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Article:

**Online Distance Learning (ODL) in the international context:
A phenomenological study based on participant observation of module
delivery as part of a TNE programme with a Chinese partner university**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a contemporary evidence-based evaluation of Online Distance Learning (ODL) in the international context. The study underpinning this paper is phenomenological in nature and uses participant observation to systematically gather data based on the authors experiences of delivering a module as part of a Trans-National Education (TNE) programme with a Chinese partner university. The main finding of the paper is that while ODL may appear to have an advantage over traditional face-to-face teaching in terms of being a low cost alternative further evaluation from the perspective of the key stakeholders reveals that this is not necessarily the case and that there may be a number of additional inherent disadvantages that also need to be considered. The findings of this study should constitute important considerations for senior managers considering ODL, course managers involved in designing and managing TNE programmes, and academics generally who are offered the opportunity to engage in ODL. The main limitations of the study are a focus on just one form of ODL, teaching that was delivered into just one overseas country using just one delivery platform (*GoToMeeting*) and a qualitative methodology that introduced an element of subjectivity. However, the paper does provide valuable insight and makes an original contribution to knowledge regarding ODL from the perspective of the academic.

Key words: Online Distance Learning (ODL), Online teaching, Trans-National Education (TNE)

Context and Objectives

According to Zappedia (2020) the internet is now used by some 3 billion people worldwide which brings with it access to education via Online Distance Learning (ODL). Indeed, ODL has grown by 900% since 2000 (Pappas, 2019) and is currently valued at some \$305bn (Global Industry Analysts Inc., 2020). Such potential, if not market opportunity, has not gone unnoticed by the UK Higher Education sector and many universities have sought to embrace ODL often as part of a blended learning strategy (Zaidi et al, 2018).

ODL has a number of advantages over more traditional methods of face-to-face teaching including the ability to more easily transcend borders and make knowledge available to people across the globe as well as embracing new pedagogical models that improve learning (Allen et al, 2016). It has also been suggested that ODL has the potential to reduce the cost of education (Ali et al, 2017). ODL, however, is not without disadvantages relating to concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction between the lecturer and the student leading to a reduced learning experience and lower student satisfaction (Andrade, 2015; Walters et al, 2017), the academic integrity of students working remotely (Harrison et al, 2017), the challenge that lecturers perceive to exist when working with technology (Harrison et al, 2017), and the impact on staff workload (Meyer, 2010; Shea, 2007; Van de Vord and Pogue, 2012).

While the advantages and disadvantages of ODL are well rehearsed in the literature much of the discourse is neither contemporary nor evidence-based which would seem to be an issue when the subject is complex and the technology is still advancing at a rapid rate. This paper, therefore, uses a recognised methodology to systematically report the personal experiences of one academic while undertaking ODL as part of an established programme of Trans-National Education (TNE).

