

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

The Virtual University as a Frontier for Navigating New Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

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We explore the practical and strategic considerations essential for establishing and maintaining a successful virtual university. Building on core concepts from the book, *Technology Enhanced Learning and the Virtual University* (Sankey et al., 2023) we highlight the need for strategic approaches to online and digital education. This panel discussion will cover governance, the virtual environment, stakeholder support, the alignment of learning theory and practice, and the preparation of educators for online teaching. It will explore the necessity of collaboration to leverage digital opportunities and mitigate risks. Additionally, the panel will address the transformative impact of artificial intelligence and gamification on online learning and consider academic integrity and student engagement along the way. Our discussion will emphasise the importance of adaptive leadership and robust quality processes. While our focus is on the development of a virtual university, the topics we present are relevant across all aspects of digital education and e-learning, especially as universities adapt to an evolving educational landscape.

Keywords: virtual university, strategic approach, digital learning, online pedagogy, governance

The Virtual University as a catalyst for change

Creating, enabling, and supporting a virtual university demands a comprehensive strategic approach that goes beyond incremental innovations to achieve scalable progress. This involves setting clear strategic direction and robust governance structures that lay the foundation for action. Engagement with relevant stakeholders is critical to ensure commitment and buy-in (Marshall, 2023; Smallman & Ryan, 2023). A successful strategy must also incorporate solid quality foundations within systems, processes and measures of success (Marshall, 2023). This means developing and implementing quality assurance frameworks that monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of both programs and technologies to meet education standards and student expectations.

The transition to a virtual university necessitates a cultural transformation that requires adaptive leadership and a visionary outlook from senior leadership (Ashford Rowe et al., 2023; Wolfe, 2015). Leaders must be flexible and forward thinking and capable of steering institutions through the complexities of digital transformation, while fostering a culture that embraces change and innovation (Bawany, 2019). Educators play a pivotal role in this transformation because online education demands that educators not only understand but also effectively implement digital pedagogies. It is further essential that the technologies used for learning and teaching are thoughtfully integrated to engage virtual learners at a deep cognitive level (Lai & Markauskaite, 2023; Sim & Huijser, 2023). This includes leveraging interactive and adaptive learning tools, promoting active learning strategies, and continuously refining teaching methods based on feedback and learning analytics.

Indeed, learning analytics are an important element of the virtual university, as they provide valuable insights that can instruct teaching practices, enhance learning outcomes and inform learning strategies. These data-driven insights enable educators to identify student needs, track progress, and tailor instructional approaches to improve student engagement and achievement. By effectively using data, educators can make informed decisions that support personalised learning experiences and foster academic success (Jones & Fitzgerald, 2023).

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Educator roles are also changing, and increasingly more is required of our educators than discipline knowledge alone. Supporting educators through continuous professional development is vital to ensure they remain adept at applying technologies and pedagogical approaches to support their work and, in doing so, enhance the overall quality of education. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement to innovate practice, virtual universities can provide high-quality, accessible education to a diverse student body (Sankey et al., 2023), particularly in the age of GenAI, where educator development can inform effective teaching and good student outcomes.

Supporting quality practices in a virtual setting also requires a learner-centred model with scaffolded supports for learner-to-learner interactions. These peer interactions are essential in all human learning activities and enabling students to choose what to learn and to find resources to assist them can contribute to an engaging learning environment (Mehall, 2020). In the virtual environment, networking around key topics within a supportive community enhances learner diversity and meaningful engagement, which is not always matched in more traditional educational contexts (Ostashewski, 2023). Thoughtfully designed peer and collaborative assessment processes also support the development of a wide range of transferable personal, interpersonal, and technical skills, and they embody learner-centred assessment (Sankey et al., 2023). Informed by theories such as social constructivism and connectivism, such an approach emphasises the importance of active learning (Campbell & Tran, 2023) and supports the aim to create self-directed and motivated learners who leverage the affordances of their networks to thrive in a dynamic and interconnected educational landscape (Ünlüsoy, 2022). Artificial Intelligence (AI), and GenAI in particular, are poised to play a pivotal role in the evolution of the virtual university, which positions the virtual university not just as a convenor of knowledge but as an engine for extending the knowledge community (Mason, 2023). This model further suggests that this community could evolve to generate new pedagogical constructs for use by both individuals and artificial entities.

Establishing a successful virtual university, therefore, involves a holistic strategy that includes clear governance, quality assurance, cultural transformation, purposeful pedagogies and robust support for educators. This strategic approach is essential for navigating the dynamic landscape of online education and ensuring that virtual universities can deliver on their promise of high-quality, scalable, and engaging learning experiences.

Panel Members

Professor Michael Sankey: University Senior Leadership Learning Futures. Expertise in strategic planning and governance.

Associate Professor Henk Huijser: Specialist in educational technology and educator training.

Associate Professor Rachel Fitzgerald: Leader in Online Education and advocate for external collaborations and partnerships

We will begin with brief presentations from each member, followed by an interactive discussion. Attendees will be encouraged to participate through Q&A and group activities designed to explore the practical implications of establishing a virtual university. The group activity, designed to explore the practical implications of creating a virtual university, will involve participants working together in small groups to tackle specific challenges and scenarios related to the creation and management of a virtual university. Each group will focus on a different aspect of the virtual university: governance, technology integration, educator training, and student engagement.

Key takeaways: Strategic insights, practical tools, and collaborative strategies for advancing online education.

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