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Preparing Higher Education Tutors for Delivering Online Courses

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Abstract—This paper identifies that academic staff need to be suitably prepared to deliver wholly online courses, and outlines the steps taken towards achieving this, at one Higher Education institution in the UK. E-learning, whether partially (blended) or wholly online, is not simply about the technology, but also requires an understanding of the pedagogical considerations, and the skills that are needed, to effectively facilitate them. Through the use of a formal questionnaire, and collation of informal comments made on a social network, evaluation is made of a staff development course designed specifically to promote effective facilitation of high quality online courses. The results determined that the course is fit for purpose and achieves its aims. Future cohorts are already over-subscribed as a result of positive commentary by participants. Further developments will be made, based upon constructive feedback by participants. Whilst possibly not unique, this course demonstrates action being taken in an educational institution to recognise that effective online delivery requires specific knowledge and skills that are different from those used in the traditional classroom.

Keywords – *staff development; distance learning; facilitating online delivery; higher education.*

I. BACKGROUND

The way that education is delivered is constantly evolving, albeit at varying pace. Learners are now immersed in a digital world, with information and multimedia entertainment available at their fingertips. With technology becoming integrated into daily living, its involvement in the way we learn is unavoidable [1].

Yet despite its inevitability, ‘e-learning’ for want of a better phrase, cannot happen without due consideration [2]; it comes with both technical and pedagogical considerations which many academics are not conversant with [3], and poor implementation by well-intentioned individuals can be blamed for much of the bad press associated with digital innovation. But this is no different to traditional delivery methods, where a badly presented subject is not well received by the learners. Unfortunately it is all too easy to blame the technology, and learners’ are then reluctant to undertake what they fear will be similar experiences in the future.

This can be addressed by ensuring that course development and delivery is carried out by academics with the relevant skills and knowledge, by querying their ‘digital literacy’; “*those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society*” [4]. The abilities of staff involved in education supported by

technology, is a specific consideration for Higher Education in the UK, as a precept in the 2010 QAA Codes of Practice, where it states that “*Staff who provide support to learners on FDL [Flexible and Distributed Learning] programmes have appropriate skills, and receive appropriate training and development*” [5]. This is clarified further in the superseding Quality Code document [6] when considering the appointment, support, and continuing development of staff:

“Individual staff members are able to access appropriate and timely support to develop inclusive forms of learning, teaching and assessment which are supported by technology.” (p.14)

“Higher education providers also recognise the importance of digital literacy for staff and make available suitable development opportunities.” (p.15)

To address this, the University of Huddersfield has taken a strategic approach to digital literacies, with the Enabling Strand ‘Professional Development of Colleagues’ within its Teaching and Learning Strategy 2013-2018 [7], stating ‘*TD3: Achievement of relevant level of digital literacy skills*’. This is to be determined through evaluation against pre-determined Standards during the annual appraisal process.

These criteria take the form of a Grid of Digital Literacies for Staff (DLS), which identify specific skills and knowledge that are set within four ascending levels of ability. The lower levels focus primarily on the use of the institution’s VLE (Blackboard™) to promote “*100% use of Virtual Learning Environment*”, which is a Foundation indicator within the afore-mentioned Teaching and Learning Strategy. There is then progression within the Grid, with advancement implied through increased, varied use of technology, both within and external to the VLE, with appropriate evidence of personal/professional development activities to underpin their introduction.

Specific attention is paid within the DLS Grid to learning modules delivered ‘wholly online’. Additional benchmark statements are identified for both delivery and course design, and demonstration of achievement can be through completion of specific modules on the University’s MSc Multimedia and eLearning course (or equivalent), or a claim for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). A third alternative, but only for wholly online delivery, is the Facilitating Online staff development course discussed in this paper.

This paper will begin in Section 2 by outlining the structure of the course, identifying the framework it is adapted from, and the regular weekly pattern adopted within it. Following a description of the methodology in Section 3, the data collected from a formal questionnaire and an informal social network is discussed in Section 4. Limitations of the study are then identified in Section 5, followed by Section 6, the conclusions, which also outline future work to be carried out in this area.

II. COURSE OUTLINE

The Facilitating Online staff development course runs over a five-week period introducing participants to the approaches of online facilitation and the various tools and technologies, which can support this. The emphasis was on the practical skills rather than theoretical understanding, with a particular focus on how to achieve social interaction and engagement from the participants, rather than examining theoretical models. Participants were asked to dedicate five hours per week to the course and participate in a number of practical and collaborative tasks that emphasise the skills required of an online facilitator and the support that they will need to provide to their students in the future. The course was designed for participants from a variety of academic disciplines and with differing technical capabilities to share experiences and evaluate different approaches. One of the key objectives of the course was to give the participants the perspective of being an online student, as often the online tutors do not have that personal experience to draw on [8].

