

NEWS RELEASE

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High Sheriff To Open New Computing Building Local school children to demonstrate handwriting recognition technology

Bryan Gray MBE, High Sheriff of Lancashire and Chairman of the North West Development Agency, will officially open the University of Central Lancashire's (UCLan's) new Computing and Technology building on Wednesday, 3 March at 11am.

The £4.3 million building on Fylde Road is at the heart of the University campus, opposite the Students' Union. It provides superb new facilities including eight new specialist computing laboratories and over 200 latest specification PCs.

And during a tour of the building the High Sheriff will meet pupils from All Saints Hesketh-With- Becconsall CofE Primary School who have been taking part in a ground-breaking research project which focuses on the usability of handwriting recognition technology for children (case study included).

UCLan students will have plenty of opportunity to make use of the facilities in the new building as they will be able to use it twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. A special swipe card system is in place which will keep the building secure at the same time as giving students access.

Martin Brown, Head of the Department of Computing, says: "This is a flagship building which greatly enhances the teaching and research provision in computing and technology. The new facilities and the open-all-hours policy are already making a significant difference to students on our courses."

Students using the building study on a range of courses from web/multimedia design and software engineering to media technology and electronic engineering. A phase 2 extension of the building is currently under construction and will be completed by the Summer of 2004.

Notes To Editor

A photo opportunity of children from All Saints Hesketh-with-Becconsall CofE Primary School demonstrating the CobWeb handwriting recognition software to Bryan Gray, Chairman of the North West Development Agency, and UCLan Vice Chancellor Dr Malcolm McVicar will take place at 10.45am on Wednesday, 3 March in the new Computing and Technology building, located on Fylde Road.

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***Handwriting Recognition For Text Entry Research Project – Case Study**

‘CobWeb’ is a prototype writing environment which enables children to write with a special pen onto a tablet device (similar to a magic slate) which captures their writing to the computer, displays it on the screen, and then allows the handwriting to be turned into computer text.

Leader of the project is researcher and Senior Lecturer Janet Read who works within the University’s Child Computer Interaction (ChiCI) Group**. Her motivation for undertaking this research stemmed from watching children struggle to master the QUERTY keyboard.

“I’m carrying out the research amongst children in the 6- 9 year old age range,” It’s a time when children traditionally make great strides in improving their verbal and written communication skills. However this process can sometimes be hampered by the additional task of learning to use a computer keyboard.

“Keyboarding takes time and children can easily loose the thread of their story as they search for a letter; in addition, the breaking up of words into letters appears to cause anxiety about spelling.”

Janet’s research has identified key usability problems for children using handwriting recognition technology. These were drawn from a range of studies using local school children and this work has been used to inform the design of the prototype writing environment (CobWeb).

Children find the CobWeb system easy to use and easy to learn. They are tolerant of the errors that the recognition software makes and the high visibility of the text encourages discussion. There is research evidence that good spelling is related to kinaesthetic memory (memory of hand movements in the actual writing process). This is supported by the handwriting recognition software but unsupported in keyboard input devices.

**The Child Computer Interaction (ChiCI) (www.chici.org) Group is well established as an innovative research team based in the Department of Computing at the University of Central Lancashire. In its short history, the group has become internationally known, and has established itself as a leader in its field.

The group is primarily concerned with research relating to the design and evaluation of interactive artefacts for children. Themes include interface design, novel interaction technologies, usability testing, evaluation paradigms, and educational applications.

The group recently hosted the 2003 International Interaction Design and Children Conference (IDC2003). In recent years, the Human Computer Interaction community has begun to take a more active interest in the design and evaluation of technology for child users. Growth areas include the study of play and the support of teachers and parents in their use and selection of interactive products.