Online distance learning: policy, evidence and debate

Presented by Kim Catcheside

Kim Catcheside
Online Distance Learning is once again in political favour, though the fear is that it will be seen as a panacea for the funding, capacity and recruitment issues facing the sector, but new research reveals some of the hidden issues in delivering effective learning online.

Montage student voices

Amy – I like online, makes things more solid in your mind.

Matrishvan – it helps us to be independent learners

Azam- can be out of sight out of mind.

Gilly Salmon
The UK higher education has a fantastic reputation and we should be taking that out in the world and new technology enables us to do that.

Richard Hall
The risk is that we prioritise the technology. The very real risk here is that we become essentialist. We take an essentialist position that says we get the technology right and it will all fall into place

Gilly Salmon
Despite all the worries it’s a good time to export learning rather than import students who then sit in lecture theatres

David White
If students are going to be paying higher fees, then what’s their expectation for what they’re going to receive for that. There’s potential that they have views that stuff that’s on line doesn’t have the same perceived value as stuff that’s face to face.

Kim Catcheside
It’s fraught with issues, but are they terminal?
Welcome to JISC ON AIR. I'm Kim Catcheside and in this programme I'll be looking at current trends, innovation and the sustainability of effective Online Distance Learning.
A key report has just been published by TALL – the technology assisted lifelong learning team at Oxford University. Funded by JISC as part of the HEFCE Online Learning Task Force, this is an initial study into current online learning in the UK. I'm with David White, co-manager of TALL

*Kim Catcheside*
David, tell us what your report has found and what you’re going to be recommending.

*David White*
What we found was that the majority of online distance courses that are offered at higher education level out of the UK are at post-graduate and that they are at professional subjects, if you like. So they have a vocational focus although they are academic in nature as well, things like MAs, MScs in Business and in the medical areas as well, would be typical of what you’d find online. Some of the other things we found were that it’s very difficult to find the courses. You’d go to an institutional website but you had to dig quite hard to find the courses if you wanted to take them. A couple of the other things were that most institutions discovered they couldn’t have too many students per tutor on line because people would start to get distance from the course – they needed the contact.
Contact was very important, whether that was in terms of peer to peer learning or them having contact with the tutor, so once they went past cohorts of around thirty then the system started to break down. So it wasn’t possible to kind of industrialise on distance learning in quite the way that perhaps some people might want to do. So, for every 30 students you're going to need another academic member of staff. Another significant finding, the final point, was that largely institutions weren’t worried about the technology. They knew that if they got their pedagogical model right, and if they got their business model right, then they were pretty confident they could find the technology they need and put it into place. So the focus was more on ‘are there students who want to take these courses?’ and exactly how should we construct these courses and run them, rather than necessarily, what pieces of fancy technology do we need to deliver this? Somebody said that the technology was vital but not central.

*Kim Catcheside*
And where things should go next?

*David White*
Well that’s a very good question. For me, personally, I think that the output of the UK in terms of online distance learning was very skewed towards particular professional courses. That people who perhaps were in highly paid employment could go on. Obviously the online format is useful for people who are in full time work because it’s flexible, and also there’s a clear return on investment for intuitions because they know these people have the finances to pay, or the employers have the finances to pay. So for me, I felt that UK Higher Education wasn’t properly represented online. Where are the philosophy courses? Where are the Arts courses? Where are the Humanities out there?
**Kim Catcheside**
So, the breadth of the curriculum is not what it could be. But then are some courses simply not suited to Online Distance Learning?
We asked Gilly Salmon, Professor of e-learning and learning technologies at the University of Leicester.

**Gilly Salmon**
At Leicester we’ve been working across all the departments and disciplines and doing a great deal of work between them. We don’t consider that there’s one discipline that’s more or less suitable. However the way we need to look at this is to make sure we’re addressing the problems of learning and then matching the technology to it. So, we should not start with technology and say what can it do for us, but what are our problems and how can technology solve them.

**Kim Catcheside**
Gilly’s colleague Alejandro Armellini, Learning Designer in the Beyond Distance Research Alliance, based in the Media Zoo at the University of Leicester, is also clear that any course is suitable for Online Distance Learning.
He’s showing me some of the design work that he and colleagues in the science and humanities faculties have developed for various courses as part of The DUCKLING project, funded by JISC, which aims to develop better delivery, presentation and assessment processes for students studying online.

**Alejandro Armellini**
The Duckling project, which is the one that all these projects are part of, has enabled them to not just try these things out and apply them, but also to research them and come to evidence based conclusions about what benefits these technologies deliver.
We’re looking at 1 of the 300 podcasts.
I’m showing you some of the podcasts to do with the research – closely linked to the disseration to it’s a high stakes module – printed material useful, but students felt not enough.

**Kim Catcheside**
Straight away I understand why this kind of podcast will be valuable to Distance learners on any Course...Amy Beecham is currently taking an electronic engineering degree at the University ..

**Amy Beecham**
From the experience I feel like I know my tutor better from the online material – audio etc. Often not reading a lecture, but telling you interesting stuff.

