Addressing postgraduate healthcare students' experience of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Introduction

Last year the University responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by pausing all on-campus teaching and moving to online delivery so as to ensure student and staff safety, and to act in accordance with the government restrictions. We were interested in what obstacles or barriers there might be for students engaging in this mode of learning. We used feedback from learners undertaking modules in semester 1 2020/21 to review and improve the experience of online learning (OL).

Methodology

A digital survey consisting of 3 questions was used as the primary method of data collection due to the remote nature of the course delivery. The survey was conducted after students had completed the module and participation was anonymous (n=9). The survey was readministered to the next cohort (n=19) after changes based on the results of the first survey had been made (see box 1). Analysis of the qualitative results was made using Garrison's (1999) Community of Inquiry Model as a framework.
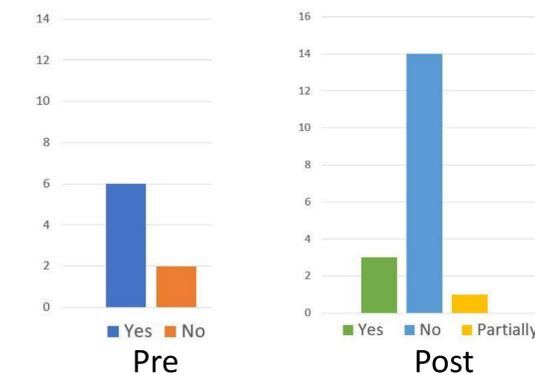
Box 1. Changes made after first survey

- Week 0 live introduction session
- Increased synchronous delivery
- Synchronous interactive expert discussions
- Regular drop in Q&A sessions
- Increased 1-2-1 tutorials

Results pre and post intervention

Q1: Do you feel that your personal productivity has been affected by the switch to online learning?

Pre | Post
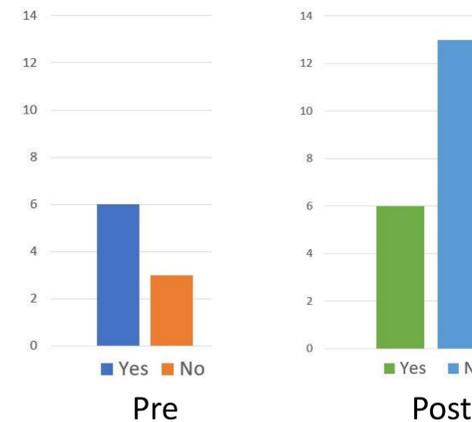
Q2: Do you feel that the online mode of delivery during this pandemic has prevented you from being able to actively participate in the module?

Pre | Post

Q3: What do you feel you lack the most when studying online from home?

The responses to this question were very similar in both the pre and post intervention survey and so are analysed together.

Element	Definition	Example response	f=
Social Presence	Communication that enhances closeness	Conversation with peers and sharing experiences	11
Teacher Presence	Designing & managing learning sequences, providing subject matter expertise, & facilitating active learning	Easy access to lectures to ask for help	5
Cognitive Presence	the extent to which the participants are able to construct meaning through sustained communication.	Being able to bounce ideas of peers in the classroom	8

Discussion

The responses to question 3 were similar in both surveys, but the perceived experience of OL by the second cohort was more positive than the first. This cannot be fully credited to the interventions (see limitations), but they are believed to have contributed. Biggs (2011) explains that if students can meet face to face before online sessions they can feel that they are genuinely conversing with their peers. The introductory session aimed to promote social presence.

William and Joyce (2014) identify that 'story-telling' and the use of 'tales' are highly valued by nursing students who assess the credibility of their educators by their ability to relate theory to practice. The synchronous 'expert' discussion sessions aimed to promote cognitive presence.

Knowles et al (2015) recognise that inexperienced learners or those with limited self directed learning (SDL) skills may feel intimidated by a course structured heavily around SDL activities and require more support. Frey and Altman (2013) found that participants valued online interaction with both their teachers and peers, both forms of interaction being vital components of a successful adult learning experience. The synchronous sessions, Q&A and 1-2-1 sessions aimed to promote teacher and cognitive presence and contributed to social presence.

Limitations

Small sample sizes, University SDL resources produced during study period, 2nd cohort may have experienced OL in previous semester.

Literature cited: Biggs JB, Tang C and Society for Research into Higher Education (2011) *Teaching for quality learning at university: what the student does.* 4th edn. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press. Frey, B. A. and Alman, S. W. (2003) "Applying Adult Learning Theory to the Online Classroom," *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 17(1), pp. 4–12. Garrison, R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). *Critical inquiry in a text based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education.* Unpublished manuscript. Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F. and Swanson, R. A. (2015) *The adult learner: the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development.* Eighth edn. London: Routledge. Williams, J. and Joyce, M (2014) 'Nursing, health and social care', in Fry, H., Ketteridge, S., Marshall, S. (2014) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice.* Abingdon: Routledge, pp.395).