



2nd International Conference on Higher Education Advances, HEAd'16, 21-23 June 2016,  
València, Spain

## Nurturing supportive and engaging induction environments for distance-learning students

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### Abstract

Distance learning (DL) students typically learn with very limited or no requirements for physical presence and this often means that learning may be perceived as a more isolating or less 'natural' experience. Postgraduate (PG) DL students are particularly vulnerable as mature students with working and family commitments who require more support in their transition to a DL PG study, having experienced a longer break in education. This paper presents the main findings of a survey of 82 students and semi-structured interviews with 11 students studying at the Robert Gordon University (Aberdeen, Scotland). The research explored their expectations and challenges encountered in transitioning to a DL PG study across a number of different subject areas. The study found that the online induction process should meet a variety of expectations and needs, focusing primarily on academic and social aspects. DL study can be an isolating experience, which can be made less alienating when there is a chance for students to get to know their peers and teaching staff. An inclusive approach to online induction geared towards flexible support and interactive, engaging content is an important consideration.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of HEAd'16

*Keywords:* postgraduate distance-learning; induction; survey; student experience; engagement; academic support; interactivity.

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## 1. Introduction and rationale

During the last decade, Scotland's higher education institutions have established a strong distance-learning (DL) education presence with programmes that are addressed to both home and international students, offering a distinctively different learning and teaching experience from traditional campus-based programmes. The global reach and *sans frontier* character of these programmes means that opportunities are now increasing for creating richer and more diverse multicultural learning environments for both home and international students (Universities Scotland, 2015). However, within an equally fast-growing and competitive international education environment, DL requires a significant movement from traditional on-campus modes of educational delivery, support, advice and pastoral care to a model that is appropriate to the needs of DL students and their diverse learning environments, expectations and requirements. DL differs from conventional campus-based forms of learning, where teaching takes place predominantly face-to-face, with sufficient personal contact between students and academic staff. DL students typically learn with very limited or no requirements for physical presence and this often means that learning may be perceived as a more isolating or less 'natural' experience. In addition, online students may be separated on the basis of different geographical locations and time differences, and a significant amount of private/independent study may be expected of them (Forrester et al., 2005). In the online environment, students' different learning styles and education expectations may be more difficult to manage. In the past few years greater use of information and communication technologies by higher education institutions has improved the delivery and the interactivity of DL programmes.

However, it has become increasingly clear that technological resources on their own are not sufficient to provide positive online education experiences. More attention should be given to induction processes for online students to allow their effective integration and adjustment to the university environment. Nevertheless, a systematic programme of interactive sessions that supports the induction of DL students is not always a formal university-wide practice. Introducing students to their virtual learning environment during the first week of teaching may result in increased dropout rates, difficulty in addressing the educational objectives of the programme and in a high volume of technical questions that overwhelm students and staff in the first weeks. DL Postgraduate (PG) students, in particular, may be quite a vulnerable learner group when it comes to online education, as it can be easily assumed that they are already confident and independent learners and their transition from an undergraduate campus-based education to postgraduate online study would be a straightforward experience. However, DL PG students are often mature students who have taken a longer break in education and this may make them feel less confident in relation to their academic and IT skills. Additionally, they often juggle studies with complex family and work commitments, which means that their adaptation period may be more complicated and take longer. Although these challenges merit a unique focus, limited studies have been conducted into the induction experiences of PG DL students (Harrison 2010). Studies that examine the perspectives of students beyond a simple analysis of the provision of programmes and their content are also scarce and this presents a limited understanding of challenges and opportunities. The aims and objectives of this research project were therefore as follows: a) to identify existing gaps in the provision of support in students' transition to postgraduate online DL education and identify needs and expectations via an examination of DL students' experiences (content, process and methods) and b) to offer recommendations for the effective design of an online induction programme for postgraduate online DL students.

## 2. Previous research

In a research study that examined the induction programmes aimed at DL students, conducted by The Open University (2015) across 14 HEIs, it was found that there is little research study in this area. Although robust induction programmes have a positive impact on student retention and progression, for creating a social presence and for maintaining collaborative learning, most institutions lack a policy on induction for DL students. In addition, most HEIs have not adopted an institution-wide, generic induction package (Harper et al., 2015). This research offered an analysis of the websites of a number of universities offering DL courses and found that induction activities take place with different objectives, cover a diverse range of topics, have a different duration, use different modes of communication and online platforms and are delivered by a range of staff, often collaboratively with other support departments. The programmes cover a number of areas, from providing practical guidance on how to use the

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