

# **ERCIM Working Group ‘User Interfaces for All’: A Success Story**

*Constantine Stephanidis*

After twelve years of successful operation, the Working Group ‘User Interfaces for All’ of the European Research Consortium for Informatics and Mathematics (ERCIM) is drawing to a close. This Working Group has contributed significantly to the creation of a scientific community dedicated to Universal Access and Design for All in Europe, as well as to the establishment of this new research field.

Since its establishment in 1995, the ERCIM Working Group ‘User Interfaces for All’ (<http://www.ui4all.gr/>) has systematically promoted the Design for All principles in human-computer interaction (HCI). The concept of ‘User Interfaces for All’ involves developing user interfaces for interactive applications and e-services that will provide universal access to interactive applications and services. The activities of the Working Group have included the organization of a series of very successful workshops, which have helped consolidate recent work and stimulate discussion in the field. These workshops have brought together researchers from ERCIM institutions and other organizations worldwide, who share the common aspiration of making the information society equally accessible to all citizens.

The work of the ERCIM WG UI4ALL led in 2001 to the establishment of the International Conference on Universal Access in Human-Computer Interaction (UAHCI), which is part of the HCI International Conference series (<http://www.hci-international.org/>). UAHCI has established an international forum attracting participants from a broad range of disciplines and fields of expertise. Its purpose is to aid theoretical, methodological and empirical research that addresses issues related to the attainment of universal access in the development of interactive software,

The Working Group has also contributed to the establishment of the international, interdisciplinary refereed journal ‘Universal Access in the Information Society’ (UAIS; <http://www.springeronline.com/journal/10209/about>), published by Springer. UAIS provides an archival publication channel for the discussion and advancement of theoretical and practical aspects of universal access in the information society, and stimulates cross-fertilization between the various contributing disciplines.

Many members of the ERCIM WG UI4ALL have also contributed to the edited book ‘User Interfaces for All – concepts, methods and tools’. This is first book to have been dedicated to issues of universal design and universal access in HCI, and was published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates in 2001 (<http://www.ics.forth.gr/hci/publications/book.html>). It is a collection of thirty chapters written by leading international authorities who are affiliated with academic, research and industrial organizations and non-market institutions. It provides a comprehensive

overview of the state of the art in the field, and includes contributions from a variety of theoretical and applied disciplines and research themes.

Furthermore, the work of the ERCIM WG UI4ALL has contributed to the establishment of the international scientific forum 'Towards an Information Society for All' (ISF-IS4ALL; 1997-2000), an international ad hoc group of experts who were the first to recognize the need for a global approach to an information society that is accessible, usable and acceptable by all citizens ([http://www.ui4all.gr/isf\\_is4all/](http://www.ui4all.gr/isf_is4all/)). Two White Papers have been published in the International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction and were also submitted to the European Commission, reporting on an evolving international R&D agenda in the field of HCI. Since then, the vision of an Information Society for All and the necessity for universal access to information society technology have acquired widespread acceptance and importance. This is the case not only at a scientific and technological level, but also at a European policy level, as demonstrated by the eEurope 'Information Society for All' initiative of the European Commission. The activities initiated by the ISF-IS4ALL continue in the framework of the Thematic Network (Working Group) 'Information Society for All' (IST-1999-14101 - IS4ALL, [http://www.ui4all.gr/isf\\_is4all/](http://www.ui4all.gr/isf_is4all/)), which has consolidated knowledge on universal access in the context of information society technology into a comprehensive validated code of design practice. This led to the publication in 2005 by Springer of the edited book 'Universal Access in Health Telematics - A Design Code of Practice' (<http://www.springeronline.com/3-540-26167-2>). An online training course in Design for All (<http://is4all-tc.ics.forth.gr>) has also been developed.

As a result of the twelve years of activities of the UI4ALL Working Group, the field of 'Universal Access and Design for All' has made significant progress towards consolidating theoretical approaches, methods, tools and technologies, as well as towards exploring new application domains. The Working Group was the recipient of the ERCIM Working Group Award in 2000, and can be considered an example of a dedicated, prolific and successful research and development community that has contributed greatly to the establishment in Europe of a new scientific field.

As of the end of 2006, following the successful 9th Workshop, the time has come to consider the mission of this Working Group fully accomplished. At the same time, the emergence of ambient intelligence is raising new and fascinating research challenges, which are rapidly gaining attention from an increasing number of researchers and practitioners in Europe and worldwide. The notions of universal access and User Interfaces for All are central to this vision, since ambient intelligence aims at providing implicit, unobtrusive interaction by putting people, their social situations, and the corresponding environments at the centre of design considerations.

These issues will be addressed by the new ERCIM Working Group 'Smart Environments and Systems for Ambient Intelligence' (SESAMI, <http://www.ics.forth.gr/sesami/>), which was established in 2006. SESAMI focuses on research towards distributing, embedding, coordinating and interactively delivering computing intelligence, while putting people and social contexts at the centre of design considerations. The research

community founded by the ERCIM Working Group UI4ALL will therefore continue its collaborative efforts in the context of SESAMI. Two special thematic sessions organised by SESAMI are to be held as part of the 4th International Conference for Universal Access in Human Computer Interaction (UAHCI), jointly with the 12th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, on 22–27 July 2007 in Beijing, China (<http://www.hcii2007.org/>).

Please contact:

Constantine Stephanidis

ICS - FORTH, Greece

Tel: +30 2810 391741

E-mail: [cs@ics.forth.gr](mailto:cs@ics.forth.gr)

<http://www.ics.forth.gr/stephanidis/index.shtml>