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**LTSN Bioscience
Book Review**

Bioscience

Reviewer:

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Details of Book:

Title: Virtual University: Educational Environments of the Future Wenner-
Gren International Series vol 79)

Date/Edition: 2001

Author(s): Ed HJ van der Molen

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Description: Proceedings of a workshop held at the Wenner-Gren Centre in
Stockholm (1999). The book comprises 12 chapters from and international group of
educationalists, academics and ICT technologists. The text is also available
electronically at <http://vu.portlandpress.com>

Further Information:

Intended audience level (e.g. A Level, undergraduate, access): academic staff

Area of application: Science education (check all those that apply):

Summary:

Now please summarise your opinion of this book:

Academic Content:	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Below Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Above Average
Usefulness to student:	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Below Average	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Above Average
Usefulness to teacher:	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Below Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Above Average
Meets objectives:	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Below Average	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Above Average
Accuracy:	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Below Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Above Average

Review:

The volume is the proceedings of a workshop held at the Wenner-Gren Centre in Stockholm (1999) . It comprises 12 chapters composed by an international group of educationalists, academics and ICT technologists. The chapters set out the scope of the book, review definitions, discuss both theoretical and practical aspects of the application of CIT to virtual education, present examples of applications and

Review: Virtual University? Educational Environments

summarise the status and future directions of virtual higher education. The book is aimed at graduate educationalists, those involved in course delivery, managers of learning environments and authors of virtual learning media.

The book adopts an advanced approach to the topic. It is illustrated in places with diagrams and tables, but on the whole requires some time to assimilate. Reading is not assisted by the very small font size in the hard copy. The book can be used for reference purposes, although only some chapters are suitable for refereeing.

I have not come across any other book with this scope of reference. Despite the fact that the workshop on which it is based was held two years ago, the ideas presented are for the most part fresh and contemporary. I have learned something from reading the book, would refer back to some of the chapters, and believe that it has influenced my views of CIT applications in learning as well as student-centred learning philosophy in general. I read the book with little background in educational theory beyond basic concepts but found the book understandable.

Chapter 1: Deals with the question 'is ICT the universal solution to the challenges facing universities?'. It rightly identifies the core identifying feature of the university in the broadest sense as the effective meeting of the minds of scholars. Beyond this it addresses important practical issues such as programme attendance and completion rates. These are the appropriate issues to address first and the chapter is a refreshing introduction, which orientates the reader who is sceptical or cynical of 'blind proponents' of CIT in Learning and teaching.

Chapter 2: Considers the place of universal knowledge and the meeting of minds, which surprisingly are concepts of John Newman written 150 years ago. It shows both the historic and the radical nature of his proposal to destroy the importance of universities as a physical place. The chapter follows on the reflective theme of the first, and contains good definitions (for those who need them) of the virtual university.

Chapter 3: An attempt to introduce concepts of management. I found this chapter less helpful, since it deals with concepts (the single, dual and mixed-mode institution) which are not defined and fully introduced until half-way through the chapter. The chapter establishes a useful 5-fold framework (policy, context, educational, philosophical, strategic) in which to place management, but asks more questions than it answers.

Chapter 4: A brief chapter which deals with what we mean by information and knowledge and how they interact. It also considers the place of universities in this interaction. A useful bridging chapter to the next 3.

Chapter 5: I found this chapter the most useful, Martin Valcke sets out to encourage institutions not to use ICT-based learning techniques before performing a systematic educational analysis of the institution in order to 'match' current educational philosophy with the proposed technological framework. We are asked to pursue the question 'why web-based education?' and to consider whether both students and academics have both experience and faith in it. The review of educational models provided is a good introduction for any academic who is not already familiar with them. Evaluating the current status of the institution is assisted with the provision of a 'congruency checklist'. Progress to ICT transformation is then facilitated by a table which relates traditional educational model components to internet activities and facilities. The policy is then exemplified through the transition already undergone in the Dutch Open University. The chapter advocates a cautious approach to virtual learning for sound reasons.

Chapter 6: This article by Dochy and Segers is a natural sequel to chapter 5, in which the same reasoned approach to CIT implementation is applied to the practical design of assessment and student management as part of the learning environment. These are both contemporary issues in many HE institutions, and it is important that they are considered alongside the presentation of the learning environment. The chapter concludes with four challenges: To review the quality of assessment instruments, to apply them systematically, to ensure staff are thoroughly trained in their use, and to bear in mind that the effectiveness of assessment instruments on learning effectiveness is still being researched.

Chapter 7: To reinforce the conservative approach, this chapter illustrates how development of a new learning package using both paper and electronic delivery has benefits where both media have demonstrable advantages. The handbook/textbook is seen as the first and most accessible method of delivery, suitable for rapid cross-referencing different educational 'modules'. CD-ROM and website versions are seen as complementary, and provide special advantages for routes of access, interactive study, data logging, distance learning etc. The article emphasises the value of student testing of the electronic resources after the textbook has been produced, particularly to enable them to experience their potential at an early stage.

Chapter 8: This article goes on to provide a further example of internet-based education for a special application - Action learning in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This chapter is likely to be of minimal

Review: Virtual University? Educational Environments

value in HE, since academics are unfamiliar or even hostile to the reflective approach advocated in action learning. There is a possibility for its application in staff training or postgraduate education.

Chapter 9: This brief chapter deals with the social implications of virtual learning, concluding that HE institutions are perhaps best placed to drive progress in virtual learning since they are best placed to review educational trends and act in a strategic manner. The chapter might be better placed at the end of this book.

Chapters 10 and 11: I found these chapters the least helpful. The first deals with concepts of 'teleiversity/andraversity/virtual university' – concepts which in contrast to those considered elsewhere in the book, are poorly defined. The chapter lists 6 virtual campuses in Korea and considers the (rather predictable) implications for the future of the country's HE system. The chapter following adopts an 'economic and social development approach' to virtual as opposed to real campuses. It is written in very opaque language and is unlikely to have much to say to science academics.

Chapter 12: The concluding chapter aims to look at the future of virtual learning from several standpoints: the nation, the university, its staff, its students and their prospective employers. It reminds us that, although review and evaluation are critical to the development of ICT in universities, there is a need for urgency to ensure Cupertino rather competition between institutions: a fact which is critical to their survival.

In conclusion, I have found some of the chapters of this book very helpful. Some are less than helpful, mainly because they are either poorly written or out of place, at least with an audience of academics in mind.

The two main points I have assimilated from the book are (i) that educational provision in HE is no longer the remit only of universities (ii) nevertheless universities are best placed to develop technologies for ICT provision, (iii) that the transformation to ICT must be made at every level on the basis of sound educational decisions.