The course was adapted from a Facilitating Online course devised by Carr et al [9] from the Centre for Educational Technology, University of Cape Town, created with a Creative Commons Share Alike licence for adaptation and reuse. It is loosely based around the Salmon 5-step model [10], consisting of a series of five stages that participant's progress through when using communication tools in an online course. The content and tasks described in the original course were substantially modified to bring them up to date, to make the course more appropriate to our context. Each week represented a different stage:

- **Week one: Accessing** - was about getting comfortable with the learning environment and aims and objectives of the course. It was also an introduction to some of the course tools we would be using and to each other, so involved setting up a profile and introducing themselves to each other to start making connections and building social presence and trust.

- **Week two: Participating** – was about exploring the different types of participant who may engage in an online space and to start thinking about how a facilitator would manage these participants and build community. We also asked the participants to reflect on what type of participant they were in this course.

- **Week three: Facilitating** – was about developing online facilitating techniques and comparing face-to-face facilitation strategies to those that can be used online.

- **Week four: Applying** – was about applying the skills learned so far on the course to produce a design for an online activity that can be facilitated, sharing that with the

group and providing feedback to others. The idea of building trust between tutors and participant and between participants was explored.

- **Week five: Evaluating** – was about evaluating both the participant's skills in facilitating online and the course as a whole and reflecting on their personal development plans for the future. The participants also evaluated another participant's activity design in a peer review process.

The course was mainly set within the institutional VLE Blackboard™ and the tools included discussion forums, group and individual blogs, group wikis, and quizzes. A social network was also set up using Yammer™ for discussion, sharing of information/resources, and for taking part in some of the tasks, which also promoted social learning amongst the participants. A weekly synchronous webinar using Adobe Connect™ was also used, mainly as a discussion space where interaction and engagement by participants was encouraged.

The structure of the course was identical each week to model good practice to the participants and establish a pattern of expected participation, so each week consisted of the following areas of content:

- An introductory video from one of the course facilitators to introduce the week's topics and activities and to demonstrate to participants the importance of the human element and online students feeling connected to the tutor, which Shin [11] labelled as 'transactional presence'.

- Pre-reading for the week's topics, which included a mixture of journal articles, blog posts, videos, websites etc., to take up to two hours to engage with. Supplementary reading and resources were also provided each week, that were optional for anyone who wanted further recommended reading.

- A short task taking no more than 30 minutes, often a more light-hearted task to ease the participants into the week's activities.

- A longer task doing something more substantial like contributing to a group wiki, which would take participants about an hour.

- The weekly webinar, held each Thursday but at different times each week to accommodate different working/teaching schedules. This also took an hour. This was recorded for anyone who was unable to attend the webinar in person, so that they could catch up later.

- Reflection in their personal blogs on the learning that week based on the reading, tasks and webinar, this was expected to take around 30 minutes for each person.

We provided motivation, to both engage with and complete the course, in three specific ways.

Firstly we issued praises on Yammer™ for various achievements. All participants who completed all the activities for each week would get a praise, and in addition the praises could be earned for a few extra activities like being the first to post on a discussion forum or for posting

up an interesting resource for the others. We also gave out praise for anyone attending the webinar in person to encourage synchronous participation. Each week we had a leader board showing who had the most praised for that particular week and overall. This received mixed reaction (see later) but it did allow staff to evaluate the ideas of earning badges and leader boards as possible motivators for their own students.

Secondly, we mapped the learning outcomes of this course onto a Digital Literacy Framework (mentioned in the introduction) and identified that successful completion of the course, followed by the actual implementation and evaluation of their 'project', served as sufficient evidence of achieving the wholly online delivery section of the Framework.

