

The Preparation of Students for Distance Learning: Two Very Different Approaches from a Wider European Perspective

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Introduction

This paper sets out the reasons why it is important to prepare students who are about to embark on a Programme of distance learning; the nature of that preparation, and focuses on and evaluates two very different projects undertaken by the North Region of the Open University, UK, to provide preparation to new students who, because of geographical remoteness, are unable to attend the type of short face-to-face session traditionally offered by the OU in well populated urban areas.

Why prepare?

Students entering on a programme of study by distance learning do so for reasons which are frequently different from those who chose to study by a more traditional route. They are more likely to be mature students who wish either to enhance or change their career or to gain a university qualification which was denied to them earlier. In any event it is very likely that they have not undertaken formal study for many years. In the case of non-British students, it is additionally likely that they are unused to studying at this intensity in English.

The Open University, UK, has long recognised the importance of preparation for study (although sadly in these times of financial constraints it is an area which cannot escape pressure on resources). The retention of new students is crucial in terms of the individuals themselves: there is little point, for example, in attracting students whose confidence in their ability is very low if they withdraw after the first few weeks, confirming their own sense of failure. Politically too it is important to retain students when the UK Higher Education market is becoming increasingly competitive with regard to mature, part-time students and when university funding depends on the numbers of students not just who register for a course but who go on to achieve an award. The evidence suggests¹ that those new 'at risk' students who have undertaken some kind of preparation before the official start of their course are more likely to make progress with their studies.

What is 'preparation'?

But what does 'preparation' mean? In Open University terms, it means providing new students with the opportunity to engage with the discourse of their chosen course- to develop good habits of study; to discover what 'distance learning' is and how to take advantage of the resources available; to practise the skills that will be required of them-, to learn something about the Open University system and its complexities; to feel that

Preparatory materials are built in to the majority of the OU's Level 1 courses with which new students are able to engage from November onwards.² These have tutor support and usually involve an optional assignment. Students beginning their studies on higher level courses, which is now increasingly an option, do not benefit from this opportunity, although it cannot be assumed that they do not need to undertake some kind of preparation. Many regional centres devise optional preparatory programmes which address some, if not all, of the areas referred to above.

Two projects

The North Region of the Open University has had responsibility for the management of students in Continental Western Europe since 1994. Students there are inevitably much more scattered since the density of provision is

¹More work is needed in evaluating the effectiveness of preparatory provision in relation to student retention. they belong to the institution (an interesting concept in its own right); to provide some activity between the often long gap between registration and the start of the course, and, equally importantly, excite and motivate the student about what lies ahead.

much lower, and it is less feasible in most cases to offer the same kind of preparatory provision as in, say, Newcastle upon Tyne, where there are sufficient numbers of new students beginning their studies in the same geographical area. Although the Open University is a well-known concept in the UK, it is less so on the continent, especially for non-British students, which means it is even more important for students to know what they are about to take on. This paper will now focus on two very different approaches which have been offered to students in Germany and which take account of the scattered student population.

a) A residential weekend

In 1995 a collaborative agreement was signed between the Open University and the University of Hamburg. The latter is also part of an association which has developed close links with five other universities providing distance education in North-West Germany. The Universities of Lüneburg and Hamburg have run a residential preparatory weekend for their new students at the Europäische Akademie at Bad Bevensen for many years, starting on the Friday evening and finishing at Sunday lunchtime. Colleagues of the three universities agreed to work together to offer the same opportunity for students about to begin their studies with the Open University. Two such weekends have since taken place: in January 1996 and 1997.

It was decided at the outset that the weekend programme would be based on the well established Lüneburg/Hamburg model and adapted as necessary to fulfil the criteria for preparation as stated above. The model involved providing, as far as practicable, a whole year's study experience in one weekend. Students were to experience the writing, of and receiving feedback on an assignment (correspondence tuition being the core of the OU's teaching method); the coping with large quantities of paperwork which is often unexpectedly daunting; attending a tutorial- the opportunity to talk to a counsellor, and to browse in a Resources Area which included IT facilities. In addition there was to be an opportunity to attend one or more Learning Skills Development workshops, which included a session on English language skills for those who were not studying in their first language. Colleagues from Lüneburg and Hamburg³ were closely involved with the OU in both planning and presenting the weekend.

The first evening comprised a series of ice-breaking group exercises, including sharing expectations of the weekend ahead - a lack of confidence is common in mature students, and it is reassuring for them to learn that others have similar apprehensions identifying criteria for success in their future studies as well as considering Potential obstacles. The Saturday involved the participants in choosing what activities they took part in and when - very much as they would in real life. Real life was mirrored in the morning when a 'postman' called to their rooms delivering a package. The students had to decide which materials in this package were important and which needed acting on. For example, a personal letter from their tutor for the weekend was intended to prepare them for a similar letter from their own course tutor which would be following shortly after their return home. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the building of a relationship between the student and tutor over large distances, and the initial introductory letter is considered vital in establishing this relationship.

