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Citation for published version:
Connelly, L & Murray, D 2018, 'Student transitions: academic support for online distance students' University of Edinburgh Learning and Teaching Conference, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, 20/06/18 - 20/06/18.

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Student transitions: academic support for online distance students

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Background
The University of Edinburgh has placed great importance on the development of distance education, with ODL students reporting a higher level of satisfaction than their on-campus counterparts (PTES survey). It can be a common perception that online students have campus envy and/or they have less support available to them.

It is important that the University understands how to support the unique cohort of online distance learners (ODL), many of whom are mature, juggling work/life commitments, and studying part-time. 53% of our research survey respondents work full-time and 24% work part-time.

Research Project
A joint research project with the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies and the Institute for Academic Development aims to explore the current provision of academic support available at different transitional stages of the student journey. In doing so, Programmes, Schools and potentially other HEIs, will be better equipped to:

• provide academic support to ODL students which can enhance their student experience;
• potentially reduce attrition rates;
• provide the appropriate academic support at the stages when it is needed.

Methodology
The initial (pilot) stage of the research (Oct 2017- Mar 2018) included the distribution of a survey (n=17 responses) and interviews (n=3) with students from the online MSc Equine Science programme. This stage has provided a baseline which will be used to prepare and disseminate future surveys, and undertake interviews with other online students, across the University.

Results
• Survey findings indicate that levels of self-efficacy and awareness of academic support varies in relation to a range of topics (see image 1).
• Key findings:
  • Students are most confident in relation to: Time management (59%); developing English (50%); and sourcing information (47%)
  • Students are quite confident in relation to: Understanding feedback (65%); group work (65%); critical reading (53%)
  • Students lack confidence in relation to: Dissertation (40%); technologies (35%); understanding data (35%)

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“I did wonder if online distance learning would offer the same level of academic support that on campus learning offers its students.”
Survey response to Q8: Before starting the programme did you have any concerns or requirements in relation to academic support?

“I feel pretty confident you know, obviously that varies from hour to hour with these things… until I think of the daunting task of the actual data analysis”
Interview participant 2 (2017)

Where next?
Taking on board what the students have stated in this research pilot will enable us to:

• Survey and interview students in other programmes, to ensure there is consensus
• Develop and signpost resources
• Develop an academic skills roadmap, outlining resources and when they are likely to be needed at each stage of the studies.