Finally, the tutors encouraged engagement in the course by having a significant presence at the beginning of the course, frequently posting to the Yammer™ network, commenting on discussion board posts, wikis and blog posts; this was reduced as the course progressed. This active facilitation also served as a demonstration of good practice to the participants, showing the importance of tutor presence in the early stages of a course, to promote discourse and encourage communication, until such time as the participants have gotten to the point of 'self sufficiency' in terms of having a communicating community. There is, however, a fine line between the facilitator having a strong presence in order to promote communication, and creating a sense of dependency that stifles communication not involving them.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research has been carried out to determine the effectiveness of the Facilitating Online staff development course in meeting its aims. The first cohort ran in March 2014 with a cohort size of 11. These participants were all members of academic staff from across the University, (5 out of the 7 Academic Schools were represented). There were 8 females and 3 males in the cohort. Formal evaluation data was collected via an anonymous survey from within the Blackboard™ VLE as part of the course evaluation and review process. In addition, the informal unsolicited qualitative comments made by the participants within the social network Yammer™, were collated and analysed. All data was anonymised, categorised and summarised and no individual can be identified from any qualitative comments included. The participants all gave written permission for their data to be included in the study. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the School's Research Ethics Panel (SREP), to conduct and report on the study.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

A. Course Administration and Induction

All (100%) of the participants (n=11) found the administration and induction process satisfactory. This included both institutional course instructions from the staff development department, and a welcome email from the course team.

Qualitative comments provided in the questionnaire supported these findings, indicating the process was '*clear and straightforward*'. In addition, constructive suggestions were made for there to be a pre-reading list made available ahead of the course, and also a pre-course checklist of what will be needed.

One respondent commented that their own practice would be influenced by their experiences of the course, as they could now see a problem with the way they had previously been inducting online students.

When asked how they would best describe the organisation and management of the course, using a 4-part Likert scale ranging from 'poor' to 'excellent', all participants except one chose the latter; with the exception suggesting it 'requires slight improvement'. This same pattern of responses occurred when the participants were asked how they would describe the facilitation of the course.

B. Course Navigation / Structure

In general, positive feedback was received on the navigation of the course. The navigation restrictions inherent within BlackBoard™, particularly difficulties encountered when trying to return to an area of content, were criticised by respondents, but the fact that this is built into the VLE and could not be altered, was also identified by them.

The participants welcomed the structured plan for each week that was repeated throughout the course, because the consistency '*prevented confusion*', became '*comfortable*', and '*helped speed up the process of understanding*'.

The delayed release of content using the Mark Review tool, which involves self-identification of having completed each stage, was well received, as it emphasised the need to complete the content in a specific sequence. The use of Learning Modules, another BlackBoard™ resource, also emphasised this sequential approach to the content, and surprisingly, this tool was something that none of the participants were previously aware of, despite having experience of using the VLE as tutors.

The resources provided at the start of each week received positive feedback, with the introductory 'talking head' video for each session, featuring the course tutors, helping to 'humanise' the activities.

One area that the participants felt may require reviewing, is the individual project development and evaluation activities, as these felt a little rushed. This is something the course team will consider, but any change has to recognise that the participants need the personal development of the earlier weeks before moving on to design their own online activity.

C. Interaction

Contact from the course team via email and the social network, were identified in the questionnaire as the methods that most encouraged interaction by participants (identified by 73% of respondents respectively), see Figure 1. The immediate intimation would be that this is due to their 'invasive' nature with notifications appearing on desktop and mobile devices. However, Yammer posts from peers were not considered as much of an encouragement as posts from the course team (55% compared to 73%), and emails

