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A July 2007 “snapshot” of
UK Higher and Further Education
Developments in Second Life

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

This report summarises an investigation into the use and uptake of Second Life (SL) by UK Higher and Further Education. The research had four main goals:

1. to determine the “state of play” of SL developments within the Higher and Further Education sector
2. to discover how these developments are supported, in terms of time, funding and other resources
3. to explore the functionality of these developments, i.e. which types of media or interactive service they incorporate
4. to establish how “busy”, or well-used, the developments have been and discover any impacts resulting from their implementation and use

Initially, the work set out to take a global perspective, as at the outset of the research there were only a small number of UK academic SL developments. However, as the work progressed a considerable number of UK Higher and Further Education SL activities were discovered (see appendix), and this report focuses exclusively on those.

It should be borne in mind that UK education activity is not restricted to just Universities and College. Support services such as the Scottish Further Education Unit and the JISC Regional Support Centres are developing facilities in SL, as are various private learning institutions e.g. the Bath School of Languages, while several schools have been active on the Teen Grid.

1.2 Methodology

Initial searches for information on the use of SL uncovered a great deal of discussion and speculation concerning its potential, but disappointingly few examples of actual use in teaching and learning. It was decided that this report should be evidence-led, based on real data, in order that it presents a true “snapshot” of SL use at this time, rather than simply adding to the conjecture.

Consequently, searches for examples of SL use in education were undertaken in February/March 2007:

- on the web in general
- in specialist domains, e.g. .ac.uk
- across the blogosphere
- across some individual university and college websites
- across peer-reviewed literature
- in SL itself
- through mailing lists

These searches did not reveal many examples of SL use in UK education, although there were a substantial number elsewhere, especially in the US. A pilot email questionnaire was constructed and refined in view of these findings.

As a result of the questionnaire, the reporter interviewed several people associated with UK academic SL developments, within SL itself. However, these interviews did not reveal much information due to:

- the reporter's inexperience, at the time, with interviewing in a virtual environment
- the large amount of time required to type questions and responses
- various in-world distractions and technical problems

Furthermore, some interviewees revealed a lack of usable information only after the reporter had spent significant time with them in-world.

A second batch of searches took place in June/July 2007, using the previous media in addition to:

- enquiries through Facebook contacts
- postings on more mailing lists

Considerably more examples of SL activity in UK Higher and Further Education were found in this batch. Developers or coordinators involved in these examples were sent the questionnaire. Some chose to fill it in, while others described their development work in different formats.

Several people have not - as yet - responded, or indicated they did not wish to respond until their SL construction was at a more advanced stage. Consequently, the data and examples in this report form an (incomplete) snapshot of SL developments in UK Higher and Further Education in June/July 2007.

2. Activity within UK Higher and Further Education

Some institutions do not appear to have a presence in SL. For example, in response to a general email enquiry, a contact in Bristol University replied:

"I think it's been vaguely mooted by the public relations people ... There are one or two learning technologists trying it out."¹

... while another, in Surrey University, reported that:

"The University (as an institution) doesn't. Some individuals do, as research sites; Aleks Krotoski, for instance."²

However, as the survey revealed, this does not indicate no SL activity within that institution. Individual departments, groups, academics and students are often establishing their own office, building or island within the SL grid, sometimes with the approval and knowledge of senior institutional management, and sometimes without.

This situation is complicated by academics in different university strata (researchers, lecturers, professors, management) often being unaware of SL activity - be it planning, development, or the use of in-world facilities - within their host institution. While some SL developments were loudly promoted within their host RL (Real Life) institutions, many others had a low profile. In addition, not every location and development within the grid can be found by searching within. Areas can also have entry restricted by the owner.

¹ Martin Poulter, Bristol University

² Nigel Gilbert, University of Surrey

This makes it easier for a lone academic, using an avatar and name, to create an SL presence which is virtually “invisible” to others. Many staff and researchers from the institutions listed in the appendix (of institutions with a presence in SL) responded that they were unaware of any SL activity in their host institution.

Survey responses were banded into eight, slightly overlapping, categories. It should be noted that some institutions fall into several categories. For example, institutions which develop their own SL “campus” often have individual structures for departments, projects and research. Edinburgh University is a prime example [Virtual University of Edinburgh, 2007], having a considerable variety of activities within SL. As well as premises for departments such as Management, courses are run, a virtual campus has been established, and non-academic departments such as marketing are taking an active interest.

2.1 Thinking or grouping together

The increase in the number of press and academic reports of SL use in education is evidently having an effect within some institutions, with several responses similar to:

“Just this last month I have been asked to think about how we might become part of the Second Life community.”³

Within SL, it is easy to establish groups of like-minded people around a common charter, goal, shared interest or development. Groups of students, staff and researchers from institutions such as City College Birmingham, Imperial College, Sheffield Hallam, the University of Wales and the University of Sunderland are active within the SL environment. Some groups seem to be there mainly for discussion, while others are dedicated to designing and developing institution-related structures within SL.

2.2 Actively planning an SL presence

Several academic units are at the stage of planning what they will build in SL. This usually involves looking at what similar departments, or other universities, have constructed; for example:

“We’re noting other law school implementations (e.g. New York Law School’s Democracy Island, Harvard’s Berkman Island, etc.), learning from that, but wanting to create a form of education that’s quite different from RL forms & genres.”⁴

A number of colleges responded, indicating that they are in the planning as opposed to development stage:

“We are not using SL at the moment but I am looking to use it, initially, for marketing purposes but eventually to provide virtual lessons. My problem is that our target audience is 14-19 year olds so I think I am going to have to go to teen grid ... I have got over the first hurdle of having it made available on our network.”⁵

An academic from Hull University is cautiously developing a building in SL to assess its usefulness:

³ Jon Sykes, Glasgow Caledonian University

⁴ Paul Maharg, Law Department, University of Strathclyde

⁵ Sandra Taylor, E-Learning Manager, Ashton Sixth Form College, nr Manchester

“The purpose of our current SL development is purely exploratory. We want to see what we can do with/in SL by being in-world. We know we'd like to establish a presence for our department and campus (but not necessarily the whole university) in the coming months, but it's more important to understand what SL is all about than just building it and hope they show up.”⁶

