Editorial

The new dividing line between richness and poverty is not between the haves and the have-nots but between the knows and the don't knows. (Schwab, 1999)

At times of major educational change we are reminded of those things of lasting value which are of formative significance for learning and teaching – those things which empower students to gain riches in the form of knowledge, understanding and skill. At the threshold of the twenty-first century it is good to acknowledge, again, that our main job as educators, learning technologists and researchers is at all times to encourage and foster such richness in all of our students. Learning technology has an exceptionally productive potential role to play in this empowerment: the role of the Association of Learning Technology in promoting good practice in the use of learning technologies is therefore particularly highlighted at the start of a new century.

This special edition of *Alt-J* in the year 2000 marks a time of major transition in the further education (FE) sector. Witness the emergence of the national and local Learning and Skills Councils, national changes to the Advanced Level curriculum and the new emphasis being placed on the transition from further to higher education with the funding of further lifelong learning governmental initiatives and growth-inducing new F/HE developments such as the foundation degree. Paramount amongst these changes has been recent formative progress in the establishment and use of learning technologies in FE, including the National Learning Network (NLN), and major infrastructural, funding and strategic policy improvements in the networking of all FE colleges. The year 2000 marks, in effect, the beginning of a new era for IT in FE.

It is therefore entirely appropriate at this time to devote a special edition of *Alt-J* to the consideration of learning technology research developments in FE. So much has been happening so fast in IT in FE – whether interpreted as 'Information and Learning Technology' (ILT) or 'Information and Communications Technology' (ICT) – that we need to examine its impact on learning and teaching, and to attempt through critical analysis to

discriminate between those things that will prove ultimately to be relatively superficial changes, and those which will have lasting value.

Yet such analysis is not without difficulty, since research in the FE sector is still nascent. The formative work of the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) in encouraging the emergence of the Further Education Research Network (FERN) recognizes the research potential of FE as the education sector providing for the largest number of UK students, but with perhaps the least evidence of published research work. Such new research initiatives have only recently begun to stimulate the growth of a research culture embracing critical conceptual analysis. Distinctive features of developmental practitioner-led and agency-funded research in FE have been evolving, encouraged by FEDA, to foster new conceptions of the application of research to further education. A debate between different strands of research in FE, including action-based, policy-led, and agency-funded research, has therefore begun to emerge which does not yet embrace shared perceptions of the kind of critical, analytical, independent, peer-reviewed academic research generally prevalent in HE.

To foster specific learning technology applications resulting from this debate, this special edition of *ALT-J* focuses particularly on research into the use of learning technologies across the three main strands in ILT/ICT (Information and Learning Technology/Information and Communications Technology) in FE of national policy, research developments and case studies. The volume consists of nine papers, and each of the three main strands opens with an invited positioning paper outlining the unique perspectives of a number of leading staff with particular knowledge of the FE sector. The contributions of these key staff give an invaluable shaping perspective at a time of such major development in IT usage in FE, following the allocation in 1998 of £74 million of government funding for a three-year programme of IT infrastructural improvements.

The research papers that follow each positioning paper give an outline marking out a new, diverse, as yet mainly uncharted, territory for analytical research into IT in FE. Like the markers of pioneers into a new conceptual world in learning technology research in further education, they remind us both of our past and of our future potential, embracing both the known and the unknown. In this they remind us that the significant issue of improving learning and teaching through the use of learning technologies is the key factor with which to examine critically the major changes currently facing the further education sector.

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This is the second in our series of *ALT-J* special issues: last year's industrial issue reported on a selection of BT's initiatives and research work. These special issues are valuable in that they help us to position the general research work reported in *ALT-J* within the wider context and in particular help us to benchmark and compare activities across sectors. This special issue on FE highlights the fact that many of the issues around the use and integration of learning technologies are cross-sectorial, despite the considerable cultural differences between the FE and HE sectors. It is also timely, given the recent move towards a closer integration of the tertiary sector within the UK (fuelled in part by the desire to

share best practice and pool resources) and evidenced in the recent announcement of the extension of the remit of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to cover FE as well as HE. We hope that this issue will act as a snapshot of FE in this transition period, which will provide a valuable reference point in the light of potential future developments.

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