

Virtual university education

Canada leads the way in post-secondary cyber education...

SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE
BY JEN ROSS

(OTTAWA). — Thanks to a new education software system, people previously shut out by distance, disability, work, or family responsibilities can now go to university — over the Internet.

The software system, dubbed Virtual-U, was created by researchers at the TeleLearning-NCE, which is funded through the federal Networks of Centers of Excellence program. Virtual-U uses a computer system connected to the Internet to create a set of virtual classrooms where students can interact with each other and their instructor, although they may be miles apart. They can view course material, have group discussions, upload assignments to their professor, and even check their grades.

Students can take individual Virtual-U classes, or tailor their own degree, selecting various on-line courses. Courses officially began in May of 1996 and over 2,500 people have logged on for classes since. A total of 45 on-line classes were offered out of Virtual-U's 15 Canadian field sites in the 96/97 school year alone.

In Virtual-U classes, there are no time constraints and almost no

full courses. People don't have to be on-line at the same time or on the same day. Classes are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and open discussion is continual.

It will particularly benefit students who need to work full time if they are to afford school and the cost of living, or parents who prefer to study at home. They can work and study without having to compromise one for the other. Proponents also note that because you can't see people in an on-line environment, there is less discrimination based on race, gender, or disability.

And while some fear technology will erase jobs, teachers are far from obsolete with Virtual-U. They have to design their courses, assign readings, guide discussions, lead tutorials, answer student's questions, and put lectures and notes up on the web in an accessible and attractive form.

By teaching on-line, professors will even be able to enrich their courses by bringing on-line guest lecturers from across the globe. They can also join forces with other professors and team teach.

"Instead of questioning new technology, people should be critical of the old," says Therese Laferriere, a University of Laval Education professor who has been

teaching Virtual-U courses for a year. "Once you discover that you can do it, then you don't fear technology anymore."

Another popular tool among students is V-Groups, a computer conference system developed for Virtual-U, which lets students engage in discussions, debates, team projects and seminars. Denise Stockley, field site coordinator and former Virtual-U student, says in a regular seminar a few students usually dominate the discussion, but because computer conferencing is asynchronous, everyone gets heard. Audio and video links are also available on the internet, which students can use if they want to see their professor and ask questions face-to-face.

Virtual-U is the first program of its kind on a national level, anywhere in the world. According to Thomas Calvert, co-leader of the TeleLearning-NCE, Canada must lead the way with this technology before U.S. universities start offering their courses here. American companies currently supply up to 90% of electronic course material.

The NCE funds going to TeleLearning result in an average annual research and development investment of \$3,275,000. They help fund 56 projects, of which Virtual-U is probably the best known. The TeleLearning-NCE links 130 researchers at 30 universities and 20 other public and private sector organizations. The NCE program is jointly funded by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Medical Research Council.

Mysterious oil spill in Halifax Harbour

BY NATALIE MACLELLAN

The Atlantic Division of Environment Canada received a call early Tuesday morning reporting a mysterious oil sheen in Halifax Harbour. It was a small spill, easily measured in gallons, of heavy oil — probably bunker fuel.

The polluting seems to have occurred Monday night at Pier 24. The source of the spill has not yet been identified. A nearby sewer

outfall was originally considered the most probable source. As well, there was a spill Monday night from a tugboat at Pier 23, which may have also been the source of the second slick.

The Coast Guard was on the scene and had the area contained for clean up and testing purposes. Oil samples were taken from the sheen and the tugboat to see if they matched.

All that glitters

Proposed gold mine threatens to destroy unique Cape Breton barren

BY NATALIE MACLELLAN

On December 3, 1996, the Nova Scotia government removed Jim Campbell's Barren from a list of protected areas. The barren covers 1,700 hectares and is located just south of the Cape Breton Highlands National Park. In 1994 it was designated as a candidate protected wilderness area in the province.

Mining companies have long been searching for gold and other minerals in the Jim Campbell's Barren area. Since 1995, two companies, North Cape Breton Resources and Highland Range Minerals, staked more than 100 claims in and near the barren area. On November 25, 1996, Regal Goldfields in Toronto announced it would buy 1.5 million in shares of the two companies, and announced a desire to begin exploration in the still protected area.

Presentations from locals, particularly those in the nearby community of Cheticamp, prompted the government to change the status of the area. The Cheticamp Development Commission (CDC) has been influential in reopening the area for exploration, believing the community will benefit from a possible mining project. A projected 1.4 million dollars will be spent in the area in 1997 by the two companies. The people of the region have been hit hard by the collapse of the cod fishery, which has taken \$10 million from the annual economy.

An independent geological evaluation of the barren undertaken by the CDC has reported that it has high mineral potential and that it is not likely a unique ecosystem.

Jim Campbell's Barren is a 450m high plateau in the Cape Breton Highlands. It is still largely unknown biologically, but is known to be the home of several rare species. The area's combination of bog and barren is the only of its kind in the Boreal zone (northern North America, Europe, and Asia).

Many people believe that the government's decision to change the status of the barren was political, rather than economical. A former provincial cabinet minister, Gerald Doucet, is listed as director and executive on both North Cape Breton Resources and Highland Range Minerals. He has also been added to Regal Goldfields' management group. Former premier John Savage told the Globe and Mail that the decision was made in the best interests of the people of Inverness County, and that Doucet never approached him about it.

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