

GetReal: Building and managing essential academic learning from the academic periphery



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Operating from the margins of the formal curriculum and with relatively limited resources, student orientation faces unique teaching and learning challenges in representing the ideas and values of the academic world in a form that is relevant and engaging for prospective students in the non-academic world outside. Online learning adds a further layer of complexity in the technical medium through which the ideas and values must flow. *GetReal*, a web-based orientation program for independent use by prospective online/distance students, tackles these challenges with a strategy that moves away from information-based orientation to focus more on the kind of border-crossing practices that enable students to operate at a genuinely independent level among the overlapping contexts of study, technology and personal life. Practices of reality-checking, confidence-building, choosing and self-motivating are enabled through a relatively simple technical concept: the online interactive checklist expanded and elaborated to the point of forming the framework of a whole orientation website and the whole orientation experience. From first moment of contact, the student user stands within a framework that not only assumes active participation in the orientation process but makes it difficult to avoid. The conceptual framework of the *GetReal* site is outlined and its practical implementation described in relation to content architecture and use of technology. The conceptual vision embodied in the *GetReal* site provides a framework for discussion on the construction and delivery of student orientation in online and distance learning environments.

Keywords: orientation, postgraduate, distance, online, student support, health sciences

Addressing orientation to distance/online learning

Meeting the continuing professional education needs of busy health professionals requires flexible approaches. Postgraduate coursework programs are increasingly using distance education and in particular online learning strategies to achieve this. The latter add yet another dimension, the use of new technologies, to the suite of new skills and knowledge which commencing students must rapidly develop. Student support has a long history in traditional distance education drawing on knowledge of the student body (Evans, 1994), guidance and periodic research (Motteram & Forester, 2005). Orientation for commencing distance and online learners, the first key element of student support, figures in the conversation but less strongly than that of support for students engaged in their formal coursework. Strategies reported (e.g. self-rating for readiness, provision of comprehensive information, group sessions) remain similar in spite of the advent of ubiquitous information and communication technologies. Concerns also remain similar: insufficient student use of orientation resources, lack of participation in activities, student naivete in self-assessment. Given the plethora of research findings which indicate the value of student support in general in preventing drop-out and supporting course completion (e.g. Anderson, Annand & Wark, 2005; Bozarth, Chapman & LaMonica, 2004), meeting the challenge of engaging distance learners in appropriate orientation continues to be an important goal for programs and institutions delivering distance and online learning (Brescia, Miller, Ibrahima & Murry, 2004). As the content elements of reported orientation programs and materials vary little, it was postulated that attention needed to be focussed on design of the orientation experience. In this paper we present the rationale and the design principles of *GetReal*, the first part of a three part orientation suite: *GettingOnTrack*, which comprises *GetReal*, *GetStarted*, and *GetLearning*.

Background

This work was carried out for the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Sydney, a very large Australian research-intensive, primarily campus-based urban university. Although the curriculum context is the allied health sciences, the issues are reflected across the broad field of specialist postgraduate education. The Faculty of Health Sciences is a provider of numerous specialist postgraduate coursework programs (graduate certificate, diploma, master's) for which the demand is not limited to metropolitan Sydney but rather is statewide, national and, increasingly, global. In addition to this geographic challenge, students are overwhelmingly enrolled part-time (76% of postgraduate coursework students in 2006), are likely to be employed and/or to have family responsibilities. To meet the demand, these programs are offered by distance education. There is no single distance teaching model in the Faculty; programs range from a primarily independent study and print-supported model to a primarily online and interactive model. Technology supported teaching and learning is universal, however, with the use of email, web publishing, sophisticated online library resources and increasing use of the university's enterprise learning management system. This diversity of approaches is an outcome of curriculum history, professional needs, and resource availability. Whatever the course teaching and learning model, orientation for new students – who may never visit Sydney – is a necessity.

