



Title:	R1.2_4: Segmentation Interviews Report – UK
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Reviewers:	Róbert Pintér (ISRI, Hungary)
Identifier:	R1.2_4
Type:	Report
Version:	Final version
Date:	07 September 2008
Status:	Final version
File:	NETIS_UK_segmentation_interviews_report_FINAL.doc

### *Summary*

This report summarizes the results from the researchers/teachers segmentation interviews carried out by UK NETIS partner's (Middlesex University) team between May and August 2007 in UK.

The United Kingdom universities have researched and written on information society for at least twenty five years often within the framework of wider interests in the interactions between science, technology and society. The NETIS project, in consequence, enters a field already rich with experience where there are practitioners showing commitment to its mission in the UK. Where the project Course Book breaks very important new ground in our view, and theirs, is in its setting of information society studies in the European context of law and institutions and the relevant policy which has changed our circumstances in the largest bloc of developed states in the world. The contribution of NETIS project to greater understanding among the most educated in society was universally welcomed by British respondents.

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# NETIS Interview Results, United Kingdom

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## PRACTITIONERS EXPECTATIONS OF TEACHING & RESEARCHING INFORMATION SOCIETY IN THE UK

By the NETIS Research Team, Middlesex University:

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Alan Richardson, Lynne Smith Social Research,  
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London, August 2008

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# Introduction

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British academics inhabit the information society to a large degree.

The United Kingdom universities have researched and written on information society for at least twenty five years often within the framework of wider interests in the interactions between science, technology and society expressed, for example, in the founding of undergraduate courses in a small number of polytechnics and universities in the late nineteen seventies in this new area of study. British higher education also benefits from studies in our language but generated in the US of America; a European contribution in English is new.

The tradition of mature student entry to part-time degree education, and to lifelong learning, exemplified by Birkbeck College London University and our largest university, the Open University, founded in the early nineteen seventies led to technology supporting teaching and learning innovations. This served the special needs of these students for distance learning through national radio and television presentations of study content which anticipated methods of communication which are now enhanced by each contemporary new medium for the transmission of information. They have international status.

The NETIS project, in consequence, enters a field already rich with experience where there are practitioners showing commitment to its mission in the UK. We were unable to secure interviews with the most prestigious however, but those who gave their time welcomed the opportunity to review the field and supported the aims of our project to generalise understanding of information society in higher education.

Where the project Course Book breaks very important new ground in our view, and theirs, is in its setting of information society studies in the European context of law and institutions and the relevant policy which has changed our circumstances in the largest bloc of developed states in the world.

# The interviewees' relation to information society

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We chose informants from within the London circle rather than our national grouping in the interests of accessibility but secured nevertheless a selection of different perspectives which illuminate salient aspects of the area.

A retired professor of science discusses the lengthy struggle to innovate teaching and learning in science and medicine using computer methods as they became available, while combatting the inertia of academic colleagues not all committed to using the new technological tools.

Another professorial intellectual technologist researching and teaching the interface of computers and humanity (especially in the sphere of air-traffic control) provides observations on our inadequate understanding of the process of e-learning and the e-mail!

A woman head of an e-learning unit comments on the growth of interactive student use of I-technology in the learning situation.

All of these are embedded in the process driving information society and are observing and encouraging its growth. Spreading a wider understanding of this process is what they have until now left to other writers.

Personal developments have often been persuaded by the availability of new technical means to progress a core professional interest through innovations using the news technical means.

# Core Issues for Information Society

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There was some significant consensus among our small sample about the topics and issues which they felt were central to propagating the advantages of information society. At the same time these facilities and their use change our interaction with each other.

In the sphere of higher education for example- it is now impossible for our respondents to imagine how students could study and write without the machines which we can now call upon to enhance the transfer of skills and knowledge. Where there is apprehension it lies in the tendency for the managers of organisations providing courses to attempt to reduce the contact time of staff and students in order to cut costs. This has led to staff continuing to promote independent learning by students through the writing of more course material and exercises which can be accessed by web and internet means. There is a strong contention here that this is not a negative but a positive pressure. Nevertheless, respondents feel, it should be argued not as a means to economy, but as a beneficial pedagogical innovation primarily.

Intensity of social interaction has risen but what the eventual consequence of this may be is a matter of ignorance, but concern. Our respondents reminded us that information society conceived more broadly than the computer, the web and the net but comprehending rather television, CD's and DVD's and the capacity to link these media through mobile phone technology is developing much more rapidly than our capacity to understand its ramifications.

