Preface

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the media-rich, technologically-enabled lives that we live, we still hear people discussing distance education as an alternative to ‘mainstream’ or face-to-face education in somewhat apologetic overtones. Today, the ‘rapid migration of technology across geographic and socioeconomic boundaries is a fundamental constituent of the times in which we live’ (Masten & Plowman, 2003, p. 75) and serves to help level the playing field in access to education. Perhaps we collectively as authors and readers share a different perception on distance and flexible education, as an enabler, not an alternative.

Historically speaking, distance education—or correspondence study as it was initially termed in the late 1800s—grew out of the need to make education accessible to those who wanted a formal education or to obtain key industry-related training and qualifications, but who could not gain these through the traditional on-campus, post-secondary pathways (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Early correspondence style modes were text and mail-based, evolving to answer the call for widening participation in education. Over time a range of technologies have been introduced, and many of us have travelled through the use of video, radio broadcasts, television broadcasts and a range of other media such as audio cassette tapes and the CD-Rom. More recently, the introduction of podcasts and vodcasts alongside Learning Management Systems (LMS) are considered essential.

However, there is a blurring of lines and what was considered the purview of distance education is no longer. In our modern digital era, even with on-campus education, there is often less of a distinction between which modality and technology is integrated into the student’s learning experience (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010). In the chapters contained within this volume, there is evidence that flexible learning is fast becoming an expectation of students “to learn when they want (frequency, timing, duration), how they want (modes of learning), and what they want (that is learners can define what constitutes learning to them)” (van den Brande, 1993, p. 2)—the when-ever, where-ever, and what-ever of flexible education (Willems, 2005a). To this, the concept of learning on their own terms (Brown & Groff, 2011; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Van der Werf & Sabatier, 2009; Traxler, 2010)— the how-ever of flexible education—has recently been added.

There are crossovers and overlaps with other modes of learning such as e-learning, virtual learning, online learning and m-learning, so what makes distance learning unique? An exploration of the nature of distance learning with this in mind warrants attention. What makes distance education, distance education from the teaching and learning perspective?
RESEARCH AREAS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

In a Delphi study of experts in the field of distance education (Zawacki-Richter, 2009), consensus was reached that research and practice in the field of distance education could be delineated into three general levels. The first level, in the structure of distance education is the macro level which examines distance education systems and theories. At this level lie five aspects: access, equity and ethics; globalisation of education and cross-cultural aspects; distance teaching systems and institutions; theories and models; and research methods in distance education and knowledge transfer. At the meso level, according to the suggested framework, a further six themes are gathered under the titles of management, organisation and technology in distance education. These themes are the management and organisation of distance education; costs and benefits; educational technology; innovation and change; professional development and faculty support; learner support services; and quality assurance. DEHub (2010) has added a seventh item to this level: Open Education Resources (OERs). Both these macro- and meso-practice and research areas in distance education are the foundation of the ‘sister’ volume to this.

This volume concerns itself with research themes located at the micro level in distance education: themes that are related to aspects concerning teaching and learning in flexible and distance education. These three aspects of instructional design, interaction and communication in learning communities, and learner characteristics are explored by authors from around the globe.

According to Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker, and Vogt (2009), who examined 695 publications from the five main journals of distance education from around the globe, the most researched areas in distance education (highest frequency) are the same three that lie at the micro level. Perhaps the higher frequency of research at this level (discussions over instructional design, interaction and communication in learning communities, and learner characteristics) is related to the point of greatest overlap between common issues with other modes of teaching, training and learning; whereas those areas specifically pertaining to distance education as a significant entity in its own right lie more in the macro and meso levels of the structure.

EXPLORING DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE MICRO LEVEL OF RESEARCH

Since the rise of early correspondence materials using the technology of the day, instructional or activity design has informed the pedagogy. Essentially, instructional design relates to key aspects of the learning event, including purpose, the types of media and technology used in the instruction, the pedagogical approach to the instruction, types of required interactions within the learning environment and considerations about the learner themselves. This typical approach to curriculum development has been the mainstay of educators for many years. However, much of what is proposed within distance and flexible environments seems “to support existing teaching structures and traditional tuition methods” (Learnovation, 2009a, p. 2). As distance modes of learning draw upon new media and the social and interaction phenomenon of the internet and social media, instructional design is more important than ever, particularly as we move towards collaboration between learners and with their facilitators (Jin, 2010).