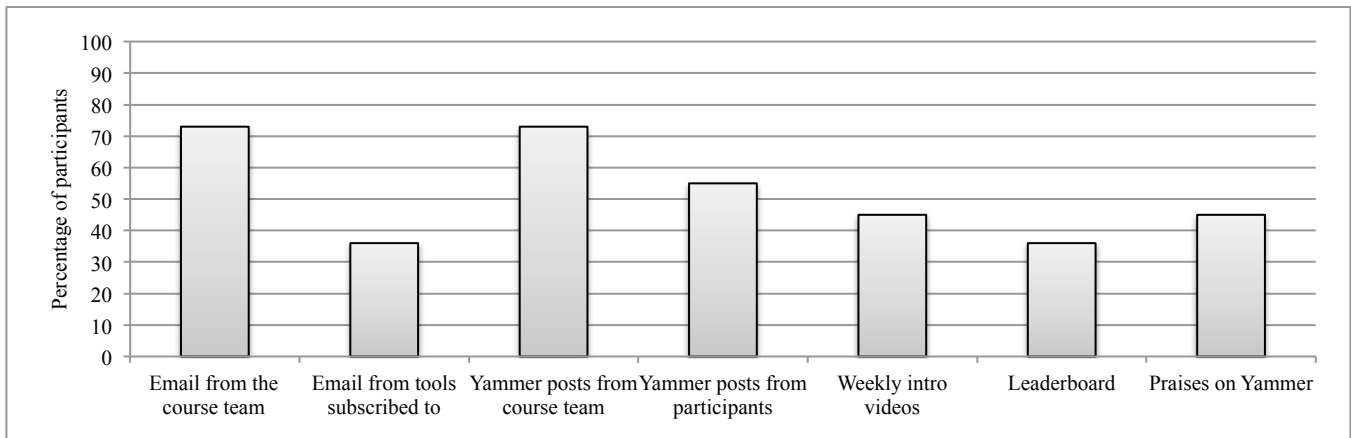


Figure 1. Distribution of the communication tools that encouraged interaction with the course

from the tools on the VLE, instigated through a subscription process, that indicated activity had taken place, were even less valued (36%). This could indicate that the participants were filtering the notifications and allocating different levels of importance to them, or possibly never even switched them on; this may be because they did not want them or just never worked out how.

Asynchronous content on the VLE, such as the videos and the leader board, were not as likely to encourage interaction (45% and 36% respectively), with the praise system on Yammer similarly appealing to some, but not others (45%)

D. Course Resources

The participants were provided with an array of resources to assist them with the course, and some were better received than others; see Figure 2.

A screencast on how to navigate the BlackBoard™ space was generally found to be useful (64%), even though the participants all had experience in using the VLE themselves as tutors. Yet the screencasts on how to use some of the

tools used on the course, (blogs, wikis, discussion boards, Yammer™ and Adobe Connect™), were, in the main, found less useful (18-28%), despite many of the participants using these tools for the first time.

Indeed, it appears that resources that facilitated the participants’ navigation around the course area within the VLE, were considered overall to be the most useful, whether these were presented as a screencast, a Videoscribe™ video, or through the use of shortcut links.

Apart from the screencast, resources associated with the webinar were also found to be useful by the majority of the participants, in terms of both pre-session setup checking, and for post-session reviewing of the videos.

When asked to comment further, one participant suggested the introduction of a light-hearted ‘fooling around with tools’ session at the start, may help with familiarisation and to test equipment functionality. It was also thought that the help area might have benefited from being highlighted more, as some participants ignored it, assuming it was generic BlackBoard™ help.

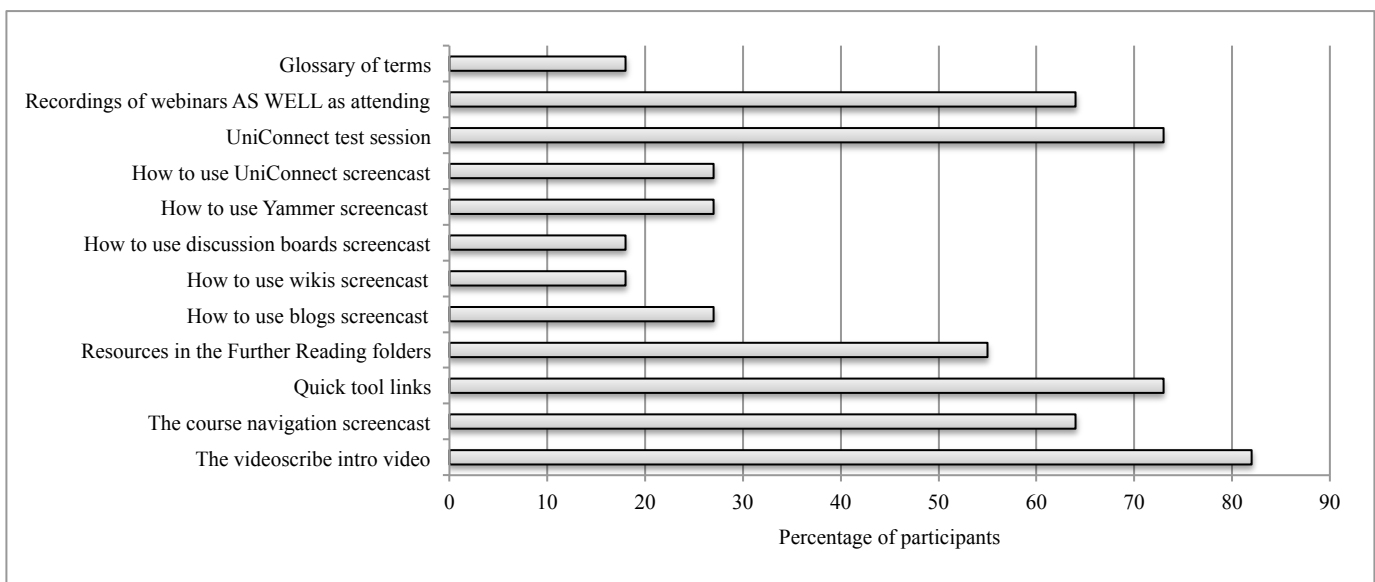


Figure 2. Distribution of the resources and tools used within the course delivery, that were found useful to the participants

