The role of e-Learning in accelerating part-time student progression

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Abstract:

The University of Winchester has been proactive in designing and delivering some innovative courses in which the needs of mid-career and professional groups are met. Case studies will be presented of two courses in which e-learning has helped to deliver traditional curricula in unconventional time-periods. It can be problematic to slot such courses into the conventional semesterised and modularised model – the case studies will explore how the course designers overcame some of these difficulties.

Keywords: accelerating, part-time, e-learning, student progression

1. Introduction

Although higher education is now regarded as a natural stage of progression for over 40% of the 18+ age cohort, it is increasingly the case that the mission of the sector is being extended to cover the needs of other groups of students. A consequence of the expansion of higher education over the decades is that there are large pockets of individuals who a generation or so were not qualified at that stage for higher education and entered employment. Had they been born a generation later, then they may well have enjoyed the benefits of higher education as part of a 'rising tide' of entrants. Such individuals (aged anything from their late 20's to the mid 50's) are often eager to grasp the opportunities for higher education if it is offered to them in part-time or flexible learning mode. They recognise that they will need to combine the demands of employment and domestic responsibilities with the demands of university style education. The Open University has traditionally provided a life-line for such students who opine that the opportunities to undertake degree level education is not so much a university of the 'second chance' as the 'last chance'. Notwithstanding the success of the Open University, there are still significant groups of students who would welcome the opportunity to undertake a blended approach to their higher education experience in which traditional face-to-face contact is as important as the provision of distance learning materials and support.

A second group of students can also be identified, some of whom may overlap with the groups identified above. These are students who are in need of mid-career or professional updating. Typically in employment, these students (and particularly their employers) are seeking for cost-effective means of updating professional competencies, often in line with government-led initiatives to improve the skill base. The courses may be at first degree level or involve only a subset of modules that address a particular need – an example is the need for updating of Nurse Prescribing, described in detail below.

The combination of these two trends means that the face to higher education is changing very rapidly. As the Institute of Employment Studies noted in a commentary

> The stereotypical student, male, 18 years old, white and leaving home to study full time has vanished. Well over half of those entering undergraduate education courses are female .. nearly one in three begin their undergraduate studies in their 30s, and one in seven comes from ethnic minorities. One third of first year students now study part time.
> (Source: Institute of Employment Studies (IES), 2001)

These trends have only intensified in recent years. Universities UK report that

> part-time students account for 41.7 of all students in higher education in England and Wales. Between 1994-95 and 2002-03, their number in the UK grew by 75 per cent. They already make up more than half the student body in 11 universities
> (Source: Universities UK, 2005)

Whilst some universities (eg. the post-1992 'modern' universities) have traditionally met the needs of part-time and professional students, the recent trends in size and scale of students attending a university in other than a full-time mode is striking. E-learning, blended learning and non-traditional modes of delivery have helped to facilitate this increasing diverse pattern.

2. The landscape of the part-time university student

There is often a bland assumption in higher education circles that part-time and distance access students just 'appear' and need to be accommodated and fitted in with the conventional i.e. full-time student. But there are several features of the student experience that have hitherto received insufficient attention.

2.1 The attitudes of employers

Some employers have always been sympathetic to the needs of part time students and indeed may some, or even all, of the tuition fees involved. There is some evidence (although the subject is under-researched) that employers are increasing reluctant to release students for times exceeding one half day per week. As training budgets are put under strain and largely committed to updating of skills that take on an increasing significance (IT training, compliance with new legislation, customer care procedures), so the amounts that can be devoted to more 'generic' skill enhancement might be reduced. Employers are also faced with the realisation that the costs might be fixed and certain but the benefits that accrue may be more long-term and uncertain. In any case, it is often the case for junior staff that their post needs to be 'back-filled' in order to allow college access and this comes at a direct cost to the employer (or an indirect cost to other employees if they are asked to provide cover for absent colleagues). In some employment situations, the employee can work 'flexi-time' which means that time at college has to be 'paid for' from the student's own allocation of working time. When courses are planned, a commitment to release employees is often made by senior personnel within organisations often in the most general of terms. However, when it comes to an individual lower level managers having to release a particular employee, then the issue of costs, time and workload becomes much more acute and some managers deny their students release at this point, with much heartache all round. Some employers are of the view that releasing their staff for courses of higher education and lifelong learning may add to the employability of staff who subsequently leave. It is also the case that, on occasions, students may not wish to solicit the support of their employers if they are wishing to attain a qualification in order to be sufficiently qualified to seek another position elsewhere. There is a glib assumption that employers will pay or, as the Higher Education Minister Bill Rammell opined when considering fees for part-time students 'Many of them are well-off, many of them are in work'(BBC News, 2005)