Furthermore, Markham (2008), for example, has described how the design of curriculum and its development and implementation rely on four interdependent sub-systems. These sub-systems are the:
1. Teacher subsystem;
2. Learner subsystem;
3. Delivery subsystem; and the
4. Administrative subsystem.

Each of these systems interlocks with each other in order to create the total learning experience.

Media and technology used in the delivery of distance and flexible education span a vast range of types. Taylor (1998, 2001) has described these in terms of “generations” of distance learning. Each generation relates to the media used in instruction. Each phase or “generation” of distance learning heralds its own specific benefits to distance learners. The first “generation” of distance learning equates with the correspondence model of distance education which is predominantly paper based. The second “generation” is characterised by the addition of audio and video instruction, as well as computer-based learning, to supplement the text-based materials of the correspondence model. The third “generation” (the telelearning model) includes the addition of audio-conferencing, teleconferencing, video-conferencing and broadcasting to deliver educational products and support and collaboration. The fourth “generation,” the “flexible” learning model, incorporates computer-mediated communications, the Internet and interactive multimedia as means of distance learning. The fifth “generation,” or intelligent flexible learning model, incorporates the inclusion of campus portal access. Each of these “generations” has important attributes that can be seen to be of value to distance learners globally depending on their context of learning.

However, Ramanujam (1999) reminds us that there is an inherent danger in considering the preceding “generation(s)” of distance learning as antiquated, “old fashioned” or obsolete. Modernisation need not disregard the strengths of previous ways of doing: the proverbial tossing of the baby out with the bathwater. As Willems (2005b) has argued, it is important not to view any of the previous generation’s technology as being totally obsolete. Rather, each “generation” has a place and as such, a multigenerational view in which key aspects of all generations have potential for incorporation into the instructional design, has been suggested. For example, rather than text-based materials from the first generation of correspondence learning being viewed as obsolete, there is a place for these. Similarly, the telephone, one of the aspects of the third “telelearning” generation of distance education media still has relevance according to a number of chapters contained in this volume. Simpson argued many years ago that using communications devices readily available to learners in all parts of the globe, especially in third world countries, such as radio technologies (Ramanujam, 1999) or the telephone, or “t-Learning” (Simpson, 2005), as some possible solutions to overcome divides created by the rapid adoption of new media in distance education between those who can maintain access and those who cannot. Indeed, the rapid rise of that new alternative to the traditional handset, mobile learning or “m-learning,” is touched on in various chapters in this volume. This, in turn, is a more equitable consideration in instructional design, and one which can assist access for learners who have difficulty regularly accessing many of the new capabilities of flexible and distance learning (Willems, 2005b).

The generational model of distance education is also influential in other considerations of what exactly is flexible and distance education. Urdan and Weggan (2000) situate the various technology and media as subsets of distance and flexible learning, as similarly does Peters (2007).

Similarly, when considering instructional design and, in addition, the different media used in instructional design, there are considerations about the broad variety of andragogical and pedagogical (hereafter collectively referred to as pedagogy) models of teaching and learning which are variously
embraced. These philosophies range from instructivist through to more student-centred approaches of constructivism, connectivism and heutagogy, and spanning all between.

While the general types of media used to deliver flexible and distance education has been outlined in the previous section, this range of media is also the basis for interaction and communication in distance environments. Interaction and communication within distance and flexible learning is complex. In addition to the media, interactions and communications within the specifics of the Learning Management System (LMS) or beyond and fundamental to the learning experience itself need to be better explored. Interaction and communication in flexible and distance education via m-Learning is a case in point.