The range of resources, from academic papers to more informal 'bite-size' multimedia content, was well appreciated, however some participants acknowledged on the social network that they could have made better use of the pre-reading, generally due to time limitations they themselves had placed on this activity, that were less than the indicated two hours. Others, however, commented that they found this resource to be a *'welcome distraction'*, providing them with a reason to be reading, rather than dealing with emails and other daily tasks. It's worth noting that the participants continued to use the term 'reading', despite the pre-reading resources comprising a range of media, including audio and video.

E. Time Management

The participants generally acknowledged in the questionnaire that the timescales employed within the course were correct for the expected workload, or thereabouts, with 55% identifying it as *'exactly what was needed'*, and a further 36% finding it was *'almost enough'*, but they would have preferred more. Only one participant felt that the time allocated to tasks was *'nowhere near enough'*, and this would appear to be specific to their own learning needs.

When asked to comment further on the time allocated for tasks, several participants acknowledged that they felt pressured to complete within the timescales, but at the same time accepted that if the course was longer they may not have subscribed to it, and increasing the course length may still not resolve the perceived problem, due to procrastination. Many participants stated that they had started the course under-estimating the time that would be needed, despite it being made very clear to them in the induction and pre-course materials.

One participant suggested making the course 'week' from Friday to Thursday, rather than starting on Monday, as this would allow the weekend to be used more by those who chose to do so.

Many of the participants used the social network to regularly apologise for their tardiness (despite it usually not being apparent until flagged in this way), which in turn caused discussion about having greater appreciation of the pressures faced by their own students.

F. Online Communication

One of the early tasks on the course was for participants to introduce themselves on the Yammer™ network, and to include their reasons for taking the course. This identified that the cohort consisted of tutors simply wanting to develop their understanding in advance of any developments, as well as those who were already involved in the delivery of online courses.

When asked in the questionnaire about the efficiency of the course tools and activities in encouraging their participation, the majority of respondents (73%) rated them as *'excellent'*. The remainder suggested they *'required slight improvement'*, but without further qualitative commentary it is difficult to determine exactly what they intended by this response, as almost every activity the participants carry out requires some form of interaction/reaction. It may be that it

is the peer-to-peer element that they felt needed further development?

On the social network it was interesting to note that several of the participants, with experience in using online communication tools, felt able to admit that they had previously given little thought to the concept that there might be different types of online participant; indeed several suggested they had believed it to simply be a case of 'active' or 'inactive'. As a result, their own practice would now change, to reflect this new understanding.

Other less-experienced participants generally defined themselves as 'lurkers', and as this trend became apparent it promoted discussion by the participants themselves on this classification, and its relationship to confidence/competency levels. These discussions raised awareness of this subject and will inevitably be beneficial in the participants' own practice.

The participants provided very positive reviews about the weekly webinars, which provided regular synchronous contact with the participants. Comments in the questionnaire such as *'proved invaluable'*, *'very helpful'*, *'extremely useful'*, *'an excellent way to finish one week and re-enthuse us to start the next'*, *'it made the group bond together'* and *'I felt part of a community'*, all indicate that this was an important part of the course structure. After each week's live webinar, the participants also used the social network to provide unsolicited positive commentary on the experience, remarking on the relaxed yet informative nature of them. Also, those participants who had previously facilitated their own webinars made a point of highlighting particular practices from the sessions, that they now intended to use themselves.

Indeed, for some, the positivity around the webinars led to negative comments in the questionnaire, where attendance had not always been possible for them: *'there was only one which I could not attend and I was really disappointed and actually felt quite out of the loop'*, and *'I found the recorded versions good... but frustrating because it was passive'*.

One participant was unable to attend any of the webinars due to work commitments on Thursdays. As a result they suggested, on the social network, that the course team should identify in advance when the majority of participants will be available to attend the webinars; but they also acknowledged that this will inevitably still result in some people missing out.