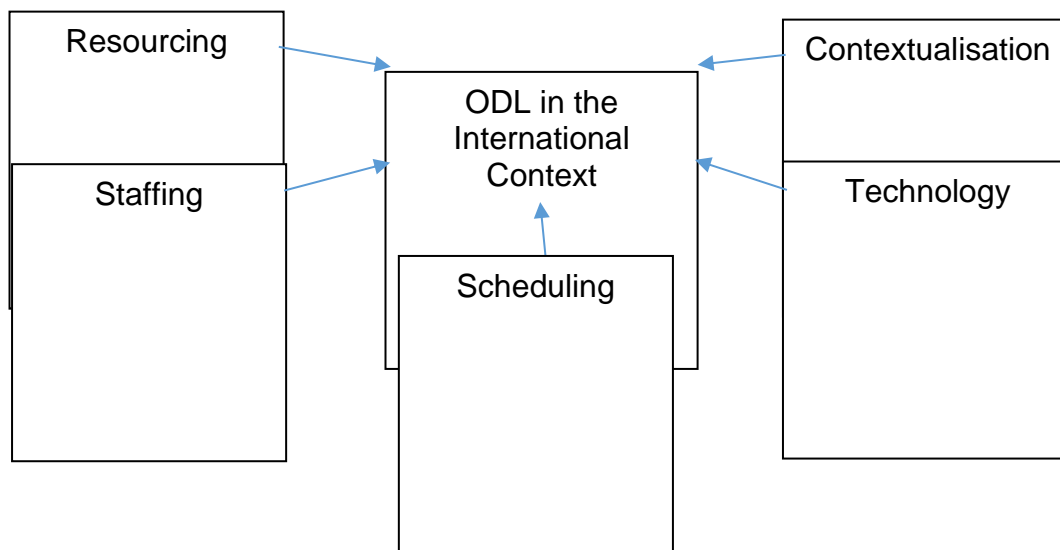
Method

The ODL that forms the focus for this paper was undertaken as part of a TNE collaboration between Harper Adams University (HAU) and Beijing University of Agricultural (BUA). The programme was set up in 2004 and is based on a 3+1 model that delivers either a BSc / BSc (Hons) International Business Management or a BSc / BSc (Hons) Food Quality and Retail Management. Since its inception the programme has produced nearly a thousand graduates with more than 70% progressing to masters or some other form of higher degree and the program received a very positive review by the QAA in 2012 (QAA, 2012).

This paper draws on the personal reflections of the author who has been teaching and researching in the area of business, management and marketing for almost 30 years. The reflective approach means that it is “...*a study of life as it is experienced by self...*” and so may be deemed to be *phenomenological* in nature (Robinson and Reed, 1998). Further, as phenomenological studies are qualitative in nature and may take various forms the fact that the researcher was actually participating in the process being observed means that the research here was executed in the form of a *Participant Observation* study which Jorgensen (1989, p16) claims “... *aims to provide practical and theoretical truths about human existence*” and, as such, “*Personal experience derived from direct participation in the insiders’ world is an extremely valuable source of information...*” (Jorgensen, 1989, p93). Indeed, Jorgensen (1989) goes on to stress that while it is important to start a Participant Observation study with an open mind it is also important that the researcher keep good records of their experiences. To this end detailed notes of the researchers experiences were kept, initially as a host of post-it notes, scribbles on the teaching schedule, and the email record, but which eventually were consolidated into a more comprehensible narrative in the form of a Research Diary. These notes recorded not

just factual data about the lectures and critical incidents but also the thoughts and feelings that the researcher experienced during the time that the module was being delivered. Finally, this data was subject to normal qualitative analysis which sought to identify “...types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns or wholes” so as to “...assemble or reconstruct the data in a meaningful or comprehensible fashion” (Jorgensen, 1989, p107). The next section presents the researchers reflections structured around the five key issues shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Five key issues relating to ODL in the international context



Results: Researcher Reflections

1. Resourcing

Resources at both HAU and the Partner institution probably received more attention in the initial discussions than any other factor. Academic staff time, hardware, and software were identified as the main resources required but in hindsight the deliberations on these matters were somewhat uninformed. Many resources, for instance technical support staff time, course management time and the cost of creating a delivery room, were not identified in the initial deliberations and those that were identified were not accurately quantified and the assumptions were very optimistic. While fully acknowledging that academic work frequently spills over into the evenings, weekends, and holiday periods the amount of time that the researcher invested in the preparation, delivery and student support of this module was estimated as being two-three times greater than delivering the same module face-to face in the UK.

2. Staffing

At the outset the agreement with the Chinese Partner was that they would provide a Tutor who would assess the module as well as attend all the online lectures to address IT issues and ensure order in the classroom. Initially, this system worked

well but as the module progressed the Tutor was required elsewhere and was replaced by a Teaching Assistant who resigned part-way through the year. With no one replacing the Teaching Assistant the students took responsibility for classroom management and the resolution of IT problems but at about the same point as the Tutor left attendance became variable and although this was probably more to do with students working on assignments and preparing for exams than the absence of a Tutor, in the final week of teaching just one student attended.

3. Scheduling

The process of scheduling synchronous online teaching sessions was complex and involved a significant amount of planning. The two institutions operate different academic years and so term dates and teaching weeks are different. There is also a significant time difference between the UK and Beijing which changes as the UK moves from BST to GMT and back again which meant that while delivery in the UK was early morning the students in China attended in the late afternoon. Fortunately, the additional complexity arising from the fact that HAU operates long-thin delivery while the Chinese university operates semesters was negated by the Chinese university operating this programme to the long-thin model. However, the complexity that was present meant that the Programme Leader was required to invest a significant amount of time and energy in developing a very detailed delivery schedule and this was undoubtedly a key aspect in ensuring the successful delivery of the module.

