

# Framing the distance experience: towards a critical understanding of **distance teaching**

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Social Sciences



# Background in the School

- Some PG distance programmes run for years
- Others being strategically considered

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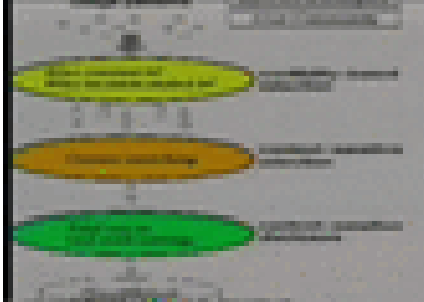
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## Our programmes by distance learning

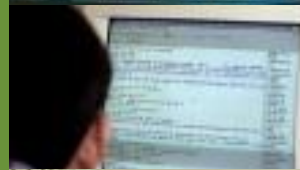
LSS offers the following Postgraduate Taught programmes by distance learning:

- [Certificate in Advanced Studies in English Language Teaching \(ELT\)](#)
- [MSc in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages \(TESOL\) MSc in Teaching English for Specific Purposes \(TESP\)](#)
- [MSc in Teaching English to Young Learners \(TEYL\)](#)
- [MSc in Educational Management in TESOL \(EMT\)](#)
- [MSc in Forensic Linguistics](#)
- [MSc in Applied Linguistics](#)
- [MPhil / PhD in Applied Linguistics.](#)





Is the **distance teaching experience** any *different....* when we all spend so much time online now anyway? Why bother to conduct the study...





# Diversity of viewpoints on a range of issues



- ▶ To seek real perceptions of lecturers about **distance TEACHING**
- ▶ Build an in-depth case study to inform our approach



## ▶ What are the issues:-

- ▶ Strategically
- ▶ Pedagogically ....and Personally
- ▶ Economically
- ▶ Administratively
- ▶ Technologically



- ▶ Are there differences in opinion from those who **teach** on DL courses and those who *do not*?
- ▶ To compare our results with some **current literature**

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# What does recent literature say?

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'
- ▶ 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
- ▶ Many DL offerings have evolved from a 'cottage industry' at departmental level. It benefits students but is a barrier to expanding provision

# No cheap option

## **Times Higher Education, 12 May 2011, *No cheap option***

- ▶ Universities are keen to beef up their online offerings/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**

- 
- ▶ Our study of academic staff opinion asked **what the lecturer believes**
  - ▶ If a cultural shift is needed, what does this mean in practice for staff currently teaching in a university?

# What we discovered to add to recent findings....



## Our approach

**Nodes** Look for:  Search In  Find Now Clear Options

- Free Nodes
- Tree Nodes
- Cases
- Relationships
- Matrices
- Search Folders
- All Nodes

| Free Nodes             |         |            |            |            |               |             |  |
|------------------------|---------|------------|------------|------------|---------------|-------------|--|
| Name                   | Sources | References | Created On | Created By | Modified On   | Modified By |  |
| admin provision        | 8       | 14         | 22/12/2010 | S          | 11/04/2011 12 | S           |  |
| cultural opportunities | 1       | 2          | 14/01/2011 | SH         | 14/01/2011 08 | SH          |  |
| distance is different  | 10      | 74         | 23/12/2010 | S          | 03/05/2011 12 | SH          |  |
| Economic factors       | 6       | 10         | 22/12/2010 | S          | 11/04/2011 12 | S           |  |

**Sources**

**Nodes**

Interaction via technology

Reference 1 - 0.16% Coverage

Keen to have Skype to see a face.

