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Nurturing supportive and engaging induction environments for distance-learning students

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Abstract

Distance learning (DL) students typically learn with very limited or no requirements for physical presence and this often means that learning may be perceived as a more isolating or less 'natural' experience. Postgraduate (PG) DL students are particularly vulnerable as mature students with working and family commitments who require more support in their transition to a DL PG study, having experienced a longer break in education. This paper presents the main findings of a survey of 82 students and semi-structured interviews with 11 students studying at the Robert Gordon University (Aberdeen, Scotland). The research explored their expectations and challenges encountered in transitioning to a DL PG study across a number of different subject areas. The study found that the online induction process should meet a variety of expectations and needs, focusing primarily on academic and social aspects. DL study can be an isolating experience, which can be made less alienating when there is a chance for students to get to know their peers and teaching staff. An inclusive approach to online induction geared towards flexible support and interactive, engaging content is an important consideration.

Keywords: postgraduate distance-learning; induction; survey; student experience; engagement; academic support; interactivity.

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1. Introduction and rationale

During the last decade, Scotland's higher education institutions have established a strong distance-learning (DL) education presence with programmes that are addressed to both home and international students, offering a distinctively different learning and teaching experience from traditional campus-based programmes. The global reach and *sans frontier* character of these programmes means that opportunities are now increasing for creating richer and more diverse multicultural learning environments for both home and international students (Universities Scotland, 2015). However, within an equally fast-growing and competitive international education environment, DL requires a significant movement from traditional on-campus modes of educational delivery, support, advice and pastoral care to a model that is appropriate to the needs of DL students and their diverse learning environments, expectations and requirements. DL differs from conventional campus-based forms of learning, where teaching takes place predominantly face-to-face, with sufficient personal contact between students and academic staff. DL students typically learn with very limited or no requirements for physical presence and this often means that learning may be perceived as a more isolating or less 'natural' experience. In addition, online students may be separated on the basis of different geographical locations and time differences, and a significant amount of private/independent study may be expected of them (Forrester et al., 2005). In the online environment, students' different learning styles and education expectations may be more difficult to manage. In the past few years greater use of information and communication technologies by higher education institutions has improved the delivery and the interactivity of DL programmes.

However, it has become increasingly clear that technological resources on their own are not sufficient to provide positive online education experiences. More attention should be given to induction processes for online students to allow their effective integration and adjustment to the university environment. Nevertheless, a systematic programme of interactive sessions that supports the induction of DL students is not always a formal university-wide practice. Introducing students to their virtual learning environment during the first week of teaching may result in increased dropout rates, difficulty in addressing the educational objectives of the programme and in a high volume of technical questions that overwhelm students and staff in the first weeks. DL Postgraduate (PG) students, in particular, may be quite a vulnerable learner group when it comes to online education, as it can be easily assumed that they are already confident and independent learners and their transition from an undergraduate campus-based education to postgraduate online study would be a straightforward experience. However, DL PG students are often mature students who have taken a longer break in education and this may make them feel less confident in relation to their academic and IT skills. Additionally, they often juggle studies with complex family and work commitments, which means that their adaptation period may be more complicated and take longer. Although these challenges merit a unique focus, limited studies have been conducted into the induction experiences of PG DL students (Harrison 2010). Studies that examine the perspectives of students beyond a simple analysis of the provision of programmes and their content are also scarce and this presents a limited understanding of challenges and opportunities. The aims and objectives of this research project were therefore as follows: a) to identify existing gaps in the provision of support in students' transition to postgraduate online DL education and identify needs and expectations via an examination of DL students' experiences (content, process and methods) and b) to offer recommendations for the effective design of an online induction programme for postgraduate online DL students.

2. Previous research

In a research study that examined the induction programmes aimed at DL students, conducted by The Open University (2015) across 14 HEIs, it was found that there is little research study in this area. Although robust induction programmes have a positive impact on student retention and progression, for creating a social presence and for maintaining collaborative learning, most institutions lack a policy on induction for DL students. In addition, most HEIs have not adopted an institution-wide, generic induction package (Harper et al., 2015). This research offered an analysis of the websites of a number of universities offering DL courses and found that induction activities take place with different objectives, cover a diverse range of topics, have a different duration, use different modes of communication and online platforms and are delivered by a range of staff, often collaboratively with other support departments. The programmes cover a number of areas, from providing practical guidance on how to use the

online environment to referencing standards, to the programme's details and regulations, to assessment information and key readings. In addition, there are four areas an online induction programme should target: a) learning & assessment, b) academic & study skills support c) rules, regulations and expectations and d) communication and creating a sense of community (Harper et al., 2015).

