



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Transitions in Postgraduate Online Distance Education, University of Edinburgh

Transition(s) the practice supports: In and through

Abstract: The exponential increase in the numbers of postgraduate taught, online distance learning students at the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, University of Edinburgh, has exposed not only a number of opportunities, but also a number of challenges to supporting the student experience and their transitions through an academic programme of study. Key areas of interest include the transition to being an online learner, the transition to being an adult learner and navigating the changes in the academic landscape from students' previous educational experiences. An increasingly heterogeneous student population brings these challenges to the fore and highlights the importance of infrastructure, staff development and resources in the on-going sustainability of providing support to this group of students.

Description:

Background

The College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (CMVM) at the University of Edinburgh is home to over 2490 postgraduate students (2014/2015), of which approximately 1600 are pursuing either postgraduate taught or MSc by Research programmes of study. This represents a growth in this student population of over 1350% from ten years ago with a corresponding increase of programmes on offer of over 1000%. Of these 1600 students, approximately 1400 are completing their degrees at a distance, on one of the 28 established online distance learning programmes. Many of these online distance learning programmes are part time and offer a flexible study route over one to six years. The provision of online distance learning represents a large area of growth in the student population at the University of Edinburgh and is projected to further increase in the coming years.

Online Distance Learning at CMVM

Currently CMVM offers a suit of 28 online distance learning programmes. This is a substantial increase from the four that were offered ten years ago. Many of the programmes on offer are specifically directed towards members of selected health, scientific and veterinary professions. Most have been designed specifically for working professionals and their related career goals, and many are offered in partnership with national and international professional organisations. For example, the MSc in Surgical Sciences is a collaborative project between The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the University of Edinburgh. This programme is only open to



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recent MBChB (or equivalent) qualified medics at the beginning of their surgical careers. The programme itself provides a strong grounding in basic sciences as applied to clinical surgery, and the level of learning is equivalent to the new intercollegiate membership of the Royal College of Surgeons syllabus (MRCS). Another example is the MSc in the Clinical Management of Pain which is open to all health professionals with a clinical interest in pain. Students, both home and international, come from a broad spectrum of health care backgrounds and study the management of pain in a variety of clinical settings. Although not formally associated, the educational content is based on an interdisciplinary curriculum developed by the International Association for the Study of Pain. Unlike the MSc in Surgical Sciences, where students have a highly developed career plan, students on the MSc in the Clinical Management of Pain may have a broader view of where their degree will take them, although most students have a strong understanding and expectation that this degree will enhance their clinical careers in this specialty area. Other degree programmes have been specifically developed for dentists or veterinarians, whilst others are wider in their approach, encompassing broad health related subjects. Equally important, increasing numbers of programmes offer shorter online courses, which may fulfil continuing professional development or continuing medical education requirements.

Our Students

As with undergraduate students, it appears short-sighted to consider all our online distance learning as a homogeneous group of learners, when they bring to their programmes varied educational experience, considerable professional experience and, in many cases, a well-developed professional identity. Part-time, online postgraduate students also bring the challenges of juggling home, personal and professional lives with the demands of study. In addition, as online distance learners do not have to leave their home countries to study at the University of Edinburgh, there is a growing population of international students who add significantly to the diversity of the student experience.

Transitions

All students have a number of transitional phases throughout their programmes of study and postgraduate, online students are no different. A number of transitions appear, however, to be uniquely oriented towards this group of students.

Transition to Becoming an Online Learner and the Challenge of Technology

For many postgraduate, online learners the actual medium of online learning is new, particularly its use as educational tool. For undergraduate students too, using technology as an educational medium may be new, but for many postgraduate students, who may have less experience of technology in general, using technology for educational purposes may be even further removed from their experience. The understanding and navigation of new technology as it is used in educational settings provides both a challenge and an opportunity for students. For students whose previous educational experience may have been focussed on face-to-face lectures in a physical space, the very act of using online technologies to explore educational content, professional discourse, and for peer interaction and support can seem foreign and challenging, and in some cases, insurmountable. But equally, technology can also be seen by students as inspiring and exhilarating as it opens up new opportunities for learning and communication with peers.