At Elmwood College in Cupar, Fife, staff are thinking laterally about the possibilities of SL with respect to the courses they run:

“We have a few outline plans but haven't tied down a particular project to start with. Some ideas we are playing with include:

1. Golf course design - we do it in real life and it could be an interesting one to develop in 3D.
2. Sports event management.
3. Marketing exercise - SLs economy could make this a more interesting exercise than a paper-based, theoretical approach.”⁷

At Leicester University, an SL facility based on an existing online information medium is being developed [Media Zoo, 2007], while at a higher level of granularity, some institutions are planning ambitious developments. Loughborough, for example, are:

“... planning a campus for the University later in the year.”⁸

2.3 Research within SL

SL is, in itself, something that can be studied in a wide range of disciplines, including computer science, design, media, literacy, education using virtual environments, and sociology and psychology.

Several research and PhD students are active within SL. For example, Mark Childs [Childs, 2006] at Warwick University is carrying out part-time PhD research into learners' experiences of mediated environments. In Glamorgan University and the University of Wales, Cameron Mitchell [Mitchell, 2007] is using SL as a means to explore terraforming as part of his BSc placement year.

At the University of Surrey, Aleks Krotoski [Krotoski, 2007] is “exploring the social networks of virtual world Second Life, which displays unique, emergent social properties reflective of offline social life” as part of her PhD examining the relationship between communication patterns and group processes in the diffusion of information through an online community.

A team from the University of Nottingham set up an office in SL as part of research into “griefing” (in-world bullying). Around 50 avatars/people took part in interviews, the sessions being monitored in RL by an occupational psychologist [Exchange, 2007].

Meanwhile, Janna Al-Bochi [Al-Bochi, 2007] is writing a Masters dissertation at the CASS Business School in London about SL and real world consumers' perceptions of branding inside the virtual world, trying to answer the question “Do virtual interactions lead to real-life consumer behaviour?”

⁶ Toni Sant, School of Arts and New Media, University of Hull

⁷ Pauline Randall, e-learning Development Co-ordinator, Elmwood College

⁸ James Dearnley, Department of Information Science, Loughborough University

At the University of Wolverhampton, the leader of the Learning Technology and Pedagogic Research Cluster is:

“currently supporting a member of staff to engage in a research project based upon the use of SL as a learning and teaching tool in a Digital Media UG programme.”⁹

At Staffordshire University, two staff will be carrying out learning experiments within SL:

“The project will involve the development of a meeting area for volunteer learners and, initially, myself and a collaborator. We will devise (preferably in conjunction with the learners) a series of SL learning/research activities. Activities will be timed and some will be individual, others collaborative. Once completed, those carrying out the activities will work with those who designed them to reflect upon the whole process and review the experience. The outcome from this will constitute useful information about how best to utilise the SL environment to supplement/complement learning and teaching.”¹⁰

And at the University of Portsmouth, a project using SL [Virtual Worlds for Student Learning, 2007] is underway to assess “the strengths and weaknesses of Virtual World simulations to support academic teaching/student learning “

At the University of Huddersfield there is a project underway “to pilot and evaluate the use of the Second Life environment with Foundation Degree e-learning and MSc Multimedia and e-learning students, beginning in the current academic year and running through to 2008”. This is part of a larger plan to “evaluate Second Life as a teaching and learning tool, in order to help inform future decisions about whether or not to establish and maintain a University presence in this environment”. Section five of the plan [Huddersfield University SL project plan, 2007] details nine members of staff across the university assessing the use of SL, including several who are “triallying its use in our curriculum area”.

2.4 Developing tools within SL

A minority of academics are using SL primarily as a platform within which to develop tools. Dr Peter Miller introduces his work:

“I am currently developing a series of visualization tools that I intend to use in cell and molecular biology lectures and make available in-world for informal student use from September 2007 onwards. They currently comprise two workstations with a strong focus on providing an end-user building capability, one in the context of protein domain structure, the other as a means of animating regulatory networks in gene expression.”¹¹

2.5 Staging an exhibition

SL has been used by several groups or departments for staging one-off exhibitions or displays. For example, design students in Goldsmiths, University of London, held a virtual degree show, which took place in an SL replica of the venue used for the real show [Design degree show on

⁹ Crispin Dale, University of Wolverhampton

¹⁰ Glynn Skerratt, Faculty of Sciences, Staffordshire University

¹¹ Peter Miller, Biological Sciences, University of Liverpool

Second Life, 2007], while students from the nearby London College of Fashion contributed images from their recent showcase to an SL structure. Leeds Metropolitan University also held an exhibition:

“Over 150 people have visited our end of year degree show exhibitions on the LeedsMet FAS sim.”¹²

Art and design staff, in responses, are keen to “test the boundaries” of what they can achieve in SL. For example, Julia Gaimster¹³, who produced the SL London College of Fashion building, replied:

“We are not aiming to replicate the college but to create areas that enable creative thinking and activities and we are keen to develop collaborative projects using the space.”

Second Scotland was developed by Honours year students studying collaborative virtual environments at the University of Paisley. The exhibition, partially based around recreations of famous Paisley buildings, contains famous Scottish products (Irn Bru, shortbread), a chip shop, highland music and a midge.

At Leeds College of Art and Design, the “DDM Collective” are the students from the Design for Digital Media degree. They created a number of structures within their SL island, describing their activities within their Collective blog [DDM Collective blog, 2007].

