

From the Guest Editors

Mr. FONS NOUWENS
Central Queensland University
Rockhampton-AUSTRALIA
f.nouwens@cqu.edu.au

Dr. ZEYNEP ERDINC
Anadolu University
Eskisehir-TURKEY
zerdinc@anadolu.edu.tr

Dr. PATRICK ALAN DANAHER
Central Queensland University
Rockhampton-AUSTRALIA
p.danaher@cqu.edu.au

As Professor Dr. Ugur Demiray has written in his companion text to this guest editors' introduction, this is TOJDE's first guest-edited special theme issue. We are privileged and delighted to have taken on the role of facilitating this issue.

The issue is entitled *Evaluation in Open and Distance Education: Retrospects and Prospects*. In a rapidly changing educational environment, efficacious environment is critical to the success of institutions, educators and learners. Today education faces a 'triple challenge' –to provide access to education, to improve quality and to improve efficiency (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1996)– and to do this in a complex and changing world. Aspects of the developing complexity of education include:

- increasing dependence on information and communication technologies;
- differences in the quality of service among rural, regional and metropolitan areas;
- a consideration of social and cultural differences in educational responsiveness;
- changes in educational needs brought about by changes in workplace and lifestyle;
- globalisation;
- the growth of the 'knowledge economy';
- pressures for increased accountability and bureaucratisation of quality.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, evaluation always involves judgments about the merit or worth of something (Worthen, Sanders & Fitzpatrick, 1997). In times of rapid change, such judgments must be made frequently. This theme issue has brought together articles that encourage policy makers, practitioners and researchers to reflect upon evaluation practices generally and their own practice in particular.

Another crucial dimension of this reflection is encapsulated in the theme issue's subtitle: "Retrospects and Prospects". In different ways, each article in the issue engages with previous and contemporary assumptions about evaluation and makes suggestions for likely future scenarios for the ongoing reconceptualisation and implementation of evaluation to take account of the multiple changes identified above.

Professor Dr. Demiray's companion text has outlined the process whereby the idea for the theme issue was mooted and subsequently became a reality. It is appropriate here to note that, in soliciting articles from colleagues, we adhered to the following dates:

- **15 March 2004:** due date for submission of article abstracts;
- **3 May 2004:** due date for submission of articles to guest editors;
- **24 May to 2 June 2004:** submission of initially edited articles for anonymous refereeing.

Each article in the issue has therefore been read carefully by at least one and in most cases two guest editors; by two anonymous referees; and by the journal's Editor-in-Chief. This process has maximised the quality and rigour of the published articles.

The first article in the issue, by Julie Bradshaw and Leone Hinton from Central Queensland University, Australia, is entitled "Benefits of an Online Discussion List in a Traditional Distance Education Course". It interrogates the utility of an online, asynchronous discussion list in promoting "academic discourse" and "attitudinal change" among undergraduate nursing students about recreational drug use. The authors deploy a five-phase content analysis of students' responses to the list to argue for important commonalities between the list and a constructivist learning model that enabled considerable higher order thinking by students.

The second article, by Jason Howarth, John Messing and Irfan Altas from Charles Sturt University, Australia, is entitled "Delivering Online Examinations: A Case Study". It examines Internet Based Testing (IBT) as a more flexible means of administering examinations to students enrolled in the university's Industry Masters degree. The authors interweave pedagogical and technological issues in their evaluation of IBT's effectiveness to highlight both the positive outcomes and those that need to be addressed in future iterations of the process.

The third article, by Daniel Teghe and Bruce Allen Knight from Central Queensland University, Australia, is entitled "Productivist Education vs. Contextual Learning: Evaluation and the Place of 'Flexibility' in Discourses of Online Education Systems". The authors assert that "productivist education systems can be perpetuated through online educational technologies". On the basis of a distinction between "productivist education" and "contextual learning", the authors draw explicit links between the design and outcomes of evaluation processes on the one hand and issues of ideology and power on the other.

The fourth article, by Luisa D. Mariano and Nikki Philline C. De La Rosa from the University of the Philippines Open University, is entitled "Beyond an Institutionalised Learning Environment: Fostering Interactions and Learning Using Synchronous and Asynchronous Messaging Systems". It considers the use of such messaging systems in linking students with the university's Integrated Virtual Learning Environment. The authors draw from students' experiences with the messaging systems to remind us of the ease with which certain groups of students are sometimes overlooked in the promotion of particular technologies, and of the ongoing importance of explicating the cultural dimension of evaluating educational technologies.

