COMMONWEALTH SCHOLARSHIPS

Distance Learning Review Scoping Activity

Alumni Advisory Panel Report
2019-2021 Panel

Executive Summary

The CSC's Alumni Advisory Panel provides a platform for Commonwealth Alumni to support the future of the programme and its Scholars by sharing personal insight and expertise to contribute to the development of CSC activities. Panel members are appointed for a two-year term and are expected to advise on at least one activity per year. The panel is comprised of 101 members.

Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarships are offered for citizens of developing Commonwealth countries to study a Master's programme at a university in the United Kingdom by distance. These scholarships are funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), with the aim of contributing to the UK's international development aims and wider overseas interests, supporting excellence in UK higher education, and sustaining the principles of the Commonwealth.

Part of the ongoing work of the CSC Evaluation Team is to conduct in-depth assessments of the CSC's different scholarship and fellowship programmes. As a part of the initial research design stage, the Evaluation Team was interested in soliciting feedback from panel members who were Commonwealth Distance Learners, or who otherwise have experience with online and distance learning.

Members of the Alumni Advisory Panel were asked to share their experience with online and distance learning either as a student, or as a tutor, teacher, or provider. This report summarises the responses shared by participating panel members on guidance to develop online and distance learning, benefits, challenges and learnings.

Methodology

Panel members were asked to complete an online survey consisting of up to nine open-ended qualitative questions. The questions asked were aimed to understand the experiences of respondents as a learner (as a Commonwealth Scholar or a student in other course), or from the education side as a course tutor or administrator.

The task was open to all panel members and 36 registered to take part. 30 submitted feedback, a response rate of 83%.

Results

Key findings from the survey are summarised below under the following headings: Experience as a Learner and Experience as an Educator.

Experience as a learner

Approximately 96% of respondents indicated they had experience as an online and distance course learner. Out of this, ten respondents had either participated in a distance learning course or were currently completing one. Respondents who had completed their studies as a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar indicated that an advantage of this mode of learning was that they were able to continue in their respective employment in their home country while studying, which enabled financial stability. Other benefits noted included access to real-time information via online modules, online resources, and peer interaction without having to physically travel to the UK.

In general, all respondents felt that a well-designed online course is essential to the learning experience. The components specifically mentioned included online real-time lectures, recorded lectures, animations, structured curriculum and guidelines, access to information through online libraries and downloadable materials, and peer interaction.

The most common stated advantage of an online course as suggested by all respondents was flexibility. Almost all respondents felt that online courses provided flexibility to complete the course at one's own convenience and three respondents observed that partaking in an online course helped them become self-reliant and enhance their research and reading skills.
Apart from pursuing a Master's via distance learning, one respondent provided other examples of online certificate courses they had completed on platforms such as Future Learn, Magic Ears University, and the American Psychological Association (APA).

All respondents identified challenges related to learning online. Some of the common challenges faced by respondents are as below:

Technology

Almost all respondents indicated that infrastructure and technology, such as reliable electricity supply, user friendly tools, and software, were key to online learning. While real-time interaction with lecturers and peers was valued by respondents, some found it challenging to connect to online discussions due to poor internet connectivity.

Quality interaction

Some respondents stated that a lack of group activities and face-to-face learning with fellow students and lecturers did not create a social learning environment. Most respondents felt that this leads to isolation and loneliness as compared to studying in a classroom environment.

Equally, a panel member currently undergoing a distance learning course stated the importance of having fellow students or instructors who are responsive is essential for collaborative group assignments, especially where these are graded. The respondent noted that lack of response from group mates or lecturers has a negative impact on the student learning experience.

Drawing on experiences gained as online course learners, respondents suggested it was essential to have a stress-free learning experience, which included reasonable timeframes to complete activities, acknowledging outside priorities and commitments, having clear rules of engagement for online learning, developing modules which cater to different learning styles and needs, and making tests and assessments more efficient with the option to access right answers and the ability to retake tests.

Cost

At least two respondents highlighted that distance learning can be expensive, especially without funding or other financial support. In light of this, one respondent noted that there is a need for online and distance learning courses to be more flexible and accommodating to learners, especially if they are charging a high cost. An example was provided of an online course not providing correct answers for tests and the option for multiple retakes.

Experience as an Educator

Out of all respondents, nine shared their responsibilities as tutors and six as course instructors. The responsibilities held by tutors included designing an online course to deliver through distance learning, teaching online modules and video lectures, organising web-conferences, enhancing students' research and presentation skills, marking formative and/or assessed assignments, marking examinations, and providing feedback, both verbal and written. Course instructors' reported responsibilities included teaching online lessons, as well as writing modules, monitoring student attendance, and developing and uploading resources.