2.2 The organisation of the academic year

Much of higher education is now semesterised, a typical pattern being 12 weeks of tuition followed by a two or three week period in which assessment and marking takes place. For a course that typically starts in late September and allows 3 week vacations at both Christmas and Easter, then a 'normal' academic year may well be completed by mid-June, leaving a 12-14 week gap until formal tuition recommences in the next academic year. Whilst such a pattern does allow academic staff some time and space to engage in research and their own professional updating, the same logic does not apply to part-time students who are anxious to complete their courses as quickly as practicable. The 'June-September' period could constitute a 'de facto' third semester but this has enormous implications from an academic staff who have already absorbed a considerable rise in student numbers with a less than

proportionate increase in the staffing base. Mature students who in the course of their employment are attuned to a 52-week year are often attracted to the idea of utilising the June to September period to accelerate their progression through a course of study. This will not be possible in all cases but many universities now have in place arrangements for WBL (work-based learning) and project assessment which lends itself well to utilising this portion of the academic year. An example of how this has been successfully utilised using e-learning materials is described below.

2.3 The possibilities for accelerated progression

Conventionally, undergraduate courses introduce students to a range of study skills such as note-taking, internet access, application packages) as well as more specialised skills such as report-writing, CV and PDP preparation and the like. In the case of mature students who have been in the workforce for several years, many of these aptitudes will have been gained experientially (and sometimes by more dedicated in-house courses). There is a strong case, therefore, that for these students approaching an undergraduate course for the first time many of the essential learning objectives typically associated with first year courses have already been met. Provided that these can be demonstrated via an APEL/APL portfolio, then mature students can often experience *accelerated progression* through the first year (or Level 1) of a course. In addition, some students will be able to demonstrate on a module by module basis that particular material has already been studied or practiced to a particular level and this too allows for more rapid progress to be made throughout a part-time degree. The Open University recognised this in a generic way by automatically giving credits for those with teacher training and the rest of the higher education sector has generally been sympathetic to the more rapid progression of students who can demonstrate that more generic skills in Level 1 modules has been met. The Dearing report specifically recommended that Students should be offered a range of types and levels of programmes, including accelerated (with APL), single subject, combined honours, broad and professional, with multiple exit points (Department for Education and Employment, 1997)

3. Case studies

The University of Winchester is a small university but with a heavy commitment and investment in its IT infrastructure. Two case studies are presented below which exemplify some of the processes outlined above and in which e-learning has proved to be a facilitating mechanism

3.1 Public Services Information Management

In the summer of 2000, Hampshire County Council (HCC) approached the university with a view to providing a course that would cater for needs of personnel in an information-giving capacity, typically employed in locations such as information centres, information points, libraries and the like. A course was constructed jointly between the university and the county council, the largest employer in Hampshire, which would lead to a Certificate in Public Services Information Management (*CertPSIM*) after two years of part-time study. In the event, the course was successful even beyond the aspirations of its authors when of the fifteen students originally recruited, eleven graduated each with a profile of marks of over 60% and with three students gaining distinctions (for an average of 65+) Having gained their Certificates, seven of the eleven Certificate students enrolled on a BA(Hons) Business Management degree with public service options. At a 'part-time' rate of progression, this would have normally have taken four years of additional study making an unacceptable six years in total to achieve an Honours degree. In order to accelerate progress, students were allowed to construct an APEL portfolio to demonstrate that they had already met some key learning objectives, reducing the number of modules to be undertaken from sixteen to eleven. The Final Year project is a double weighted module so the number of taught modules was now reduced to a manageable nine taught over two academic years (two modules per semester with one additional 'internet available' course). The eventual outcome is that a cohort of students graduated with good degrees after four years of part-time study.

