Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Transition into Online Distance Learning Postgraduate Taught Education, University of Edinburgh

Transition(s) the practice supports: In

Student(s) the practice supports: Postgraduate taught online distance learning

Abstract: An outline of the outcomes of a student-led session delivered at the Gearing up for Transitions event in March 2016. The session highlighted the diverse range of postgraduate taught students studying online at the University and current students and graduates shared their experiences of joining an online postgraduate taught programme (MSc Clinical Education) which has a period of induction. Generally students find the induction helpful in orientating them to the University and its systems and very helpful in fostering a sense of community and addressing potential feelings of isolation.

Description: Discussion centred on what a good induction programme should consider and session attendees produced some initial thoughts to support those designing induction programmes for online distance learning postgraduate taught students. Topics to consider included: building a sense of community; the notion of hospitality; cultural sensitivity; and the real conviction that 'one-size' does not fit all. Online distance learners are the fastest growing group of students at the University and a successful transition in will be the first step to ensuring a successful, stimulating and painless experience for all.

Contact details: Gill Aitken, Deputy Programme Director, MSc Clinical Education, gill.aitken@ed.ac.uk

All examples provided will be posted to the Enhancement Themes website with the intention of including them in the National Transitions map.

Transition into postgraduate taught online distance learning education: points to consider for programme teams thinking about their students' induction.

- Tutor staff support is key. Ensure academic staff are available to students early and remain highly visible.

- You get one chance to set the scene and tone for the rest of the programme so it's important to get the introductions right for your particular group of students.

- The programme handbook has got to be good, with the answers to commonly asked questions. Students tend to rely on the handbook as a reliable source of information before they get into the routine of the course. It should be available at the start of the year (preferably before) and be thoroughly updated annually by someone closely involved with the programme delivery to ensure information is correct.

- Do not underestimate the importance of the online discussion board – it is an excellent way to share and helps students feel they are "not alone". It can be easy to overlook discussion boards in the early days, particularly if you offer synchronous sessions.

- Usually students are familiar with academic work, but transitions into online distance learning can be different. Students may not have undertaken academic work for a long time and may be apprehensive. Consider Institute for Academic Development resources; also English language support if required. Importance here of early feed-forward formative assessment.

- Forming a community, the use of tasks can be useful. Generally programmes have an amazingly diverse student group that is spread across the world. Tasks such as plotting locations on a map, describing the view from a desk, favourite food, etc. helps to establish connections and commonality. Aim to cover introductions, using the technology and getting it working and then settling into the academic skills

- Role of staff is vital, the need for a somewhat exaggerated online presence, more excited, cheery, engaged, enthusiastic, so that the students pick up on the social connection that can sometimes be diluted in text. Tutorials are a major element in building community, particularly if they are synchronous. People become more comfortable as they become used to getting together over time.

- Tutorials: free discussion, students should be active – learning by discussion – different learning modality to what many students have experienced previously and this can be challenging to many. Tutors can help by being absolutely explicit on what the expectations of students are.

- Preparing for the transition into online distance learning academic work: consider the time commitment. Considering the challenge of balancing personal/family/professional life alongside an existing job, staff should be clear and honest about potential time commitment. What does 5-15 hours per week feel like (is it always enough)? Need to be self disciplined with tasks and time. Combining academic work, career and family life is a major challenge and should not be underestimated.

- Social media as a safe zone. Outside and away with the programme team – it is moderated by the class rep – so an independent external way of making points to the programme team. Also useful to the programme team in that it can be an honest view

through the class rep. Important to ensure all feel they can contribute and engage. Wordpress has discussion boards that can be exclusive to staff (or students).

- All students will engage differently. Some active, some more passive participants. English as first language or second language – second language may be a barrier? Accents, speed of conversation and slang can make it difficult for all to be involved in discussions. Tutors are generally aware of this but what about other students? Cultural sensitivity.

- Role of tutor at the start very much: "hospitality" – holding a party! Come into that hosting ability to build a community making it a sharing experience – social collaborative sharing academic development. This will be new to many from other cultures and it's important to set programme ethos at the outset.

- Nuanced around the type of participant and the type of programme – are they professionals taking the programme so they can further develop their existing career? Or are they using the programme to start off a new career (different types of student)?

- Not everyone will be happy about how everything is set up and that it works all the time but this can be optimised and linked up to help everyone. It's important to recognise that with online distance learning one size does not fit all. Tutors cannot be too prescriptive.

- Try and get students access to and using systems as early as possible (this can be a problem with late applicants).