As part of their experience as Educators, respondents were asked to provide feedback on the benefits of online study from the perspective of this role. The majority indicated that online teaching was highly interactive and helped engage a large group of students. In general,

Educators felt online teaching was flexible while at the same time provided a structure, as the module covers topics in a certain timeframe. One respondent mentioned that online course delivery enables wider access to education and training and prepares learners to take greater responsibility of their learning process. One respondent found their experience as an online learner useful in their role as a Course Tutor, as it enabled them to understand the discipline and proactive approach they needed to foster in their students as a tutor. Another respondent indicated that facilitating an online course requires tutors to be more organised and follow guidelines.

Most respondents found online discussion forums to be a good way for learners to discuss course content as well as for educators to respond to queries. One respondent stated that online discussion forums particularly enhanced the peer-to-peer review and learning process as learners are usually from diverse backgrounds and lend new perspectives.

Technology was found to be the biggest challenge by most respondents, as tutors felt the need to develop skills in IT and working with online resources. One respondent suggested that internet issues in developing countries can demotivate students as well as teachers. They also felt that following-up on queries can be challenging post-online sessions. One respondent stated that lack of training and learners limited or negative past experiences in online learning provides limited opportunity for learning. Another respondent observed a rise in plagiarism in students' content signifying that this mode of learning faced similar challenges to face-to-face teaching.

Experience as a Course Coordinator

Five respondents shared their experience as online Course Coordinators. In this role, their responsibilities involved most of the planning and implementation necessary to deliver an online course, such as scheduling and monitoring classes, support in course enrolment, liaising between faculty and students, training faculty to use online teaching platforms and related software, uploading/sending weekly plans and online resources for students, preparing online results, and attending online webinars and similar training. As Course Coordinators, most respondents felt that an online course offers flexibility and provides the opportunity for educators to try an alternative and innovative method to deliver courses to a wide range of students, both part and full time.

One respondent appreciated efforts to initiate virtual labs in higher education institutions, which delivers online lessons, project assignments, and vivas via platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. It is noted that this move will help in data compilations and policy development related to higher education.

Benefits of online and distance learning programmes

Respondents indicated a range of advantages of online and distance learning programmes. In general, all respondents felt that DL offers flexibility of time and convenience. Most respondents acknowledged that distance learning enables learners to stay with family, continue in their employment, jobs and apply the knowledge and skills directly to their work. The ability to

acquire knowledge and obtain a degree from a reputed academic institution from any geographical location was most appreciated by all respondents.

Some respondents indicated that distance learning promotes independence, improves IT and computer skills, and helps in acquiring transferable skills. It was observed that distance learning helps in networking with fellow students and enables a diverse knowledge sharing experience. Two respondents stated the inclusive factor of distance learning as it caters to the needs of a wide range of learners, such as females from restrictive cultures.

A few respondents mentioned the importance of technology in online and distance learning as it has connected students to universities around the globe and helped in the transfer of knowledge and skills. One respondent mentioned that institutions which have been offering online courses for many years have not been drastically affected due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. It is observed that technology has kept the learning space going during this time as higher education institutions can adapt to alternative methods of delivering teaching virtually.

Challenges of online or distance learning programmes

Some of the common challenges and barriers to online learning related to technology such as, poor internet connectivity, low competence in ICT skills, lack of infrastructure, such as electricity shutdowns, and availability of gadgets like computers, laptops, and webcams. Related to technology, one respondent highlighted the health implications of completing an online course, noting the impact on vision due to prolonged exposure to the screen and impact on posture.

Almost all respondents indicated the lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and tutors to receive feedback. It is observed that although online learning provides flexibility, it is not the same as a classroom student-learning experience. One respondent mentioned that online learning can be difficult for students with disabilities. One respondent felt that an online course learner must go through more study materials and resources as opposed to onsite students. Some respondents mentioned the lack of practical learning experience as some course content requires laboratory sessions and demos. Two respondents indicated that with the rise of online course both free of costs and paid, it is essential to check the accreditation of the institution.

Summary

Based on their experiences as learners, respondent feedback highlighted that advantages of online or distance learning courses included widening access to education, financial and family stability while studying, flexibility of study, and being part of an online community. Common reported challenges were related to technology, prohibitive costs, and a lack of quality interaction, leading in some cases to isolation and disengagement. Recommendations to advance or increase the quality of online and distance learning courses for learner included receiving clear guidance and rules of engagement to participate in online learning, low-cost fees, and opportunities to visit the institute offer the course for face-to-face opportunities.

Respondents with experience as educators in distance or online learning courses felt that having a user-friendly experience on the online learning platform is key to course delivery, and

that experience as a learner is important in the planning and design of the course. Effective and regular communication between educators and learners was also rated highly.

Based on feedback from participants, it is evident online and distance learning courses play a significant role in enabling access to educational opportunities, and that further development of the learner experience and support to educators and course coordinators will have significant impact on the quality and accessibility of this mode of study. It should be noted that respondents highlighted the current global challenge of COVID-19 and the subsequent demand and importance of online and distance learning as a result.

The benefits, challenges, and recommendations shared by respondents will be used to validate the research framework developed for the CSC Evaluation Team Distance Learning Review and will feed into the development of questions for current Distance Learning Scholars and course providers as part of this work.