4. Contextualising

Although the researcher had taught the module successfully in the UK for many years it was clear from the start that using the existing material would be inappropriate in the Chinese context and that contextualisation would require a significant investment of time and effort. In the first instance, some of the lectures and tutorials required a level of interactivity only possible in a face-to-face situation and so these sessions had to be replaced with others designed specifically for online delivery. Second, even though the existing material had a global perspective it was apparent that much of it would have little meaning to these Chinese students and so this had to be replaced with material drawn from the Chinese context. Thirdly, as the teaching plan was being developed it became apparent that the Chinese system allowed for significantly less Reading Weeks than the UK system obliging the researcher to generate an additional ten weeks lectures and tutorials. A final point to note is that a significant amount of time was also invested in producing a reading list and various tutorial exercises that were made available via a dedicated space on the HAU Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) but despite encouragement the students made little use of this support material.

5. Technology

According to Prieto-Rodriguez et al (2016, p22) “...*technology acts as a mediator of the teaching and learning experience within online learning scenarios...*” which means that it is an integral aspect of ODL and while the researcher is not an expert in either IT or online delivery his experiences permit some observations concerning the technology that was used in this initiative.

The first observation concerns the delivery platform used to facilitate the online delivery of this module which was *GoToMeeting*. *GoToMeeting* emerged as the recommended delivery platform from discussions with the IT department that sought to work within a minimum cost parameter; the fact that at the time *GoToMeeting* was free was ideal. Although *GoToMeeting* is not bespoke online teaching software, after some practice, it was relatively easy to use and after a few weeks of experiencing its use, the students did make use of the two-way communication facility to engage with the researcher.

A second observation is that while the software performed well it still relied on the Internet which at times was a problem. During delivery there were numerous instances of either the sound or the video or both *dropping-out* due to what is believed to be bandwidth issues. Attempts were made to solve this issue by moving delivery from the researcher's office to a properly equipped studio and moving the students from a normal teaching room to an IT suite but the improvement was only marginal. As such, and while largely out-with the auspices of either university to address, the bandwidth issue did have a negative impact on the delivery of the module.

A final point with regard to technology is that it is not an input that operates in isolation but is part of a broader system. Indeed, input from the IT department was required in many areas including identifying the delivery platform, training in the use of the delivery platform, testing of *GoToMeeting*, booking of the IT studio, and processing and storage of the video recordings. It is apparent therefore, that not only must the technology work but so too must the broader system if the technology is to be deployed correctly and the potential benefits are to be realised. In the case of this project there were several instances where the broader system failed to the detriment of the delivery. None of these failures were catastrophic and all were seen as learning experiences but they related to such matters as the scheduled *GoToMeeting* sessions being inadvertently deleted, the IT staff supporting the initiative changing and bringing discontinuity to the level and nature of support, and misplaced recordings of the *GoToMeeting* sessions.

Discussion

Although this study has limitations in terms of focusing on just one form of ODL (there are others such as narrated PowerPoints), the teaching was delivered into just one overseas country (China), just one platform (*GoToMeeting*) was used to deliver the teaching, and the methodology underpinning this study was qualitative in nature and so somewhat subjective, there was a conscious attempt to systematically record as much data as possible and a sincere attempt to focus on matters of relevance. As a consequence the findings appear valid and have value for others engaging in ODL in the international context. Indeed, in terms of learning about ODL in the international context from this study it is useful to consider matters from the perspectives of the key stakeholders.

When the assessment marks for the module that was the focus for this study are considered it is apparent that they were similar to the marks of previous cohorts of

students studying the same module. It might be assumed, therefore, that Vice Chancellors are fervent supporters of ODL as they may well concur with Ali et al (2017) and conclude that ODL is a low cost means of delivering education.

Students, however, might view ODL somewhat less favourably. While today's students may be referred to as *digital natives* not all of them will either expect to be educated online or be able to engage to the same level online. In the first instance, UK students now pay a lot of money for their education and probably have expectations about the format of their education and contact with staff which may be very different than the experience provided by ODL. Secondly, at least some students are likely to experience difficulty with the online approach for reasons ranging from habit, attitude, cultural conditioning, interaction, ease of attention, and image quality through to the inability of computer applications to provide *spatial landmarks* (Siegenthaler et al, 2012; Myrberg and Wiberg, 2015; Gudinavicius, 2016; Yuill and Martin, 2016). As a consequence, working on screens is not a medium favoured by many people (Holzinger et al, 2011) and where ODL is introduced without adequate notice and support the transition from face-to-face teaching will be challenging (Thanaraj, 2016) and this may well reduce perceived teaching quality (Andrade, 2015), detract from the student experience, and reduce student satisfaction.

