Foreword

There can be little doubt that "online education" has provided significant opportunities and enhanced access to courses, knowledge, and information for people engaged in lifelong learning. Over the past decade, online education has provided an important and potentially innovative means of enhancing teaching and learning experiences within the context of lifelong learning. Online education has now evolved from a marginal form of education to a commonly accepted and increasingly popular means of providing lifelong learning opportunities to a wide range of learners. Online education provides a valuable means for lifelong learners to participate in learning regardless of geographic location (place-independent) theoretically "24 hours a day" (time-independent), thus providing access to lifelong learning which may not otherwise be possible. In addition, online education can provide anonymity of characteristics such as gender, race, age, social status, and special needs, which can reduce the feeling of discrimination and provide equality of social interaction among learners.

Online education has gone through significant changes in terms of both available technology and the ways in which online technologies can improve the quality of learning and opportunities for learners. Connolly and Stansfield (in press) identify three distinct generations of online education. The *first* generation, which was based mainly on the passive use of the Internet (circa 1994-1999), focused primarily on the conversion of course material to an online format, basic mentoring via e-mail and low-fidelity streamed audio and/or video. The *second* generation (circa 2000-2003) was characterized by the use of more advanced technologies with high-bandwidth access, rich streaming media and virtual learning environments (VLEs) providing access to course material, communication facilities, and student services. VLEs became capable of supporting a constructivist form of learning encouraging more reflection and rigorous thinking, which helped learners make connections among ideas and to construct internal, coherent knowledge structures. The *third* generation (since 2003) is characterized by more collaborative learning environments

based more on constructivist epistemology, promoting reflective practice through tools such as e-portfolios, blogs, wikis, games-based online learning, and highly interactive online simulations. We are also now starting to see the development of mobile learning with the wider adoption of devices like PDAs, mobile phones, and smartphones. Above all, online education is providing much greater freedom and flexibility for lifelong learning in that the very latest knowledge and information can be delivered and tailored to the needs and context of the learner, at a time when they need it (just-in-time learning) to a place of their convenience (work, home, or on the move).

The knowledge-driven society is increasing demand for continuing professional development in which employees need to update their skills and knowledge and evolve to meet the changing demands of industry and commerce. The demand for higher education is expanding exponentially throughout the world, which is an indication of the trend towards globalization, which, due to the changing nature of employment, a job for life is no longer the norm. As a result of globalization and a push for mass higher education from both government and society, and in responding to the needs of learners and employers for greater flexibility, continuing education and lifelong learning, institutions across the world are under increasing pressure to integrate new technologies associated with online education into existing teaching, learning, administrative, and student support services.

In addition to significant technological changes, online education has managed to successfully develop past much of the hype and unrealistic expectations that plagued it in the mid- to late-1990s and contributed to the failure of a number of high profile online education initiatives across the world. We are now entering a crucial stage in the evolution of online education in which it is starting to become part of mainstream teaching and learning, with learners now having access to hundreds of thousands of online courses throughout the world.

If online education for lifelong learning is to be sustainable, this presents a number of key economic, social, pedagogic, and technological challenges that learning providers must address. Specific issues such as ensuring that online education provides for cost effective lifelong learning are vital to ensuring its long-term sustainability. The issue of how online education is costed and funded is vital for many educational institutions across the world with limited resources. There are challenges in addressing the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds whose cultural experiences might be different from the dominant educational culture which underpins their online course. This is particularly relevant within the context of the international delivery of online courses and franchising or joint partnership agreements between educational institutions in different countries and continents.

While technology might be leading change at a rapid pace, it could be argued that too little attention is being paid to exploring the new forms of pedagogy made possible by online education. It is vital that effective staff development is provided within educational institutions so that online learning tutors and developers change the way

they think about teaching and learning and how to employ emerging technologies to enhance learning. Online education is only as good as the people who provide and deliver the learning experiences and support. Having the most up-to-date and innovative technologies in itself will not guarantee success and learner satisfaction.

Yukiko Inoue's book provides invaluable insight into the key issues surrounding the use of online education for lifelong learning. Experienced and esteemed authors from around the globe have contributed chapters that cover the full spectrum of technological, pedagogic, social, and economic issues relating to online education for lifelong learning. Key issues are explored from both a theoretical and practical perspective. This publication provides essential reading to all stakeholders involved in online learning whether they are tutors, researchers, academics, administrators, senior managers, or policy-makers. Online education for lifelong learning is about sustainability and working towards achieving long terms strategic goals rather than providing short term quick fixes.

I myself have been closely involved in online education for lifelong learning for over a decade in a variety of different roles as a content developer, tutor, academic support, program leader, researcher, and author. I have seen firsthand how online education has provided access to lifelong learning opportunities that otherwise would not be possible for managers in full-time employment. In addition, I have seen part-time students within an online learning environment flourish and consistently perform better than the face-to-face students (Connolly, MacArthur, Stansfield, & McLellen, in press).

Many of us have learned valuable lessons from the hype and failures of the recent past and online education for lifelong learning is gaining greater acceptance within many educational institutions. However, there is still much work to be done before online education reaches maturity and realizes its full potential for lifelong learners from preschool age, throughout school and university education, during employment, and into retirement. In addition, if many of the obstacles and issues are to be addressed, then it is essential that stakeholders are informed and make decisions based on the latest thinking and developments in online education and lifelong learning. This book provides a key resource and essential reading in helping people stay informed and enhance their online education provision. Yukiko Inoue and the contributing authors are to be congratulated on this publication, which is timely and highly relevant.

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References

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