2.6 Departmental or Centre presence

One aspect of SL is the possibility to develop, within reason, anywhere. This presents opportunities for individuals, departments and centres to develop an autonomous presence, or one in collaboration with another partner, that does not need to be “inside” the island of the host institution. For example, Sheila Webber from the University of Sheffield states that:

“Eduserv has given us (me + others in the department getting interested) temporary office space on Eduserv Island for the Centre for Information Literacy Research we’re setting up (not with any funding - but as a focus for research in Information Literacy) and launching in a week or so.”¹⁴

Martin Harmer at York College is developing an SL area so he can:

“link to more active learning experiences in SL that learners can visit - hope to pilot it with a small group of mature HE students from late September.”¹⁵

Derby University also have a building in SL, which is being developed over the summer by Simon Bignell (a lecturer in Psychology with his own in-world office), containing teaching and research labs.

Clive Gould developed an interactive area on the grid for prospective students of his computing courses to use:

¹² Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

¹³ Julia Gaimster, London College of Fashion

¹⁴ Sheila Webber, Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield

¹⁵ Martin Harmer, ILT manager, York College

“Over the years I have come across applicants for the courses who did not have prior experience of programming. This year I have been able to recommend the sim to such applicants. There they can learn LSL (Linden Script Language) programming in a fun environment and see if they enjoy programming and are good at it, before committing themselves to an HE course involving a lot of programming.”¹⁶

Several other academic departments have staked a presence on the grid. The Faculty of Technology at the University of Portsmouth has an SL presence, and the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University are developing their own island. Norwich City College have a building on the UK Education Island, while Warwick University Maths department have their own island.

2.7 Using SL to support a course or module

The tools for creating meeting and communication facilities in SL offer opportunities to develop generic learning facilities, especially when the learners (in the real world) are in disparate locations. The Open University have three islands: SchomeBase and CetlMent on the main grid, and Schome Park on the teen grid. The Open University has already built up considerable experience in operating various classes and distance learning facilities using SL:

“We have several courses formally adopting SL as a teaching environment now ... sessions on CetlMent have tended to be scheduled tutorials.”¹⁷

Leeds Metropolitan University have also started to run “organised classes”, which have

“... created flurries of activity, with between 5 and 20 avatars attending.”¹⁸

The design facilities of SL allows students to actively develop within the grid. This provides opportunities for SL use in subject areas such as architecture:

“I am in the process of preparing a class ‘Designing in Virtual Worlds’ to be offered next academic session ... The class will be almost entirely in SL, and it’s about designing and building (after all, these are architecture students!). Students will be creating their own designs in SL, which I hope will be a mix of designs that could be built in RL and those exclusively for the virtual world (we’ll see how the class goes). There will naturally be a bit of critiquing existing work in SL.”¹⁹

The area created by David Jukes (from the business school at Nottingham Trent University) and an external person seeks to develop commercially viable courses and training that connect with outside bodies and organisations via the business school. David explains:

“The basis for this work was a module we are developing online called the Inclusive Teaching Project. This has a role in SL whereby we look at aspects of the module that would be limited elsewhere by time and physicality limitations and ethics.”²⁰

Another business school lecturer, this time in Newcastle University, is: “... working with Information Systems and Services to create a virtual collaborative learning environment in Second Life within which her e-business students can produce coursework.” [Berry, J., 2007]

¹⁶ Clive Gould, Bromley College

¹⁷ Jacqui Bennett, Open University

¹⁸ Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

¹⁹ Scott Chase, Department of Architecture, University of Strathclyde

²⁰ David Jukes, Business School, Nottingham Trent University

SL educational activities are not just confined to “traditional” academic disciplines. Plymouth University are rapidly creating an in-world facility to provide and acquire information about the sexual health of young adult users of SL [Boulos, 2007b]:

“We will collect data from users as to their information needs and their response to the program. We will track the development process systematically and use the lessons learned to suggest best practices for delivering sexual health programming in multi-user virtual environments (MUVES).”

The SL world itself appears on the curriculum of several courses, such as the degree in computer games and animation technology at Anglia Ruskin University [Get a degree in the game of life, 2006]. In their course, SL is used as one of several information and communications technology tools:

“The group work project was set as a competition to build the best 'boat house'. For the programming exercises we got students to implement parts of a car park simulation. Using a blended learning environment, backed up by VLE and blogs, allowed us to focus on doing what is best in SL and not trying to get it to be a browser or classroom.”²¹

2.8 Building a campus-wide presence

Several universities are developing an official version of their campus within SL. The University of Hertfordshire have a campus which is “a space dedicated to exhibiting the major assets of the university, with a special focus on the Learning Resource Centres” [Virtual University of Hertfordshire, 2007].

Anglia Ruskin University are in the process of designing their campus:

“The university has recently bought an Island and we are actively involved in this development and trying to decide what the look and feel for the virtual campus should be.”²²

Coventry University are also building a campus, which will be launched in a split-world event:

“Yes, our VC is very enthusiastic. The VC has own avatar and will be launching the island at large event on 13th Sept, in RL and SL ... the island is being used by all departments in the university pretty much as well as marketing and alumni.”²³

Searches on the main grid map reveal several other islands which are named after Universities, such as Sunderland and Oxford, perhaps indicative of developments of institutional presences in SL.

²¹ Mike Hobbs, Anglia Ruskin University

²² Mike Hobbs, Anglia Ruskin University

²³ Maggi Savin-Baden, Director of The Learning Innovation Group, Coventry University

3. Functionality and support

3.1 Meeting places

A key aspect of SL is the ability to communicate with other people (through their avatars) in a variety of ways. Examination of islands being developed by academics shows that most have some kind of mutual seating area, be it outdoor benches (often in a group arrangement so most people can see who is speaking without turning around), or a room (often resembling a RL room) with all the seating facing a speaker.

