



**Maintaining a sustainable Future  
for IT in Higher Education**

**Thursday 16th June 2011**

**Time: 14:30 - 15:00**

## **Framing The Distance Experience: Towards a Critical Understanding of Distance Teaching**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 2010, strategic development of distance learning (DL) courses were part of the Aston University Learning and Teaching institutional plan and therefore also under discussion within the School of Languages and Social Sciences (LSS).

In research studies to date there has been a persistent tendency to compare 'distance' learning to the 'face-to-face' experience (Blake, 2000), but this seems rather outdated, when so much time is spent now by all 'online'. In 2008, in *Distance Education*, Goodyear & Ellis stated:-

Educational technology research has spent too long trapped in a paradigm of simplistic comparisons....ignoring a whole range of difficult but researchable practical issues whose resolution is essential to take up (Goodyear & Ellis, 2008).

Many studies evaluate and compare learner experiences in minimal ways, measuring 'student outcomes' on individual courses, rather than complete programmes (Merisotis, & Phipps, 1999). Few undertake systematic inquiry to research consistent themes emerging for staff across a range of disciplines and backgrounds to compare with recent literature.

To critically examine what practical issues LSS teaching staff might raise, 40 academic staff across 6 subject groups were interviewed by members of the Learning & Teaching Support Team: David Pollard & Sarah Hayes.

### **2. BACKGROUND**

The HEFCE commissioned *Study of UK Online Learning*, March 2010, David White, Nicola Warren, Sean Faughnan & Marion Manton, found:-

- The vast majority of online DL courses in UK HE institutions is at PG level, often professional development, or strong vocational focus
- Online DL courses are not easy for students to find in web searches
- Cost of fees and quality of marketing websites varied greatly

- The technology was described as 'vital but not central'
- There was a requirement for low student-tutor ratios and regular feedback
- A robust institutional infrastructure for developing, delivering & maintaining courses is essential, preferably with central support, as many DL offerings have evolved from a 'cottage industry' style approach at departmental level
- This benefits students, but is also a potential barrier to expanding provision

In 2011 the Times Higher Education reported:-

- Universities are keen to beef up their online offerings and generate income
- Developing good courses though is expensive
- Simply taking a conventional course and putting the lecture notes online does not work. This can mean a cultural shift for academics
- To avoid pitfalls, **understand what the student wants**

In our study of academic staff opinion we asked **what the lecturer believes**. If a cultural shift is needed, what does this mean in practice for staff currently teaching in a university? Following ethics approval, the LSS staff interviewed were asked to give their opinions anonymously in answer to 6 open-ended questions about distance *teaching*:-

Do you have any experience of distance teaching?  
What do you think some of the issues might be?  
What kind of administrative support do you think is required?  
What are the institutional responsibilities?  
What do you know about enabling technologies for distance teaching?  
Is there anything further you would like to add about distance teaching?

Interviews were recorded and uploaded to Nvivo for qualitative analysis. Consistent themes were identified.

## Results

Eight key themes emerged:-

- What constitutes distance learning?
- Institutional issues
- Economic factors
- Learner issues
- Administrative support
- Technology
- Cultural opportunities
- Distance IS different

### 2.1. WHAT CONSTITUTES DISTANCE TEACHING?

Amongst the 40 academic staff interviewed:

- **12** confirmed they *had experience* of distance teaching
- **17** confirmed they had *no experience*

*The remainder were unclear in respect of what distance teaching actually means*

- **17 out of the 40 confirmed they had supervised distance PhD or placement students**
- **9** confirmed they had *experienced distance learning as a student*
- **2** had *prepared distance materials, but had not had to teach these*
- **2** had *assessed the work of distance learners that they had not taught*

Amongst this varied picture, many said they were already incorporating DL elements in work that was not formally classed as DL - via supervision, or online contact with campus-based students and so were unclear as to what extent they were already distance teaching. Some expressed a clear preference about whether or not they wished to engage in distance teaching at all in the future:-