Interaction and communication within the context of flexible and distance learning can be centred on the spoken word (text of speech). This encompasses both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. Other means of communication, such as visual graphics and multimedia, enable interaction and communication. Communication may be synchronous or asynchronous. It may be uni-directional or multi-directional. It may be static, as in a reference document, or interactively enabled and socially-sharing, such as in the building of a collegial wiki, such as Delicious. As O’Reilly and Battelle (2009) have also detailed, social media and various Web 2.0 applications have been built for, and enable, communication and interaction. Over the past few years, we are seeing an increase in the number of research projects being reported that draw upon “connectivism” situated around the new social media phenomenon.

Interaction and communication in flexible and distance learning can also encompass novel ways to make what might be a passive learning experience for some participants into a deep and richly rewarding learning experience, such as the addition of online role-plays.

Learners are diverse. They bring to the learning environment a range of personal attributes. According to Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy, each individual has a unique set of cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitudes) and psychomotor (skills) characteristics. Each of these aspects might potentially affect the learning experience.

The diverse attributes of distance learners also include their demographics. The demographics include such aspects of potential relevance as their age, gender and their type (full-time or part-time) and level of enrolment (undergraduate, post-graduate or higher degree by research).

Increasingly in our digital age, learning is being “disrupted” by the users themselves. The advent of social media with the Web 2.0 paradigm has opened new challenges for teachers and students alike (Barnes & Tynan, 2007), as is the expectation that all are digitally literate (Jones, Ramanau, Cross, & Healing, 2010). More learners are engaging with the creation of ideas, transactional actions and social engagement, within community groups, using social tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, micro-blogs, wikis, social networking sites, virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds—just to suggest a few. As has already been noted by Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickhur (2010), this is not just the purview of young people either. Adults, who tend to make up a large proportion of distance and flexible learners, are not being left behind and are increasingly engaging with the Internet and social media for personal, social and transactional uses. Andrews and Tynan (2010) have also noted that distance learners need a deeper understanding of their preferences in order to facilitate better learning experiences. It appears that learners themselves are drawing upon the affordances being offered by creating their own community of learners. This creates plenty of challenges for the facilitator, teacher and institution (Andrews, Tynan, & Stewart, 2011).
STRUCTURE OF THIS VOLUME

Section 1: Instructional Design

Section 1 examines issues in instructional design. Instructional design is also referred to as learning design, e-learning design or educational design, and can refer as much to the specific system used, the systematic choices in the design process, the particular model used, the aim of instruction and, ideally, the needs of the learner. These variances are reflected in the six chapters in this section.

“Curriculum Design for Developing Capacity to Deal with Complex Issues: Theoretical Perspectives” by Cherry Stewart, Ashfaq Khan and John Hedberg, examines curriculum design and development in interactive distance learning. Using mental complexity theory, the authors propose that a particular philosophical mindset leads a curriculum designer to choose learning designs that fit within a particular thinking paradigm. These philosophical paradigms relate to how a curriculum might be conceived and communicated. The learning strategies that designers choose, in constructing the curriculum, impact significantly on how their learners approach, and gain from, these experiences. The authors offer a framework for creating curriculum that supports learners to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes appropriate for dealing with greater degrees of intellectual, social and environmental complexity.

Asking the rhetorical question, “Are We Having Fun Yet, Miranda?” Jacquelyn Kenney explores potentially disruptive pedagogies that can take place within the instructional design. The chapter suggests a conceptual framework developed from characteristic features of disruptive pedagogies, including motivation, engagement, higher-order thinking, sociability and fun in learning. These concepts are then applied to review how an undergraduate consumer behaviour learning design is used, preferred and experienced by learners. The review yields evidence of disruptive pedagogies within the context of technology-rich and focused activity and interactive, collaborative learning settings, suggesting that the learning design engages and supports learning and its experience in different ways for different learners.

John Rafferty, Jenni Munday, and Janet Buchan suggest “ten rules of thumb” in developing blended and flexible learning in the chapter “Ten Rules of Thumb in Blended and Flexible Learning: A Study on Pedagogies, Challenges, and Changing Perspectives.” They argue that as emerging Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are increasingly being engaged as pedagogical tools, the role of traditional academic values might be overlooked. The authors go on to highlight some of the challenges faced by educators as they reconcile their own pedagogical reasoning with the engagement opportunities presented through ICTs, reporting a study that followed the introduction of three blended-mode university subjects into teacher education programs over several years. The research resulted in identifying ten considerations for an effective pedagogy to use for flexible and blended learning, and it identified ten organisational limitations of applying good pedagogical practices in pursuing blended-mode learning.

