

# Taking the distance out of distance learning

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## Abstract

Staffordshire University offers a range of web-based distance learning (DL) environment/sustainability taught postgraduate awards with well over 200 enrolled students around the world. This article explores how the awards have been received over the last five years, both from the learners' and from the tutors' viewpoint, and also discusses the importance of student-tutor interaction in determining the quality of delivery and ensuring learner retention. The article also addresses ways in which the award provider's institutional policies and regulations need to adapt to accommodating off-campus distance learning students and when developing delivery partnership arrangements.

## Introduction

This is the fifth year of biannual recruitment to Staffordshire University's off-campus taught postgraduate environment/sustainability distance learning awards (<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/courses/distlearn/>). These awards range from the MA in Sustainable Development, through MSc programmes in Sustainability and Environmental Management and Water and Environmental Management to MSc in Pollution Management, with the more recent addition of MAs in NGOs and Sustainable Development, and in Governance and Sustainable Development. Our particular model of distance learning involves web-based, off-campus delivery of most of the learning and teaching content (combined with continuous formative/summative assessments against learning outcomes), together with two biannual face-to-face weekend workshops that are held on-campus.

At present, the introductory workshop and the pre-dissertation workshop (for those students on the masters programmes) are compulsory. Whilst accepting that 'appropriate induction and ongoing support are essential for effective learning to happen' (Ruis-Riu, 2002), there can be obvious disadvantages in having only this relatively short (but intensive) amount of face-to-face contact time - particularly for non-UK based students who have to travel a long distance to attend. The disadvantage here is offset by the very real social and pedagogic benefits that flow from the personal interactions of students and tutors and between students themselves. Post workshop questionnaires regularly cite 'meeting students and tutors' as one of the workshops' principal benefits.

Generally, students seem not to have a strong view about the timing of these workshops, with a survey in 2004 [19 responses] suggesting that opinion about whether it is preferable to attend over a weekend or during the working week being fairly evenly split. In part, this may be a reflection of the particular market for these DL awards - many learners work in organisations that support them financially and also by giving them some time in which to study.

Students are attracted to e-learning courses for a variety of reasons (HEFCE, 2003; Pettenati et al, 2000; O'Leary, 2002; Ruis-Riu, 2002); feedback at Staffordshire University suggests an almost unanimous view that the accessibility and flexibility (in being able to combine domestic and professional commitments with further postgraduate study or continuing professional development) of our courses makes them preferable to alternatives that require

on-campus attendance. During the last five years, we have seen enrolled numbers grow to over 200 across the environment/sustainability DL awards, and we have been fortunate in recent years in gaining support from the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK to provide tuition funding for learners at our two partner institutions - the University of Madras and Jadavpur University in India. These Indian partner institutions provide local venues for our induction and continuing learner two-day workshops - as well as important local cultural, political and market sensitivity that enables us to advertise and deliver our courses more effectively. Staff at Jadavpur and Madras also have the opportunity to learn more about (and ultimately participate in) e-learning delivery and assessment itself. This last factor is an important aspect of our capacity building activities, although increasing involvement of partners in offering Staffordshire University awards brings increasing complexity in delivery and quality assurance

arrangements. Our own internal audit procedures, coupled with external scrutiny from QAA, drive us, quite correctly, towards increased vigilance and higher standards of course delivery and operation.

Building capacity with colleagues at partner institutions by providing timely and relevant staff development provides direct benefits to all parties. Colleagues in partner institutions are able to increase their own skill sets to a level commensurate with the needs of the award(s) and the expectations of Staffordshire University and our learners,

and they then become more confident and innovative when developing their own e-learning material and associated assessments. In addition to the pedagogic developmental aspects of such partnerships, another important facet involves increasing the partner's understanding of Staffordshire University's institutional policy and regulatory requirements (see Box 1). The effort required in this development process should not be underestimated, but it is a vital component in building a secure and self-sustaining future for delivery partnerships.

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### Box 1: Areas for staff development at partner institutions

- E-learning authoring, assessment and moderating/tutoring
- Anonymous marking and second marking policies and procedures
- Main provider's referencing and plagiarism policies and procedures
- Effective personal tutoring, student mentoring and pastoral support for students
- Personal development planning and employability issues
- Main provider's extenuating circumstances procedures and student complaint/grievance procedures
- Peer observation of teaching
- Methods for soliciting student feedback – acquiring, reviewing and feeding back outputs into course delivery and development processes, and also student/staff liaison policies
- Data/information collection systems and compilation for main provider's award annual monitoring procedures



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- Tuition fees are £3600 for the entire programme (£300 per module); 20 Commonwealth Scholarships, funded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK, pay all tuition fees for the most outstanding candidates. Tuition fees include textbooks and learning packs of core resources
- There are workshops at Jadavpur University with staff from Staffordshire and Jadavpur Universities twice a year; these offer vital opportunities for students and staff to interact, support learning and monitor progress
- Membership of Staffordshire University assures access to a wide range of resources and expertise; computer and pastoral advice is accessible at Jadavpur University
- Weekly or fortnightly online tutorials with module leaders in Staffordshire University enable regular discussion with staff and fellow students

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## Learners' and tutors' perceptions

Wegner et al (1999) commented that 'distance learning systems, especially internet-based systems, obviously cannot compete with face-to-face communication opportunities'. I suppose the accuracy of this statement rather depends upon what the authors mean by their use of the word 'compete' - and whilst it is undoubtedly true that e-learning programmes tend to be more reliant on written communication than face-to-face courses, tutors and learners are able to employ different skills and use varying emphases in order to enable (the same) learning outcomes to be achieved simply by navigating a different route to that which would apply to students attending an on-campus programme.