In response a University supported strategic elearning development project was carried out in 2006 to design, develop and pilot an orientation program to meet the needs of these diverse programs and students. The design brief was informed by review of accessible orientation sites on the web, the extensive experience of the University's elearning help desk since the introduction of WebCT in 2001, literature on orientation to distance and online learning and local formal and informal research on commencing students' views of their orientation needs. Ultimately named *GettingOnTrack*, the guiding principles included active learning to engage users, confidence building, modeling of good practice, and a timeline beginning at inquiry. *GetReal*, the first element, is an open-to-the-world web resource for prospective and commencing students. *GetReal* is the subject of the remainder of this paper. The resource itself can be found on the University's Faculty of Health Sciences website at URL: <http://www.fhs.usyd.edu.au/getreal>.

Existing practices in prospective student orientation

The range of web-based orientation resources currently provided on the open-web for prospective students at pre-enrolment and pre-commencement stages of study is currently limited to two basic types: (1) information package in the form of mini-website and (2) self-rating checklist/s for study readiness. In the thirteen orientation websites reviewed as part of the initial investigation for the *GetReal* site, resources consisted primarily of mini-website type information package, supplemented by a study readiness checklist in some cases, with the check-list taking two forms: either static or dynamic. The static form is a simple list of reflective questions. The dynamic form is a kind of self-test quiz where users respond to a series of questions, usually multiple-choice, and receive an automatic rating of their study readiness based on the responses given.

Information web-sites standing in isolation fail to address the essential question of how to get students using them. Information-centred student orientation comes with the inherent limitation of all information-based learning in ignoring how students process and interpret the information given. In the orientation context, a strategy of active engagement becomes particularly important and information-centred approaches particularly fraught. Outside the bounds of the formal curriculum structure, information that does not seem of immediate importance from the student perspective is readily ignored.

Study-readiness checklists appear to offer the beginning of an engagement strategy in presenting the student with something to do: evaluate their chances of successful study using a set of given measures. The checklist engagement strategy, however, comes with a requirement that the user be already well-prepared for the kind of high level cognitive exercise that it provides. To a certain extent, it is study orientation for the already well-oriented. Rather than building engagement, the checklist strategy takes it for granted. For users not approaching the resource in a deep reflection frame of mind, there is not much to lead them there. From this perspective, a static check-list may appear little different from an information page: just another list of things to keep in mind for the future but of no actionable consequence in the present. An interactive quiz type check list may actually be counterproductive, reducing the complex reflective challenge of study preparation to a simple "tick the box" exercise, where readiness for further study becomes nothing more than an ability to pick multiple-choice answers that are often obvious from the start.

As students move further down the study track to their official point of commencement, a wider range of orientation resources becomes available, including hard-copy orientation packs and orientation mini-courses with either compulsory or optional participation. Mini-courses in particular offer greater possibilities for active engagement of students and may seem the most appropriate means of dealing with active learning related issues. However, the delivery timing of these resources, at point of commencement, puts them out of synch and out of reach for students in pre-enrolment and pre-commencement phase. Apart from the timing issue, traditional orientation packs and mini courses also face difficulties of pedagogical design in building student engagement with study orientation issues. Information packages tend to come with an information rather than an engagement focus, leaving the task of orienting students to a more engaged style of learning for the formal course environment (assuming that the course itself takes on that responsibility rather than passing the responsibility back to student orientation services or the student themselves). Mini-course type orientation raises a different problem. The task of actively engaging students is brought forward to an earlier date rather than leaving it for the formal course of study but this is done by replicating many of the features of the formal course itself, in particular the substantial claims of time and effort that formal study imposes on its participants.

Course-based student orientation brings with it, by its very nature, a need for some sort of previous orientation to prepare students for course itself. Here arises the dilemma of whether the course is to be compulsory or not. In both cases, the question remains: how are students to become actively engaged in the process? One way or another, substantial issues of student preparation remain up in the air. If the orientation course is voluntary, the question still remains of how students are to be persuaded to voluntarily join. If the course is compulsory, it leaves the domain of early preparation behind altogether, engaging with students only when they are already committed to the study program that the course is supposed to be preparing them for. Question of how students come to make that commitment in the first place remain unaddressed.