In a face-to-face setting, poor course design can often be compensated for by an astute academic where physical cues can be received directly from the students and delivery can be immediately adjusted accordingly. Moving a course to a blended, online or distance environment prompts some level of course evaluation and re-design, as within these environments, it can be harder to gauge student concern or challenges, so poor course design can have a devastating effect on student learning. In “Giving Teaching Advice Meaning: The Importance of Contextualizing Pedagogical Instruction within the Discipline,” Leanne Cameron highlights the importance of contextualising pedagogical instruction within the discipline when undertaking course evaluation and/or redesign.
In the chapter, “Open Education Resources: Content without Context?” author Lindy Klein considers the role of Open Education Resources (OERs) in instructional design as content without context. She argues for a move away from OERs as simply print-based online resources and for the development of OERs in ways that allow independent, self-directed adult learners to engage and interact with the resources within their own learning contexts. In so doing, the author argues that cross-cultural boundaries may be overcome and new communities of learning built.

The final chapter in this section considers inclusivity as an equity concern in distance education. In “Six Practical Principles for Inclusive Curriculum Design,” Sharron Kerr and Michaela Baker suggest six practical principles for inclusive curriculum design. Within the context of the Australian Higher Education sector, this chapter aims to draw together the principles of inclusive curriculum design and Universal Instructional Design to provide lecturers and curriculum designers within concrete advice on how to design curricula that are both inclusive and accessible. Through a review of the literature and the introduction of six practical principles, the chapter sheds light on the importance of inclusive curriculum design for all students and, more particularly, students studying in online, distance or blended modes.

Section 2: Interaction and Communication in Learning Communities

Interaction and communication within learning communities in distance education takes place via a variety of modes of learning, applications, and media. These range from traditional print-based materials and their electronic counterparts, through to mobile learning, virtual worlds, and the social sharing capabilities of Web 2.0 (Downes, 2005). This enables interactivity, creativity, and authoring, and not simply passivity on the part of the learner (De Leeuwe, 2007). Through the ten chapters in Section 2, various aspects of interaction and communication that, for a distance learner, are mediated through a variety of these technologies, are explored. The section also explores online role-plays, gaming and simulations as alternative means to foster interaction and communication for those training or undertaking formal education at a distance.

In the first of these chapters, Gráinne Conole examines the implications of social and participatory media on social exclusion or inclusion in education in “Social Exclusion or Inclusion: The Implications of Social and Participatory Media on Education.” She describes how over the past five years, the emergence of a range of new social and participatory media, including blogs, wikis, social networks like Facevolume, microblogging sites like Twitter, and media sharing repositories such as Flickr and YouTube, are offering new and exciting ways to support learning and to enable learners and teachers to communicate and share. This chapter examines the implications of this changing digital landscape for education and, in particular, the implications for learners, teachers and institutions.

In the chapter “mLearn: Designing a Platform for Mobile Learning,” the authors, Mohammed Samaka and John Impagliazzo, discuss the research, design and development of an integrated architecture as the design platform for a possible mobile learning platform. Three defined learning approaches were chosen for the mLearn platform: exposition, exploration and communication. A high-level architecture was designed that allows XML multimedia content delivery over a HTTP protocol. It also uses J2ME on the client side in support of computer-aided learning approaches used in mobile learning. In addition, the mLearn platform uses several SMS delivery methods, including Push, Pull and WAP Push, enabling learners to interact with each other and to share content.

“The Pedagogical Suitability of Using Cellphones to Support Distance Education Students” also explores mobile learning possibilities for distance learning. Examining the pedagogical suitability of using
cell phones to support distance education students, author Mpine Makoe argues that the use of mobile technologies in education has had a major impact on the pedagogy as known and understood by many academics in Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. The aim of this chapter is to investigate the pedagogic approaches that best support effective use of cell phones in the distance education context. Social interaction will be used as a conceptual framework to explore the potential for using “MXit,” a cell phone instant messaging system, to support distance learners.