3. Research design

This research used multiple methods for data collection that provided a rich set of qualitative and quantitative data, informing students' attitudes and practices in relation to postgraduate induction activities. For the purposes of this study, induction was taken to mean the period once students are registered for a course, programme or qualification. The main method consisted of a survey of postgraduate students studying at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, Scotland. The overall purpose of the survey was to explore expectations of students in relation to what an ideal induction programme would include, how it would be designed and run, as well as the enablers and barriers that students may encounter. The survey provided a basis for further discussions with students in the form of semi-structured online interviews via Skype, with the purpose of developing a more detailed understanding of the main issues, opportunities and challenges raised and to identify innovative ideas.

4. Questionnaire results

A total of 82 postgraduate students studying in a variety of courses at The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen completed the survey (Table 1). The students came from courses in librarianship, information management and law, in addition to various management-related courses. A snowball sampling approach was followed via which Course Leaders invited their students to participate in the research. Only 32.4% (n=24) had attended their induction programme while 52.9% (n=38) indicated that it was not available in their course. The students were asked to offer their perspectives on the design, content and delivery of an ideal induction programme on the level of practical and affective needs. A 5-point Likert scale was used to rank the importance students' assigned to these areas (1=not important at all to 5=very important). As Table 1 illustrates, students assigned high importance to most of the practical areas although the value of university support contacts was slightly lower.

Table 1. What do you think an online induction programme should do (in relation to practical areas)?

Questions	Average
Q 1.Allow students opportunities for some hands-on practice with the online learning tools (e.g. forums, wikis, video conferencing)	4.28
Q 2. Help students understand the requirements of the programme and the university regulations (e.g. assessments, deadlines, grading system etc.)	4.43
Q 3. Help students understand what support is available from tutors/lecturers and how to approach them	4.48
Q 4. Introduce students to university support contacts (e.g. IT support, teaching and learning support)	3.99
Q 5. Help students understand expectations on how they should be approaching their postgraduate study (e.g. time management, research-based skills, report writing)	4.33
Q 6. Introduce students to library services and how to access the library	4.41

In relation to the affective aspects, students indicated that an induction programme should address a number of different needs across all areas. However, the most important consideration was around increasing students' confidence with the virtual learning environment (Table 2).

Table 2. What do you think an online induction programme should do (in relation to affective areas)?

Questions	Average
Q1. Help students develop confidence with the virtual learning environment (increase awareness of tools, processes, facilities)	4.37
Q2. Ameliorate any feelings of isolation in online learning by helping students get to know each other	4.06
Q3. Support collaborative relationships and create a strong sense of a learning community	4.01
Q4. Motivate students into online learning (i.e. help them become responsible for their own learning and reflect in the learning process)	4.02
Q5. Help students achieve personal goals and plan further development (e.g. career options, further study, training)	3.68

Regarding the types of activities the students would like to see, preference was given to flexible and interactive sessions (e.g. flexible course-related activities that offer opportunities to interact with academic staff (68.3%, n=56), flexible self-assessment tasks that help students understand their learning styles and approaches to study (51.2%, n=42) and flexible (completed in your own time) group 'ice-breaker' activities, involving wikis, discussion fora and interactive seminars (50%, n=41). Students favoured less real-time activities (e.g. a real-time 'ice-breaker' or fun social activities which offer opportunities to interact with other students (32.9%, n=27), and placed less value on resources/support that were not directly related to their course, e.g. careers advice (26.8%, n=22), extracurricular activities (20.7%, n=17), and the university regulations and administrative procedures (23.2%, n=19). However, they placed emphasis on guidance around study support services (52.4%, n=43) and interactive guides/virtual tours to help in obtaining library resources (53.7%, n=44).

The vast majority indicated that they would like to see their Course Leader involved in their online induction course (87.8%, n=72), followed by academic staff who teach different subjects in the course (69.5%, n=57) and finally library staff (37.8%, n=31). Interestingly, the students did not value the presence of the Head of Department/Subject Leader in the induction. In addition, only 24.4% (n=20) thought that the University Support Services should be involved. They also did not see a role for the Class Representative, although 34.1% (n=28) expressed the view that all the students in the online class should be involved, and that these sessions should be compulsory. The most valuable time for the induction would be at the beginning of their course (52%, n=63.4) rather than at different stages, because after the first year students would be familiar with the procedures followed, the staff and services.

