Chapter 5
Technology Enhanced Distance Learning Utilising Sakai CLE and Adobe Connect Pro

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ABSTRACT

On-line environments have been incorporated in the Distance learning programmes of the International Equine Institute (IEI) in order to address concerns about streamlining assessment turn-around, distance student attendance at tutorials, providing more detailed and quicker assignment feedback, student peer interaction, student to tutor[1] interaction and, of course, student support. The overriding concern was to provide a more flexible, active learning environment to develop and enhance learning opportunities while, concurrently, integrating more closely the learning activities of the student with the University of Limerick (UL) community. The impetus, therefore, was to make studies convenient and attractive to the location of the distance student, while maintaining educational quality through the provision of pedagogical innovations and at the same time providing a social and interactive environment to support the distance student. In so doing, the IEI uses the collaborative learning environment (CLE) Sakai (www.Sakaiproject.org) to support the distance student and also utilises Adobe Connect Pro™ to deliver on-line synchronous desktop-to-desktop tutorials. This chapter outlines aspects drawn from our experiences with the on-line support and delivery of distance learning programmes. Throughout, various recommendations on enhancing the experiences for students are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

The use of on-line technologies[2] has changed contemporary education in ways that were not imaginable in the past. The impact on higher education, and most especially distance learning, has become significant (Kingsley et al., 2009; Spector, 2001). According to Bennett et al., (2004) "Advancements in on-line technologies have facilitated a convergence of distance and campus-based learning". This phenomenon has progressed (Bennett et al.,

2004) to such an extent that programmes offering courses through distance learning have begun involving a mix of reduced face-to-face classes and greater on-line interaction (Lockyer et al., 2006), including on-line access to course materials, on-line virtual tutorials, and collaborative learning environments (CLE), to mention just a few of the many flexible on-line technologies currently available (Concannon et al., 2005).

Universities are also now required to cater to the lifelong learning market by offering greater flexibility in learning opportunities (Robins et al., 1999) as cited in (Eynon, 2008). As a result, flexible on-line learning technologies are becoming widely used in a response to the differing needs of students. Effective integration of these technologies into higher education is becoming an essential proficiency for tutors (Ala-Mutka et al., 2009), especially for those involved in distance learning. Expertise in the use of the technology and competencies in the various learning elements and pedagogy, and a range of social interaction skills, have become necessary to effectively implement and, subsequently, integrate the technology enhanced learning (TEL) into the design of curricula.

The IEI, established in 1993, is part of the Department of Life Sciences in the Faculty of Science and Engineering at the University of Limerick, Ireland. The IEI coordinates the distance learning delivery of Honours Certificate and Diploma in Science (Equine Science) programmes. For further information, see the edited transcription of questions and answers (2009) administered by the IEI to tutors on its programmes (Appendix 1).

Objectives

The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Discuss the background to the integration of on-line technologies into the IEI programmes

- Evaluate the integration of on-line technologies into the programmes in the context of more traditional learning opportunities and through this, discuss issues, problems and controversies encountered by the IEI
- Discuss solutions and recommendations established by the IEI through their experiences of using on-line technologies on the distance learning programmes

Background

The concept of lifelong learning has created a greater focus on the provision of open and flexible learning opportunities developed to accommodate the very many people who were unable to commit themselves to full-time education. The Open University, UK enrolled its first students in 1971 and Oscail, based at Dublin City University, begun enrolling distance learning students in 1982. Other institutions across the world, some for many years prior to the 70's and 80's, were also in the business of offering open and distance learning programmes. Increasing numbers of students were looking to access education and training opportunities through use of on-line technologies. Eynon (2008) confirms this logic in universities outside of Ireland. As a result of these initiatives, and based on recognition of a growing demand from potential students and current faculty for wider and more flexible access to programmes, the University of Limerick commissioned a collaborative learning environment (CLE), called Sulis which is based on the SAKAI CLE framework. This CLE reflects the "dual mode package" concept advocated by Enyon, (2008) which caters to students both on and off campus. The Equine Science distance learning initiative, at the University of Limerick, relied on TopClass CLE technology to support delivery of its programmes, until the adoption of the newly commissioned Sulis CLE in 2007.

The need for the utilisation of on-line technologies on the Equine Science distance learning pro-

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