Some academic developers have made the "comfort" of their users, many of whom would have little experience of a virtual environment such as SL, a high priority:

"We have been interested in SL as a meeting place, and so we have been more concerned with the issues of how people conduct themselves in that space, than the creation of artefacts in the space ... The bulk of the effort was in configuring a 'comfortable' space for people to meet and interact."²⁴

3.2 Popular media

Certain specific media proved popular, being installed in their SL area by a number of academics:

- Many of the UK Higher Education constructs incorporated video screens. For example, in the University of Edinburgh Management School, prospective students can watch a video about Edinburgh and the university
- Nearly as popular as video displays, amongst the respondents, were facilities to present PowerPoint and slideshows within SL
- XML and RSS feeds were installed by several academics, allowing users to access the latest content from specific websites
- Visitor counters, and sensors to log avatar presence
- Interactive message board or whiteboard
- Links to websites were present in most academic SL developments. This is often presented as a card or mock laptop. For example, the University of Plymouth installation has a "laptop displaying a page from Contraception Education - clicking the laptop in-world will launch the corresponding web page"
- Direct links to academics, e.g. pressing a button sends an IM or email to a member of staff
- Freeview TV, usually surrounded by an auditorium in the same way as video-streamed meetings, is available in a few locations

Some academic developers, such as the Open University, put a heavy emphasis on functionality that "captures" various media from an in-world session.

"We keep chat records for all tutorials as well as taking movies/snapshots to record so we can complete evaluation activities within the OU Ethics requirements ... We're also in the process of building a Sloodle implementation so we can link activities on Cetlment directly to activities in the OU VLE (which is a Moodle implementation)."²⁵

²⁴ Hamish MacLeod, Edinburgh University

²⁵ Jacqui Bennett, Open University

“We have developed a tool called the SLog which allows you to create notes in-world which are saved to your SLogBook (web page) - you can also take snapshots in-world which are also saved to your SLogBook.”²⁶

3.3 Other media

A mixture of “off-the-shelf” media, and functionality scripted by academics and hired coders, can be found in the various islands and buildings under development. These include:

- e-books
- a flickr browser
- a synonym cloud generator
- an ansaphone
- interactive sculptures
- Freeview TV
- a visitor survey in-world, where user feedback is then sent via e-mail to an individual or project team

3.4 Future functionality development

A factor in whether SL is a suitable medium for some potential adopters is whether tools currently in use or in existence can be somehow integrated into the SL environment. For example, the Law Department at the University of Strathclyde consider that:

“In addition we want to embed the SIMPLE [2007] platform and tools we're working on within a 3D environment; and we're not sure that SL is the appropriate specific environment for that yet.”²⁷

Again, the Open University are keen to integrate the in-world aspects of SL to other materials associated with their students:

“The holy grail will be when we can link directly to e-portfolios and record assessments.”²⁸

It seems increasingly easy to extract content from SL and “slurp” into another application. For example, Katharine Berry [Berry, K., 2007] has produced an ajax-based SL client that works, to varying degrees, in different browsers without the need for the standard SL viewer. Such access has implications for developing information transfer between SL and other net-based applications.

3.5 Support media outside SL

There is a range of online media outside the grid which assists both developers and users of SL.

²⁶ Peter Twining, Open University

²⁷ Paul Maharg, Law Department, University of Strathclyde

²⁸ Jacqui Bennett, Open University

Linden Labs actively promote the use of SL for education and learning support [Second Life Education 2007], providing mailing lists, a wiki, active promotion and special rates for in-world land used for educational purposes [e.g. Campus: Second Life, 2007]. Some in-world locations where UK Higher and Further Education activities are taking place are listed in the appendix.

There is a growing body of conferences dedicated to education, learning and research in SL. Increasingly, conferences are run in RL and broadcast (sometimes with an element of interaction) in SL. For example, the Eduserv Foundation Symposium [Powell, 2007] was broadcast to three SL locations, with some questions for the speakers taken from in-world visitors, and in October 2007 the Internet Research 8.0 workshop [About IR8.0, 2007] on learning and research in SL “will be simulcast into Second Life”.

Linden support 17 mailing lists [Second Life, 2007], including three (Educators, Educatorsandteens, In-world education) of relevance to people in UK Higher and Further Education. JISCmail [JISCmail 2007] recently started supporting a list for educators.

Many developers of educational facilities in SL also run blogs or (to a lesser extent) wikis, where their work is chronicled. For example, there are blogs describing the work at:

- Edinburgh University [Bing, 2007]
- Leeds College of Art and Design [Robinson, 2007]
- Liverpool University [Miller, 2007]
- Loughborough University [A Second Life Campus for DIS, 2007]
- University of Plymouth [Boulos, 2007a]

The University of Hertfordshire has a wiki [Virtual University of Hertfordshire, 2007] for team members to provide latest news on developments. This is linked to a development forum [FEIS Technical Forum, 2007] for discussion between the island developers.

Other Web 2.0 applications or social networking services contain some element of SL interest or crossover. Facebook in particular has “groups”, where like-minded people can discuss topics of mutual interest. Several such groups, including “K-12 Educators in Second Life” and “Second Life for Educators” are accumulating members. However, topic discussion activity is low, indicating that most people joining are doing so out of curiosity or are just “lurking”.

4. Usage, impact and problems

Most structures within SL are intended to be used in some way by a defined audience or demographic. Many respondents indicated that, as they were developing towards a target date - usually the next academic year - or defined objective, usage was currently not an issue and the impact of their development would be assessed after official use. However, some respondents were able to provide some initial findings.

4.1 Usage

SL provides some metrics on how many visitors an area has:

“As at 12 July 2007 noon our official Linden SL parcel traffic value has increased to 215 (up from 54 on 11 July).”²⁹

²⁹ Maged Kamel Boulos, Plymouth University

“Traffic stays at around 1000 (not sure how that equates to real numbers). We have had one meeting, it was an internal event used to try and see how difficult it is to ‘herd’ people around. We had about 25 people. We’re not actually ‘open’ yet and, as such, advertising has been kept to a minimum.”³⁰

Some developers have also designed systems to keep a log or tally of visitors to their land or facility. The open nature of SL makes for a different approach to attendance at events, where access is possible to anywhere where the land owner has not placed restrictions. For events such as in-world courses and meetings, this has implications for both keeping wanted people “in” (when there may be more interesting content elsewhere in SL or RL), and keeping unwanted people “out”.

