TOWARDS PROVIDING DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENTS WITH A COMPARABLE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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***Abstract:** The Internet has become an additional strand in the teaching strategy of many courses, as students become increasingly able to make use of computers from their home. This has led to an increase in the range and number of Distance Learning courses: either entirely online or utilising an online element as teaching support. This paper highlights some issues and areas that should be addressed to ensure that Distance Learning Students have a learning experience comparable with 'traditional' students*

***Key words:** Distance Learning, education, Internet, Student experience.*

INTRODUCTION

Education is an integral part of the development of modern society, and is frequently given top priority in government programmes. Education is continually reviewed and new requirements are imposed. The traditional barriers to education can be classified into three primary categories: financial, educational or personal. For the first category, certain courses require fees; while for the second category, the most frequently encountered constraint is the entry requirement being too high for some courses. The final area constraints include a lack of confidence, a lack of awareness of what subjects are available, being too distant from the University or being housebound.

From the early days of education, teaching has largely involved lecturers instructing their students in face-to-face settings, such as classrooms. In the last century radio, television and satellite broadcasting provided Distance Learning with new delivery methods. Advances in information and communications technology coupled with the emergence of the Internet as a global network are making access to information and education easier than ever before. Within Higher Education, e-learning has emerged as one of the fastest growing trends. Despite the huge interest in e-learning, academic research on using the web in a pedagogical context has been limited to 'accounts' of technology implementation' with limited comment on wider issues [3]. Hara and Kling [4] are concerned that studies do not address human factors such as student isolation and the loss of personal contact with classmates and lecturers, or frustrations with technical problems. The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK and the Santa Clara University are examples of educational establishments that have developed computer/web-based packages and studied the effects upon student learning patterns [5].

DISTANCE LEARNING

In the UK the proliferation of Distance Learning and the range of experiences it covers, has required the QAA to produce guidelines for quality assurance within their Code of Practice [6]. Within these guidelines the QAA acknowledge four 'dimensions of Distance Learning':

1. *materials-based learning* – this refers to all the materials provided to the distance learner in place of face-to-face classroom contact. The materials may be in a number of formats including paper-based, audio/visual, web-or IT based.

2. *programme components delivered by visiting lecturers* – this refers to teaching staff from the institution travelling to the location of the learners to deliver parts of the programme.

3. *learning supported locally* – in place of staff travelling from the institution, teaching staff are employed locally to deliver elements of the programme including student support.

4. *learning supported from the providing institution remotely from the student* – this refers to the different forms of communication a tutor may use to support individual learners or groups of learners. The forms may include postal, telephone, email and even video-conferencing.

The traditional student has a learning experience which is centred around their department. They are provided with a weekly timetable of when to attend lectures, tutorials, laboratory session and so on – always with an academic present. If at any point they encounter academic difficulties then students know when and where to find the appropriate lecturer. If these students have problems of a non-academic nature, then most Universities have a range of Student Support Services that can be used for advice and assistance. On an almost daily basis these students are surrounded by their peers and thus have a sense of "cohort identity", which provides them with friends to turn to. Finally, these students are at the centre of a thriving social community which provides activities from extra curricula clubs, such a sailing, to infamous student parties: all providing the students with ample opportunity to develop as an individual as well as a learner. All in all the life of a student physically attending University full-time is quite full. Contrast this with the various forms of distance learner. For example let us look at the far case, namely the student who is studying online and thus has no physical contact with people connected with the University. These students are likely to undertake their learning at different times to their peers,. Often their only communication with the University is through emails to the academics. These students have no opportunity to talk to classmates, to enjoy the social life of a student (which is a valuable experience in itself), and often have no means of accessing University Student Support Services. These students may well complete the academic side of their University career with extremely good grades, however there is an important question to ask "have they actually had a valuable learning experience".

STAGES OF LEARNER SUPPORT
During the programme design process thought needs to be given to both the academic and administrative support that students will need, from recruitment to graduation and beyond. The type and level of support must be appropriate to the level of the programme and relative to the subject being delivered. Concern over learner support should not be restricted to students on the programme; thought also needs to be given to the type of support that the learner or prospective learner needs at all stages, from application to graduation. It is also important that from the outset the learner or prospective learner knows not only what they can expect from the programme and the HEI but also knows what is expected of them.

Stage One: support before starting the programme
Gaining access to information about what Distance Learning programmes are on offer and the details about each programme is a vital part of marketing. Learning at a distance may not suit all students or all types of programme. It is important that prospective applicants are provided with full information about how Distance Learning works and, in particular, what methods of delivery will be used for the particular programme for which they might be applying. This will help applicants decide whether this particular programme taught in a particular way suits their lifestyle and learning style.