5. Interview an qualitative questionnaire results

Throughout the interviews the students placed emphasis on the value of interactivity, flexibility, personal contact and opportunities for participatory online learning and socialising experiences. Engagement with other students meant feeling part of a community of learners and experiencing via interaction with others that progress in learning is made: "a network of people…to discuss things with" and this would help them increase their confidence" and

"bounce ideas off". For example, students were worried that posting something wrong in the discussion forum could make them look foolish. A student mentioned the idea of a socialising app designed to link together people in the same geographical area. Widely available communication media were considered useful. Students, who had already created Facebook pages and forums, and communicated on Skype, favoured accessibility via smartphones. This was expressed as "peer networking" for "creating a sense of sociability", which is not possible on Moodle. Overall, encouraging students to share more information about themselves was considered as a helpful first step in this process.

On a more formal level, student mentors were also mentioned as a good way of connecting with other students who have more experience of DL. A mentorship/buddy programme could equally be created with external professionals with industry experience (e.g. alumni). However, not all students favoured socialising activities that were not directly related to the course; these were perceived as "not a good use of time" during an intensive DL course that involves too much reading and where there is "no time for socialisation". On the other hand, contact with staff meant that they were "not just reading Power Point sheets" but they had experience of what they called a "human lecture", not via a "message board, but question and answer sessions" and video sessions that were considered as the most effective method to "see people on the course with you, people you can engage with". Students required more information about their lecturers, "what they have done, looking at their specific discipline and their experiences" and linked to this idea was the value of creating a sense of immediacy in early communication when students felt that they were "working in the dark". Different time zones and work commitments, however, made synchronous communication "a big commitment" and thus recording live sessions was deemed very valuable. In addition, messages were often not received or digested by students because of the overwhelming amount of information they were exposed to, and their unfamiliarity with the online environment created worry and anxiety that they were missing important information.

Finally, emphasis was placed mainly on information "to become familiar with the course, who is running it, the course materials, and its structure" rather than peripheral information, although navigating the online learning environment and awareness of the library resources was considered important. Some students also saw an aspect of time management as a component of the induction session to help with course deadlines and work-life balance. Others also favoured opportunities for hands-on experience to develop academic skills and particularly report writing.

6. Discussion and conclusions

DL students require the online induction process to meet a variety of expectations and needs focusing not only on the academic aspects but also upon the social and pastoral side of learning, in order to ease their transition from traditional campus-based education to the online learning environment (Dzakiria, 2008; Forrester et al., 2005). One of the most frequently cited concerns is that new DL students appear to perceive and expect that their study will be an isolating experience. In order to find a sense of student identity within the online environment, a rapport and empathy with the vision of the educational institution and its representatives, and engagement with the online community is necessary so as to become empowered, autonomous and ultimately successful learners. Therefore, an induction programme should create these opportunities from the outset of the course. Some of the key features of the most effective DL orientation programmes appear to be centred around offering a staged, holistic approach to implementation and delivery, which first and foremost incorporates social opportunities underpinned by a thorough, easy-to-use-and-understand method of ICT/digital literacy skills training for quickly building students' confidence and experience (Dzakiria, 2008; Forrester & Parkinson, 2006; Winnard & Elliott, 2012).

Consideration also needs to be given to the necessity for the induction programme to suit specific courses and cohorts. It should ideally offer maximum flexibility for aligning the learning resources available on the programme with the different learning styles/preferences, speeds and pre-induction technical abilities of individual students. This would ensure the highest levels of efficacy in aiding the acquisition, retention and success of students studying in online learning environments (O'Donnell et al., 2006; Phillips et al., 2004). Turner and Myer (2009) suggest that the use of a highly interactive online environment, including the implementation of social media and other Web 2.0 features, offers a vital tool for promoting a welcoming and inclusive image of the university to newcomers. They

recommend online films and audio guides for introducing DL students to key university staff, and providing online orientation tours of the physical space occupied by the university campus – particularly the library. This also works to connect students with the human element, a 'friendly face', and thus breaks down any barriers to communication, by creating a 'safe' online environment through which students feel comfortable interacting and forming meaningful bonds with staff and their peers. Such an approach would thus ultimately help to counteract students' initial feelings of apprehension and isolation at the beginning of their DL studies. Harper et al. (2015) advocate that incorporation of light-hearted "ice-breakers", appropriate to the postgraduate context, can help to nurture a supportive social learning community together with the early involvement of academic staff; this can have a lasting, positive impact on DL student achievement and retention because it encourages students to integrate and develop a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, offering adequate staff training and development, by focusing on ways to support course teams to work together and adapt their teaching styles to the DL method and context, would ensure that induction programmes could be delivered in a more cohesive and collaborative manner across all departments. This may also prove to be a particularly beneficial foundation for the evolvement of university policy and best practice regarding DL induction (Dzakiria, 2008). Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, there is also a need for sufficient publicity of an online induction programme to encourage the early embedding of a proactive attitude towards full participation in the online learning community (Phillips et al., 2004).

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