A few respondents commented on aspects of meetings and visitors within their development:

“It’s still early days. 6 or 7 meetings. A small amount of piloting for teaching. Lots of visitors to the two sites, the virtual office & ‘SL-Labs’ University of Derby teaching facility.”³¹

“The ‘structure’ has been a picnic table, or a beach fire pit - just meeting places. At ‘timetables sessions’ we have entertained three groups of about half a dozen people at a time. At other times, when courses are running, it is quite common to ‘bump into’ course members just hanging out. One of the things that we have wanted to achieve in our ‘construction’ in-world has been a place where people can go and know that anyone they encounter will belong to the course/programme (or be closely associated with it) and that they can have a secure and unthreatening meeting.”³²

4.2 Impact

Even though many of the respondents were still in the development phase, various impacts were reported. Some refer to individual student experiences:

“We have evidence of students commenting on the confidence given to them by the environment and how this has helped them as learners ... Results indicate that collaborative working in-world invokes considerably more enablers to flow than face-to-face sessions but this is not yet concluded.”³³

“We have evidence (in the form of reports from students) that their activities within the Scheme Park Projects have had an impact on their real world activities (e.g. they have gained confidence in leading meetings in-world which has impacted on their confidence when it comes to real world meetings).”³⁴

“One particular student, who had been struggling all year to find out what she was about, took to Second Life straight away. She recognised the creative potential, and it allowed her to re-invent herself. This has given her confidence in her real life working practice, and she now engages much more effectively with her course.”³⁵

³⁰ Andrew Marunchak, University of Hertfordshire

³¹ Simon Bignell, Department of Psychology, University of Derby

³² Hamish MacLeod, Edinburgh University

³³ Jacquie Bennett, Open University

³⁴ Peter Twining, Open University

³⁵ Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

Several respondents reported a positive impact from the perspective of collaboration with other academics, both within their own institution and elsewhere in the wider education sector:

“The main real world impact so far has been in fostering collaboration across the university. Whilst this began as a project for the School of Education and Professional Development, it has developed to include two other schools. In terms of recruitment, not yet - but we believe there may be potential here and one proposed outcome of the project is an area devoted to talking to potential students and providing information about the institution.”³⁶

“Personally I have met a number of academics working in my field from around the world, links that I would otherwise not have made. Similarly I have now met a number of academics at my own institution that I would otherwise not have worked with.”³⁷

Informal correspondence with some academics indicates an interest in SL by the marketing and/or alumni departments of their universities:

“I have had one or two enquiries about the Masters from prospective students who have made a point of visiting Holyrood Park before getting in touch - a hint that SL can play a role in recruitment.”³⁸

“We have had [many] enquiries regarding course costs but have no system in place to track the decisions people make.”³⁹

4.3 Problems

Most of the respondents didn't report any problems as yet; several pointed out that, as they were in development mode, they hadn't yet tested in scaled-up conditions. One respondent compared his experience of teaching a class in SL from his home, with that of teaching it in the (real) classroom:

“I conducted a Second Life induction session with post-grad students where I was at home, and the students were in a classroom. This was a disaster, as I was not able to command the attention of the class through my avatar. I repeated the same class the following day with first year undergraduates, but this time I was physically in the classroom. This was a huge success, and we achieved more in 30 minutes than we had in three hours the previous night. It made me realise the importance of a blended approach to inductions into Second Life.”⁴⁰

5. Considerations for an SL presence

5.1 Developing within an academic environment

³⁶ Cheryl Reynolds, School of Education & Professional Development, University of Huddersfield

³⁷ Maggi Savin-Baden, Director of The Learning Innovation Group, Coventry University

³⁸ Hamish MacLeod, Edinburgh University

³⁹ Andrew Marunchak, University of Hertfordshire

⁴⁰ Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

In some institutions, specific senior people have not only approved the development, but are also actively participating. Many respondents who were developing in SL had recognition and approval from senior staff in their institution.

“Yes. VC (Vice Chancellor) very enthusiastic. VC has own avatar and will be launching the island at large event on 13th Sept, in RL and SL.”⁴¹

“Our activity is sanctioned by a Dean and the Head of my department.”⁴²

“(Currently in the last month) the position is that the VC was proud to announce the purchase of an Island, the head of the IT and communications infrastructure has set up a ‘working group’ for coordinating the use of SL.”⁴³

“I did a presentation about our Second Life activities to the Senior Executive Team, which included the Vice Chancellor, and no objections were raised.”⁴⁴

“We had a meeting with the VC and some heads of schools and departments in real life. It was a presentation we gave with a promotional video; since then there has been another presentation which was also well received.”⁴⁵

In Strathclyde University, the driving forces appear to come equally from individuals in departments and from senior management. Derek Law explains:

“Strathclyde University’s strategic plan has three key strands, one of which is innovative learning. Academic and support staff are encouraged to explore new technologies and services and have developed a number of novel approaches in recent years. Social networking in general and Second Life in particular offer interesting opportunities both for novel forms of pedagogy and for reaching new markets. So we are exploring the development of specific courses in Law and Architecture which offer possibilities for role play and for easy building design respectively. More generally we are looking at courses aimed at overseas markets.”⁴⁶

Some academics who are not creating a large institutional presence in SL do not need to seek official status, as SL is merely a platform for their individual work and research:

“I am not constructing buildings or badging land, just constructing tools for staff and student use. I presented on some of this work at our Teaching & Learning Conference last week and our eLearning team is aware (and broadly supportive) of these small-scale activities.”⁴⁷

However, in at least one UK Higher Education institution, SL activity by staff has been stopped by the press/marketing office until university management are comfortable with the development from a marketing and branding perspective.

