

**The Virtualization Project in the South West College of Further and Higher Education in  
Northern Ireland: A Case Study**

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## **RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY**

The authors of this case study are doctoral students enrolled in the Spring 2012 GDIT 711: Distance Learning Global Leadership course at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Western Pennsylvania, USA. This course aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to flourish and to provide leadership in distance teaching and learning in the digital era. In particular, students are expected to explore and exploit the pedagogical affordances of new and emerging digital technologies.

One of the main objectives of the course is to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to bring a real-world practical dimension to the theoretical study of distance education. The course practicum, which took the form of this case study, set out to bridge this gap.

The purpose of the case study is to examine and explore Phase 1 of the Virtualization Initiative in the South West College (SWC) of Further and Higher Education in Northern Ireland (NI) as the College began the process of moving systemically into the virtual world, potentially transforming current teaching and learning practices and the delivery of support services.

## **ABSTRACT**

This case study profiles Phase 1 of the Virtualization Initiative of the South West College (SWC) of Further and Higher Education in Northern Ireland. It draws on College documentation, videos, and interviews with senior management, the Virtualization team, and staff members. It seeks to examine and document the process of preparing, managing, and implementing the main elements of the first phase of the Initiative, including curriculum, pedagogy, staff development, learning environments and the technology infrastructure of the SWC. Set in the context of ongoing technology-driven societal change, it considers the role of further education in Northern Ireland, and the importance of visionary leadership in changing times, and it provides an overview of SWC's Virtual Day and Virtual Week which were the culmination of Phase 1. It is hoped that this case study will encourage further development and research in the area of systemic virtualization of third level educational institutions.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the course of 2011, the South West College (SWC) of Further and Higher Education in Northern Ireland embarked on the first phase of an ambitious Virtualization Initiative which would offer the entire curriculum online in a blended learning format and would provide remote access to all services. This study examines the process of preparing, managing, and implementing the main elements of this first phase, including curriculum, pedagogy, staff development, learning environments, and the technology infrastructure of the College. Set in the context of ongoing technology-driven societal change, it considers the role of further education in Northern Ireland, the importance of visionary leadership in changing times, and it provides an overview of SWC's Virtual Day and Virtual Week which were the culmination of Phase 1.

“Unpredictable, nonlinear change” (Fullan, 2001, ix) is a distinctive feature of the twenty-first century. A key factor driving this type of change is the ever- accelerating pace of technology development which makes the future “discontinuous with the past” (Ausburn, 2002). "Technological change is what many have said is the only constant in our work today" (Kubala, 2000). New technologies are transforming all sectors of life, but one sector that has been slow to implement change is education (Beetham and Sharpe, 2007). This study focuses on a major change process in relation to the development of distance education in a blended learning format in the South West College.

### **Background**

Technology-mediated distance learning is not a new phenomenon. Correspondence courses, which aimed to overcome geographical constraints and increase access to education by teaching through text, have been available in some form since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Jeffries, 2001). In

the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, developments in the postal service made such courses widely available to people living in remote areas or otherwise unable to access campus-based tuition.

Correspondence education created a dramatic shift from the traditional form of classroom teaching and learning to more independent learning (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010).

Bernard and Abrami (2004) identify five generations of distance education: print-based correspondence; broadcast TV, radio, and tapes; teleconferencing and hypertext; computer-mediated Internet; and online interactive media, including Internet-based access to the World Wide Web. This, in turn, has led to the need to re-examine pedagogy and how students learn. A timeline marking the technology-driven transition from distance learning to e-learning and blended learning is given in Appendix B.

In recent years, the number of online learning courses and degree programs in higher education, as well as the enrollment numbers, is increasing around the world. The Sloan Consortium 2011 Report on Online Education in the US reveals that the number of students taking at least one online course has now surpassed 6 million. Now nearly one-third of all students in higher education are taking at least one online course. Research commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) found that no real overview of online (distance) provision existed, but reported significant activity in the UK Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) sector, with many institutions keen to expand their offerings in this area. The UK's Open University (OU) now has 164,000 active users of Moodle and is receiving hits from as many as 50,000 separate individuals every day.

## **Terminology**

As a form of distance education, online learning “represents a range of practices based on the Internet that provides synchronous and asynchronous communication in a personal and group environment” (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010, p.19). Naidu (2006) identifies a number of other terms related to online learning. These include e-learning, virtual learning, distributed learning, networked or web-based learning. We use some of these terms interchangeably in this paper. We also use the term blended learning to describe the method of course delivery being developed by the SWC through their Virtualization Initiative. This term is seen by some scholars as identical to distributed learning (Bonk and Graham, 2006) and is here understood as “learning that combines different technologies, in particular a combination of traditional (e.g. face-to-face instruction) and online teaching approaches and media” (Littlejohn and Pegler, 2007, p.226).

## **Aim of Case Study**

The aim of this case study is to examine and explore the Virtualization Project, which was the first phase of a major four-year Virtualization Initiative in the South West College. The Initiative aims to provide online curriculum and support services on a systemic basis by 2014.

Set in the context of change, this case study will specifically highlight:

- change within the FE sector in Northern Ireland;
- the SWC as a product of change;
- leadership in a time of change;
- the goals, aims, and objectives of the SWC Virtualization Initiative;
- the challenges and strategies of implementation in relation to technology and pedagogy;

- the process of creating and managing the SWC Virtualization Initiative;
- the implementation of the “Virtual Day” and “Virtual Week”;
- the integration of students with special needs in the SWC Virtual Initiative;
- and
- the current status and future direction of the Initiative.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As the purpose of this paper is to research and tell the story of the process of virtualization undertaken by the South West College, it was decided that a qualitative case study, complemented by quantitative data, would best capture both the affective element - how the participants experienced the process – and the factual elements of the project. Accordingly, a qualitative approach, based on open-ended interviews, field work observations, and examination of digital and text materials (Patton, 2002, Yin, 2012) was adopted for research, combined with a study of the surveys and other data made available by the SWC.

What is perhaps of particular interest about the qualitative research is that, in order to overcome the barrier of distance, much of it was conducted virtually. Interviews were conducted using Skype. Where virtual face-to-face interviews were not possible because of the constraints imposed by different time zones (Greenwich Mean Time, Eastern Standard Time, and China Standard Time), teaching and technical support staff at the College made videos specifically to supplement, from various perspectives, the information supplied by other materials, and offered these to the authors as research resources. Field work was made possible by the student-authors having access to videos of the virtual learning events, thus enabling them to observe repeatedly the sessions they were researching and make detailed field notes. At the invitation of SWC staff,