Sandra Wills rethinks the reusability aspects of online role-play from the perspective of a longitudinal study in Australian higher education in “Rethinking Reusability: Implications from a Longitudinal Study of Online Role Play in Australian Higher Education.” The chapter provides the results of a study that tracked the use of 53 online role plays in Australian higher education over the period 1990–2006, calculating that 45 of these were a reuse of another role play. The author considers issues surrounding what is meant by ‘reuse’ and describing factors that could improve the design of Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs). The implications from this study apply in particular to RLOs that involve active, authentic, and collaborative learning such as online role plays.

Mat Hardy and Sally Totman explore using an online simulation to address equity issues for off-campus students in “Using an Online Simulation to Address Equity Issues for Off-Campus Students.” The Middle East Politics Simulation (MEPS) is an online role-play exercise aimed at providing students with an improved level of understanding of the political dimensions of the Middle East. MEPS has been running since 1993, providing a useful longitudinal perspective on utilising a collaborative online workplace to offer enhanced learning outcomes. The wholly online nature of the simulation means that students of all study modes, and even different institutions, can participate and benefit equally, thus negating some of the disadvantages faced by off-campus students in learning and assessment, while also accommodating the needs of those with differing learning styles.

Following its public release in mid 2010, the chapter, “A Preliminary Evaluation of the iPad as a Tool for Learning and Teaching,” evaluates the preliminary implementation of the iPad as a tool for learning and teaching. This chapter, written by Sue Gregory, Tony Brown and Mitchell Parkes explores the use of the iPad as a tool for learning at a large distance education university from three perspectives: from a lecturer’s point of view, a student’s point of view and from an insider perspective reviewing the variety of applications (apps) available. The overall impression is that the iPad has great potential as a tool for learning, but it will not necessarily reduce the need for desktop or laptop computers.

In “How are Australian and New Zealand Higher Educators using 3D Immersive Virtual Worlds in their Teaching,” Mark J.W. Lee, Barney Dalgarno, Sue Gregory, Lauren Carlson, and Belinda Tynan write that despite the publication of numerous papers on specific applications of 3D immersive virtual worlds in higher education, there have been few attempts to systematically analyse and document views, experiences and applications across the sector. They redress this by sharing the selected results and findings of a study of the use of 3D immersive virtual worlds in Australia and New Zealand for learning and teaching in distance/online, face-to-face, and blended settings.

Virtual worlds are providing welcome opportunities for the development of innovative curricula for tertiary educators, particularly those engaged with distance education. They provide a virtual meeting ground for those students and teachers who are geographically remote from one another, rendering distance irrelevant and enabling the formation of community. Helen Farley examines those factors—physical, social, virtual and those related to pedagogy—that facilitate immersion in virtual worlds such as Second Life and Open Sim in “Facilitating Immersion in Virtual Worlds: An Examination of the Physical, Virtual, Social, and Pedagogical Factors Leading to Engagement and Flow.” They describe the suspension of
disbelief that generates the feeling of presence or “being there,” which is crucial to promoting student engagement and, ultimately, flow.

From a differing perspective, Yvonne Masters and Sue Gregory investigate the efficacy of whether an educator as a novice user of one virtual world, *Second Life*, could quickly learn to teach effectively with this tool as a viable adjunct to other online learning experiences, particularly for distance education students. This teaching experience is outlined in “Second Life: A Novice/Expert Teaching and Learning Tale” from two points of view: the novice and the expert. In addition to considering *Second Life* as a teaching and learning environment for distance education students, the chapter also explores the level of support that might be needed to assist other novices to teach in-world.