**Kim Catcheside**
But are there limits to what can be effectively delivered through online learning?
Alejandro Armellini
It’s all about design. If the design is right there are no limits. There are obvious benefits for distance learning across all disciplines.
You could argue there are fewer benefits for on campus courses. There is the argument that everyone is a distance learner too.
Online engineering example is a good one of a dramatic change. At Leicester, it reduced dropouts, failing, made the tutor happy.

Kim Catcheside
Are there are examples of where bad design has set back online learning?

Alejandro Armellini
Yes – loads of examples…in particular when you take the approach that, “I put my content on line therefore my students do e-learning.”.
That has given online learning the worst possible press – based on certain assumptions – “I write well, my material are good, I use them in a clever way, I put my materials on line and my students have to use it” it doesn’t work like that. You’ve got to think, design again – you’ve got to think story board, the blueprint of your course again, you’ve got to think what are the pathways for that material to be accessed and turned into intake in an effective way? What form what shape do those activities take? E-tivities. Powerful instrument between the learners and the material. Those are often ignored in design because people tend to have a very content centric approach to things – dump, dump, dump and therefore they will learn – sorry it doesn’t work.

Kim Catcheside
What proportion of online learning is characterised by that dumping that you described?
Alejandro Armellini
90%, if not more.

Kim Catcheside
The potential for Online Distance Learning is huge, so what is hindering the development of a wider curriculum being available on line? Will history or philosophy students be persuaded to pay high prices for online courses if they can’t expect to earn high salaries as a result? Will institutions be prepared to invest in the first place?
Joining David White and me is Richard Hall, e-Learning coordinator at De Montfort University

Richard Hall
If you’re thinking Business as usual is viable, then I would see that that’s the way institutions would want to go. That actually we would perhaps look at marketing, or we’d look at the economic realities of those courses. Certainly Lord Brown and the comprehensive spending
review ideologically position everything around the economy and they position everything around effectively 3% growth and so it’s natural that those kind of professional courses be represented.

Kim Catcheside
I wonder if I could ask both of you to reflect how the use of online could be a panacea to funding cuts.

David White
That would assume that online is a cheap or good value way to go. Coming back to that idea that students need an awful lot of contact so they don’t drop out, and this was something that a for-profit organisation had said to us as well as the traditional institutions. In those terms I don’t necessarily see online as being an economic solution in that sense. There’s probably another challenge there as well which is if students are going to be paying higher fees then what’s their expectation for what they are going to receive for that? And I think there’s potential that they have views that stuff that’s on line doesn’t have the same perceived value as stuff that’s face to face. For example, if you go to a physical room and attend a lecture then you’ve been to an event, you’ve got that sense of belonging to that cohort of students and that’s very effective and obviously Higher Education Institutions have done that for years and years. Whereas if you pay a significant amount of money and then you find that you’ve got an hour a week on campus and the rest of it is on line, even if that’s the correct way to go educationally, even if that’s pedagogically sound and convenient, I think that students might have a problem with it.

Richard Hall
One of the real risks, I think, of technology is that it separates people out. We’re virtualised, we’re hidden, our identities are kind of migrated on line and actually we lose some of the stuff that Dave’s just been talking about; about the event, about the importance of actually coming together.

Kim Catcheside
To find out how JISC can support your institution with the role technology can play in Online Distant Learning, please visit www.jisc.ac.uk/elearningprogramme
One vivid example of an online resource that is aiming to make more of the event, to enable students to come together within a learning environment is the SWIFT project. Here we have a laboratory set in Second Life where new medical students are introduced to lab etiquette – health and safety as well as important theoretical principles that need to be understood from the outset. Suzanne Lavelle, teaching fellow in the Department of Genetics at the University of Leicester, believes it beats some of the learning that traditionally happened in a real world lab.

Suzanne Lavelle
Students get a little booklet with all the information which we know they’re not going to read really. And they turn up in labs having “read” the health and safety and should know, but it’s so dull and Second life will make it much more interesting and we can do stuff in second life that they can never really do in the real labs. For example we have a Bunsen burner with some ethanol and we can move the Bunsen next to the ethanol and it explodes and there’s a big bang and flames come out! They could never do this in real labs, but what they can realise is not to put the alcohol near the flames as they will start a fire. And they can look at stuff in more detail and in their own time and they get lots of bits of information about equipment and the health and safety things to do with this which is not what they get in an ordinary lab

**Kim Catcheside**
Swift is also part of the Beyond Distance Research Alliance in collaboration with the Genetics Education Networking for Innovation and Excellence. Currently there are no students present in Suzanne’s astonishing online lab so she’s moving her avatar around freely, but at appointed times, tutorials will actually take place in this virtual environment.

