The Distance Learning Experience: Evaluating the needs of post-graduate students

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Introduction

To provide successful and sustainable distance learning courses it is important to identify and understand the various needs and preferences of our ‘dispersed and diverse learning populations’ (Davidson & Goldberg, 2010:2). The MSc Public Health – Health Promotion programme started entirely online in the autumn of 2014. The course recruits from a number of countries across the world bringing students virtually together from a range of professional and academic backgrounds to study. Translating traditional, face-to-face courses into distance learning provision needs to be done with students’ circumstances and learning needs in mind.

Aim: To explore the needs and experiences of Masters students undertaking the MSc Public Health – Health Promotion Distance Learning course.

Objectives:
1. Explore experiences of the students on the course.
2. Assess students’ learning and professional development needs, and curriculum inclusivity.
3. Identify recommendations for strengthening inclusiveness on this and other DL courses addressing such diverse needs and expectations.

Method: Using a qualitative approach, nine* semi-structured, in-depth telephone interviews were held with DL students; transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (*approximately one third of the students on the programme).

Key Findings – Four Main Themes (all inter-related)

- Enjoying the course
  - Study, work and life balance
  - Practical relevance – applicable to work roles
  - Like the flexibility of studying online – fits around family & work
  - Challenges regarding high workloads

- Communication and connecting with others
  - Positive about
    - modular content
    - Clear directions re assessment needed
    - More consistent workload preferred across modules
    - Appreciate weekly reminders from tutors
  - Many wanting more contact with each other and with staff
  - Some feeling isolated, some preferring to work alone
  - Potential for use of social media: harvested the potential of social media
  - Mixed use of discussion boards

- Personal experiences and challenges
  - Consistent information about course structure & application process needed
  - Maintenance of VLE is important
  - Clear signposting for procedures
  - Mixed use of discussion boards

- Course content, resources and structure
  - Issue about payment were not communicated clearly to us
  - In the past there were issues about who to contact. I’m not quite sure right now if I have an issue
  - When you are studying, and click on some links, there are not too many but some of them are not working properly

Implications

The student experience is generally positive. They enjoy the flexibility of doing a Distance Learning Course. Some areas for improvement and/or change have been identified as follows:

- Clearer admission and enrolment procedures.
- Creation of additional opportunities for students to interact with each other, and with the course team, harnessing the potential of social media.
- Consider the workload balance between the different modules
- Clearer information for students on course structure, timescales and timetables.

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