Although there is plenty of evidence to suggest that a significant degree of collaboration between learners on distance learning programmes enhances the learning experience (Eastwood, 2002; Hughes et al, 2002; Ruis-Riu, 2002; Salmon, 2000), our experience is that appropriate tutor-learner interaction coupled with attractively organised and presented learning and teaching content and combined with imaginative assessments can provide a very supportive and enriching learning environment. Williams (2004) recognises the importance of this, whilst McPherson and Nunes (2004) and Landis (2001 - and references cited therein) acknowledge the importance of the tutor-student interaction. It is not just we, as tutors, who believe this; our student feedback through the post-module questionnaires generate consistent satisfaction ratings in excess of 80% in response to specific questions about feedback and support from university personnel, the speed of response to queries and the overall format and content of modules and their delivery.

The extent to which success in an e-learning course might depend upon the level and speed of development of independent learning skills by the student is also of interest. To an extent, the constituency to which a DL course most appeals will be self-selecting, in that it will more naturally lend itself to those individuals who have an enthusiasm, a curiosity and an appetite for such an e-course, combined with a latent confidence in their ability to tackle such a programme at a distance. This tends to be borne out by the responses of a sample of the students who attend our induction workshops. When questioned, 96% (of a sample of 26) agreed or strongly agreed that a capacity for independent learning should be one of the most highly valued goals in higher education. Opinions were more mixed about whether independent learning mainly involved being able to work 'on one's own', with only 68% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with this proposition. Reassuringly (for tutors), 88% disagreed with the suggestion that lecturers had little/no role to play with independent learners.

Retention rates in e-learning courses can also be a matter of concern. West Texas A&M University have reported that online courses tend to enrol more students than comparable campus-based courses but that they also suffer from higher attrition rates (Willing & Johnson, 2004). Box 2 lists the principal factors that influence students in their decision to leave an e-learning course, as reported by Willing & Johnson (2004), Landis (2001) and Murray (2001). In our own case, the vast majority of students who withdraw have clear personal or professional issues that have interfered with their studies, and many of these choose to intermit and return at a later date to continue with their awards. Increasing flexibility in the approach to study through DL makes it difficult to generate definitive short-term retention data, but our information suggests that the attrition rates on these DL awards are no higher than for those of our on-campus activities.

## Institutional issues

Often, many of a higher education institution's (HEI's) policies, regulations and procedures are designed to cater for 'traditional' on-campus undergraduate students. If the HEI decides to validate and deliver off-campus distance learning programmes then there are a number of important areas that urgently need to be addressed so that DL tutors and students genuinely feel as though they are a valued part of the University's core activity. If these structural changes are not made then distance learners and

### Box 2: Principal factors that can reduce student retention on e-learning courses

- Isolation
- Disconnectedness
- Technological problems
- Financial and/or family circumstances
- Job-related time constraints
- Dissatisfaction with the learning environment
- Low confidence levels in distance learning as a means of acquiring new knowledge and information
- Feelings of inadequacy in using the virtual learning environment as an effective learning tool
- Feeling overwhelmed by the amount of new knowledge needed and suffering from information overload
- Insufficient support from tutors and administrators
- A depersonalised learning environment
- Lack of tutor-student and student-student interaction

### Box 3: Some of the institutional factors that need to be addressed if distance/distributed learning programmes are to be successful

- Generic institutional support – how embedded is the e-learning activity within the pedagogic philosophy of the institution? What support is available for tutors, administrators and learners?
- Quality assurance issues – what particular areas need to be addressed when validating a distance learning award and what on-going quality assurance/control regime is appropriate for this form of delivery and assessment.
- Security and audit trail for applicants' credentials and bona fides.
- Procedures for effectively enrolling and tracking e-learners, including receipt, distribution, marking and archiving of submitted assessments/assignments, preparation of marks and archiving of submitted work [and its availability for external examiners and accreditation assessors].
- Staff-student liaison policies and procedures.
- Assessment deadlines, plagiarism and extenuating circumstances policies and procedures - submission requirements and appeals procedures
- What are considered to be acceptable and/or appropriate retention/non-completion rates for distance learning courses?
- Decisions about the flexibility of access to learning and teaching material; enrolment and registration formalities and procedures, timetabling of learning, phasing of modules, start and end dates for modules etc.
- The balance of on-campus and face-to-face attendance.
- Costing/pricing models for modules/awards – fees structure. There risks being little correlation between the cost of development and delivery of the programme and the fees charges.
- Marketing the programmes – who is best placed to investigate the sensitivity, targeting and costs?
- Accreditation/partnerships - is it cost effective to gain accreditation of the course(s) or parts of a course by institutes and/or institutions in order to help attract students; is it appropriate to develop partnership arrangements with other institutions to

e-tutors risk feeling disenfranchised or embarrassed through exclusion. Box 3 lists some of the important areas that have to be tackled; the importance of institutions recognising and dealing with these should not be underestimated. The timeliness with which the HEI moves to incorporate e-learning into its mainstream activities may be the one factor above all others that dictates the extent to which the whole enterprise will be successful.

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