12 said they <i>would be happy to distance teach</i>	12 said they <i>would not</i>
‘I like it better and we do not have to fill in forms to prove we met as our emails are the evidence’	‘I enjoy and relish student contact and dread a distance situation that would take away the elements of my job I think I am good at’
‘We should be pursuing DL as I regularly have enquiries’	‘As a teacher I operate best when the students are physically here’
‘I would be happy to distance teach - I would not like my whole life conducted at a distance’	‘I would miss the human touch. I love to have the proximity. I prefer to teach in the flesh!’
‘With support for the technologies I would be happy to write materials for DL and to be involved. It could be the way that we are going’	‘It is unrewarding as a teacher. You do not see the evolution of your work. As a student you feel anonymous and are tempted to drop out’
‘It is very positive and enjoyable. I had no training and had to learn the hard way, but it gives students flexibility and I have found it fascinating. A DL tutor has to be highly skilled’	‘DL is a second choice – I wouldn’t recommend it unless they couldn’t learn any other way’
‘I know it works. I would be happy to distance teach. There are elements that need to be improved especially with languages. Writing needs to be practised’	‘For languages I am not enthusiastic. Face to face is what counts. To pick up how to address someone culturally, you need to look them in the eye. You cannot do this with technology.’

## 2.2. INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

Summary of points raised	A few illustrative quotes
Direction from the top is very important	‘I did not feel pedagogically prepared for teaching a totally online course’
Be very clear about the target niche	
Institutionally, it is not a low-cost option	‘Course teams spend a lot of time developing resources <u>before</u> the programme is launched’
Institutions must invest in it properly	‘Issue of resource creation is a huge time commitment and traditionally in HE you get the money and create the course. In DL it is the other way around. You invest upfront’
Perception is that it is very <b><u>time intensive</u></b>	
DL is not yet fully supported	‘How to peer review each other as teachers?’
Needs marketing budget and admin staff and time allowance for teachers. Must be properly resourced and properly understood.	‘Very hard to quantify or prescribe how much time to spend on each student’
	‘Universities must give people time to work on

It can be a money-spinner if we are clever about <b>who does which bits</b>	this'  'We are using PhDs to free up tutor time because DL is very time consuming'
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### 2.3. ECONOMIC FACTORS

Summary of points raised	A few illustrative quotes
As fees go up student expectations will rise	'The students will be paying such extraordinary high tuition fees we will be expected to be there for them and make other things available.'
Not necessarily cheaper	The increase in fees will not increase the level of quality.  The expectation that all will be electronic
Cost in time is a key factor.	'Not convinced it is cheaper for the institution though it may be helpful to students.'
Good way of reaching other markets.	Not the next cash cow  I have been fortunate that I have had some pots of money that have allowed me to buy people to write the materials.  'Fees a problem if in another country you can do the course for free'.

### 2.4. LEARNER ISSUES

Summary of points raised	A few illustrative quotes
Not useful for UG.	'They need to learn academic rigour in the academic environment. More positive for PG for teacher and student'
Mostly postgraduate	'PG better for DL than UG. Less sure for UG. Contact is so important. There is to some extent a 'typical' first year student'  'suits a particular profile of learner autonomous, proactive, why it has been mostly PG so far'
Type of DL student	'successful DL programmes attract independent students'  'People with a clear view of where they are going'
Flexibility: The distance learning	'It is a completely different student on our programmes, compared to on-campus, professional,

