Flexible Learning at the University of Dundee

As Institutional Lead for flexible learning I am delighted that this issue is dedicated to the increasingly flexible approach to supporting study needed in today’s Higher Education arena. Our Principal, Professor Andrew Atherton, talked recently about the potential misnomer of distance learning. Although many of our 5000 distance learners are overseas, many are local, but welcome the flexible models we support. Professionals are often neither able or want to take time out of their work. Their studies can be more meaningful and make a larger impact when completed as work-based learning. This special edition opens up some of the discussions and activities already happening.

Dr Susie Schofield

DUSA and Distance Learners

Dundee University Students’ Association (DUSA) is committed to ensuring that all of our students have a strong voice in shaping their learning experience and access to support, which helps them reach their academic goals.

The majority of our efforts to date have focused on our on-campus (Dundee City campus, Ninewells and Kirkcaldy) students; however, one group we need to do more for is our distance learners. This growing group of students has presented a challenge for us to innovate how we provide services and support; recently we have taken a number of steps to try and bridge that gap.

On the completion of the DL internal audit in 2017, a working group was established in partnership between the University and DUSA to look at representation of DL students. This important step forward allowed experts from across the Institution to focus on improving our DL students’ voice. This led to us working with student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparsq) to contribute to an engagement toolkit - Engaging Students in Online Distance Learning - which has now been embedded as best practice in the Joint Agreement of Representation at the University of Dundee. www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/ODL%20Guidance.pdf

DUSA has also been improving students’ access to class representative training. Last academic year DUSA introduced a flipped classroom approach combining online videos and a standard practical workshop to develop important skills. This academic year, with the aid of our Student Voice Support Officers, DUSA trained around 130 representatives. In addition, working with sparqs, a specific Postgraduate workshop was created which will form the basis of future training for DLs. Using Office 365 Teams will allow us to include DL representatives in the practical workshops.

We’re also improving DL access to a range of other DUSA services. A new innovation is the inclusion of a Student Led Teaching Award for those staff who teach Distance Learning courses. This will provide an opportunity for these students to recognise the contribution of a particular teacher and will also help identify best practice, which can be used to enhance the overall DL student experience.

We’re creating a volunteer accreditation scheme to recognise and reward our students who undertake a range of extra-curricular activities. DLs who volunteer inside and outside the Institution will be able to apply to this scheme.

Welfare impacts on all student journeys and we are considering how we support DL students with matters such as mitigating circumstances, fitness to practise, and mental health issues.

There is still a long way to go and much of our work is at an early stage; however, DUSA is committed to making sure we provide representation and support to all of our students, be it on campus or at a distance.

Stewart Squire, Democratic Support & Policy Co-ordinator, DUSA

Flexible Learning Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asynchronous</th>
<th>Students contribute to an activity at different times e.g. via online discussion fora, recorded lectures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>Blended learning (a mix of ODL and F2F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cohort</td>
<td>Module has clearly defined start/submission(s)/finish dates</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuing professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td>DL</td>
<td>Distance learning, increasingly synonymous with ODL</td>
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<tr>
<td>F2F</td>
<td>Face to face (usually but not always on one of Dundee campuses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td>Flexible learning – this can be place, pace, curriculum and/or modality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flipped classroom</td>
<td>Online materials and tasks are provided before the F2F session, which is then used as a tutorial, flipping the traditional lecture followed by homework</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flying faculty</td>
<td>Faculty from Dundee going to teach elsewhere, often abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLC</td>
<td>Library and Learning Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-cohort</td>
<td>Students go at own pace – material can either be triggered by completion of task or all module material released at start of module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODL</td>
<td>Online distance learning, usually supported by the VLE, sometimes shortened to DL</td>
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<tr>
<td>RPL</td>
<td>Recognised prior learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stackable</td>
<td>A programme with multiple exit points, e.g. PGCert, PGDip, Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous</td>
<td>Students attend an activity (F2F or Online) at the same time e.g. via Collaborate</td>
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<tr>
<td>VLE</td>
<td>Virtual learning environment</td>
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Masters in Medical Education (MMEd)

Our MMEd is the University’s oldest Distance Learning programme, having been started by Professor Ronald Harden over 40 years ago as a correspondence course. Since then we’ve graduated over 4000 non-cohort students at Certificate, Diploma, Masters and Research Degree levels.

We moved online in 2010, then to cohort in 2016, allowing us to take a more social constructivist approach, introducing peer support and feedback. We have maintained flexibility in a managed framework, presenting modules three times a year and allowing up to two years for each stage in the MMEd. Our students are health professionals, often with an educational role sitting alongside their main clinical role, and at any given time we have about 1000 online students enrolled on our programme. About 30% are international, giving students a truly global experience with their peers online.