Transition to Being an Adult Learner

A unique characteristic of the postgraduate, online learners at CMVM is that many are secure in their professional identities and have a well-formed understanding of their own profession. Most are experienced, middle to senior professionals with distinguished clinical careers and others are on early, yet highly specialised, career tracks. At the same time, many are new to being adult learners, particularly autonomous, adult learners, and returning 'to university' can be a challenge to many students' sense of accomplishment as they may be faced with aspects of learning that they are unable to reconcile with their level of clinical

achievement. As an example, students may feel initially disappointed with the marks achieved for an academic assessment; a mark which may be significantly lower than what befits their position as a senior, experienced clinician. Learner confidence could easily be undermined in these situations and being able to provide appropriate feedback to students and provide support as students transition to an academic phase of their learning and development is key to ongoing success. The transition to being an adult learner is also seen in the relationship between 'staff' and 'student'. As postgraduate adult learners, the relationship between academic staff and student is more akin to the relationship between professional colleagues than a traditional staff-student relationship. These can be difficult transitions as the very notions challenge what many students have experienced in their past education settings.

Transitions in the Academic Landscape

Adult learning provides many situations that challenge students' previous educational experiences. From the very nature and flexible, autonomous structure of online postgraduate learning, to managing the competing demands of family and well-being, employment, financing and professional interests, students face a number of transitional periods. Equally, the academic landscape has changed since many postgraduates were last in formal education – a recent survey of one online distance learning programme at CMVM suggested that the students had had their last formal educational experience between 2 and 36 years ago. The changes in the delivery of education over this time have been dramatic, with increasing emphasis on group work, peer-to-peer learning and interaction, self-assessment, and, autonomous and self-directed learning.

The Challenges of Addressing Transition

In order to help smooth some of these transitions, particularly those relating to technology, many of the Colleges' online distance learning programmes have developed programme-specific induction courses which run in advance of the academic year. These induction courses vary in format, but generally include, an introduction to the technologies that will be used in the programme including communication tools and the virtual learning environment, and an introduction to the programme format including lectures and content delivery. In addition to programme-specific inductions, the Institute for Academic Development, a central University support service, has, since 2011, been providing specific support for taught postgraduate students, both online and on-campus. The Institute for Academic Development provides events, a blog, Twitter and a dedicated website which contains a variety of academic skills resources including:

- Getting started at masters level
- Academic writing (including an e-writing online course)
- 'Developing your English' resources
- Literature searching
- Dissertation resources

In addition to website based resources, the Institute for Academic Development runs a number of live, online workshops on topics such as:

- Getting started with your studies
- Introduction to the virtual library
- Study skills: being critical
- Dissertation writing
- Decision making in practice

Other transitions, for example, the transition to an adult learner and the navigation through the academic landscape, are less well served. Some are beginning to be addressed formally by the Institute for Academic Development in online workshops such as 'Time and

Goal Management', 'Academic Writing: Who's afraid of the big blank page' and through one to one consultations; however, much of the management of these transitions currently rests with individual programme teams. Whilst academic programme teams are the often the students' first port of call, they may not be best placed, for a variety of reasons including resources, training, and conflicts of interest, to manage some of these transitions.

The challenge of addressing transitions highlights a number of areas for consideration including infrastructure, staff development, and resources, all of which are closely linked.

The infrastructure in which staff and students interact will continue to be key to supporting transitions at all stages. Technology, governance, social organisation, physical and virtual space and communication are needed to provide a strong and flexible base of support for our students. The development of staff, both as individuals and as programme teams cannot be underestimated as both academic, and other staff, are essential in providing support as students negotiate transitional periods. Many academics, for example, whilst experts in subject areas or research endeavours, may not be well-placed to provide support in certain transitional areas.

Enabling smooth and seamless transitions is an increasingly important part of the work of programme teams and of the University as a whole, and this must be recognised in the overall infrastructure, in staff development and in resource allocation. In the short time CMVM has been providing postgraduate online distance learning programmes, the numbers of students and the programmes taken have grown exponentially. Programme teams and the University have learned much about the students we support and how best to support them, and in many ways we are only beginning to address some of these transitional periods. We are however, only setting out on the journey to understanding the variety of transitions this group of students face and the challenge now is to be open to the fact that we have much to learn.

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