The course based solution to the need for early reflection on the demands of formal study is essentially one of adding an extra step inside the formal program itself, leaving students still very much on their own until they cross the threshold into the program itself. The boundary wall is moved forward rather than bridged. While course-based orientation plays a major part in the overall orientation solution, it cannot be considered a complete solution in itself, particularly in regard to the needs of pre-enrolment and pre-commencement students. It is precisely the difficulty of addressing early orientation needs in the same framework as point-of-commencement issues that gave rise to the staged orientation concept in which *GetReal* forms the first part.

Determining initial orientation requirements

The specific requirements and issues of the pre-enrolment and pre-commencement phase of study orientation for online and distance mode need to be defined more precisely. The overall framework employed here draws on a combination of broad theoretical principle and practical experience. Wenger's concept of learning as a crossing of boundaries that enclose a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) provides a broad starting point for defining what study orientation entails from a learning point of view. It is a question of getting across the outer threshold of the academic community of practice. Conceptualising the student orientation resource as a 'border object' anchored in different practice worlds of academic and non-academic life and working from their practical differences points to a number of specific requirements for effective orientation support. The issues of practice, differences between practices, and entry into practice, in particular, need to be closely addressed. The mission of the student orientation resource operating at the external non-academic interface may be conceived as one of creating a practice-oriented environment with the following features:

- *Reality-checking practice - practice that questions.* There's no point trying to establish a sense of academic reality by prescription for someone who stands in a substantially different context. Preliminary student orientation needs to contain an element of stopping and checking of assumptions about future study rather than explanation of what the correct assumptions should be.
- *Confidence building practice - practice that confirms.* Confidence is no less important than readiness to question in finding a path between conflicting realities. The reality-checking and confidence building requirements obviously pull in opposing directions to some degree, but balance between the two must nevertheless be found.
- *Elective practice - practice in choosing.* Preliminary student orientation is a matter of free choice from two perspectives. Students firstly stand outside the constraints of the academic world. They can

choose to participate in orientation activities or not, based on the extent to which the activities appear to address their immediate needs and interests. Secondly, these students stand at the point of choosing to leave their current state of freedom and pass into the academic zone. The needs and interests to be addressed in preliminary student orientation are bound up with the process of deciding on readiness to assume the responsibilities that further study entails. The choice of taking on (or not) the responsibilities of future study is necessarily the main focus of student orientation in the initial phase.

- *Self-motivating practice - practice in pushing forward in face of uncertainty.* Student orientation supports prospective students projecting themselves imaginatively into the world of future study. There is an element here of the traditional pedagogical values of engagement and independent learning but also something extra that comes from overwhelming dependence on whatever the prospective student personally brings to the process. Student self-direction in the orientation context needs more than fostering or encouragement. It has to be kick-started from the beginning as it is the only force available to drive participation. What carries students forward is not just a sense of interest or stimulation but a sense of personal implication: This is not just an adventure game. It is your life.

The student orientation concept outlined here is process-centred by contrast with the prevailing content-centred approaches. Key content concerns such as orientation to the learning space, information environment and pedagogical approach (Levy, 2006) are still there to be addressed but within a broader framework where content itself is no longer the main point but rather practical uses that it might be put by the prospective student in questioning, confirming, deciding and pushing themselves on the issue of how ready they might be for the commitments further study.

The *GetReal* design

The basic design concept of the *GetReal* student orientation resource is a much expanded form of interactive study-readiness quiz, with a range of enhancements that lift the design beyond the rote response patterns of the quiz format and bring it closer to the complex multi-dimensional processes of real-life decision making. It becomes less of a quiz and more of a scenario building tool, where the flow on implications of user choices progressively aggregate through multiple pathways to present the user with an overall picture of study preparedness that is detailed, multi-dimensional and based in serious reflection. There are no right and wrong answers in the final analysis, only choices and consequences with an overall meaning and value unique to the individual user. The critical features underpinning the function of the *GetReal* design as a framework of reflective choice are structural diversification, content integration, and immediacy.