The final chapter in this section also explores the use of virtual worlds as a teaching and learning environment to form distance education from a cross-institutional perspective. Titled “Learning and Teaching in Second Life: Educator and Student Perspectives,” the chapter examines teaching and learning in *Second Life* by six educators from five Australian universities. The authors of this chapter (Sue Gregory, Julie Willems, Denise Wood, Lyn Hay, Allan Ellis, and Lisa Jacka) provide their accounts of teaching in a virtual world and report on the learning outcomes, as well as their students’ perceptions of their learning experiences. Until relatively recently, there has been a lack of empirical evidence reporting on the learning outcomes for students participating in these virtual learning sessions. Good pedagogical practices must be taken into consideration when educating in a virtual world. The authors present case studies to contribute to the literature on effective pedagogy in virtual worlds.

**Section 3: Learner Characteristics**

Finally, Section 3 explores aspects related to the end-users of distance education: the distance learner. The 12 chapters encompassed in this section represent education and training across the sectors. In addition, issues relating to undergraduate, graduate, and Higher Degree by Research (HDR) distance learners are explored in chapters concerning the higher education sector.

In “Acknowledging the Distance Learner: The Role of the Student Voice in Enhancing the Quality of the Distance Learner’s eLearning Experience,” Trish Andrews acknowledges the distance learner by discussing the role of the student voice in understanding and addressing students’ needs in relation to the quality of their learning experience. She suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to the distinct voice of the distance education student. The chapter also provides some methodologies for collecting the student’s voice and gives consideration to how addressing the distance learner’s voice to enhance their learning experience might be most effectively accomplished.

“Learning Relationships: A Condition and Consequence of Learner-Learner Interaction in Online Contexts” by Dolene Rossi, examines relationships in the distance learning experience as a condition and consequence of learner-learner interaction in online contexts. Examining the processes of, and relationship between, learner-learner interaction and knowledge construction within an online, undergraduate, communication course, the chapter describes how Social Network Analysis (SNA) and constant comparative method were utilised to reveal how a single cohort of learners interacted and constructed knowledge within large and small groups using asynchronous and synchronous communication. This, in turn, has important implications for educational practice as it reveals a range of conditions that are conducive for learner-learner interaction, dialogic learning and a sense of community in online courses.

“E-Learning and M-Learning for Students with Special Learning Needs: Competence Registration in Design of Personalised Learning Environment” examines the possibility of competence registration in
e-learning and m-learning environments for students with special learning needs. Authors Andreja Istenic Starcic and Ziga Turk argue that educational technology and Information Communication Technology (ICT) play an important role in creating an effective and adaptable learning environment, especially when teaching students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This includes students with a range of physical, sensory, communication or cognitive disabilities in learning. The emphasis for special needs education is on high individualisation and the personalisation of the learning process, and, hence, the need for competence registration of the SEN student in the planning, design, learning process, and evaluation.

In “Attrition in the Digital Age: Reminders from the Literature,” Kate Reed, Nathan Wise, Belinda Tynan, and Carina Bossu argue that distance education (learning and teaching by distance modes of information exchange) is often characterised by having higher attrition rates (often labelled as “drop-out” or “withdrawal”) compared to traditional face-to-face (or ‘on-campus’) education and that no area of research in distance education has received more attention. This suggests that a holistic understanding of attrition continues to elude researchers. This chapter will explore underlying concerns and identify key questions and gaps regarding attrition in distance education for the digital age.

Distance learners are typically embedded within rich and complex life-contexts that comprise family, friends, work colleagues and community connections. However, relatively few studies explore the interplay between distance learners’ life-contexts and their studies or examine the study-related interactions that distance learners engage in with other people in their life-contexts. Sharon Watson describes a study in “Distance Learner’s Study-Related Interactions with Other People in their Life Contexts: Investigating an Unexplored Phenomenon” to explore the phenomenon of distance learner’s study-related interactions with other people in their life contexts.

Barrie Todhunter writes in “Reshaping Distance Education: Returning the Student to Centre Stage” that in order to reshape distance education, the student must be returned to centre stage. This chapter examines critical issues associated with teaching and learning at a distance, with a focus on the three aspects of the institutional environment, the pedagogical frameworks and the learning setting of the actual students. The chapter provides guidance for administrators, teachers and learners by offering a holistic framework of Distance Education Learning Principles for Higher Education (DELPHE) as a meaningful tool for reshaping postgraduate distance education learning and teaching models.

