From the President: as the nights draw in

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From the President

As the nights draw in

The peaks and troughs of the academic year give a strong sense of seasonality for those of us working in universities. Although it comes as a surprise to some that we remain busy during the summer after the undergraduates have gone, it is in an environment of quiet calm. Moving into autumn, September and October bring a disconcerting flurry of activity, preparing for the return of students and the ramp up to teaching again.

At Loughborough, we are in the third year of delivering our ergonomics and human factors Masters programmes in ‘short-fat’ format, with modules run one at a time in series. Previously modules were ‘long-thin’, with several running in parallel. Crudely, it’s now effectively a module in a week, making the programmes much more accessible for those in employment looking for part-time study. This year saw 30 new students enrolled for the Introduction to Ergonomics module that I lead and which fills my life during the first part of the semester. The module aims to convey a flavour of the breadth of ergonomics and human factors, hopefully enthusing along the way. At the same time, it gives a grounding in the basics of human equipment interface design.

Autumn is also the time of year here in the UK when we start to turn up our home heating again. My four year old house incorporates various energy saving technologies, among which is the main heating system, an air source heat pump. This can be thought of as an air conditioning unit running in reverse, taking heat from the outdoor air, using it to warm underfloor heating, radiator and hot water circuits. The good news is that even down to low outdoor temperatures, these ‘pumps’ transfer more heat energy from the air than electricity consumed. At around 5°C, 1kW electricity still yields 2-3kW of heat energy, for example.

The not so good news is that the user interface is a nightmare and a ready example for my Introduction to Ergonomics module. The primary goal of setting the heating to achieve appropriate temperatures in different areas of the house, at different times of the day, is not well supported by the larger than usual number of poorly integrated points of system control (multiple programmers, room thermostats, thermostatic radiator valves), providing a fine collection of differing and unintuitive interfaces. One interesting feature, reflecting the complexity of the control system, is a metal guard restricting access to the main control unit, seemingly fitted as an afterthought to prevent home owners getting into difficulty with it and needing to call out a service engineer. Although the well-known Japanese company that manufactured the heating system described it as "maximizing on innovative technologies", an observation for students is that such claims and a respected multinational brand is no guarantee of good ergonomics.

Best wishes

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