The fifth article, by Fons Nouwens, Elaine Ross, R. E. Harreveld, Jan Thomson and P. A. Danaher from Central Queensland University, Australia, is entitled "Evaluation Perspectives: Interrogating Open and Distance Education Provision at an Australian Regional University". It applies the first-named author's distinction among management, teaching and learning conceptions of evaluation to identify respectively the technical, practical and emancipatory interests of learners highlighted by different evaluation designs. The authors argue for a holistic evaluation framework, underpinned and informed by evidence-based practice, that will broaden rather than narrow the range of interests served by evaluation.

The sixth article, by Ayshe Talay-Ongan from Macquarie University, Australia, is entitled "From a Distance: Student Empowerment and Constructing Teacher Identities Online". It describes how undergraduate courses in early childhood education using WebCT seek to construct contribute to a process of "empowering, shaping and re-shaping the often-intertwined university teacher and pre-service teacher identities". The author draws on a qualitative interpretation of students' informal evaluations of the courses to contend that pedagogy and technology can be aligned in ways that build on the positive potential of current online learning environments.

The seventh article, by Phillipa Sturgess and Fons Nouwens from Central Queensland University, Australia, is entitled "Evaluation of Online Learning Management Systems". It outlines "a participative, action evaluation process" that underpinned the decision to change the university's online learning management system from WebCT to Blackboard. Conceptualising educational institutions as sociotechnical systems, the authors argue that changing the learning management system highlighted the multiple stakeholders and the sometimes uneasy

intersection of economics, pedagogy and technology, which in turn underscores the ongoing need for formative and participative evaluation.

The eighth and final article, by Beth Tennent and Paul Hyland from Central Queensland University, Australia, is entitled "The WebCT Discussion List and How it is Perceived". It uses links between "perceived characteristics of distance and online learning and characteristics of the student" as a basis for analysing students' perceptions of such a discussion list. Student characteristics canvassed included form of enrolment (full-time or part-time and internal or external), age, gender and degree; of these, only age seemed to be a significant factor, with younger students more likely to regard the discussion list positively. The authors note that student evaluations are vital to assess the perceived strengths and limitations of particular pedagogical and technological tools.

The fact that all but one of the articles hails from Australia recalls the theme issue's initial focus on open and distance education in that country, subsequently altered to concentrate on evaluation and augmented by the contribution from the Philippines by Luisa D. Mariano and Nikki Philline C. De La Rosa. While many of the topics canvassed in the issue reflect international and global developments in the late 1900s and the early 2000s, it is nevertheless salutary to remember that evaluation practices attending open and distance education are framed, mediated and implemented differently in different national contexts. Similarly, the issue's emphasis on universities not with standing, such practices are likely also to be manifested differently in non-university settings.

A brief synthesis identifies the rich variety of topics included in the theme issue. These topics include:

- different conceptual frameworks (learners' technical, practical and emancipatory interests, productivist education versus contextual learning);
- different course or learning management systems (Blackboard, WebCT);
- different disciplines (business, early childhood, information technology, nursing);
- different uses of online learning technologies (discussion lists, examinations, messaging systems);
- different intended outcomes of such technologies for students (attitudinal change, empowerment, engagement with the university, with a particular technology and/or with one another);
- different actual outcomes of such technologies for students (positive, neutral and negative perceptions and experiences).

More broadly, the articles in the theme issue draw attention to some of the enduringly significant dimensions of evaluation. These dimensions include:

- Evaluation is an *educational* process that is crucial to the ongoing enhancement of both student learning and program design;
- Evaluation is an *ethical* process that ascribes considerable responsibility to all participants and stakeholders to produce accurate and comprehensive data and to use those data wisely;
- Evaluation is an *ideological* process that reflects multiple and sometimes competing worldviews;
- Evaluation is a *political* process that is influenced by, and can in turn be used to influence, the exercise of power;
- Evaluation is a *value-laden* process that is framed by, and can help to perpetuate and/or to transform, particular ideals and principles.

In combination, these dimensions reinforce the crucial importance of evaluation in helping to engage with the educational challenges elaborated above in relation to education (including open and distance education), and they justify TOJDE's first special theme issue's being devoted to this topic. Moreover, they attest to the continuing need to be attentive to the retrospective and prospective elements of evaluation if education's contemporary 'triple challenge' of promoting access, improving quality and improving efficiency (Organisation for Economic Co-

operation and Development, 1996) is to be addressed and engaged.

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