



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Supporting Distance Learning Students

Transition(s) the practice supports: Transition to HE from employment (or alongside employment)

Abstract:

Distance learning programmes widen access to education for students who are in employment or have other commitments, and who often need to fit in study alongside these. Typically distance learning is attractive to mature students who have been away from academic study for an extended period, or have little previous experience of academia. It is important that these students feel supported in this transition, since a lack of support is likely to provide a barrier to learning. SRUC offers part-time distance learning programmes at SQA Higher National Certificate and at postgraduate level. This example will focus on the support mechanisms in place within the MSc Organic Farming programme.

Description:

The MSc in Organic Farming comprises an initial Postgraduate Diploma offered as eight taught modules over a two year period of part-time study, followed by an individual research project once students complete the taught modules to progression standard.

This specialist programme has been offered in distance learning format since 2002 in order to allow those who wish to study to be able to do so alongside work and/or family life. It is delivered by staff from the Education, Research and Consulting Divisions of SRUC, along with external specialists from other institutions. The programme combines online study using the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle, with residential study weekends and real time online tutorials which allow live “out of hours” interaction between students and staff.

The programme attracts students from a wide range of backgrounds and experience, and with varying levels of academic qualification. Not all are graduates, and those who are may have gained previous qualifications some time ago. An essential element of a high quality learning experience is effective student support. Emphasis is placed on this within the programme, including supporting both the return to study and the transition to studying whilst



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also potentially working full time. To this end, students are provided with:

- A face-to-face interactive session on the use of SRUC IS systems, VLE and Go-to-Meeting (which is the software used to facilitate online tutorials).
- A face-to-face study skills session to describe and explain scientific writing and the Harvard referencing system, and including an interactive exercise on correct use and citation of reference material. At this session a study skills pack is also provided to the students which includes a Study Skills Toolkit. This contains tips for successful study, explanation of the language used at this academic level (e.g. the meaning of process words such as *discuss* or *evaluate* which will frequently be used in assessments), the marking scheme used within the postgraduate programme, and examples of marked assessments with feedback and grading.
- A face-to-face interactive session on accessing the library and searching for literature online.
- Live interactive online tutorials which tutors will use a number of times for each module to clarify material and assessment processes. In addition, a tutorial about exam technique is run for first year students.
- A clear explanation of assessment procedures and what is expected. This has been highlighted as good practice by the External Examiner for the programme.
- A high level of feedback on submitted work. This is given as both individual and general feedback and is provided electronically. Feedback comments relate to the specialist content of the work plus, for example, style and referencing – this is particularly important for those new to, or returning to, study and enables students to develop their skills. Students are appreciative of the quality of the feedback they receive, and this has also been highlighted as an example of good practice by the External Examiner. One first year student has commented over a number of occasions: *Thank you to all the team for the great support we receive from you all; I am privileged to be on this course, thanks for all your help; Thanks for all the help and guidance we get from you guys, and also the feedback from the previous assignments, it is really useful.*
- Access to staff by phone and email for the provision of additional support if required.

A [case study](#) (with [video](#)) on supporting SRUC Distance Learning students was submitted to QAA as part of the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme.

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