Reference 2 - 11.78% Coverage

Camera - one to one or small group is OK as long as I can see all faces. If a class then a movable, zoomable camera. Control what is going on in the class

# The interviews

- ▶ **40 academic staff** across subjects were interviewed by members of
- ▶ Learning & Teaching Support Team : David Pollard & Sarah Hayes
- ▶ Important to plan carefully what to ask (and when...)
  - ▶ 20 mins maximum
  - ▶ Anonymity guaranteed
  - ▶ 6 open-ended questions
  - ▶ **Not** a technology-based study
  - ▶ Recorded interviews analysed using Nvivo
  - ▶ Consistent themes were identified
  - ▶ These have been compared with recent literature

Major themes that emerged were

- ▶ ***What constitutes distance teaching?***
- ▶ ***Institutional responsibilities***
- ▶ ***Economic factors***
- ▶ ***Learner issues***
- ▶ ***Administrative support***
- ▶ ***Cultural opportunities***
- ▶ ***Technology***
- ▶ ***Distance IS different***

# 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 as to 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.....**

**Here is what some had to say....**

## I don't want to distance teach

'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'

'As a teacher I operate best when the students are physically here'

'I would miss the human touch. I love to have the proximity. I prefer to teach in the flesh!'

'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'

'DL is a second choice – I wouldn't recommend it unless they couldn't learn any other way'

'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.'

## I'm happy to distance teach

'I like it better and we do not have to fill in forms to prove we met as our emails are the evidence'

'We should be pursuing DL as I regularly have enquiries'

'I would be happy to distance teach – I would not like my whole life conducted at a distance'

'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 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'

'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'

## 2. Institutional responsibilities

- ▶ Direction from the top is very important
  - ▶ Be very clear about the target niche
  - ▶ Institutionally, it is not a low-cost option
  - ▶ Institutions must invest in it properly
  - ▶ Perception is that it is very **time intensive**
- 
- ▶ DL is not yet fully supported
- 
- ▶ Needs marketing budget and admin staff and time allowance for teachers. Must be properly resourced and properly understood.
- 
- ▶ It can be a money-spinner if we are clever about **who does which bits**

'Course teams spend a lot of time developing resources before the programme is launched'

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

'Very hard to quantify or prescribe how much time to spend on each student'

'Universities must give people time to work on this'

DL is not a big burden for admin if well-designed.

'We are using PhDs to free up tutor time because DL is very time consuming'

# Economic factors

| Points raised  | A few illustrative quotes  |
|--|--|
| <p>As fees go up student expectations will rise</p> <p>Not necessarily cheaper</p> <p>Cost in <b>time</b> is a key factor.</p> | <p>'The students will be paying such extraordinary high tuition fees we will be expected to be there for them and make other things available.'</p> <p>'Increase in fees will not increase levels of quality'.</p> <p>'Fees a problem if in another country you can do the course for free'.</p> <p>'Not convinced it is cheaper for the institution though it may be helpful to students.'</p> <p>Not the next cash cow</p> <p>I am fortunate I have had some pots of money to allow me to buy people to write the materials.</p> |

# Learner issues

| Points raised   | A few illustrative quotes  |
|---|--|
| Not useful for UG.                                      | ‘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’.   |
| Type of DL student                                      | ‘They need to learn academic rigour in the academic environment’<br>‘suits a particular profile of learner autonomous, proactive. Mostly PG ’  |
| Flexibility: The distance learning advantage            | ‘successful DL programmes attract independent students’<br>‘People with a clear view of where they are going’<br>‘It is a completely different student on our programmes, compared to on-campus, professional, also working, |
| Excellent student support from a dedicated module tutor | ‘there are many elements we could introduce for our on-campus students who also work. Less distinction between distance and on-campus’   |
| No formal guidelines for how much exchange              | ‘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’  |
| Situating learning                                      | ‘I feel there isn't a harmonised experience.<br>Very different with each student. No established rules’  |
| Situating learning                                      | DL can miss out on the extras, optional debates,   |

# Administrative support

| Points raised  | A few illustrative quotes  |
|--|--|
| <p>Processes</p>   | <p>'basic things, enrolment, submission, need to get them working well'<br/>'It requires 3 full time admins for 250 students'<br/>'Student progress meeting every 3 weeks'</p>   |
| <p>Admin needs to be specific to the online needs.</p>                                     | <p>'Support staff must understand major difference in DL to on-campus. There must be an explicit distinction.'<br/>'admin for DL need to know complexity of the programme. Be a programme manager'</p>   |
| <p>Someone in charge of all aspects to support the programme is ideal.</p>                 | <p>'Students at different stages. They need a contact who knows everything for continuity'<br/><br/>'DL is not a big burden for admin if well-designed'</p>  |
| <p>An admin who understands the subject area can fill gap between admin and lecturing.</p> | <p>'Someone for practical questions. Not the tutor time.'<br/>'Distance learning runs off its files. Where is this student, what have they achieved, we have no way of tracking. Distance teaching is academic light and admin heavy. Cheap to formalise PhDs doing a lot'</p> |
| <p>Overworked administrators can be expected to do even more with DL</p>                   | <p>'admin support needs to be strong as people at a distance can still demand a lot'</p>   |

