Appendix D: Sample dissertation proposal

1.1 Background

The traditional approach to teaching and learning in universities involves a mix of face-to-face lectures, seminars/tutorials, individual tuition/supervision and, where relevant, laboratory work; all reinforced with independent self-study. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) over the last two decades has increased the means of enhancing student knowledge. This is reflected in the prevalence of PowerPoint-based lectures, digital library databases, mobile technologies (e.g. iPad/iPhone), the Internet and managed Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). When ICT is used to support independent study, it is generally given the term ‘e-Learning’. E-Learning is now a core strategy for universities, reflected in their investments in VLEs such as WebCT, Blackboard and Moodle (OLTF 2011).

However, an area of consistent concern is the preparedness of academic staff to contribute meaningfully to e-Learning environments (Salmon 2011; Thuraya 2014). Indeed, as early as 1997, Dearing highlighted in his report (1997: 36) that ‘many academics have had no training and little experience in the use of communications and information technology as an educational tool’. As the technology has increased down the years, so have the voices expressing apprehension over staff training to cope with a new pedagogy that places staff from the sage on the stage to a guide on the side (Laurillard 2001; Straub 2002; Laurillard 2009; MacKeogh and Fox 2009; Slade and Readman 2013). Mayes and De Freitas (2013: 28) recognize that ‘positioning empowered individual learners at the centre of the technology-enhanced design process will clearly impact on the role of the educator’ and that there is a need for universities to articulate a teaching and learning pedagogy that allows academic staff to bridge the gap between theory and practice. A critique of staff preparation models/frameworks will form the central plank of this research.

Academic staff engagement is crucial to the success of e-Learning in universities (Dyment and Downing 2013). If academic staff do not accept the educational
benefits of e-Learning, then they may be less likely to be willing participants in e-Learning initiatives, irrespective of the professional nature of staff training programmes. Schneckenberg (2009) argued that there is a need to understand the staff barriers to meaningful involvement in e-Learning, citing staff motivation as an example. Tomei (2004) highlighted the negative impact of online teaching on academic staff ‘load’. As such, it makes sense as part of the study of academic staff preparedness for e-Learning, to clarify the University drivers for e-Learning (and how they are communicated to academic staff) and the main barriers to academic staff becoming involved in e-Learning.

These concerns over staff training issues necessitate an exploratory study on how academic staff are being prepared for e-Learning. Furthermore, technology is changing rapidly with students no longer solely dependent on face-to-face instruction – universities need to adapt to this changing educational landscape. A failure by universities to ensure that their academic staff can meet the challenges of an ever-developing digital world will impact adversely on the student learning experience and, in effect, the ability of a university to meet its core e-Learning strategy. Having an academic body well versed on e-Learning pedagogy will be to the benefit of senior management, academics and students.

1.2 Research aim and research objectives

The overall aim of this research is to advance an understanding of the issues surrounding the preparation of university academic staff to support student e-Learning.

Within the context of higher education, the specific objectives of this research are to:

1. **Identify** the forces driving e-Learning and the barriers to the successful delivery of e-Learning programmes.
2. **Evaluate critically** models and frameworks relevant to supporting academic staff in coping with e-Learning.
3. **Explore** staff stakeholder views and practices related to e-Learning preparation, including drivers and barriers to e-Learning.
4. **Formulate** recommendations on staff preparation issues.

1.3 Research methods and timescales

This research will depend on a review of pertinent literature (objectives 1 and 2) and the collection of empirical data through a case study (objective 3). The secondary data (i.e. literature review) will largely come from journals, e.g. *International Journal of e-Learning*; conference proceedings, e.g. Online Educa; seminal books, e.g. *E-moderating* by Salmon (2011); and published surveys/reports, e.g. Walker et al. (2012): ‘Survey of technology enhanced learning for higher education in the UK’, published by UCISA. The following library databases will, in particular, be utilized to support this research: ERIC, British Education Index (ProQuest) and JSTOR.
The primary data (i.e. empirical data) will be collected through a case study. A case study is a study of a single unit (Cohen and Manion 2005), allowing exploratory research in depth (Yin 2003). The case unit will consist of an academic department within Inverclyde University. The means of collecting the primary data will be based on an initial questionnaire from which a subset of the target population will be subject to a detailed follow-up interview. In addition, a number of elite staff – those responsible for the success of e-Learning and staff training – will be interviewed. The combination of a literature review and empirical research will allow theory and practice to be compared, from which a rich picture of academic staff preparation should emerge.

This research does not aim to generalize the status of staff preparation in e-Learning but, instead, seeks an in-depth understanding of the elements that constitute e-Learning preparation, including drivers and barriers. Hence the use of a case study to support an extensive literature review.

Table D.1 below shows the expected timescales for this dissertation proposal, from finalising initial research objectives to submission of dissertation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dissertation activity</th>
<th>Duration (in weeks)</th>
<th>Month</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarify Aim/Objectives</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>June–July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methods</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>August–September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25 September 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Full details of the research methods used for this research, including justification for the chosen methods, will appear in a chapter entitled Research Methods within the dissertation proper.

### 1.4 Beneficiaries of this research

This research will benefit the academic research community by contributing to the field of e-Learning in the area of academic staff preparation. The results of this work – secondary and primary data – can be used to enrich existing research schemas, particularly in relation to staff preparation models/frameworks and staff views, thus adding incrementally to the knowledge base of e-Learning research.

Although the output from this research work cannot be generalized, nonetheless the literature review findings and the empirical case study can act as a focus to inform elite staff in universities on potential staff e-Learning preparation issues, encouraging management to revisit how they prepare academic staff to engage fully with e-Learning. At the very least, this work will raise the profile of an area of educational delivery – e-Learning – that Vermeer (2000: 329) once
decried had often been dependent on ‘the enthusiasm of the recently converted’ for its success. Technology is increasingly at the heart of university education and this research will benefit all those with an interest in ensuring that technology is exploited by fully trained academic staff: senior management, students and academic staff.

1.5 Ethics

There are no ethical issues requiring approval from the University’s ethical committee. Academic staff will be interviewed as part of this research but their responses will be anonymised, with no identifying data used (unless permission is explicitly given), in line with Data Protection principles.

1.6 References

Jamlan, M. (2004). 'Faculty opinions towards introducing e-Learning at the University of Bahrain', International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 5(2).

Student signature: Joseph Bloggs
Date: 15 April 2014