The form and nature of academic support available to Distance Learning Students should be made clear from the earliest information received, and details provided about who they can contact to ask questions about any aspect of the prospective course. Pre-enrolment Course information should outline the following:
• aims and objectives of the programme of study;

• level of study and the entry requirements, with some information about the types of people for whom the programme is intended;
• delivery methods and subsequent implications for whether students require the possession of certain equipment;
• nature of programme and institutional level support services both pastoral and academic;
• specific application procedures: it might be worth considering whether any of the application process can also be completed online.

The programme team might wish to consider whether applicants can have a 'taster' of the programme before they commit fully to enrolment. If the programme is to make use of web-based or other ICT-based resources applicants could, perhaps, be given limited access to some of the materials. In the case of paper-based materials the student could be sent a sample of the types of activities they might be asked to engage in as part of the programme. All potential students could be given the opportunity to complete a dummy 'assessment' or learning activity and be provided with feedback on how they have responded to the materials. We can learn from the experience of other HEIs. For instance, Robert Gordon University (RGU) has created a Virtual Campus♦ which provides applicants with the opportunity to see, in advance, what Distance Learning is like and so decide whether it is really for them. RGU has also developed an induction programme which applicants must complete prior to enrolment. This induction is designed to enable applicants to self-assess their aptitude for Distance Learning.

Stage Two: support at the start and during the programme
Distance learners will require specific advice and support on the following:
• how to enrol on the programme and acquire proof of status
• how to get IT help and support
• how to contact tutors and support staff. Students should be provided with information detailing how their Distance Learning programme will be delivered and supported; what they might expect from staff and what will be expected of them. This information may be provided in the form of a '*service agreement*', within the course handbook, that describes what type and level of service can be reasonably expected. In this way the expectations on both sides are, hopefully, realistic and may help to prevent later grievances and grounds for appeal. The following should be addressed:
• which staff to contact, for what purpose and by what means;
• maximum response times for email queries, both academic and administrative;
• realistic timescales for the feedback on and return of submitted assessment work.

Appropriate addresses for communication should be established, where appropriate. Thus where emails are to be the main mechanism for communication, generic email addresses for tutor, administration and assessment messages are often helpful. The student handbook, whether in printed or electronic form, is a useful mechanism for answering many student queries in the form of FAQs, this way many general student queries can be anticipated and dealt with. Programme tutors may also wish to consider implementing an email filtering system so that they are not inundated with queries which could be better dealt with by programme administrators. Many institutional services will have their own policies for dealing with Distance Learning Students. Students need a personal tutor who can help with both academic and general study problems. Personal tutors should be chosen for their experience in dealing with Distance Learning students or made aware, through staff development, of the particular issues in supporting Distance Learners. While always desirable as part of an educational experience, face-to-face

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♦ http://campus.rgu.com

contact might not be a practical option for your particular programme so alternative means of giving students the opportunity to work with or at least be in contact with other students needs considering. It is important that, wherever possible, self-help communities of Distance Learners are established. It may be worth considering organising the students into virtual tutorial groups and requiring them to work with each other on assignments.

The level and type of peer support that is practicable will depend on how many students are enrolled and whether they progress through the programme as a cohort. Even where there is no cohort it is often possible to connect all those on the programme, perhaps via a newsletter or through the operation of student representatives on Boards of Study. Distance Learning Students should know what access they have to services such as Counselling, Welfare and the Chaplaincy. Whilst Distance Learning students will be able to access this provision through email or telephone, face-to-face contact will be limited and as this is a key element in supporting students it is likely that they may be referred, in certain circumstances, to local services in their own community.

Stage Three: support when the programme is completed

Students may access the Careers Service through the website and via email. It should also be possible for Distance Learning Students to access careers advice from their local HEI, through reciprocal arrangements in place between university careers services. It is important that distance learners are encouraged to attend their graduation ceremony, if at all possible. Paradoxically, this may be the first time that students get to meet one another and their tutors. The final stage of being a student is becoming an alumnus. Alumni from Distance Learning programmes as with all programmes are an important resource both in terms of providing feedback on provision and also as returning students.

LEARNING RESOURCE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Independent of the delivery medium, there are common concepts for learning resource structure and content that should be addressed to help promote effective learning at a distance. As well as an overall contents map or page, the learning resources should include, where possible, cross-references to other sections within them. This enables students to have a more holistic view of the whole programme. In traditional lectures this is often done in passing with off-the-cuff remarks by staff.