Structural diversification

The *GetReal* design involves a coordinated battery of self-tests, not just a single stand-alone check list. The overall structure comprises three main constituents shown in the site map (Figure 1): (1) an 'activity zone' containing the interactive self-tests, (2) an information zone containing information pages relating to the various issues canvassed in the self-test area and (3) a homepage setting the decision-making context of the package of the whole. There are three main study readiness self-tests with focus on technology issues, course requirements and study-life balance respectively. Each test comes with a relatively advanced level of internal complexity and cognitive challenge, but with no standard pattern. The interactive check-list takes a distinct evolutionary trail in each case to the point where the common ancestry is barely recognisable. The internal design of each self-test is uniquely adapted to the type of study readiness issue under consideration with conceptual formats ranging from obstacle course in the technology self-test to a 'sudoku' type quantitative puzzle in study-life balance.

Content integration

The battery of self-test tasks possesses a critical mass which enables the tasks to dominate the overall structure of the orientation resource and its information content. The *GetReal* site is a practice activity based resource with supporting information pages rather than an information resource with practice activity added on. Integration of information content within the activity framework is further enhanced by cross-linking of information and self-test pages. The cross-linking creates reflective pathways where self-test feedback supplies direction and focus for reading of information pages while information pages become stepping stones for a round of self-testing. The integrated structure is underpinned by a simple xml-based course information database which enables consistent management of key content elements shared across the site.

