

LOGGING ON FOR INTERACTIVE LEARNING

By Professor Roy Leitch, Chief Executive of Interactive University.

Education throughout the world is entering a process of major change – some say even a paradigm shift. One need only look at the education conferences, press and academic journals to see a plethora of types of learning being developed. Some new, some old, and some rediscovered – distance learning, open learning, resource-based learning, problem-based learning, activity learning, flexible learning, e-learning, to name but a few. All are the result of two major (and related) developments. Firstly the internationalisation of Higher Education, inspired by the developments in communication and technology – and, in particular, the internet. Secondly, a fundamental shift in the focus of learning from being lecturer or teacher centred to being student-centred, recognising that people learn in different ways, at different rates.

The mission of Interactive University, the global Publishing and Distribution Company for the Scottish Higher and Further Education sector, is to maximise the international distribution of Scottish Education. We serve nearly 100,000 students around the world, who access learning through a network for 35 local learning partner institutions in 20 countries. The majority of our programmes lead to a Scottish educational award from secondary school level through to undergraduate bachelor degree level to post-graduate master's degree level.

IU's approach in delivering programmes in partnership with approved, local institutions ensures that all learning is embedded within a context and that learners feel part of, and included within a learning community. A critical component of our business model is treating our overseas partners as peers. Their involvement is crucial to the success of every programme. It is this face to face tutorial support, as well as the relevant, contextualised programme which makes courses delivered through IU and its partners different from traditional distance learning options – and we know these reasons to be why we have a growing global campus of peers.

In the last six months, since its formation, Interactive University has taken on the development and distribution of six core programmes from Heriot-Watt University, and is in the process of negotiating an extended syllabus from other Universities in Scotland.

The most popular under-graduate programme is the Heriot-Watt Management Programme which has 1200 current students. The Business Foundation Course, which is a precursor to the Management Programme, for students seeking additional skills in English, Information Technology and Mathematics is also extremely popular - particularly in the Middle East.

However, IU is also responsible for distributing Heriot-Watt SCHOLAR – the world's largest e-learning programme. SCHOLAR empowers students through the online provision of Scottish Advanced Higher, Higher, Higher National Certificate and Heriot-Watt University first level courses, and there are 60,000 registered users in Scotland alone. In May 2003, 30,000 students in Hong Kong logged onto SCHOLAR when their schools closed due to the SARS outbreak.

South East Asia is IU's largest and most mature market and where China and India, in particular, demonstrate the greatest potential. Given that between them, India, Malaysia and China are home to 75% of the world's population, this is perhaps unsurprising! These emerging economies have an intense hunger for learning and knowledge and it is this seemingly insatiable appetite which is driving the market forward.

Courses delivered through IU are absolutely identical to those delivered at Universities in Scotland. There is no distinction between the education received by the student studying an IU programme overseas or one studying, for example, the same course at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. The syllabus and content are identical. The examinations are identical. The examiners are identical. Validation is identical.

In terms of value, students who can study at home and qualify with an internationally recognised degree which includes relevant, localised content are extremely well qualified and a valuable addition to the local economy. Many of our students study in a mixed mode - that is both through supported distributed-learning in their home country and coming to Scotland for a few months of study.

Because IU offers a fully articulated suite of programmes from foundation programmes to post-graduate degree level, almost all of our students go on to further study with IU after completing a course. In doing so they have the ability to develop their career from the mix of programmes offered by IU's four Virtual Schools: Management, Informatics, Life Sciences and Engineering.

We look forward to welcoming our Polish friends into the global campus.