

# The hidden role of the administrator in small scale distance education

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# Overview

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# Background

- Distance Education at *our* university
- Quality ..... Expectations & experiences of stakeholders

*“the higher education process not only shapes student expectations, the education process is itself influenced by the character of these expectations”*

*“There is presently no single theoretical framework that adequately deals with these relationships.”*

(James, 2002, p.71)

# The project

- exploration of expectations and perceptions
- teaching staff, administrators, students
- concerning the roles, processes and activities involved in distance education
- a single institution

# Aim, design & methods

- interpretivist approach (Erickson, 1986)
- Goal: To investigate and build understandings of the range of experiences of distance education from the perspectives of small groups of students, teachers and administrators
- Data sources
  - interviews with 20 staff (10 lecturers, 10 administrators) and 12 students (tried to match to courses/papers)
  - 10 postgraduate distance courses; health science, science, business and humanities
- Analysis
  - thematic analysis, constant comparative technique (Silverman, 2001)

# Findings 1 - Relationship-building

*My role covers from the minute a student first makes an inquiry to us about what papers they may want to undertake...right through to when they graduate. ...So it is a real relationship and you do get to know, you do get to know them and what kind of makes them tick. (Administrator)*

*Well I know what [pay] they get and it's over and above what she's paid for, which is our administrator who provides very personal advice and support as things happen during the course (Lecturer)*

# Findings 1 - Relationship-building cont

*I was a little cautious and I felt very much reassured by umm, by [course administrator] who encouraged me to just give it a go which, which was the right thing to do and umm, yeah, so I've, I've done one semester and I, I did enjoy it hugely and umm, I do want to continue (Student)*

*you start thinking about, you know what's ahead and ... I'm nearly over halfway through the compulsory papers so I'm, yeah, definitely starting to look at that. But anyway, I know if I ask [the course administrator], that they'll give me a steer. (Student)*

## Findings 2 – Mediating

*I'm the main administrative staff in terms of the, the pivotal point between the lecturer and the students and making sure everything runs (Administrator)*

*Sometimes I might go down to a [lecturer's] office and say, I've just been talking to so-and-so and they're like, oh yes! ... So, yeah, I'm always of that mind set of I'd rather over-inform people ... People can just say, 'ohh yeah, I did know. Thanks very much.' Or, 'no, I didn't. You know, tell me more.'*  
(Administrator)



## Findings 2 – Mediating cont

*it's not particularly clear cut, and it usually ends up coming to [administrator's name] who's our administrator for the whole programme (Lecturer)*

*the administrator's going to come to me anyway ... and say, look can this person have an extension or not or what do we do? How do we manage this? (Lecturer)*

## Findings 3 – Bridging (gaps)

*you spend a bit of time doing your best for the student because I kind of feel that, I'm kind of the link between the university and the distance students (Administrator)*

*we're trying to develop lifelong learners ...and these people are quite engaged ... they want to learn and they're kind of got the thirst for knowledge ... but they are working full-time and they are busy and sometimes processes are cumbersome and they get, can get quite frustrated. So it's a case of just really supporting them through (Administrator)*

# Conclusions

Administrators help students to navigate the often tricky waters of institutional structures and decipher and respond to lecturers' demands, through

- **Relationship-building:** Distance learning administrators build long term relationships with students
- **Mediating** - Distance Learning administrators mediate between students and lecturers
- **Bridging** – Distance Learning administrators smooth the way at an institutional level through connection and bridging gaps

These hidden roles are important, perhaps even critical, to ensuring the smooth running of DE courses.

# Significance

- Small-scale distance learning is not addressed in the literature.
- Administration usually couched in broad, systemic ways, not personal and individual.
- In our small-scale DE context, the administrators are pivotal to the success of DE at the institution
  - but the impact of their role is generally hidden or overlooked;
  - not usually seen as enabling student learning in any direct way.
- High quality DE cannot be the same as those of larger scale operations
  - Not possible to develop intricate systems and build economies of scale that are usually the focus of efforts of larger scale operations.
- Outcomes of this project:
  - contributing to facilitating curriculum transformation for our (unique) higher education context
  - informing the literature about different approaches to DE that are not emphasizing up-scaling

# References

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