Lecturers should adapt their material to compensate for lack of face-to-face contact, for example elements to promote self-motivation, opportunities for reflection, self-pacing aids. Students need to be self-motivated, to be aware of what they have learnt and to know how to pace themselves as they progress through the programme. Learner support strategies that encourage communication between student, peers and staff can help with motivation. Activities within the content that help students reflect on their learning can also act as motivators. These could include a reflective log or simple self-assessment exercises. Providing an example of the timeline for a 'typical' student's progression through the cources could be used as an aid for student self-pacing.

In order to engage students in the learning process, opportunities for active learning should be incorporated into Distance Learning programmes. This can be achieved for electronic media by including multimedia content or computer-based assessment. Group collaborative work via discussion board or chatrooms is also possible where a cohort of students exists. It is more appropriate to use specialised software for this type of conferencing. One such example is Lyceum: a synchronous conferencing system which provides a way to support and assist students who are remotely located. Lyceum provides a shared work space in the form of an electronic white board. Pre-prepared material can

be placed onto the whiteboard and used interactively with students who can annotate the common view. 'Chat' is provided in acoustic and textual form.

Web-learning allows for asynchronous learning where students can access course material whenever and wherever convenient. This arrangement has proved to be adequate for students in the main, however students now have a higher expectation level and are more demanding in their need for interactive involvement. This extends to their lecturers, who are required to be available whenever students are online: thus 24-hour accessibility is an expectation. In fact the students undertaking the Distance Learning course may be in a different time zone to the HEI, and thus can only access 'out of hours'. While it is not possible for the lecturer to be available constantly, it might be appropriate to provide some form of 24-hour academic support across a grouping of modules – if Distance Learning Student numbers are sufficient. As a minimum, HEI's need to provide a statement of their policy, for example "*lecturers will respond to emails within 2 working days*".

Support from Learning & Information Services
Frequently Distance Learning Students can spend a significant amount of time searching for relevant information on the Internet. One way to alleviate this is for Universities to provide Resource Management Services, where a searchable database is developed containing highly relevant and quality controlled resources. One major problem that Distance Learning Students face is access to books, manuals, journals etc. An obvious solution is to provide these resources through the Internet. Many journals mow offer web-based subscriptions allowing students access whenever they need it. Book publishers are now offering more texts in E-book format, so much so tat LJMU recently acquired 12,000 E-books. There are also advantages to this format, such as the ability to search for books by title, author or subject, as well as searches for individual words or phrases within each book. For Distance Learning Students there should also be provision made for them to have borrowing rights from their local libraries: public and HEI.

Staff at JMU use a wide variety of software, most of which is extremely expensive for Distance Learning Students to purchase. Hence we have developed a piece of software called "Off-Campus Applications" which allows staff and students to gain access to the software applications and information resources from outside the JMU network. Accessible applications and resources include, Microsoft Office packages, such as Word, Excel and Access, personal file store, email, electronic journals, Blackboard and past exam papers. Additionally, we provide Learning & Information Skills Tutorial Which is a selection of subject specific interactive tutorials intended to help students develop their research skills and find useful information in our learning resource centres and on the World Wide Web.

CONCLUSIONS
As educators, we should be making more effective use of the Web and its potential to create better educational environments. The opportunities that new technologies present for enhanced learning are exciting. There is one clear message to those who develop material for use in an electronic environment, namely that developers need to give careful consideration to the end-users' needs beyond those associated with the pedagogy of the subject.

Technology offers many benefits, but it does not have the capacity in itself to help students learn. This is the challenge for the e-tutor, who has to create a supportive learning environment without the rich visual or verbal cues that people interpret in a face-to-face situation. It has been suggested by authors such as Jonassen *et al* [7] and Collis

[8] that there is a need for a change in 'mindset' of teachers engaged in online teaching as opposed to traditional print based delivery. Online environments, in particular, require on-going research to measure their effectiveness and efficiency, and inform users. A learner on a web based Distance Learning course is likely to feel far more isolated than their counter parts do on traditional courses. This isolation and remoteness is the reason that most learners give for not finishing Distance Learning courses. The new environments, with their chat rooms bulletin boards and email, will bring students closer together and keep them more in touch with their tutor. This should improve retention rates on such courses and help more learners to succeed.

Learning is usually a co-operative and social endeavour with students gaining significant benefit from being part of a cohort and interacting with staff and other students on a daily basis. When students learn at a distance, thought needs to be given as to how this important co-operative experience can be replicated without the standard on-campus interactive processes taking place in classrooms, tutorials and social occasions. Distance Learning should not equate with students feeling that they are learning in isolation. Learner support mechanisms should be designed with this concern in mind, a prime objective being to reduce the risk of students becoming demotivated and, therefore, perhaps more likely to withdraw from the programme.

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