<p>advantage</p> <p>Excellent student support is required</p> <p>A dedicated module tutor</p> <p>No formal guidelines for how much exchange</p> <p>A multi-method approach to teaching and learning</p> <p>Situated learning</p>	<p>also working,</p> <p>‘there are many elements we could introduce for our on-campus students who also work. If we put something in place then we have less distinction between distance and on-campus’</p> <p>‘a lot of admin questions to answer’</p> <p>‘Self-discipline and autonomy is required . They are very motivated, but they find it hard to keep this going so we encourage them to touch base’</p> <p>‘I feel there isn't a harmonised experience. Very different with each student. No established rules’</p> <p>It was clear that materials needed to be professional, well prepared and well finished for DL</p> <p>DL can miss out on the extras, optional debates,</p>
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## 2.5. ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Summary of points raised	A few illustrative quotes
Processes	‘basic things, enrolment, submission, must do these for a while to get them working well’
Admin needs to be specific to the online needs	<p>Need to work out new timetables to plan DL, summer schools and additional activities</p> <p>‘It requires 3 full time admins for 250 students’</p> <p>Student progress meeting every 3 weeks.</p> <p>Support staff must understand there is a major difference in DL to on-campus. There must be an explicit distinction.</p>
Someone in charge of all aspects to support the programme is ideal.	<p>‘admin for DL need to know complexity of the programme. Be a programme manager’</p> <p>Students at different stages. They need contact who knows everything for continuity’</p>
The design of the programme and a good administrator is essential.	<p>‘DL is not a big burden for admin if well-designed’</p> <p>‘Someone for practical questions. Not the tutor time. Technical support, submission’.</p>
It requires an admin who understands the subject area and can fill gap between admin	‘Distance learning runs off its files. Where is this student, what have they achieved, we have no

<p>and lecturing.</p> <p>Overworked administrators can be expected to do even more with DL</p>	<p>way of tracking. Cheap to formalise PhDs doing a lot'</p> <p>'admin support needs to be strong as people at a distance can still demand a lot'</p>
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## 2.6. TECHNOLOGY

Summary of points raised	A few illustrative quotes
Recording lectures	<p>'Recordings and podcasts of university events are good to make available for DL'</p> <p>'I am getting hassle to have my lectures recorded. I have always avoided agreeing because setting a lecture up to be recorded affects the relations between you and the students. The process changes the lecture.'</p> <p>'I don't know though where I stand on some of the provocative things I say being recorded.'</p> <p>'You would feel much more conscious and less inclined to make off the record comments if it is being recorded'</p> <p>'I know students record me but it doesn't bother me because I don't think about it'</p> <p>'I think it is good to record lectures'</p> <p>'Recording lectures is useful'</p>
Pre-recorded web lectures	<p>'Depends if a live meeting or a pre-recorded video and students by themselves with the resource to work through. If the students cannot ask directly about what they do not understand. Some will email and others will just drop it'</p> <p>'Web lectures stop you over-delivering to students'. On campus you don't deliver/spoon feed you expect critical analysis. Web lectures bring it closer to a campus model and technology is good for that. Students request the lectures in different modes to read away from PC or listen to'</p>
Skype	<p>'Skype is a very good method to see, hear, write and speak. Multi-modal'</p> <p>'Using Skype improves the tutor experience'</p>

<p>Technology generally</p>	<p>'I use Skype a lot. I am not keen to do seminars in that way. Better to bring people in. I am not anti-technology but it is no substitute for good teaching, for reading and for homework. I don't want to introduce technological features for the sake of it.'</p> <p>'We have had some criticism for not exploiting IT enough. Fair comment. Some feedback there is a lot of reading. Perhaps some people prefer to listen. We have been using Elluminate. Screen capture for feedback, Camtasia, podcasts and video to introduce ourselves. Use of Articulate and Presenter to provide voice over slides. We record visiting speakers using Panopto and provide these files for DL'</p> <p>'Important to have technology, but not the most important aspect.'</p>
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## 2.7. CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

Summary of points raised	A few illustrative quotes
<p>Students who otherwise could not study at Aston</p>	<p>'There may be an issue why students cannot come to university. There are advantages to reaching these people, advantages for the student who would not otherwise benefit'</p> <p>'Phd students in different parts even of UK may have problems to get here. Makes it feasible to continue learning by distance.'</p> <p>'how to establish a group dynamic for people across the world to work together and get to know each other'</p> <p>'increased opportunity for communication with people who can't get to uni. Take the good stuff out to them. Mums, dads with small children who want to go back to work and study. Expand this across a lot of space. Theory between here and US teach something similar share on a facebook site, have a cross-cultural debate.'</p> <p>'What happens in a discussion that could not happen in isolation? When you recognise certain people are not speaking and you see why they don't speak. They may be segregated racially.'</p>
<p>Distance study may be liberating for some</p>	<p>'The positives of opening up your skills and experience as a lecturer to people you would otherwise never meet, e.g. different cultures bringing their own 'spin' to subject theory.'</p>