There are several factors that account for this successful outcome. Not least is the fact that as group of mature and information-ate students, the group developed a remarkably strong social cohesion developing into potentially a *community of practice* (Haslam P., Hart M.C. and Hart M, 2002). A bulletin board was established to share common practice and a strong email culture helped to keep students in almost daily contact with each other. The successful outcome attached to the 'internet version' of a module proved instructive. The tutor made available a range of sources and materials

which were then downloaded and discussed by the student group. As one group member subsequently remarked – 'that was the best course we have ever done in this university' which, given the fact that the tutor was only available periodically to give advice and academic guidance gives pause for thought. Some practical problems had to be overcome to achieve the overall outcome. Students could only be released by their employers for the same half day per week and although on occasions this the public service information management (PSIM) students could join an existing taught class, there were other occasions when a class had to provided especially for them or when an 'internet' version of a module was the only viable solution.

From the point of e-learning, several issues arise here. We could summarise that e-learning within a blended learning environment is most likely to be successful when:\

  (i)   the students are mature, committed and time-limited
 (ii) there is a willingness and a capacity to deploy APEL procedures to achieve accelerated outcomes
(iii)   the June-September period is used to good effect.

Even though the certificate course was successful, it was evident to the course designers that students of this commitment and calibre should be offered the opportunity to achieve a first qualification beyond a Certificate level (which equates to the successful completion of Level 1 of a degree programme). The opportunity was taken to rewrite the essential parts of the programme as a Foundation Degree (FdA) in Public Services Information Management. Again the opportunities were taken to incorporate accelerated progression via an APEL portfolio and it was judged that any such portfolio should preferably be deployed at Level 1 rather than subsequent levels. After a degree of debate within the college, it was decided that any such accelerated progression should be specifically mapped onto each of the learning outcomes of a range of modules on a cognate degree course (in this case, BA(Hons) Business Management) The outcome was that students were required to submit a portfolio of about 18,000 words in which they needed to demonstrate some 37 learning objectives associated with six Level 1 modules. This sounds an enormous task and indeed take a considerable amount of time and effort. However, an e-learning solution was to ease the task considerably. For each of the learning objectives, a range of internet derived resources was made available but in a particular form. Where possible, the sources were downloaded and incorporated into a .doc or a .pdf file, thus 'freezing' the content of the link but also ensuring that the material was actually available (and minimising, but not completing avoiding, the problem of out-of-date or transient links). For each learning outcome, a range of sources was provided and a particular 'sub-task' delineated ranging from 400-1000 words. The word-limit brief for the portfolio was written to approximate to the guidance for assignments then extant within the university (1500 words for Level 1 students). Students were encouraged to build up their portfolio task by task and to avail themselves of mutual self-help groups or, in some cases, specific tutor advice. Student reaction to this regime is that, whilst onerous, they felt tremendously well prepared for their Level 2 studies (and perhaps even better prepared than their full-time counterparts, given that each learning outcome had to be demonstrated)

The outcome of these procedures is as follows. Students are recruited during the autumn term but actually commence two Level 1 modules during the second semester. In the course of the summer term and the 'June-September' period, students construct their accelerated progression portfolio which is then assessed by an APEL Board before the start of the normal academic year. Success was judged by outcomes in which some 80-90 percent of the learning outcomes had been successfully met. At this point, the students need to undertake a further 8 Level 2 modules which they can do at the rate of two modules a year over three semesters with a further two modules provided on a 'work-based learning'[WBL] or internet version basis. The eventual outcome is that students are capable of graduating with a Foundation Degree (FdA) after two calendar years of study.

