

Why do non-EU/UK distance learners have lower grade attainment?

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Objectives

1. To describe Grade Point Average (GPA) and degree attainment for EU (i.e. including UK) and transnational (international) students on a postgraduate online distance learning (ODL) programme in public health & primary care (PHPC)
2. To identify **pre and post-admission** predictors of GPA and degree attainment for EU and transnational students
3. To examine the relationship and impact of students' cultural & contextual (professional and personal) backgrounds with their learning experience and identify innovative opportunities to deliver an outstanding learning experience for postgraduate ODL students regardless of geography
4. Implement identified innovations and seek funding for an impact study of these.

Background

The UoM needs to ensure a reputation across the globe as delivering an outstanding learning experience for **ALL** of its students, regardless of the programme and regardless of the students' geographical location.

Like other programmes, the ODL in PHPC has some **disparity in degree attainment** between EU and transnational students despite changes to the content of the programme and courses on offer. This is of **concern**.

Research and published literature on this topic is remarkably scant, despite the global expansion of distance learning generally. Most of the literature has focused on international students coming to study in another country (i.e student coming to study on campus at UoM) or, on branch/satellite campuses where universities set up some form of infrastructure in a different country.

There is a dearth of research on this important topic (Feast & Bretag, 2005; Wallace & Dunn, 2013).

Few studies have examined the comparative performance of distance learning students based on their:

- A. country of origin
- B. current place/country of learning and
- C. other potentially important baseline characteristics.

From an evidence-based perspective, the amount of evidence on this topic is **small** when focused on distance learning programmes for transnational postgraduate students.

Our efforts to identify and improve upon lower academic performance of transnational students, might themselves be limited by historical Anglicised approaches in higher education. Again the literature on this topic is very limited and deserves much more attention.

Methods

Quantitative data:

Create an integrated **dataset of pre-& post-admission** data for past & current students on the DL programme in Public Health & Primary Care.

Identify key variables of value to the analysis & carry out exploratory analysis. Possible hypotheses / variables to be examined include the effect of *XYZ* on final Grade Performance:

- ☐ Age, sex
- ☐ Full time / part time
- ☐ Domicile country
- ☐ Country for current study
- ☐ Effect of different country groupings (e.g. low, middle, developed)
- ☐ Previous highest degree attainment.

Qualitative data:

Carry out **ten semi-structured interviews** with identified transnational students to obtain unique in-depth information relating to their learning experience.

Themes to be explored include:

- ☐ Relevance of curriculum content
- ☐ The student's environment/context
- ☐ Previous educational experience/practices Professional roles.

Interviews were recorded & carried out using telephone, Skype or Fuze & transcribed before thematic analysis.

Results

Quantitative data

As anticipated

- o identifying
- o obtaining, and
- o linking different datasets into a working file is challenging

Problems include:

- o Sourcing different datasets across the University was challenging despite the wealth of collected student data
- o A lack of standardised approaches to variable formats
- o Key variables embedded within text strings
A number of key datasets have now been obtained and work is on-going to develop these into workable files ready for analysis.

Recommendation 1.

Extensive work is required across the UoM to develop mechanisms for linking datasets to inform and support student learning, alongside current Administrative functions.

Qualitative interviews

Initial analysis finds students had:

- o a high quality course with excellent support
- o relevant choice of course units/topics
- o tendency for UK-centric for learning materials – this was of benefit to some aspects of learning, but not others
- o some tutors lacked appreciation of the poor infrastructure in some students' countries
- o some students lacked courage to interact with each other and with tutors, both formally & informally
- o less flexibility & harder than anticipated
- o **most students said the programme was of use to them.**

Recommendation 2.

Use the results as a basis for focus groups with course tutors, admin and e-learning staff to identify & plan implementation of key administrative, technical, academic and pedagogical changes/interventions and evaluate their impact.