International connections	<p>Looking outside the European context.'</p> <p>'It could produce connections with institutions abroad. Encourage links around the world for combined programmes. Could help institutions in China. Staff need to be financed to make these links as a part of the expansion and development'</p>
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## 2.8. DISTANCE IS DIFFERENT

Summary of points raised	A few illustrative quotes
Realities of the distance tutor experience	<p>'Hard to pitch tone. Don't know who the students are. Level of detail. Lonely as a tutor.'</p> <p>'I like students in front of me, email scares and depresses me deeply.'</p> <p>'I don't see advantages for teachers who enjoy teaching to teach at a distance'</p> <p>'Willing to help with DL but I am really a face to face teacher.'</p>
Can these issues be solved?	<p>'Buzz of immediate feedback in face to face. Cultural understandings and re-inforcement. DL would feel like a processor to me. Poor substitute'</p> <p>'How to know what students 'know'. Have to take care with feedback. Hard to write less positive things when no face to face contact. If people at same pace and time it is easier. If people work in different time spans it is much harder- lots of individual one-offs.'</p>
Disciplinary considerations	<p>'Sociological study lends itself to discussion of abstract concepts. The language is inaccessible if just from study guides. Students will struggle. Need to bounce ideas off staff and each other, discuss reactions and relations to theory.'</p> <p>'To write another language online relies on too many assumptions. How would you know that other written language is being associated with the right sounds in the head?'</p> <p>'Those in our school experienced in DL have developed practice and know what to do. People new to distance teaching could</p>

<p>Developing practice and recognizing the difference</p>	<p>misconstrue what is required. On campus teaching and DL are very different things.'</p> <p>'It was very creative, but neat compared to regular teaching. Planning in advance for an audience you don't know. I tried out a couple of things on my PhD students. Asked them to tell me what I should do in certain circumstances.'</p> <p>'We have developed philosophical strands about DL. One is about response and relationship building, another is about situated learning. People are in their context/working environment and they know more about that than we do. We don't set assignments that don't apply. Students create those based on their context. This is a more sophisticated approach to DL'.</p> <p>'We cannot assume that DL comes for free. Recognise it as a different kind of experience and plan the assessment, recruitment and support accordingly.'</p>
<p>DL and on-campus practice can support each other</p>	<p>'Blurred boundaries between student and teacher in DL are good. Students are not seen as grown-ups on campus.'</p> <p>'Currently DL is still separate from on campus. I imagine they will come closer together. We will need to deliver more electronically to all students, DL or not. We can think how DL approaches may benefit those on campus.'</p>

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

These interviews suggest the following beliefs are common:

- Post-graduate learning is most suitable for distance teaching (White, Warren, Faughnan,& Manton, 2010)  
Many academics now interact so much online with their campus students and those they supervise, that there is no clear distinction between DL and non-DL in the area of communication
- DL requires a support infrastructure specifically dedicated to distance students
- A much greater distinction should be made in the creation of materials and activities. Materials created for distance students could benefit on-campus groups too. On the other hand, it is inappropriate to simply place materials designed for face-to-face groups online for distance learners.
- Technology was not the focus of this study, but many discussed it as useful for offering different means of interaction if appropriate support is available
- There are concerns over being overwhelmed with queries from distance students. Dedicated, well-trained and well-informed administrators, PhD students, or staff that bridge the gap between academics and students can help address this.
- Distance teaching is not an easy way of raising revenue, but if done well it could bring new and interesting experiences for those who want to learn and teach in this way
- The distinction between 'distance' and 'local' education is now more blurred than in the past. However, these forms of provision should not be merged as one, or compared as opposites.
- There was a split in attitudes of staff with little or no experience of distance learning - some staff expressed no desire to move from face-to-face teaching to distance learning while others were more positive about engaging in DL teaching

Finally, the majority of interviewees agreed that distance teaching experience has to be framed differently: with effective course management systems, dedicated administrative support, and teaching strategies that utilise technology well. Institutions need to identify and understand trends within subject areas and systematically address the range of practical points that lecturers raise to encourage take-up

### 4. REFERENCES

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