This regime evidently makes much use of blended learning techniques in which there is a judicious mixture of formally taught courses, portfolio preparation and work-based learning/internet versions of the course. The fact that this is possible and attainable is demonstrated by the fact that a cohort of students was recruited onto the then Certificate course, were translated into a Foundation Degree and subsequently graduated with a Foundation Degree (FdA) within two academic years. Again the proportions gaining success were similar to earlier cohorts and non-progression was, without exception, the combination of domestic and work-related pressures rather than academic failure.

3.2 Nurse Prescribing course

The second case study draws upon the experience of the University of Winchester in providing a professional updating course to fill an identified national need. Open Learning has been established in the University of Winchester since 1991 in a collaborative partnership with the publishing company Emap Healthcare. Emap is a major supplier of open learning material for nurse education in the UK. The advantage of using such open learning material is its consistent design by professional educationalists and extensive testing with a wide mix of students. The use of such quality educational material has created opportunities for higher education institutions to offer nurses flexible alternative routes to accumulate credits towards professional and academic qualifications.

At this University the B.Sc. (Hons) Degree Course in Professional Practice in Health and Social Care is conducted through open learning and is aimed at in-service health professionals. The main benefits of using an open learning approach are derived from the flexible nature of the course including the reduced number of direct contact days, travelling time and expense, and time away from clinical practice.

A limited number of specially trained nurses have been prescribing medicines from the Nurse Prescribers' Formulary since 1998. In May 2001, the Department announced plans to extend nurse prescribing. By training nurses to prescribe a broader range of medicines for a broader range of conditions, the initiative eases the burden on doctors and reduces waiting times (Department of Health, 2005)

A Department of Health sponsored research project found that independent nurse prescribing was viewed positively by patients, doctors and nurses themselves, with patients citing accessibility as a major advantage when obtaining their medicine from a nurse rather than a doctor. The research, carried out by the University of Southampton, evaluated the first two years of extended formulary nurse prescribing and used a national survey, observation of prescribing nurses and the views of stakeholders in its assessment. (Latter, S. *et. al,* 2005)

A new module (2004) for Nurse Prescribing was developed by Emap to meet a Government initiative in developing the role of nurses. This on-line module was created to be delivered using the internet because of the wide spread national requirement, the need to keep the learning material up to date and to extend it easily as required. Fourteen students have completed the on-line Nurse Prescribing course and some of the lessons learnt from this first cohort will be discussed below.

In England, formally taught Independent, Extended and Supplementary Nurse Prescribing courses require 26 days attendance at a university over a six month period for the theoretical element. However, this University has uniquely pioneered the use of online open learning materials to be taken by suitably qualified nurses either as a stand alone course or to achieve credits towards a B.Sc. degree in Professional Practice. As a result attendance at this university is only required for 6 days. This was approved by the NMC in 2004. The Emap Healthcare Open Learning Nurse Prescribing Course is intended to help nurses meet the statutory requirements for independent, extended and supplementary nurse prescribing. The materials were developed in conjunction with the University of Stirling and placed on the Winchester's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). They are composed of static web pages with links to other relevant web sites and also links back to itself. The web pages contain structured materials with readings and tasks to guide the students through the learning outcomes of the course. The Winchester VLE is an in-house development iteratively based on changing user needs. It lets students access the materials securely in their own time and place, using a computer with a basic specification that can browse the internet and open MS Office documents. Minimum and recommended specifications are supplied in leaflets, along with guides to computing and studying away from the University. The VLE includes a 'Café forum' area where students on the same course can communicate and exchange resources. Course teachers can also use the VLE to distribute other resources such as study day information, standard forms and handbooks easily and simply. A notice board specific to the course keeps students in touch with developments. Support for passwords, technical queries or training is handled though the Winchester helpdesk, which is available through email, telephone or in person.