The students chose which sessions to attend during the Saturday and worked out how they would find the time to write their assignment, the details of which were also included in the package. The fact that several had to request an extension to the 'deadline' of 5 p.m. again reflected reality and provided an opportunity for those students to consider how they were going to manage their time once their course had started and the importance of pacing their studies. A slot on the Sunday morning was arranged to enable students to consider the time-management issue more thoroughly. (This was one of the most highly valued sessions of the weekend.) More students withdraw from their studies because they -et behind - despite the built-in flexibilities and it was felt right to emphasise this as part of the preparation process. Feedback on the marked assignment was also provided in a session on the Sunday morning where the students were encouraged to practise self-reflection on their efforts, another skill that is particularly important to develop in distance learning.

²OU courses, for the most part, begin in February each year.

³ The weekend course would not have taken place were it not for the work and collegiality of Dr Marion Bruhn-Suhr and Mr Michael Ribold respectively of the Universities of Hamburg and Lüneburg.

The planning of the weekend not only involved the programme itself, but also an estimate of how far people would be prepared to travel. An initial bid for Eurofunding had not been successful, which meant that the students had to bear the whole cost. The cost to the student was DM 230⁴ to which travelling expenses had to be added. On the other hand, it was thought that some might find it worthwhile to travel relatively long distances for a course lasting a weekend. Invitations were therefore issued to all new students in Germany (including those registered through the British Forces, many of whom were based relatively locally) and those in Denmark. Of the nineteen who attended in 1996⁵, the majority came from Nordrhein-Westphalen, although one travelled from Baden-Württemberg. Another had applied from as far away as Bayern but was prevented from attending because of illness. This year, however, the majority of the twenty came from Hamburg and Berlin. No students applied either year from Denmark. One did enquire but considered it too complicated a journey from Copenhagen. In the feedback, it was noticeable that distance was far less of a problem in 1997 than it had been the previous year, when three students indicated that it had been 'a considerable problem'.

Despite the time and cost of travel for many of those who attended in both years, every student considered the weekend extremely worthwhile, noting that their confidence had increased as a result of participating. It is significant that the main reason for 90% of those attending was to meet with other students, something that they would not be doing on a regular basis once their specific courses had begun⁶. Other reasons were to find out more about distance learning, how the Open University works, and to improve study skills. A sizeable proportion understandably wanted to find out more about their particular course. This was far easier to achieve in 1996 when all students attending were registered for one of four Level 1 courses. For students entering the University in 1997, the regulations allowed entry at any level which meant that a wider range of courses was represented, and it was not possible for tutors of each to be present. This also reflected reality, because the numbers of students in Germany - as elsewhere on the continent - do not as yet justify the appointment of a 'local' tutor, even on Level 1 courses, and the vast majority are allocated to a tutor either in the UK or elsewhere on the continent. However, it was ensured that course Materials for each course were available for consultation during the weekend.

The concern that we would be raising students' expectations about the nature of the support available to them by this intensive face-to-face experience seems not to have been justified. By attending appropriate sessions during the weekend, students came to understand what alternative methods of support would be available to them once their course proper had begun and yet make the most of the face-to-face contact offered during the weekend. In fact, the links established during both weekends have persisted during the academic year, across courses, and this has proved beneficial. It should be noted, too, that for those students whose course involved attending a weeklong residential school in the summer, this weekend would be good preparation. The feedback indicated that the expectations of every student were met.

b) Virtual preparatory course

Despite the success of the Bad Bevensen project, it was obvious that it was not open to all new students in Germany, whether because of time or cost or accessibility. A small team in the Newcastle Regional Centre adapted the programme into a version that could be presented in any of the Region's study centres in a single day, and this 'portable' face-to-face version was offered in the autumn of 1996 in various parts of the Region, both in the North of England and elsewhere on the continent. It was during the planning stage of this programme that the decision was taken to offer the preparatory day via a special website on the Internet.

⁴DM280 for single room occupancy.

⁵Twenty-six students applied in the first year, but seven had to drop out because of a flu epidemic.

⁶Students in Continent Western Europe are given the opportunity to release their names and addresses to other students on the same course and, in addition, to other OU students who are attached to the same study-centre. The Students' Association, OUSA, is also increasingly involved in setting up social events locally.