# Technology

| Points raised             | A few illustrative quotes   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Recording lectures        | <p>'Recordings and podcasts of university events are good to make available for DL'<br/>'I think it is good to record lectures' 'Recording lectures is useful'<br/>The process changes the lecture.' 'Less inclined to make off the record comments'<br/>'I know students record me but it doesn't bother me because I don't think about it'</p>  |
| Pre-recorded web lectures | <p>'Students like them. Takes less time to create. Quicker than writing to talk over your slides'<br/>'Web lectures stop you over-delivering to students'.<br/>Web lectures bring it closer to a campus model and technology is good for that.<br/>'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'<br/>'Using Skype improves the tutor experience'<br/>'I use Skype a lot. I am not keen to do seminars in that way. Better to bring people in.</p>  |
| Technology generally      | <p>'Feedback is there is a lot of reading. Perhaps people prefer to listen. We use Elluminate. Screen capture for feedback, podcasts and video to introduce ourselves. Articulate and Presenter to provide voice over slides. We record visiting speakers using Panopto'<br/>'I am not anti-technology but it is no substitute for good teaching, reading and homework.<br/>'I don't want to introduce technological features for the sake of it.'<br/>'Important to have technology, but not the most important aspect.'</p> |

# Cultural opportunities

| Points raised                                   | A few illustrative quotes  |
|---|--|
| Students who otherwise could not study at Aston | <p>‘There may be issues why students cannot come to university. ‘DL advantages for the student who would not otherwise benefit’ ‘Take the good stuff out to them’</p> <p>‘increased opportunity for communication with Mums, dads with small children who want to go back to work and study. Makes it feasible to continue learning’</p> <p>‘Phd students in different parts even of UK may have problems to get here.</p>   |
| Communication                                   | <p>‘how to establish a group dynamic for people across the world to work together’</p> <p>Expand this across a lot of space. Theory between here and US, share on a facebook site, have a cross-cultural debate.’</p>  |
| Distance study is liberating                    | <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>  |
| International connections                       | <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. Looking outside the European context.’</p> <p>‘It could produce connections with institutions abroad. Encourage links around the world for combined programmes. Institutions in China. Staff need to be financed to make these links as a part of the expansion and development’</p> |

# *Distance IS different*

'We cannot assume that DL comes for free. Recognise it as a different kind of experience and plan the assessment, recruitment and support accordingly.'

'We have developed philosophical strands about DL, about response, relationship building, and situated learning. People are in their context/working environment and 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'

Hard to pitch tone. Don't know who the students are. Level of detail.  
Lonely as a tutor.'  
'I like students in front of me, email scares and depresses me deeply.'

'Those in our school experienced in DL have developed practice and know what to do. People new to distance teaching could misconstrue what is required. On campus teaching and DL are very different things.'

'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.'

'It was very creative, but neat compared to regular teaching. Planning in advance for an audience you don't know'



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## Some concluding remarks

Some tutors would prefer to remain in the lecture theatre:-

*I would like to know I could come back next year to give the lecture*

Some tutors are excited about challenges as a teacher and flexibility to learn:-

*In distance learning the tutor has to have a hundred eyes but I learned Arabic that way in 2 months – so I am the living proof*

All agreed it must be done properly and in a dedicated approach:-

**Distance is so much more than a 'bit on the side of what you normally do'**

**TIME** was the biggest concern of *all* tutors. Institutions need DL-specific systems to help lecturers tackle practical issues of design, management and support of DL students. Then they will be well positioned to bring benefits to those on campus also

***'We need to switch our mindset from seeing students as either distance ,or on-campus, as they are potentially both'***

