

Distance education more effective

So far, yet so close, writes *Jan Ring* thanks to Virtual Campus

Providing higher education services to a population scattered over the Australian continent has been no easy task. Research into the delivery of distance education to this vast country is shrinking the nation, and giving off-campus students the

Virtual Campus is the outcome of collaborative research into distance education delivery by Ms Jan Ring, Senior Lecturer in Computer Science, supported by Associate Professor Tony Watson, Head, School of Information Technology and Mathematics, and

Australia 22%; Victoria 10%; Northern Territory 3% and South Australia 2%.

Feedback on Virtual Campus has been positive. Students report that the ability to communicate two-way with tutors and other students makes them feel part of the University.



Jan Ring (Reproduced with kind permission of Quest, newsletter of the Edith Cowan University, Vol 1, No 1, April 1993)

chance to be virtually on campus. The technology used is readily adaptable to the training needs of businesses and government agencies in remote locations.

The opportunity for isolated external students of Edith Cowan University to have twenty-four hour access, seven days a week, to the normal facilities available to internal students has been achieved through Commonwealth funded research. The cost so far has exceeded \$500 000.

Access to services is gained through a computer-based communication system dubbed *Virtual Campus*. This enables individual students, through their computer keyboards and screens, to 'speak' to lecturers and fellow students. They can join tutorial groups, use library catalogues, display notices, submit and receive back marked assignments, and access the worldwide resources of the Australian Academic and Research Network (AARNet). They can even have regular social chats over cups of coffee, or chew-the-fat about assignments.

Associate Professor Tony Knight, Head, External Studies Division.

Distance education

Edith Cowan University has been a major provider of tertiary-level distance education for nearly two decades. During this time the delivery mechanisms have moved from traditional packages of notes and books to incorporate new options based on advanced technology.

At the forefront of this new technology, Virtual Campus is changing the way in which distance education is delivered, managed, and assessed. It has the potential to be cost effective in the delivery of course materials and, by facilitating student interaction, to provide learning opportunities which otherwise would not exist.

Three of the University's five faculties are using Virtual Campus to teach external courses including Nursing, Justice Studies, Computer Education, and Library Technology. In 1992, the students were distributed widely across the Australian states: Queensland 35%; New South Wales 28%; Western

Electronic outreach

The Virtual Campus project provides the University with an electronic outreach, not only to Australia but also to our near neighbours in South-East Asia and beyond. Tony Watson reports that the Virtual Campus system is being used in a joint research project with Chung-Ang University in Seoul, Korea, with which international links have been established to promote, among other things, cooperative teaching and research programs.

Access

Access to Virtual Campus is via telephone lines through AUSTPAC using a modem and communications software on a personal computer. The hardware base to the electronic campus was carefully selected using a high-quality, fault-tolerant TANDEM system to ensure round-the-clock reliability for students who live and work in different time zones and study outside normal working hours.

Each call to Virtual Campus incurs a local-call cost to the student's own telephone account. Once the caller is connected to AUSTPAC and then to the Virtual Campus, all time and volume charges are reverse-charged to the University. That is to say, students incur no costs on their telephone accounts other than the initial local-call fee made to establish the connection.

Virtual Campus is enabling the University to reach distant students. It has the potential to meet the staff development needs of organisations whose staff are scattered and isolated. An advantage is that students can work at their own pace but be monitored by tutors on a regular basis. It is an effective and cost-effective way of training staff. ■