Such a project could not have been contemplated were it not for the expertise offered by colleagues in the recently established regional New Technology Research and Implementation Unit.⁷ The Virtual Prepdag, as it was called, was a pilot project for those students entering the University in 1997⁸

Clearly the Internet provided an opportunity for those students in Germany who could not or do did not wish to attend the residential weekend - indeed anyone at all who had access to the Internet - to benefit from some preparatory activity. How well did the face-to-face version translate into this medium taking into account the definition of preparation given at the beginning of this paper and what students attending the weekend identified as being important to them? It should be stressed that the time needed in exploiting the Potential of the website was considerably underestimated; indeed the whole exercise was a learning experience for us, and part of that learning was discovering what that Potential was. Despite the importance of providing new students with the experience of writing and receiving feedback on a short assignment, it was not possible at this stage either to devise appropriate topics to cover potentially the whole range of the OU's course Provision or to find tutors to mark them. The valuable experience of having to meet deadlines was therefore not offered to those taking part. Neither was the opportunity to sift through the variety of paperwork. Nonetheless the Internet students were able to choose what 'sessions' they went to.

The face-to-face tutorials were intended to provide a flavour of each student's particular faculty. Those leading these sessions originally had been asked to provide notes which were translated into the new medium, as were various Learning Skills Development workshops, including, one on 'How the OU Works'. The OU's teaching Materials have always been student-centred and involve frequent interactive exercises. It was soon realised by those involved in delivering the IT version that the Potential for interaction via the Internet was far greater and this is an area which is being developed for future offerings. A greater degree of interaction was built into the opening icebreaker sessions, where students were invited to 'register' for the preparatory day, enter their expectations and suggest their own criteria for and obstacles to success in their studies. It was just as easy for them to see other students' ideas and apprehensions as it was at the real event. Nonetheless, several students commented on the time and consequent Telephone costs in participating in these ice-breaker exercises, and it would seem that there is also a place for providing the type of notes on sessions referred to above which can be more economically be downloaded for later use.

There is no doubt that those students who registered for the Virtual Prepdag were able to benefit from those aspects which had been identified as important by their fellows attending the residential weekend: to find out about more about distance learning, how the OU works and improve their study skills. However, the feature which was considered by the vast majority on the weekend course to be particularly valuable - the meeting, with other students - could not happen. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the computer conferencing, facilities open to all students in Continental Western Europe, which are undoubtedly effective in bringing students together. It is unlikely, however, that the Virtual Prepdag students would strike up the same friendships and support networks which originated during the residential weekend, or even during the day workshops held in the UK.

This whole enterprise was a new development for the New Technology Research and implementation Unit, and in realising the face-to-face preparatory day in this new medium, it was tempting sometimes to show off our expertise for its own sake, maybe to impress our peers, forgetting that a substantial proportion of prospective users had access to the Prepdag only on a read-only basis. Graphics and audio facilities, dynamic and conducive to student learning as they might be, could not be essential features of the project at this stage. Similarly, we were interested to track those students who accessed the website for evaluation and research purposes. Some of those who responded to this invitation commented on the time (and cost) of doing so and felt that it was a barrier to them embarking on the workshop proper. On the other hand, it was important to set up something that was worthy of the OU's reputation in distance learning materials. This was very much a regional offering, which was not advertised on the OU's official page on the Internet. As a result of this, some students found it difficult to find.

⁷ I am particularly indebted to Bill Ward. not just for Ws expertise, but for his imagination in transferring the academic content on the preparatory day into an exciting, accessible format.

⁸ The Internet address for the -virtual preparatory day is <http://ntriur09.open.ac.uk/prepdag5/>

There is currently much debate as to the nature of distance learning. Even the terminology is being challenged. No matter how good the quality of the teaching materials, however, it is the support offered that so often makes the difference between a student's success and failure. The two case studies discussed in this paper offer two very different approaches to the provision of that support. The Virtual Prepday experience may be viewed as a success- it certainly offered support in an important area to students who would otherwise not be able to attend a workshop in person (potentially those who are geographically remote from a study centre, those whose professional or domestic circumstances prevent them from attending a face-to-face session, or those with a disability). It should not be assumed, however, that distance learning obviates the need for face-to-face support, from both tutors and fellow students. The fact that a group of students in Germany were prepared to spend substantial time and money to attend a residential weekend and clearly found that the meeting with other students the single most important component of that course indicates that we do away with face-to-face support at our peril. To attend such event helped those groups in both years to feel that they belonged to the institution. There are relatively few other opportunities that allow them to do so. New students need a boost at the start of their studies. The residential weekend certainly provided that boost, and its positive effects lasted well into the course itself. In my view, it is not a coincidence that the success rate of the 1996 group was much higher than average.