The majority of our students graduate with the Certificate, though we are noticing increasing interest in Diploma and Masters since cohorting. We also have a cohort of full-time F2F students starting each September. https://www.dundee.ac.uk/study/pg/medical-education-parttime-distancelearning/  

Dr Sean McAleer, Course Director/Senior Lecturer

ODL in Humanities

The School of Humanities is one of the largest providers of ODL education at the University of Dundee, with a diverse portfolio encompassing Undergraduate and Postgraduate levels of education in the following subject areas:

- Archive and Information Studies (AIS) is the biggest worldwide provider of practice-based DL Masters degrees in Archives, Records Management, Digital Preservation and Family History. Since 2004, over 1000 international and home students have graduated and are now working as professionally qualified practitioners and leaders as archivists, records managers and genealogists.

- The Masters in Scottish History by DL provides an integrated programme of study including research skills, a critical understanding of the principal theories and concepts of Scottish History and historiography, and the chance through independent research to make a contribution to the development of Scottish History.

- The Languages DL provision offers courses to people worldwide wanting to study languages and their cultures (French, Gaelic, German, Mandarin and Spanish). Learners engage with high quality online material and weekly Skype sessions. Courses are available from beginner to Graduate Diploma level.

Dr Craig Gauld, School of Humanities Distance Learning Officer, and lecturer in Archive and Information Studies

Enhancing Nursing Across the World

The School of Nursing and Health Sciences has been delivering DL and BL programmes for around 20 years. In that time we’ve transformed the lives of our students and those they care for all around the world, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, North America and of course the UK.

We deliver post-registration programmes that enable registered nurses to “top up” their diplomas to a nursing degree - an important global trend to upskill and enhance the nursing profession. We also deliver a range of MSc programmes - and not just in nursing. One of our specialist areas, infection prevention and control, attracts students nationally and internationally. We currently have ten Commonwealth Scholarship Fund students from West African countries taking this programme.

In recent years our programmes have benefited enormously from the enhancements to the University’s educational technologies, allowing much better interactive activities, synchronously and asynchronously, helping to overcome the isolation that DL students can feel. We believe very strongly in the benefits of DL and BL programmes. They reach students who might not otherwise be able to access higher education and in developing countries in particular, they encourage students to stay in their home country and make a difference to healthcare during their studies and beyond.

Dr Linda Martindale, Interim Dean, School of Nursing & Health Sciences

Master of Education (MEd) postgraduate degree

The MEd distance learning programme has grown over the past five years to almost 400 students spread across 30 countries, embracing the University’s encouragement to ‘take Dundee to the world’. Students come from a range of educational settings including schools, nurseries, colleges and universities.

Students can choose the general Leading Learning and Teaching pathway, or a specialist pathway (International Education, Inclusive Education or Educational Leadership). As a teaching team, many of whom have themselves studied via distance learning, we have embraced technology-enhanced learning and use tools including Collaborate Ultra (for online classroom) and JIng (for screencasting), to enhance the student experience.

Strong links have been developed with partner Local Authorities, the International Baccalaureate, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and our recruitment partner Staffford Global Associates Ltd. We also offer the Scottish Headship programmes Into Headship and In Headship in partnership with Education Scotland.

The MEd can also be taken as a full time on campus masters.

Dianne Cantali, MEd Programme Director, School of Education & Social Work
Society’s challenges today are complex and interdisciplinary, and current solutions emerging from single disciplines are often sub-optimal. This complexity requires a different type of professional; one who is equipped to work in a creative and collaborative way across disciplines. Our new part-time, interdisciplinary Professional Doctorate Programme (PDP) is aimed at helping professionals to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes required to fulfil this role.

What is a Professional Doctorate?
The PDP is a doctoral level qualification with specific focus on professional context and application to practice. Although applicants apply for the specific named awards they are interested in, out of a possible ten choices, they join a community of PDP postgraduates from across the University, sharing interdisciplinary modules, whilst also benefiting from close associations with their ‘home’ School.

What’s the structure?
Starting each January, it has a modular structure, particularly in years 1 and 2, with the emphasis shifting to thesis work in years 3 and 4. Each January and June students attend an intensive 6-day sessions on campus. These are blended with a rich online experience, for which we draw on DL expertise from across the University. This ensures a flexible and innovative learning experience for busy professionals across the globe.

Best thing about PDP to date?
The buzz around the room during our first on-campus sessions was inspiring – there was a real sense of camaraderie, anticipation, excitement, and that wasn’t just from the new research postgraduates! The PDP has been a great vehicle for bringing academics from very different disciplinary backgrounds together to shape content and delivery.

