at a distance; the curriculum design; the technical structure of the VLE and the evaluation of the course.

In Chapter Five David Catterick reports on a collaborative project between a UK and Australian university of Sydney designed to test the validity some issues and hypotheses pertaining to on-line learning programmes. The chapter also considers how the results of this project might go some way to informing student support considerations.

In Chapter Six William Bostock examines prospects for the 'paperless' University. The chapter outlines how strides towards such an institution have already been made. In particular Dr Bostock considers the paperless thesis by assessing the challenge this concept presents to universities, academics and thesis writers, and reviews progress in its implementation.

In Chapter Seven Loykie Lominé addresses the issues for those individuals who are new to online instruction. It identifies the professional challenges and pedagogical opportunities pertaining to virtuality in higher education. In line with the topic theme, the chapter does not follow the traditional form of academic papers. Instead it is designed as a series of messages posted onto an online discussion board. In both form and content the chapter provides special emphasis on the potentially creative nature of e-teaching.

In Chapter Eight Peter Williams seeks to provide contextual and internal analyses of E-learning as an initial stage in the process of creating a frame of reference that can be used to determine what types of E-learning suits the context in which it is being applied. Boundaries of E-learning are examined and an overview is made of ways in which it is employed at higher education level within private, corporate and state-funded systems. Earlier conceptual models for E-learning are examined and a model is proposed and assessed comprising four dimensions of virtual space: course utility, study flexibility, delivery technology and learning paradigm.

In Chapter Nine Jenny Prior examines the main reasons behind developing a computer aided learning (CAL) package for a midwifery curriculum within a UK university. Furthermore Dr Prior considers the subsequent development of the CAL package and evaluates its implementation.

In Chapter Ten Godfried Williams and Hossein Jahankhani discuss the security implications of virtual learning (VL) as a form of E-learning. It is the belief of Drs Williams and Jahankhani that VL and security is a much ignored but significant consideration when selecting and using E-learning. In particular they examine the authentication issues and methods appropriate for ensuring the integrity, confidentiality and availability of resources that supports e-learners, VL systems and tools.

In Chapter Eleven Lynda R. Ross, Peter Holt and Julia Johnson report on an on-going project, at Canada's Athabasca University examining and analyzing the under-representation of females in computer science degree courses. Based on data from some of the women students the authors suggest some potential remedies for this globally all too common condition.

I am grateful to all the contributors of both this book and the 2003 Oxford Conference as well as the many who contributed to the subsequent discussions. As ever I am extremely grateful to the Series Editor Rob Fisher for being generally so helpful and supportive. In addition I owe an enormous debt to my co-editor, Tuan Hoang Nguyen for his extraordinary technical talents and fast turnaround of my large number of questions and requests.

This book is dedicated to my extraordinary wife, Margaret and our wonderful children, Benjamin, Rachel and Gabriella.

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