**Suzanne Lavelle**
With the students I have a headset and can talk. They won’t be able to speak back, but they can type and I’ll see it as a running commentary, on the side here. And that works really well because we don’t all talk over each other. There’s a structure that’s imposed on the sessions so that it doesn’t get too hectic. But it means we can keep a record of their questions and answer them vocally rather than it being a one to one. These sessions are in real time. All students will be in a computer lab in a single building. I will be physically present in the same virtual space, but not in the same physical room

**Kim Catcheside**
As yet, there is no data to show that this is an effective way of training students in the lab, but it’s certainly good fun. This interaction is certainly cheaper than buying a lab, it’s by no means a cheap resource. Developing and designing the SWIFT lab, renting its island site in SecondLife, programming information…all takes real time and real money. What’s becoming clear is that engaging, accessible and enriching online courses take careful preparation and students still need attention – this is not an economic solution. David White.

**David White**
Those who are looking towards online distance learning as perhaps being some form of economic solution would be keen to create courses that are very narrowly focussed on the course, on learning a chunk of knowledge, getting through a particular assessment and putting that notch on your cv.

**Richard Hall**
The risk is that we prioritise the technology. The very real risk here is that we become essentialist. We take an essentialist position that says we get the technology right and it will all fall into place and that doesn’t think about the people who are involved. We talk about students a lot and we are right to. I think quite often we forget about staff and we forget about those staff who are acting as mentors,

Kim Catcheside
Given that and given that there is likely to be a move towards more use of technology, how do you manage that change with those human beings who are supposed to be delivering it?

David White
I think we have to challenge that notion Richard alluded to that technology is all about efficiency and that technology is just a convenient way of exporting education. That it can be more than that.
I think there are plenty of opportunities for us to use technology to engage people with that more social, more conversational kind of approach

Kim Catcheside
For Learning Designer Alejandro Armellini the potential for Universities to be more conversational, to “open up” is central to the increasing value of Online Distance Learning. His advice to academics and course directors is...

Alejandro Armellini
Think Open – think of the enormous amount of knowledge and resources already available. Think of the amount of time you can save, and the amount of enrichment you can add to your course. You don’t need to think about re writing your notes from a course 2 years ago. There are fantastic repositories that can be used. This is one source that the government has injected a bit of cash into and this is benefitted our work here at Leicester.

Kim Catcheside
Matrishvan Ravle is an engineering student who really values some of the open access material available.

Student voice talking about an MIT open resource.

Lynn Crawford
I’m Lynn Crawford professor of Project management at Bond University in Australia. Here to learn about online technologies.

Kim Catcheside
Visiting Alejandro and his colleagues at the Media zoo at the University of Leicester, Lynn is here to find ways to open up the university where she teaches, to enhance the course …

*Lynn Crawford*

Students travelling in can’t make it so important we use all the technology we have – and when they can’t turn up, they can still continue to participate. We have black board – it’s a case of using it more creatively.

*Kim Catcheside*

How do you get over the feeling amongst many that distance learning is a second class option, particularly when you come to these non-traditional subjects?

*David White*

I think it is a second class option. Let me explain why! The reason being, that it’s not second class in the education that you can receive through the technology. Not at all. I think in many ways because of the way that the pedagogy has to be focussed around low student to tutor ratio, I suspect that a lot of people that are taking up good online courses in programmes that are successful – in a sense that they have expanding student numbers – they probably have more contact time with their tutors than a normal, face to face, classic kind of undergraduate degree student who might have five hours a week teaching time on campus and some of that might be in a lecture with 300 other students. They hand an essay in, it disappears somewhere. It comes back with a mark, they don’t get a chance to talk to members of academic staff. There’s virtually no contact time.

But, in terms of it being second class there is a real danger that if you consider what Higher Education is about, one of the things is it’s an opportunity to have a broad student experience. To be able to go to the bar, to be able to join clubs and societies, to potentially meet some of the people you might end up working with for the rest of your life and to start forming those networks, if you like. And I think that what we could have is a situation where by those that take online distance learning, they do well in terms of accreditation and hypothetically on their CVs but they miss the opportunities that you get from coming to the face to face institution. That said, there’s no reason why all of those opportunities can’t be available online if the technology is used effectively and with a kind of social approach to it, rather than just the core of the course.

*Richard Hall*

One of the problems is we tend to polarise online and face to face and we tend to see them in black and white terms, so online is this thing that we can consume. Face to face is this thing that is homogenised and actually the shades of grey in there are kind of phenomenal. So, we do tend to see online as being some form of second class approach rather than seeing that actually that it’s just a continuum of student experiences, and as Dave’s stated, those experiences are anything from the social right the way through to the cognitive. And that happens in a variety of ways so at this institution we have students who, whilst notionally
being distance learning, actually come in for specific delivery days so they can actually get some face to face discussion, they can build those social networks, they begin to engage

*Kim Catcheside*

We’ve heard compelling evidence that online distance learning can be engaging, enriching and effective. Students are the drivers and if they sense they’re being palmed off with ill considered, unstructured, poorly moderated online courses, they simply won’t take part.

If you’re interested in developing or improving your online distance learning courses, please send an email to us at – onair@jisc.ac.uk

In the next edition of JISC on air, we’ll be looking at how to meet student needs to improve retention.