British Governments throughout the late nineties and into the twenty first century have set aims to improve access to computing so that our respondents reflected this positive climate and approved of NETIS attempt to broaden and deepen understanding. All local government has been funded to place computing facilities in public libraries for free access, to combat the growth of an information poor class in society. Our respondents felt that any formation of such a class would be a reflection of existing social and economic structures not based in the nature of technical development in the UK.

The contribution of our work to greater understanding among the most educated in society was universally welcomed by British respondents.

# Comments on the Course Book content

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Our interviewees applauded the main purpose of the Course Book as a supplement integrating the specialised areas to which they [the students] will be pointed. They approved the European aspect of the knowledge base of the project which is absent from virtually all English language publications and hence will do much to enlarge the students' awareness of a future dimension of their social reality as they join the adult world of work. It was mentioned that it may be a counterweight to predictable American influence internationally.

## I. Topics which might be enlarged upon

There will need to be provision for regular revision, perhaps by NETIS, the Leonardo organisation or Unesco, of the policy developments in this area since policy is far from static. The Course Book itself as now manifested is less than entirely clear in this area. There have been suggestions that these issues might be alleviated by providing the Course Book online. (The Hungarian review of results does this).

The same awareness of revision will be required in the areas of economy and legislation.

Since e-learning is so central to student concerns it might be argued that greater attention might be given to the topic.

Is the use of mobile phones and texting by young people sufficiently analysed and discussed? E-mail phone access adds another dimension.

Is the labour market and work related issues sufficiently represented?

Is cultural change and change in the manipulation of images adequately represented in view of the interest of this to the young and the growing importance of the “cultural industries” economically?

Is it possible yet to make comparisons of information society internationally by continent rather than country?

Some of the attempts at definition are subject to argument and contention, justifiably, but they will also need revision and extension as the field of study enlarges and deepens.

# Teaching and Researching Information Society in Britain

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Our respondents agree that since computer literacy is widespread and growing amongst school age children and adolescents the provision of content explaining and interpreting the information society is a service that education should provide not only at higher level but also earlier in the process. Provision of these materials through the process of writing analyses and researching the issues and theories as they are identified is the foundation of our scientific and social understanding of the processes propelling us towards the information society.

Similarly, the continuous information revolution affects the adult population as much and possibly more than the young who in the main take the speed of change for granted. Having more investment in the status quo ante the adult population of different generations may be more in need of a framework to allow them to discuss and understand technical, social and economic changes which may dramatically alter their lives, and those of their families.

A central problem of describing then theorising the interactions of new technologies with the social and economic institutions and other groups and structures, is to identify the dynamics and the processes of change in action. It has been suggested that this continuous process of movement away from earlier forms of communication and interaction and towards the new type of social structure and process may provide opportunities for observation and experiment resulting in explanations. These studies should be organised in order to identify problems as they arise. They are then likely to reveal issues for debate and allow us to initiate policies to tackle the problems. This process may be used as a teaching and learning process in itself and might lead to a renewal of public interest in social and political action. These reflections are hinted at already in our text.

The concerns of British academics to develop technical innovations while others studied the employment and economic likely outcomes has been a continuous process over the last two decades. Our respondents are aware of this and although their own interests were specialist in application they all acknowledged that need for observation of the general situation which might make it possible to provide students with study material which can enhance their personal understanding of the information society and its possible consequences for them and their families.

# Comparative Country Reports

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Here respondents tended to revert to their specialisms to some extent; thus, technologically oriented professionals nominated technical comparisons- for example speed of spread of broadband, access to PC's or cost of access to internet services. Mobile phone use and access was less nominated than expected- though here full internet access through phone services is spreading more slowly except in cities. Use of imaging on phones might be illuminating.

Surprisingly perhaps a Government report (there is policy here) on the spread of broadband access in Britain recently said that the rural subscribers were 2% more likely to have broadband than urban subscribers. (June 2008). Both were over 50% of subscribers.

Social policy and economic interests laid more importance on demographic differences in access, use and competence. The age groups, especially contrasting the teens with the growing group of the aged. Sex comparisons and extending that, ethnic and religious differences by sex.

Economic and occupational groups were also nominated as worthy of comparison across nations and within the European Union.

# Annex – list of experts interviewed

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**Dr. K. Anagnostopoulou**, Head of E-Learning, Middlesex University, London

**J. Long**, Emeritus Professor of Cognitive Ergonomics, University College London

**Dr. David Porteous**, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Middlesex University, London

**A. J. Richardson**, University Lecturer (Retd.), Middlesex University, London

**A. Ryder**, e-Learning Research and Innovation Advisor, Middlesex University, London

**Dr. M. Tribe**, Senior Lecturer Emeritus, University of Sussex, England