

## GUEST EDITORIAL

**Steve WHEELER**  
**University of Plymouth,**  
**THE UNITED KINGDOM**  
[S.Wheeler@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:S.Wheeler@plymouth.ac.uk)

### Dear TOJDE Readers

Welcome to this special issue of the Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, in which we focus largely on distance education research and practice within the newly enlarged European Union. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2004, ten new countries were admitted to the EU, increasing the number to 25 member states, ensuring that the EU is now set to become the largest and most influential economy on the planet. This is both an exciting and daunting time for all those who live in the EU.

The implications for enlargement in distance education terms may be profound, not least in terms of the amount of transnational collaboration that could be instigated. Pan-European collaboration has existed for a long time, with organisations such as the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN), European Association for Research into Learning and Instruction (EARLI) and the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) active across the continent. Lowering of borders between EU member states implies that partnerships between nation states should be easier to establish, and that the economic, political and social issues impacting upon distance education may be less problematic to manage. However, the case is probably less clear cut than this, and we must wait to see how an enlarged and expanded Europe will enable educators to develop and exploit its new status in terms of distance education development.

Distance education seems to have been the preserve of large area nations such as Canada, Australia, South Africa and the USA, and indeed much of the early empirical research to emerge came from these countries. Europe was fragmented, and its countries relatively small in size, so that distance education was assumed to be less expedient. However, the EU now covers a vast geographical area, and is continuing to expand with further candidates, including Turkey, knocking on the door for admission. Distance education is now more expedient than ever, with Europe poised to be a hot bed of research into electronic forms of education and training in the next few years. Distance is not an issue now that technology is bridging the gap between teachers and their students. The issues that remain are to be found lodged within the social, psychological, political and economic fabrics of our society.

The papers selected for inclusion in this issue may provide a keener insight into some of the above issues. Embedded within a European culture of practice, each paper will provide a focus on what I consider to be key areas of development within the profile of European distance education. In this special issue contains nine articles under my patronage.

The first paper was authored by Judith Hurst and Susannah Quinsee who are at the City University, London, England. This is the first of two papers they have submitted for this special issue and the focus is on a somewhat neglected area of distance education – nursing and clinical practice. Hurst and Quinsee examine a blended learning solution for the education of practitioners working in the care of renal patients. They evaluate the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE) and its impact upon the continuing professional development and education of a group of clinical practitioners. The authors argue that although students may be at a distance, they need not be distant students, as with well founded and sensitive tutorial support, the distance can be obviated.

The second article, written by Coskun Bayrak and Eren Kesim of Anadolu University, Eskisehir, Turkey, considers the economic basis of distance education from a Turkish

perspective. Using data from recent program delivery, Bayrak and Kesim analyse the cost benefits of provision and offer the reader a realistic and practical mathematical formula for measuring the long term financial risks and benefits of distance education courses. Turkey is poised with the potential to become a new member state in the next phase of European Union expansion, so the above paper provides an apposite contribution to the debate on costs benefits analysis of distance education provision for undergraduate students.

The third paper in this special issue is provided by Kelly Carey of West Valley College, in Saratoga, California, USA and Stanko Blatnik who is director of the Institute for Symbolic Analysis and Development of Information Technologies at Velenje, Slovenia. It is especially pleasing to publish a paper from one of the newest member states of the EU, and as Slovenia emerges from its troubled past and its history of ties with Yugoslavia and the Soviet Bloc, it is perhaps time to consider how this budding nation aims to exploit distance education in its quest to provide world class educational experiences for its populace. The emphasis is on economic regeneration through training, and Carey and Blatnik are candid in their views on the role of e-learning as a route to achieving such an outcome in a country emerging from the aftermath of an ethnic war.

The fourth paper in this issue of TOJDE is written by Carlos Machado of the Free University of Brussels, Belgium and Kaye Thompson of Strathclyde University, Glasgow, in Scotland, examines the use of open source software and poses several pertinent questions about how and why it is becoming such a widespread phenomenon in distance learning. The authors suggest that the openness and freedom embodied by the Internet has created a climate of adoption, and this in turn is underpinned by pedagogical, technological, economic and philosophical issues.

The fifth paper in this European section revisits clinical practice and professional nurse education and was authored by Susannah Quinsee and Judith Hurst at the City University in London. In this paper, the authors dwell on issues of learner support and examine a number of key issues. They draw on the work of Salmon, Palloff and Pratt and others to negotiate learning communities, e-moderating and the role of the e-tutor in distance learning. Quinsee and Hurst conclude by offering a range of best practice guidelines including a clear structuring the online environment and course materials, channelling of resources and coherent organisation of tutor support to create a comprehensive support strategy.

Scott Walker's article along with me and Shannon AMIOTTE's paper as both deal with issues associated with the US and how this can be applied to EU strategies.

So, the sixth article is entitled as "Objective Evaluation in an Online Geographic Information System Certificate Program", written by Scott L. Walker, from Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, USA. His paper outlines an evaluation of a departmental distance-education program. The evaluation utilized several methods that strived to inject objectivity in evaluation and subsequent decision-making.

Seventh article is "The Death of Distance: Documenting the South Dakota Distance Learning Project" which written by me and Shannon AMIOTTE from Department for Education and Cultural Affairs, State of South Dakota, USA. Our paper documents some of the major findings of a three year research project to study the establishment of a digital learning network across the US state of South Dakota. The authors worked on a major evaluation project between 2002-2003 to measure the success rate of the new technology based learning approaches, and the extent to which the 'death of distance' could be achieved and the 'tyranny of distance' overcome. Surveys and interviews with key instructors and administrators across the state were conducted, which yielded a rich vein of data. In this paper, the authors document the broader effects that the introduction of the technical infrastructure has had on the general population of South Dakota.

The eighth article arrived from Turkey. It designs on application of distance education in Turkey. An article is entitled "Preparing for the European Language Portfolio: Internet connections" written by Philip Glover, Ismail Hakkı MIRICI from Akdeniz University and Mualla Bilgin AKSU, Inonu University, Faculty of Education, TURKEY. Their paper indicates the uses of internet to look at how the ELP has been implemented in different settings and to suggest how the ELP may be approached. The paper introduces a small-scale case study of ELP pilot implementation in a university preparatory school. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is a tool for developing learner responsibility and autonomy through reflection and self-awareness. The ELP is based on the Common European Framework (CEF) Reference Levels that enable learners to describe what they can do in different languages. The CEF is a Council of Europe initiative aimed at improving the learning of foreign languages.

The ninth and latest article is written by Res. Ass. Erman YUKSELTURK from Middle East Technical University, Turkey, on the subject which entitled as "Online Information Technologies Certificate Program" In this study, author indicates that Information Technologies Certificate Program which is based on synchronous and asynchronous communication methods over the Internet offered by cooperation of Middle East Technical University, Computer Engineering Department and Continuing Education Centre were examined. This online certificate program started in May 1998 and it is still active. The program includes eight fundamental courses of Computer Engineering Department and comprised of four semesters lasting totally nine months. The main aim of this program is to train the participants in IT field to meet demand in the field of computer technologies in Turkey. As a conclusion, the properties of this program were discussed in a detailed way.

As being the guest editor, I am very grateful to the contributing authors to this special theme issue of TOJDE; without them the issue would not have been possible.

Steve Wheeler  
Plymouth  
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