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

Ruth Cross, Helen Ingle* and Thom Shaw

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 on-line 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)

"It is amazing, I am quite happy with a lot of things"

"I cannot take time off from work to study so it is a good option...the course is very practical and I can apply most of the things I have learned to the work that I am doing"

"The materials and the way the teachers teach is good. I think there is a problem, I think the workload is very high. Sometimes it is too much. Some weeks it is impossible to cope with".

"I think the materials are very clear; you can hear them at home, sitting watching TV with your headset. You can be travelling in a vehicle. I think that's a plus".

"I have used the discussion boards but not so much. What I have done sometimes is to go and look at other people's ideas. I am hesitant to talk in case I am off the mark. I wouldn't want that to be out for the public to see".

"If they are forcing us to do group work it is really hard for us and I do not think it helps too much, not at this level because we all work [...] my suggestion is they should give the option to people. Some students want to do group work, some don't".

"I think I would get more out of the course if I had any kind of personal relationship with the other members".

- 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

- Many wanting more contact with each other and with staff
- Some feeling isolated; some preferring to work alone
- Potential for use of social media
- Mixed use of discussion boards

Personal experiences and challenges

Communication and connecting with others

Course content, resources and structure

Course management and maintenance

- Positive about modular content
- Clear directions re assessment needed
- More consistent workload preferred across modules
- Appreciate weekly reminders from tutors

- Consistent information about course structure & application process needed
- Maintenance of VLE is important
- Clear signposting for additional support
- Would like more reminders

"I like the way the course is organised. When I go to the modules it keeps me up-to-date...the way different topics are week to week you can see it you are falling behind. I love the audio lectures and the materials. I am able to access a lot of information".

"The content is useful and applicable. I find application for everything I have learnt so far".

"I like the view that it gives me, a different kind of view than the medical perspective I had previously. I'm learning a lot of new things and new concepts that I had no idea about...I am learning new things and that has been very beneficial in where I work".

"Issues 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".

"They (the university) kept asking me lots of things during the enrolment process, not the course department, it was the university". It was quite inconvenient, not very pleasant...It was not a very friendly situation".

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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