Budgetary and financial approval can also be a problem, though the number of UK educational institutions who have purchased an SL island and/or are developing on one indicates this is usually surmountable. As previously mentioned, one approach being taken by some academics is to undertake their SL development “invisibly”, or as independently from their host

⁴¹ Maggi Savin-Baden, Director of The Learning Innovation Group, Coventry University

⁴² Tony Sant, School of Arts and New Media, University of Hull

⁴³ Mike Hobbs, Anglia Ruskin University

⁴⁴ Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

⁴⁵ Andrew Marunchak, University of Hertfordshire

⁴⁶ Derek Law, Head of Information Services Directorate, University of Strathclyde

⁴⁷ Peter Miller, Biological Sciences, University of Liverpool

institution as possible. However, this does not solve the problem of official funding for an island. A member of staff at the University of Bath observes:

“I've heard that Computer Science is trying to buy an island, but they're having problems justifying this to the finance department.”⁴⁸

Though the majority of respondents enjoy institution and home access to SL, a minority, and several HE and FE developers on mailing lists, indicated technical problems. For example:

“Currently we can't access SL from the university campus or machines on the network. IT are trying to find a solution to this.”⁴⁹

Most of the technical issues concern using PCs powerful enough to develop within SL at a reasonable speed, and having access to ports needed for activities such as teleporting.

Some academics use their skills, experience and/or ownership of land to give their initiative a position of strength within their institution:

“As I've built up my SL interests I've built up a supply of land and so it was easier to make some space available for this first part of the exercise rather than try and persuade people that SL was a good idea AND the college needed to buy land!”⁵⁰

From the responses, two observations can be made:

1. Successful SL developments usually seem to be the product of a determined academic, and/or have received the support of senior university management early on.
2. SL developments are more prevalent in colleges and the “newer” universities (82% of responses from active developers), rather than the “older” universities (18% of responses). Why this was is unclear; possibilities include:
 - Colleges and “new” universities having more vocational-oriented subjects that can take obvious advantage of SL.
 - Additional, accumulated bureaucracy in older universities that is not (yet) present in “new” universities.

5.2 Time

It is difficult to quantify how much time is spent, or needs to be spent, on a development in SL. Factors include:

- structure and artefact planning and research
- the developers' level of experience
- the ambitiousness and complexity of the construction
- the extent of testing and promotion

Several respondents indicated that they were hoping to accelerate their SL development activities over the summer academic vacation, to prepare in-world facilities for the forthcoming academic year.

⁴⁸ Brian Kelly, University of Bath

⁴⁹ Gilly Salmon, Leicester University

⁵⁰ Pauline Randall, e-learning Development Co-ordinator, Elmwood College

A few respondents discussed a relatively quick development time, or didn't use any official work time:

"The actual building in SL doesn't take much time (a week or two would usually be enough, thanks to prefab objects that can be edited and customised)."⁵¹

"Overtime - probably about 2-3 weeks evening work"⁵²

However, most of the survey respondents had invested significant amounts of work time to create and support structures and activities within SL:

"Before any students started using Schome Park we estimated that we had invested somewhere in the region of 1500 staff hours on preparation (exploration of the potential of SL, planning, design, building, scripting, etc.). Roughly half of that time was spent in-world. Since then the staff team have clocked up hundreds (low thousands) of hours in-world - in addition to the time spent on related activities in the Schomunity wiki and forum (and other real world activities/meetings)."⁵³

Other academics, such as David Jukes, have dedicated significant amounts of their own personal time to SL developments:

"Not completely finished the sim yet but in total to put in the terraform, planning and building a total of 1,000+ person hours has been recorded. There are two people working on the build, one during the day and one in the evening. This was mainly due to not having all the skills necessary at the start to achieve what we wanted. This is actual work and not the research and visiting other sims for ideas and inspiration. Personally, I spent over 1500 hours being in-world understanding social interactions between October 2006 and May 2007, to get to grips with how SL works to hopefully help realise the full potential of what we/I could achieve. All this was done mainly outside official work hours as I am a full time lecturer and program leader."⁵⁴

From the survey, it is evident that the large majority of staff do not restrict their in-world time to just their work hours in RL. It is clear that there is a high level of enjoyment and satisfaction among SL developers, with many carrying on their SL activities at home, in the evenings and at weekends. Ian Truelove confesses:

"If only I'd kept a log. At least 40 hours a week between myself and Graham Hibbert. Often a lot more. We've had the sims since April, so probably about 500 hours. The vast majority of that time was not in official work time, although LeedsMet have been very supportive, and allowed us to be flexible with our work time to develop the island. We have time allocated for research and scholarly activities, so some of the time fits into this. It is a form of entertainment for us, so we don't feel hard done by. It's better than watching TV."⁵⁵

5.3 Funding

To develop something in SL requires an area of land. Funding is also required for other in-world costs, such as search listing, apparel and items constructed in SL by third-party developers.

⁵¹ Maged Kamel Boulos, Plymouth University

⁵² Savvas Papagiannidis, Newcastle University

⁵³ Peter Twining, Open University

⁵⁴ David Jukes, Business School, Nottingham Trent University

⁵⁵ Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

There are a number of costs outside of SL that also need to be factored in:

- PC use. Though the SL “viewer” software is free, high specification PCs are usually required in order to carry out in-world development at a reasonable speed.
- Staff time. As the previous section shows, staff time is often significant, thus necessitating a large financial cost within the project.

Respondents indicated a variety of sources of funding for their development within SL. Some academics obtained funds from grants and awards:

“I bought the island from money I received in an award for teaching.”⁵⁶

“We received a HEFCE grant (which was distributed by the University) for the island.”⁵⁷

“Part of our funding came from external sources e.g. NAGTY, Innovation Unit, BECTA, NESTA.”⁵⁸

Some institutions, such as Coventry University and Bromley College, have invested significant internal money into their SL development:

“Cost of island and £20k to purchase team to build (students flying squad) and to help staff time.”⁵⁹

“The marketing department in the College is now in the process of buying a full island (64K:-)”⁶⁰

Other academics have obtained money from several different internal sources:

“The Faculty of Arts & Society funded one of the sims, and the Office of the Pro-vice Chancellor (Assessment, Teaching and Learning) funded the other one.”⁶¹

At the University of Derby, an academic is partially funding the development himself:

“Myself and a free space grant from EducationUK.”⁶²

Several other colleges and universities are benefiting from Education UK Island [Education UK Island, 2007], which offers space and an education land grants programme. For the forthcoming academic year, this programme received three times as many applications as awards were available. As well as Derby, successful land grants projects were awarded to:

- The British Literature Classroom
- Scottish Further Education Unit
- King George V College
- Mid Cheshire College
- University of the West of England

⁵⁶ Gilly Salmon, Leicester University

⁵⁷ James Dearnley, Department of Information Science, Loughborough University

⁵⁸ Peter Twining, Open University

⁵⁹ Maggi Savin-Baden, Director of The Learning Innovation Group, Coventry University

⁶⁰ Clive Gould, Bromley College

⁶¹ Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

⁶² Simon Bignell, Department of Psychology, University of Derby

Office space projects were awarded to:

- University of Staffordshire
- University of Hull
- Association of Physical Educators

Developing a small proof-of-concept presence within SL to obtain internal funding for a larger institutional presence may be a successful approach for some academics:

“We have *recently* bought an island, funded central by the University's Information Services. Before then - that is, most of the actual work we have done in world with students - was in a small area of ‘Campus’ lent to us by Linden.”⁶³

An additional cost for some projects is the use of external SL developers to construct their in-world presence:

“We’re in the process of purchasing an island called ‘Kristi Island’ and are drawing upon the expertise of an SL landscape designer ... to assist in the development of our island’s architecture.”⁶⁴

“We're waiting to hear from TwoFour media about total development time from them.”⁶⁵

5.4 Replication of real world

A topic that frequently appears in SL discussion forums is whether to “mimic” a structure from RL, or to create something new that can take extra advantage of SL functionality. The mimic argument is best summarised thus [Loon]:

“One of the basic principles of good teaching is to begin on familiar ground and use it as a launch zone for stepping into the unknown. If a learner has to deal with too many new experiences at once, she can be distracted from the one you intended as the focus. I believe that if SL were NOT full of familiar RL features, it would not be an effective learning environment.”

Some institutions are deliberately creating an image of their campus in SL. Imperial College London have an in-world version of their real-world Sir Alexander Fleming building, with (teleport) signs to facilities such as the library, course guides, and an authentic looking lecture theatre. Leeds Metropolitan University reason for recreating their campus in SL:

“We recreated our RL building to provide an initial bridge for new users (to stop them feeling too scared by this strange new world and to give them a sense of ownership).”⁶⁶

The opposite, anti-mimic stance is taken by people wishing to overcome the physical and psychological limitations of RL environments; for example [Levine]:

“I really hate stairs in SL, they are so tedious to walk. And rooms that force you to use a single door (unless there is a narrative reason for the experience) and buildings with

⁶³ Hamish MacLeod, Edinburgh University

⁶⁴ Crispin Dale, University of Wolverhampton

⁶⁵ Gilly Salmon, Leicester University

⁶⁶ Ian Truelove, Leeds Metropolitan University

small rooms where your views on rotating put you looking at the outside of a wall. I've rezzed accidentally into concrete, mountains.”

“Hopefully folk will realise that replicating their physical campus is a waste of time pedagogically (though it may serve a useful marketing purpose).”⁶⁷

This is the approach being taken by the Law department in Strathclyde University:

“We want to create a form of education that's quite different from RL forms & genres. There's a lot in SL that merely mimics RL forms of education.”⁶⁸

As yet, there is no clear consensus on the best approach, however the context of the development and the envisaged end-user seem to be the main factors taken into consideration.

6. Conclusion: the 2007-2008 academic year

This report shows that a growing number of UK academic institutions, departments and groups are at different stages of SL development. It is, perhaps, presumptuous to conclude that UK Higher Education has reached a “tipping point” in terms of using and developing facilities in SL. However, there has been a considerable increase in activity between March and July 2007, marked by the beginning and end of this survey. The appendix lists over 40 UK Universities and Colleges that have a building, land or island on the grid, many appearing in the last few weeks and not yet open for public visiting while they are being developed.

While some institutions are openly and actively developing in SL, others are doing so less publicly, and others still are either watching developments before making a decision, or being slowed down by institutional bureaucracy. Support services for Higher and Further Education are noting a high level of consideration:

“There's been a lot of interest in SL within the colleges in our region recently and we've received quite a few requests for information on the subject.”⁶⁹

Several institutions are interested in SL from the income stream perspectives of marketing (future students) and alumni (previous students):

“There has been quite a burgeoning of interest in SL across the university, and our Alumni Office is getting very interested. Their aspirations are, of course, quite different from ours.”⁷⁰

“The island was to include promotional information on the college, the University of Greenwich and our HE computing courses.”⁷¹

It will be interesting to observe how these different perspectives - marketing, teaching and learning - drive institutions' developments on the grid.

One point that came through very strongly in this survey was that many academics are developing in SL with a view to providing facilities for the 2007-2008 academic year:

⁶⁷ Peter Twining, Open University

⁶⁸ Paul Maharg, Law Department, University of Strathclyde

⁶⁹ Kenji Lamb, JISC RSC for North East Scotland

⁷⁰ Hamish MacLeod, Edinburgh University

⁷¹ Clive Gould, Bromley College

“We are not officially open yet but plan to be in October 2007 and that's when we will start teaching.”⁷²

“Teaching with students is planned for later this year.”⁷³

“My aim is to launch for large courses in September.”⁷⁴

The end of the 2007-08 academic year, therefore, should provide an opportunity to take stock of these developments and discover how widespread and “mature” they are. At that point, there should be sufficient qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more considered analysis of the effectiveness or usefulness of SL in the provision of learning services within UK education.