Participants also commented on how the weekly webinars helped keep them focused on the course, with both the live sessions and the recorded videos of the webinars, assisting with this.

G. Benefits from the Course

When asked what they found particularly useful about the course, some of the participants acknowledged that they couldn't single out one particular thing, and that all of it was of use. Others identified the webinars and group activities as being useful, with individual participants finding benefit from the pre-reading, the telephone tutorial, from peer feedback, tutor support, and the fact that the participation was compulsory (even though the latter was not something the course team could enforce). It is worth noting that within

the responses provided by the participants, there is no obvious preference identified for either synchronous or asynchronous activities.

The high standard of the course and the support provided by the course team was praised by participants, both in the questionnaire and on Yammer™, which is to be expected as the course tutors are trying to be exemplars of the genre – teaching effective online facilitating through online facilitation. Informal comments on the social network indicated that areas of good practice built into the course had been acknowledged by the participants, with the need for scaffolding, signposting, and regular interaction all being particularly highlighted, as well as realisation that up to now, some of the expectations that had been placed on their own students had been too high, in terms of tasks and timescales. One participant's comment particularly indicates this point: *'the course has shown me how a DL [distance learning] course should be set up'*.

In addition, all participants identified that they felt they had achieved the course objectives.

H. Course Enhancement

When asked if they would leave anything out of the course, the participants' responses were very clear, that nothing should be removed.

When asked if they would include anything else in the course, the participants provided some very constructive suggestions. A 'warm up week' was one idea, but this would of course then extend the course to 6 weeks. Providing examples of what other universities are doing in this field was another suggestion, which may be something that could be added to the pre-reading for one of the weeks.

Despite the screencasts being rated low when asked if they had been useful, some participants asked for further screencasts to be provided, featuring some of the analytical tools available in BlackBoard™, which had been demonstrated during the webinars. The intimation was, that these would particularly be useful as post-course resources, rather than during it.

Other requests focused on specific elements of the course that the participants considered examples of good practice, that they wished to utilise, such as tutor control within the wikis, the Learning Module and Task Review resources in BlackBoard™, and the icebreaker games and music that were used at the beginning of the webinars.

One participant suggested that rather than adding to this course, that maybe an advanced course was needed to further develop participants' skills and knowledge.

V. LIMITATIONS

This is a small-scale study and the data was drawn from a specific course with a limited number of participants. The study may have been influenced by factors specific to the student groups, which are not immediately evident from the findings. Also, experiences external to the course content and delivery may have contributed to the outcomes and opinions.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This paper has described the development and evaluation of a staff development course for higher education tutors, to promote effective delivery of online courses. Whilst recognising that such courses may inevitably already exist in other institutions, this course was specifically aimed at promoting good practice within this University, to raise awareness of the ways in which online delivery differs from the traditional face-to-face classroom, to reinforce that it is not simply a case of transferring practices from the latter to the former.

The course is based upon an established framework, which was then brought up-to-date and made relevant to the current digital environment. Scaffolding is provided through a repetitive weekly structure, that utilises the same tools that the participants have available to use in their own courses. This is supported with an obvious online 'tutor' presence in all of the communication tools used, and regular timetabled live interactions.

The evaluation indicates that the course is successful in achieving its aim, with participants, who are experienced academic tutors, acknowledging their raised awareness and new knowledge, of what is required in presenting their courses wholly online. As a result, for many participants their existing practice is to be reviewed, with further consideration given to the tutor's role, and the student experience.

This paper includes the evaluations of one cohort, but at the time of writing another cohort is due to conclude, with a further two already planned. There has been very little official promotion or marketing of the course; instead, word of mouth and positive commentary by participants has resulted in significant numbers signing up for the course.

The constructive feedback provided by the participants in their evaluations will inform future work that is to be carried out, in developing the course further.

One example of this, is that the next course will run from Friday to Thursday, with this change to the 'course week' providing the opportunity for participants to make greater use of the weekend, if they choose to, which may reduce some of the time-related pressures previously identified.

The significant importance that participants placed upon attendance at the webinars, and the negativity it caused when this was not possible, has also been noted. Whilst it is accepted that the day of the week on which these are held should not change, in the future the induction process will include calendar invites being sent for all of the webinars; the timing of the events will then be amended/confirmed to promote the maximum attendance for each specific cohort.

Future cohorts will also continue to evaluate the course, which will provide further data upon which to gauge how successful any changes are, and to determine whether an 'advanced' course really is required, as was suggested in this evaluation.

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