Institutional concern about attrition rates of doctoral students raises the question of whether these students withdraw from a program due to perceptions of a lack of connectedness to supervisors, peers or for other reasons. Ronel Erwee, Peter Albion, and Luke van der Laan investigate the connectedness needs of external doctoral students in “Connectedness Needs of External Doctoral Students.” They describe that following the implementation of the Doctoral Student Connectedness Scale to examine communication challenges faced by external doctoral students, a three factor structure of connectedness needs emerged: student-to-student connectedness, a student-to-faculty connectedness and a student-to-supervisor connectedness. The authors suggest how interventions may be developed to offer external doctoral students a more complete learning experience.

In the context of higher education, resilience is often defined as being a reaction to adversity or hardship rather than a pre-emptive strategy to prevent or minimise attrition. Moreover, resilience is at times framed in relation to a student deficit, as opposed to an ecological construct for which many are responsible. In “Resilience and the Distance Higher Degree by Research Candidate,” Julie Willems and Andrea Reupert argue that resilience is a quadripartite responsibility for students, educators, institutions and communities alike and propose a model to assess and promote resilience strategies of which connectedness is one aspect.
“Communities of Practice for Distance Research Students in Australia: Why Do We Need Them and How Might We Create Them?” concerns itself with issues surrounding communities of practice for distance research students in Australia. The author, Judith Redman, asks why we need communities of practice and how we might create them? The literature on best practice Higher Degree Research (HDR) supervision indicates that incorporation of candidates into communities of practice is an essential part of the process. In exploring the literature, the chapter draws on the author’s experiences as a part-time HDR student and as someone whose employment has involved providing support for HDR students, highlighting the problems and possibilities of incorporating HDR students into communities of practice.

“The Challenges and Opportunities of Online Postgraduate Coursework Programs in a Traditional University Context,” written by Elizabeth Devonshire, Hannah Forsyth, Sharon Reid, and Judy Simpson, argues that educational technologies have led to a mainstreaming of distance education across the Australian tertiary sector, so that some remote delivery is now expected of nearly all universities. When combined with postgraduate coursework, the flexibility of online delivery supports development of niche courses that have strategic significance for industries and the nation, which can present a number of challenges and opportunities. As a consequence, traditional on-campus universities are now engaging in modes of educational delivery that do not necessarily align to their organisational culture, structures of governance, policy, administration, and pedagogical norms.

Julie Willems, Helen Farley, Allan Ellis, Debra McCormick, and Dan Walker consider issues surrounding “Supervising Higher Degree Research (HDR) Candidates at a Distance: What Do Emerging Virtual World Technologies Have to Offer?” Early adopters and innovators are currently exploring what the emerging virtual world technologies, such as Second Life, offer specific cohorts of students, such as the distance Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidate. This chapter explores the experiences of three educators and four HDR candidates using virtual worlds as part of the supervisory process, exploring the potentials and pitfalls of the medium and suggesting solutions to overcome some of the challenges.

Fredy-Roberto Valenzuela, Josie Fisher and Sue Whale discuss the perceptions of off-campus postgraduate students regarding the positive and negative aspects of their experience with the online learning environment in “Lecturers’ Social Presence and Personality in the Online Environment: The Perceptions of Off-Campus Postgraduate and On and Off-Campus Undergraduate Management Students.” The chapter identifies the range of activities students have experienced when learning online, their perceptions regarding the way these activities were managed and the students’ perception of the personality of their online lecturers in the online environment. Results show that these students consider the lack of interaction, traditional approaches to learning in the online environment, poor feedback from lecturers, and low usage of online learning tools are the most negative aspects of their experience.

This volume concludes with the “Epilogue.” It flags current gaps in research and practice at the micro level of of instructional design, interaction and communication in learning communities, and learner characteristics in flexible and distance education. In addition, it also points towards future research areas that colleagues might wish to pursue as we progress further into the 21st century.

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REFERENCES