⁷² David Jukes, Nottingham Trent University

⁷³ Simon Bignell, Department of Psychology, University of Derby

⁷⁴ Shale Bing, Edinburgh University

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Appendix

Some SL developments within UK Higher and Further Education institutions

The “Cat” column follows the framework used in section 2 of the report:

1. Thinking about it but not planning - not included in the table below
2. Actively planning an SL presence
3. Researching within SL
4. Developing tools within SL
5. Staging an exhibition
6. Departmental or centre presence
7. SL providing support structures for a course
8. Building a campus-wide presence

= islands or developments not yet accessible to everyone.

| Institution | Contact / Leader | Cat | URL or SLURL |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------|--|
| # Anglia Ruskin University | Mike Hobbs | 7 / 8 | secondlife://Anglia%20Ruskin%20University/128/128/0 |
| Ashton Sixth Form College | Sandra Taylor | 2 | - |
| Bedfordia University | ?? | 8? | secondlife://Bedfordia/229/201/23 |
| Bromley College | Clive Gould | 6 / 8 | secondlife://Daydream%20SE%20Islands/206/40 |
| # Coventry University | Maggi Savin-Baden | 6 / 8 | secondlife://Coventry%20University/148/138/37/ |
| # De Montfort University | ?? | ?? | secondlife://De%20Montfort%20Island/109/101/27 or possibly secondlife://DMU/128/128/0 |
| Derby University | Simon Bignell | 3 / 8 | secondlife://Education%20UK/36/145/23 secondlife://Education%20UK/241/94/23 |
| Edinburgh University | Shale Bing Fiona Littleton Hamish MacLeod | 6 / 7 / 8 | http://vue.ed.ac.uk secondlife://Vue/195/86/27 |
| Elmwood College | Pauline Randall | 2 | - |
| Glamorgan University | Cameron Mitchell | 3 | http://learning.weblog.glam.ac.uk/posts/show/73 |
| # Glasgow Caledonian Uni. | ?? | 8? | secondlife://Glasgow%20Caledonian/190/62/27 |
| Goldsmiths, London University | Matt Ward | 4 | http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6609333.stm |
| Hertfordshire University | Andrew Marunchak | 8 | secondlife://University%20of%20Hertfordshire/122/76/26 |
| # Huddersfield University | Cheryl Reynolds | 2 / 3 | secondlifeproject.pbwiki.com secondlife://Queensgate/128/128/0 |
| Hull University | Toni Sant | 2 / 6 | secondlife://Education%20UK/105/71/41 |
| Imperial College London | ?? | 6 / 8 | secondlife://Imperial%20College%20London/143/124/30 |
| # Lancaster University | ?? | 8 | secondlife://Lancaster%20University/128/128/0 |
| Leeds College of Art and Design | Annabeth Robinson | 5 | http://ddmcollective.blogspot.com/ secondlife://Gourdneck/170/181/120 |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|---|
| Leeds Metropolitan University | Ian Truelove | 5 / 7 / 8 | secondlife://LeedsMet/128/128/0 |
| # Leicester University | Gilly Salmon | 2 | secondlife://Media%20Zoo/125/128/23 |
| Liverpool University | Peter Miller | 4 | http://tidalblog.blogspot.com secondlife://Second%20Nature/181/215/24 |
| # Liverpool Hope University | ?? | 8? | secondlife://Liverpool%20Hope/27/168/27 |
| # Loughborough University | James Dearney | 6 / 8 | http://www.dis-sl.blogspot.com/ secondlife://DISland/92/159/30 |
| # London College of Communication | Andy Savery | 2 | secondlife://LCC/140/133/30 |
| London College of Fashion | Julia Gaimster | 5 | secondlife://London%20College%20of%20Fashion/137/194/25 |
| Newcastle University | Joanna Berry | 7 | secondlife://Ebusiness/170/110/26 http://www.ncl.ac.uk/nubs/staff/profile/joanna.berry |
| Norwich City College | ?? | ?? | secondlife://Education%20UK/241/171/21 |
| Nottingham University | Thomas Chesney | 3 / 6 | http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/shared/shared_exchange/pdf/June07_full.pdf |
| Nottingham Trent University | David Jukes | 7 | secondlife://Trent%20Island/83/210/24 |
| Open University | Jacque Bennett Peter Twining | 6 / 7 | http://schome.open.ac.uk/wikiworks/index.php/Schome secondlife://SchomeBase/128/128/0 |
| # Oxford University | ?? | 8? | secondlife://University%20of%20Oxford/131/121/47 |
| Paisley University "Second Scotland" | Daniel Livingstone | 5 / 6 / 7 | secondlife://Vesuvius/185/92/27 secondlife://virtuALBA/56/46/27 |
| Plymouth University | Maged Kamel Boulos | 7 | http://www.sl-sexualhealth.org.uk secondlife://Education%20UK/31/63/23 |
| Portsmouth University | Jane Chandler | ?? | secondlife://Teaching%202/32/60/29 |
| Sheffield University | Sheila Webber | 6 | secondlife://Eduserv%20Island/203/237/50 |
| Staffordshire University | Glynn Skerratt | 3 | secondlife://Education%20UK/194/167/22 |
| Strathclyde University | Paul Maharg Scott Chase | 2 / 7 | - |
| # Sunderland University | ?? | 8? | secondlife://University%20of%20Sunderland/131/121/47 |
| # Ulster University (Magee Campus) | ?? | 8? | secondlife://University%20Ulster%20Magee/162/82/30 |
| Surrey University | Aleks Krotoski | 3 | http://mypages.surrey.ac.uk/psp1ak secondlife://Hyperborea/200/100/22 |
| # Warwick University | Mark Childs Maths Dept. | 3 6 | http://www.tinyurl.com/ypdjkc secondlife://Warwick%20University%20Maths/128/128/0 |
| # Wolverhampton University | Crispin Dale | 3 | Island purchased |
| York College | Martin Harmer | 5 | http://www.tinyurl.com/3crujv |

It should be stressed that this table forms an incomplete profile of SL developments within UK HE and FE. The Simteach wiki [Institutions and Organisations in SL, 2007] also lists the following as having a presence:

- Sheffield Hallam University
- University of Surrey
- University of Wales in Newport

It should also be noted that SL developments in UK HE and FE are moving rapidly; this table provides a snapshot for the second week of July 2007.

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