How can you get involved?
Our team already includes academics from seven of our Schools, members of the Centre for Technology and Innovation in Learning, the Library and Learning Centre and the Academic Skills Centre, and our administrator, Tracy Pratt. However, there are still opportunities to get involved – as module team members, supervisors or in a more ad hoc way.

And, of course, we’d be delighted to hear from staff, either academic or those in professional services, interested in themselves taking a PDP.

For further information: https://join.dundee.ac.uk/professionaldoctorates/
Or email: professionaldoctorate@dundee.ac.uk

Dr Linda McSwiggan, Programme Director
Launched over 20 years ago, the Distance Learning Forum (DLF) meets four times a year, and is a lively mix of academics, professional staff (administrative and learning technology) and students, whether currently involved in DL or just curious. Our philosophy is that our DL community has similar needs to our F2F students, and we look at equity in provision, including peer support, student services and our extensive online library. However, DL students are often juggling study alongside a full-time career, sometimes in other time zones around the world, at times with poor internet connectivity and other obstacles to contend with. Within the DLF community, we are committed to finding ways around such issues, by sharing our practices and supporting each other to provide the best possible learning experience for our distance learners and tutors.

Topics for the meetings are decided by the members themselves and this year we have hosted various speakers and shared experiences about: online learning design, student engagement online: how we do it and how we could do it better; evaluating distance learning programmes – and more! We also promote and champion DL within the Institution, ensuring representation on relevant university committees. Our new co-chair is Dr Susie Schofield, who was appointed to the newly-created role of Flexible Learning Institutional Lead last September.

To find out more about the DLF, check out our blog: http://bit.ly/DLFDundee where you will find our DLF manifesto and various news items, including details of previous and future meetings of the forum.

To sign up to our distribution list and receive occasional emails about upcoming DLF events, please contact one of the co-convenors: Aileen McGuigan, School of Education & Social Work (a.mcguigan@dundee.ac.uk) or Susie Schofield (s.j.schofield@dundee.ac.uk). Ideas for future speakers/topics for the DLF are always welcome.

The DLF next meets on Thursday 9 May, 2-4pm, in Dalhousie 1G06, when one of our discussion topics will be the Office 365 suite of tools. We hope to see you there!

Dr Aileen McGuigan, DLF co-chair and Senior Lecturer, ESW

New Adviser of Studies role in Childhood Practice

The BA Childhood Practice is a part-time DL course for childhood professionals, which allows them to gain an academic and professional qualification whilst remaining in employment. This academic year, the programme introduced an Adviser of Studies (AoS) role to ensure DL students have the same support and guidance at University as those students who are on campus full time. We explored how we could make this a meaningful and supportive role to ensure students felt consistency and connected to the University of Dundee.

Students were given clear information regarding the new role and who their AoS would be. Since August, each AoS for a group of students has emailed regularly with timed advice, pointers to support services and so on. We will now be inviting students to self-assess their grades for this year and then email their AoS on topics which could help them advance their results. We will thematically analyse these emails to inform a set of online workshops, which will also support students’ developing professional identity.

Lynn Boyle, Senior Lecturer, Programme Director Childhood Practice, School of Education & Social Work

What’s your current role?
In September 2018 I took on the role of Flexible Learning Institutional Lead, combining this with my existing role of Reader in Medical Education at the Medical School.

What did you do before?
My first job at Dundee was Research Assistant in Applied Computing. My subsequent PhD in Education and the role of Staff Development Officer for NHS staff involved in delivery of our MBChB led to being appointed lecturer on the Centre for Medical Education’s Masters Programme. I’ve really enjoyed leading the move from paper to online, and from non-cohort to cohort.

What current task would you like to highlight?
There’s so much exciting stuff going on around DL and BL it’s difficult to choose just one task (though of course this edition has showcased quite a bit). So I think the task I’d like to highlight is about sharing knowledge and good practice, and letting people know what support is available.

What do you see as the longer term goals of your job?
Flexible learning is about empowering students by offering them choices in how, what, when and where they learn: the pace, place and mode of delivery. (HEA, 2015). I am looking forward to working across the University to further grow and diversify our student community, advance our values, and intensify our impact locally and globally. This will allow us to embed interdisciplinary research and teaching as we increasingly work across the Institution, both by sharing modules and by co-designing modules across Schools.

Tell us something we wouldn’t guess about you?
My favourite composer is Vaughan Williams and I have a tattoo on my shoulder of a lark ascending over the first bar of the Lark Ascending music.