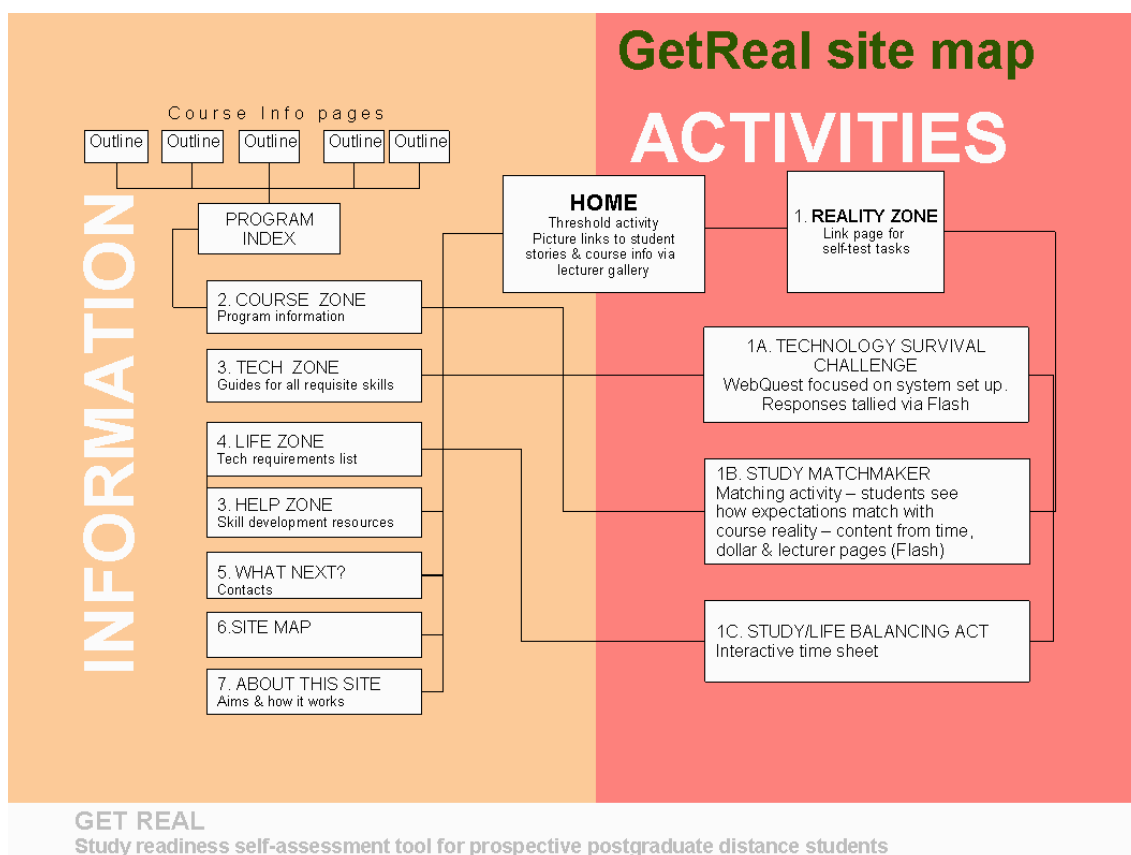


Figure 1: *GetReal* site map

The *GetReal* design also involves extensive integration between technology as content material and technology as medium of delivery. The level of technological sophistication on the site follows an upward curve through the activity side. Having the most important part of the site hedged with technology barriers comes, of course, with an obvious risk of exclusion where users are limited in equipment or skills. This, however, is the whole point of the rising curve technical challenge: to make it easy for users with lower levels of skills or equipment to enter the site but not so easy to leave without getting a clear, unmistakable message about the skills and resources needed for effective participation in online learning.

Immediacy

The immediacy of the study readiness self-test is based in a narrative framing that reduces the conceptual distance between the student user and the prospective consequences of their study choices (see Figure 2). A sense of accelerated movement from choice to consequence is created through a combination of devices starting with the structure of the whole site as a series of hyperlinked text objects embodying choice and consequence following in close succession. Consequences unleashed by one choice become trigger for others, carrying the user forward in a succession of rebounding movements. The onrush of impending consequence becomes a prompt for accelerated efforts to engage them. The strategy is something like the old trick of getting yourself to be on time by the moving your watch forward, but using contextual time signals instead of an actual timepiece.

Visual layout and scene-setting text play a critical role in bringing narrative momentum to making of study choice, particularly at homepage level. Here, the deciding of study readiness is brought forward from its natural position as ultimate conclusion of the initial orientation process and placed front and centre as the first thing the user addresses, as if the decision was virtually made. The whole weight of that decision is concentrated in a single hyperlinked button dominating the centre page, where users are asked to confirm their study readiness.

The centrally placed hyperlink button both challenges and compels in the same way that prominently based buttons always do, whether on software download pages or online shopping sites. The compelling force is augmented in this case by the natural tension resulting from being faced with the conclusion of an important personal decision before it has even started. Users are not obliged to confirm their study readiness but are placed in a position of having to struggle against the flow of the situation if they want to

avoid doing so. Careful consideration of choice is facilitated by closing off opportunities for avoidance. The confirmation button is a kind of threshold commitment test that compels the user to consider their position carefully right from the start. Response to the initial test underpins the overall flow of users through the site, splitting them into two streams according to the initial readiness that they express at this point, as illustrated in Figure 3.

