

## DE Learning and Teaching

A central online agency could support professionals engaged in distance education across the Australian tertiary education sector by providing a central resource for best practice methods, theories, systems, and structures to facilitate all forms of learning and teaching. The Australian distance education environment, particularly within the tertiary education sector, is rapidly expanding to meet a student body that is increasingly non-metropolitan, technologically conscious, internet connected, older, and balancing study with full-time employment. Given this changing demographic, it is increasingly recognised that distance education modes are a good way of attracting good quality students who may otherwise be unable, or unwilling, to participate in more traditional modes of delivery (Mir and Rahaman, p. 40). To meet the new demands and requirements of this new and changing student body, tertiary educators must be able to provide new methods and systems of distance education for external students whilst still achieving similar outcomes to that achieved in the traditional modes of delivery designed for internal students.

Mir and Rahaman argue, for example, that internal students have a range of advantages over external students, and subsequently perform better in academic assessment tasks (Mir and Rahaman, pp. 41, 46). Internal students receive immediate, personal contact between learner and teacher, whereas external students have delayed contact, internal students learn in an established education-based environment, whereas external students often learn in environments designed for other purposes (eg: online chat forums and discussion threads), and internal students receive a high degree of evaluation and feedback, whereas external students receive a comparatively low degree of evaluation and feedback (Mir and Rahaman, p. 41). Distance education providers need to ensure that are familiar with these differences, and address the difficulties and circumstances faced by external students. Primarily, educators need to ensure that they are not sacrificing educational quality when translating tertiary education programs to a distance education format for external students.

One way tertiary institutions are attempting to meet the needs of external students is by adopting increasingly advanced technological tools to assist in online course delivery (Cameron 2005, p. 1). Technological innovations are often seen as user-friendly, and within the tertiary education sector technologies have promised greater personalisation and learning productivity (Laurillard 2007 [e-Teaching Leadership, p. 1]). However, without careful planning the changes that new technologies bring can place increased pressures on tertiary educators and, far from reducing academic workloads, can actually create further complexities as educators wrestle with new and constantly changing systems and protocols (Tynan, Lee, Barnes 2008 [e-teaching p. 4]).

Technological innovations, far from 'speeding up' the educational process, have considerably slowed things down. Whereas a tutor could guide a group of 14 internal students in the exchange of ideas and arguments in a one hour tutorial, that same tutor often now needs to wait for those 14 students to post individual ideas one at a time on a discussion thread, whenever it is appropriate for the student. Students can directly respond to discussion thread postings, and still challenge each other, but the time

required to do so is far longer than one hour, and there is less scope for the tutor to be able to 'guide' a flowing conversation.

The technologies involved in distance education are improving at such a rapid pace that older technologies, and the systems and practices employed in association, are becoming obsolete at a far greater pace than ever before. In 2001, Visser argued that,

The pace at which the environment with which we interact changes has overtaken the rhythm set by the approximately 20-year time interval separating the human generations. This has profound implications for the ways in which members of the human species must prepare themselves for life and maintain their preparedness throughout life as well as for the role a previous generation can play in preparing the conditions of learning for the next one. That latter role has become greatly diminished in one respect: It is no longer appropriate for the older generation to tell the younger generation what it should learn. *Everyone, at any age, is in need of learning, and continuous development of the capacity to learn has become more important than the learning of specific competencies in the early stages of life* (Visser 2001, p. 1, italics and bold in original).

Huijser, Bedford, and Bull extended on this argument,

During the past 30 years, there has been rapid, profound, and continuing changes in the types of workplace knowledge and skills demanded by Australian industries, and in the means by which people can acquire the needed knowledge and skills. These changes have necessitated a continual updating of such knowledge and skills in order for people to remain or become productive members of Australian society. For those who want to gain employment or remain in employment, the ongoing changes of the means by which knowledge and skills can be acquired, necessitates a continuing process of 'learning how to learn' in contemporary Australian society. 'Learning how to learn' in contemporary Australian society involves learning how to make effective use of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), as these technologies are now the major means by which up-to-date information relating to employment is made available to the general public (Huijser, Bedford, and Bull 2008, p. 7).

As changes occur in technological trends and 'cultures of learning', students and staff both need to be able to adapt to changing environments. In some cases, a technology-based educational system may become obsolete before it is even fully implemented within a tertiary education system. In other cases, multiple competing technologies within a single institution may hamper integration and synchronisation with the existing systems and protocols. Multiple technologies require multiple levels of knowledge and understanding to operate, and, when things go wrong, multiple levels of support to find solutions. The 'culture of learning' has clearly changed, and continues to change rapidly, as technological trends transform.

As these cultures change, educators not only need to adapt to the new modes of delivery, but must also adapt to the new pedagogical practices involved in these modes. Laurillard argued that the tertiary education sector:

is being forced to change, and the pressures wrought upon it have nothing to do with traditions and values. Instead the pressure is for reduced costs, for greater scale and scope, and for innovation through technology... Academics are going on courses on management training and marketing methods. Reform of an education system might progress faster if they went on courses on how to teach better (Laurillard p. 3 [e-teaching p. 4]).

In recognition of these growing issues, DEHub could be established as the first contact for these educators to be able to access, understand, and implement the 'world's best' practises. For educational professionals already working within a distance education environment, DEHub could provide updates on the latest pedagogical theories and technological tools. For educational professionals working in a distance education environment for the first time, DEHub could assist in providing directions and resources for setting up programs, courses, units, and associated facilities.

DEHub could facilitate a wide range of distance education learning and teaching alternatives. Experts from around the world will be invited to attend a DEHub colloquium in 2010 to ascertain best practises. A subsequent DEHub conference will invite the broader academic community to review and contribute to DEHub's core functions and approaches. Throughout these processes, DEHub could seek to identify, accommodate, and facilitate the diverse requirements and strategic interests of Australian tertiary education institutions.

DEHub could position itself to serve as a central online agency of distance education expertise for the Australian tertiary education sector. It may steer towards supporting an international online community to enable patrons to share and support best practices in distance education, whilst also reducing duplication, overlap, and wasted resources across the sector. It has the potential to help tertiary educators to manage their academic workloads by providing easy to access, easy to understand, and easy to implement resources to meet their particular needs within their respective institutions. It could also help distance education students by enabling tertiary institutions to provide the world's best distance education systems on offer and ensuring teaching staff are comfortable and capable with their roles and duties. Finally, it can help the Australian tertiary institutions by ensuring that the systems implemented suitably conform to the broader strategic interests of the institution.