Staff views about ODL may well be variable. Some may like using technology and embrace ODL but it is well documented (eg Harrison et al, 2017) that many staff, like the students, are uneasy with this form of delivery. Indeed, this unease is not an irrational fear of change per se but relates to not just the same issues impacting the students but also *staff efficacy* (Ali et al, 2017), that is an individual's confidence in their capabilities to organize and execute actions to accomplish goals, regarding ODL. While there is an obvious link between *staff efficacy* and experience of online teaching the corollary is that in the first instance of being required to engage with ODL, where engagement is occasional and infrequent, or engagement is a one-off delivery situation (as with the case reported here) then *staff efficacy* will be low. In such a situation the transition from face-to-face teaching to ODL needs to be considered and dealt with as an instance of *change management* that requires institutional investment in order to properly support and train the staff involved (Thanaraj, 2016). Further, the majority of the literature on online teaching assumes that online teaching is the one and only activity of an academic but this is rarely the case. Most university academics are required to engage in research and some may also be involved in third stream activities, widening participation or even management. Engagement with online teaching, particularly on an occasional basis, will require a substantial investment of time on the part of the academic and so any evaluation of ODL needs to embrace the opportunity costs as well as the direct costs.

Conclusion

Having delivered a module online in the international context the researcher is left with mixed thoughts and feelings on the matter. The instance of ODL in an international context reported in this paper was deemed successful in terms of student attainment and the researcher did experience a feeling of euphoria having

completed the online delivery of the module. However, the euphoria was more to do with overcoming the many and varied challenges of delivery rather than having established an emotional bond with at least some of the students which you might expect with face-to-face teaching, and so this instance of ODL must be considered a lesser experience for the tutor as well as the students. Also, while this instance of ODL in the international context might not have added any additional costs to the Vice Chancellors accounts it wasn't because there weren't any but because they were incurred by the individual academic rather than the institution. Indeed, while the researcher would not outright reject ODL as a means of delivery in the future he would advocate using the experiences outlined in this paper to ensure better implementation.

In particular, any sort of financial evaluation of potential ODL needs to embrace all the likely costs and be based on a realistic estimate of those costs. While it is relatively easy to quantify revenue in terms of a share of student fees (and possibly residential income) it is not so easy to quantify the costs. It would be important to not just include the costs of academic staff time, hardware, and software as was initially done in this study, but also consider the costs of a bespoke delivery room as well as technical support staff time and course management time. It would also be important to ensure that these costs were not optimistic estimates as with this study but realistic to ensure accuracy. Indeed, to this end it may be best to take a "*worst case scenario*" approach to estimating the costs and especially the cost of staff time.

In many universities staff time seems to be treated as a nominal resource with the implicit assumption that because staff are on a professional contract they will work evenings, weekends, and holidays to ensure work is completed. However, taking this approach with ODL in the international context is risky, especially in one-off situations, because it may require an investment of time that is so much greater than normal face-to-face delivery that it may be impossible to achieve. The researcher's own experiences suggested that ODL in the international context required two-three times as much time as delivering the same module face-to-face in the UK and even though in this case only one module was delivered in this way there were significant opportunity costs incurred. However, where a member of staff is faced with a full workload that is to be delivered as ODL in the international context and it takes them two-three times as much time as delivering the same module face-to-face in the UK, then it may not be possible to do this even if they work in the evenings, weekends and in their holidays. Indeed, the only way that that person could deliver a full workload of ODL in the international context would be by cutting corners, compromising standards, or both. There is, however, an obvious strategy to deal with this situation and that is to adjust the workload tariff possibly by a multiple of two for first time engagement with ODL and by a multiple of three for first time engagement with ODL in an international context.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the case on which this paper is based revealed the real costs to be both short-term, and long-term with the university costings focused very much on the former. The additional hours required to prepare, deliver, and support ODL in the international context were largely incurred by the staff member so they did not appear in the university costings but staff who are over-worked, stressed and demotivated may be forced to take time-off or may become disillusioned when dealing with students and these matters will incur costs for the

university at some later stage. Similarly, students who have registered on a course in the expectation of face-to-face teaching but who are then required to engage with ODL may be dissatisfied which may cause them to decide to undertake postgraduate study elsewhere, again, adversely impacting university finances at a later date.

In short, if ODL in the international context is to be successful and sustainable a university's senior management need to be open and honest with staff and students. Project costings need to be comprehensive and realistic in order to provide staff with the increased time required to engage with ODL in the international context while communication with students is needed to ensure that delivery meets expectations and does not adversely affect student satisfaction. Staff and students are perfectly reasonable as long as they understand what is happening and why it is happening. Finally, the costs of ODL in the international context are related to *experience* and so there is a case for universities, schools, and courses to either *specialise* in ODL in the international context or to avoid this activity.

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