

A Systemic Approach to Online Learning and Teaching Support

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Since 1996, Charles Sturt University has been investigating how best it would use the Internet to enhance learning outcomes for its more than 20 000 students, most of whom study by distance mode; in particular how to improve student-lecturer and student- student communications.

Rather than concentrating on developing fully online courses in a few discipline areas - some of which are already under way but require much time and resources - the decision was made to attempt to provide online support for all subjects of the University by the start of the 1999 academic year. The magnitude of this task is apparent from the number of subjects (more than 1600 annually) and the number of academic and support staff involved (more than 700). From the outset it was important to define precisely what was meant by online support for subjects. A distinction was drawn between an online supported subject and a fully online subject.

An online supported subject is one where support services to the student are enhanced by the following online features:

- Online access through the CSU Subject Template to the Subject Outline for the subject;
- Online access to a range of administrative and support services, such as the Library,

Student

- Records, Student Services;
- e-mail communication between the Subject Coordinator and the student;
- A subject specific electronic discussion group/forum;
- Links to other web resources selected by the Subject Coordinator to enhance student learning.

A small trial, with about 25 subjects, was commenced in the first teaching session in 1997, followed by a more extensive and focussed trial in the second half of the year, with 150 subjects. Each of these subjects was provided with an electronic forum, used by academic staff as well as students in

various ways: updating learning resources, comments on assessment items, social interaction etc. For the first session 1998, the number of subjects has grown to over 300 with the emphasis now shifting to online support for courses instead of just for individual subjects, and it is anticipated that by the start of the 1999 academic year, virtually all subjects (and courses) on offer from the University, both internally and by distance education, will be online supported. This has required a major ongoing program of academic staff development, as well as additional programming, web conversion, quality assurance and monitoring support.

The poster presentation will provide updated information on the progress of this project, including resources provided to students, staff development and details of evaluations completed to date; there will be an opportunity to visit the site, and look at the subject based forums and also the academic forum which is being used to help in staff development. Plans for future developments will also be discussed.