It is expected that the nurse will study the open learning material for around 170 hours. The students are allocated to tutors on a geographical and subject basis. They negotiate a minimum contact time of

10 hours per module; the method of communication is agreed, either face to face via group or individual tutorials, telephone or email. The module is assessed using the traditional format of assignment which includes a 3000 word essay, a 4000 word evidence based portfolio, a written examination and assessment in practice, which is work based. Clinical practice as a valuable learning experience has always been recognised and assessed as part of a health professional qualification. All staff involved in the assessment of practice are invited to a seminar to discuss the course and to identify and clarify their role. However, due to the distances involved, the tutor always arranges an additional meeting with the designated medical practitioner and the student. The role may vary as the terminology indicates: mentors, assessors, practice facilitators, supervisors. Some professionals may have a combination of roles depending on the particular student for whom they have responsibility and the course the student is undertaking. Successful students are recorded on the NMC Register as having a post registration qualification in Nurse Prescribing.

The first cohort of students responded very positively to this experience. On a five point scale ranging from Very Poor to Excellent, no aspect of the course was rated less than Satisfactory. Rated across all eight dimensions of the scale, 14% of responses indicated 'Satisfactory', 54% 'Good' and 32% 'Excellent'. There are aspects that can still be improved, in particular the effectiveness of the designated medical practitioner in providing guidance and support, which 4 students rated as satisfactory. To some extent this is outside the control of the University team as the medical practitioner is a colleague who works with the student in practice. Improvements have been subsequently made to the preparation the medical practitioners receive for their role in supervising the students. The online materials were also criticised in that students were also expected to undertake library searches and read hard copy texts and one felt that it should all be online. However having to undertake library searches ensures the students gain and maintain this skill.

Several of the students travelled 300 kilometres to attend each of the six study days and then had difficulty parking on arrival. This clearly does not engender a favourable attitude in mature professionals undertaking further study. This issue was highlighted fairly early on in the course and special car parking arrangements were made for the students. The course also avoids the busiest days of the week in the University. Some study days are held outside the normal academic semester time. Also where there are a number of students from the same or adjoining employment areas and the employer is paying the course fees, tutors have travelled to the local hospital and held a study day there, so reducing the cost in time and expense to students. The employer has paid for the travel of the tutor and any room requirements.

There are several lessons to be learnt from this particular case-study. In particular, we can highlight the following features which exhibit congruencies with the earlier case study of public service information management (PSIM) students:

E-learning philosophies and materials have enabled:

- A reduction in the required numbers of 'attendance days' from 26 to 6
- The use of 'extra-semester' time periods (for example, some cohorts are taking this module during August-September)
- Blended approaches involving distance learning materials, face-to-face tutorials, medical practitioner guidance and support

4. Conclusions

The case studies, which could no doubt be replicated in many other contemporary universities, reveal clearly how new patterns of course organisation and delivery are now possible using e-learning solutions. It is clear that without the element of e-learning materials, it would not be possible for students to make such rapid progress in their studies. It is also the case that mature students (mature learners?), typically in employment, appear to be the group of students for whom e-learning has most discernible impact.

A cynical view remains that resource-based learning is a response to the massification of the student experience of recent decades:

..The term "resource-based learning" (RBL) began life as organisational newspeak for student learning with reduced support from lecturers. During the late 80's and early 90's it generally took the form of text-based distance learning methods employed within the university environment. The use of this kind of RBL was finance-led: massification of HE simultaneously increased student: staff ratios, requiring recruitment from further down the population ability curve. Universities were forced to reduce lecturer input per student just as there was an increase in the input needed by the average student to maintain existing performance standards. The response from universities was to try to make explicit and standardise in text form learning support processes which had hitherto been part of the interaction process between lecturer and student. Though universities had little alternative but to go down the RBL road, compromising with the harsh bottom line of reduced funding was accompanied by much disingenuous talk of students gaining from being forced to become autonomous learners.
(Lindsey and Breen, 2004)

The challenge for professional educators and e-learning professionals is how to graft the undoubted advantages that e-learning can demonstrate for the part-time and professional university student into the experiences of their full-time fellow students.

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