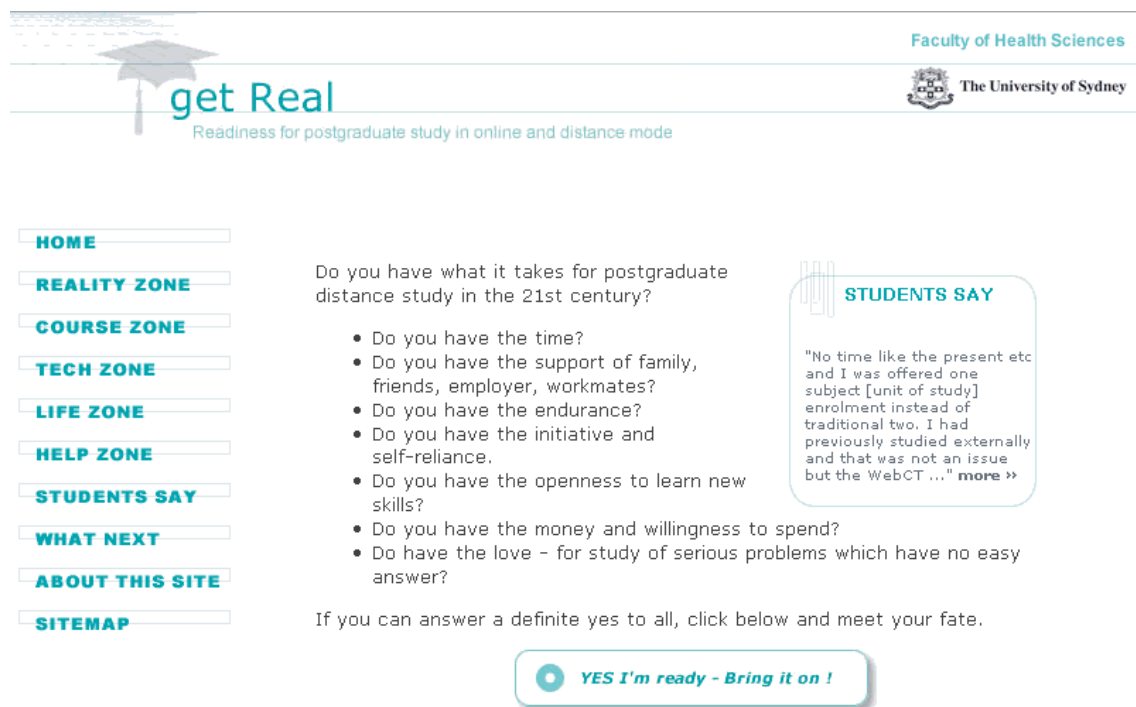


Figure 2: *GetReal* homepage

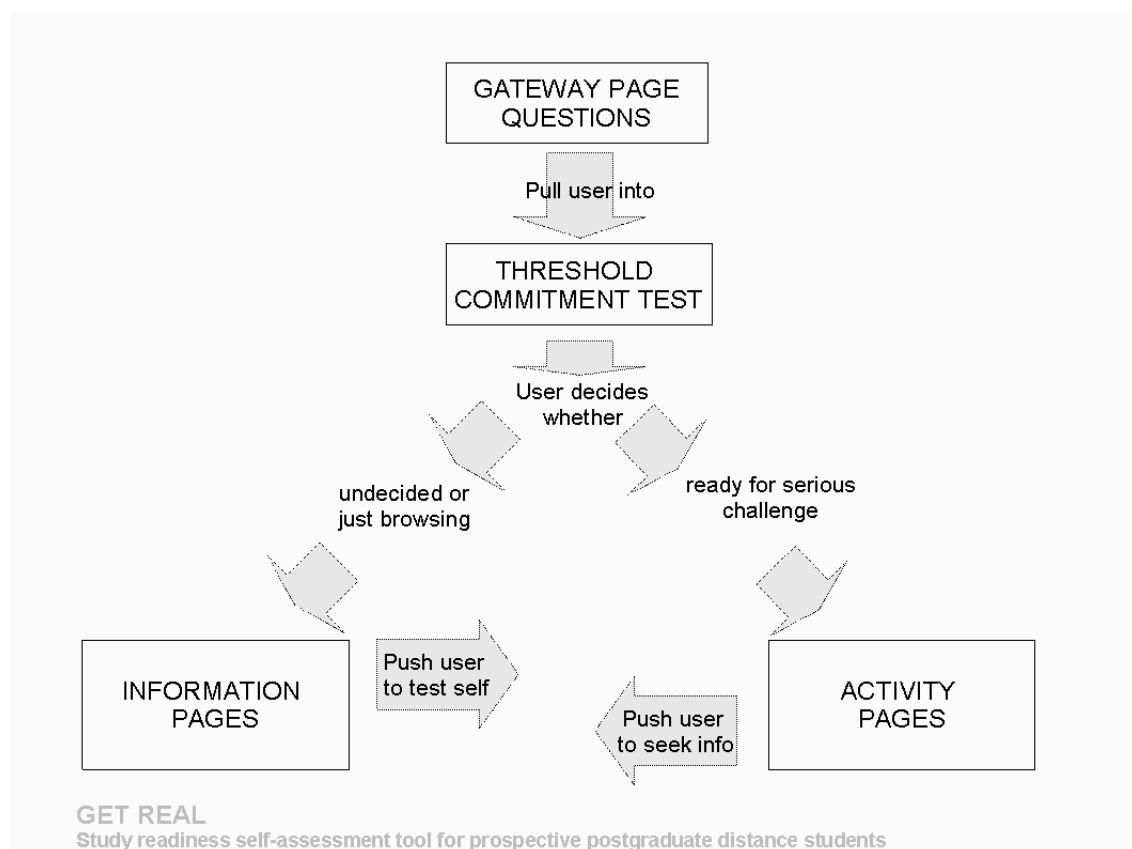


Figure 3: *GetReal* user pathways

How does the *GetReal* design measure up to requirements?

The four key requirements of student orientation practice outlined above all find a substantial expression in the *GetReal* design. The 'practice in choosing' element of student orientation is embedded throughout the site as part of the process of working through it. Every step from the homepage onwards is a challenge in reflective choice. User choice is enhanced by varied navigational pathways provided by the site. There is no obligation to follow any particular linear progression. Users do not have to read the information handouts before proceeding to the self-test stage. They can just as readily do the self-test first and find out what they need to read, if anything, before endeavouring to do so.

The 'practice in pushing forward' element of student orientation also comes into play with the accelerated construction of the movement from choice to consequence. The 'reality-checking' element is addressed firstly in the form of robust self-test activities targeting three major points of potentially clashing assumptions: technology, course requirements and study-life balance. A further reality checking element can be found in the way certain self-tests draw in elements of surrounding social and physical realities. The technology self-test is test of the prospective student's computer, software and internet connection, not just the person using them. The study-life balance self-test asks for a response from the user's family and/or work colleagues. 'Confidence-building' needs are met by detailed supportive feedback embedded in the self-test activities and by detailed procedural guides comprehensively covering all points of technological knowledge.

During development extensive formative review of the *GetReal* site was conducted. The effectiveness of the *GetReal* site, however, remains to be substantially tested in a number of critical areas. Its level of realism in anticipating the challenges of online-distance study may possibly be overdone or underdone or both. It may possibly 'frighten the horses'. The latter seems less likely than the former, but we cannot be certain of either without extensive investigation. The adequacy of the supporting information pages and embedded feedback likewise remains to be assessed. Evidence regarding navigational economy of the site and its ability to draw users in is also needed.

GetReal has been promoted on a trial basis since the second half of 2006. As an 'open to the world' site for students who have not yet enrolled, the site has no way of identifying its users for tracking of subsequent progress. Anecdotal feedback from trial course coordinators who actively promoted *GetReal* to prospective students is that there appeared to be fewer student problems in engaging with online study. Institutional factors, including the University's migration and updating of its learning management system, confounded the student experience in the first half of 2007. A more structured promotion of *GetReal* to potential 2008 commencing students is planned, as part of the *GettingOnTrack* orientation strategy.

Conclusion

With the final impact on learning remains to be explored, the *GetReal* case is best seen as a demonstration of theory to practice translation in educational design. The strength of *GetReal* is the creation of a clear cut pedagogically grounded model of how student orientation for online distance learning might be made to work sustainably in the online-distance medium. This model enables evaluation and fine-tuning of the practical implementation to be conducted in a consistent and productive manner, recognising that there may well be some fine tuning to go.

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