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Student Support – Andragogy in a Virtual World

The Development of an Essential Information Website for Postgraduate Students

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Abstract:

The increasingly ubiquitous nature of e-learning has meant that adult learners need support and guidance both in the use of resources; programme and institution obligations; but also in terms of socialisation particularly regarding student obligations and expectations. These issues have been addressed through the development of a website available to all prospective students through to those that register and continue on a programme of study. This website has been available to current students for one academic year. The website has had almost two thousand visitors in the academic year since its inception and has had extensive attention from other schools in the University and from external clients, which is indicative of its potential to fulfil an emergent but essential function in adult learning for postgraduate distance learning students. The development and utility of the website is accounted for in this paper.

1. Introduction

The increasingly ubiquitous nature of e-learning has afforded incredible opportunity in terms of fulfilling andragogical principles in terms of its potential to focus on the relevance of what adults learn to their needs (Knowles et al 1998). For the purposes of this paper, E-Learning is regarded as learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technologies.

There has been an observed and exponential change in student preference for e-learning across a short time frame requiring faculty to adapt the curriculum accordingly. There is a clear and increasing preference for Students of the School of Postgraduate Medicine, University of Hertfordshire to enrol on modules that are delivered as distance (preferably through e-learning) due to the increasing difficulty in obtaining time away from the workplace and this has resulted in adult learners needing support and guidance both in the use of resources; programme and institutional rules, regulations and in student and staff obligations. The later is related to student socialisation particularly regarding the relationship of students to the school and to school identity. It has long been known that University Schools of study do have a significant impact on the socialisation of students (for example

Simpson 1979) therefore when the school is voiceless and faceless the impact on students is unknown, and at best can be assumed to be neutral. The experience of staff in the School of Postgraduate Medicine at the University of Hertfordshire is one of increasing distance from students who are 'time poor' and wish to minimise direct contact time with faculty. As a result of this much essential information both of both an intra and extracurricular nature has been unavailable to them resulting in increased telephone queries regarding a range of issues, and problems due to lack of a sense of belonging to the School.

These issues have been addressed through the development of a website available to all enquiring and prospective students through to those that register and continue on a programme of study. This website has been available to current students for one academic year. The website has had almost two thousand visitors in the academic year since its inception and has had extensive attention from other schools in the University and from a range of external clients who are experiencing similar problems, which is indicative of its potential to fulfil an emergent but essential function in adult learning for postgraduate distance learning students. The development and utility of the website is accounted for in this paper.

2. Rationale for the development

The implementation of Modernising Medical Careers (MMC 2009) has reduced the time available to doctors for class based attendance for their continuing professional development (CPD), a trend which is also mirrored in other professional groups. This has not only increased the demand for blended learning activities, particularly distance learning, but has also meant that health care practitioners are becoming more discerning about how their limited contact time is spent. Other students never attend the university, and therefore have no opportunity for induction where traditionally students receive and can seek out information regarding the University, the School and resources available to them. Therefore through limited face to face contact an important source of student support is no longer available.

In addition the internet has facilitated a revolution in the availability of all sorts of information. In terms of education there is a growing literature in terms of the influence of internet based educational resources on pedagogy which has extended to medical education nationally and internationally (see for example de Leng et al 2006; Thakore and McMahon 2006; Pereira et al 2007), with many authors evidencing superior results to traditional pedagogical methods. However although many institutions have adopted e-learning for some or all of their programmes, there is a dearth of literature dealing with student support for this mode of learning and it is acknowledged that pedagogical concerns often are of secondary importance in e-learning initiatives (JISC 2005). Student support is crucial to enhancing the learning experience for students which is acknowledged by quality assurance bodies such as the QAA (2004), and enshrined in their documentation. Faculty in the School of

Postgraduate Medicine has identified student support as a fundamental need for students without which they are unable to engage with other distance learning activities.

This paper concerns the creation and further development of a website (named EIFS an acronym for Essential Information for Students) which was created in order to support distance and blended learning postgraduate students of the School of Postgraduate Medicine, University of Hertfordshire, England. Web address: <http://www.bhpms.ac.uk/eifs/>. (Fig1)

The website houses the following information:

- Identity of the school
- Contact details background and responsibilities of school staff
- Enrolment information
- Joining instructions for programmes and modules within the school
- Information on travel and parking
- Accessing the virtual learning environment (StudyNet and Voyager)
- A range of information on commonly raised issues for example student rights and responsibilities; submission of coursework; attendance and absence etc.

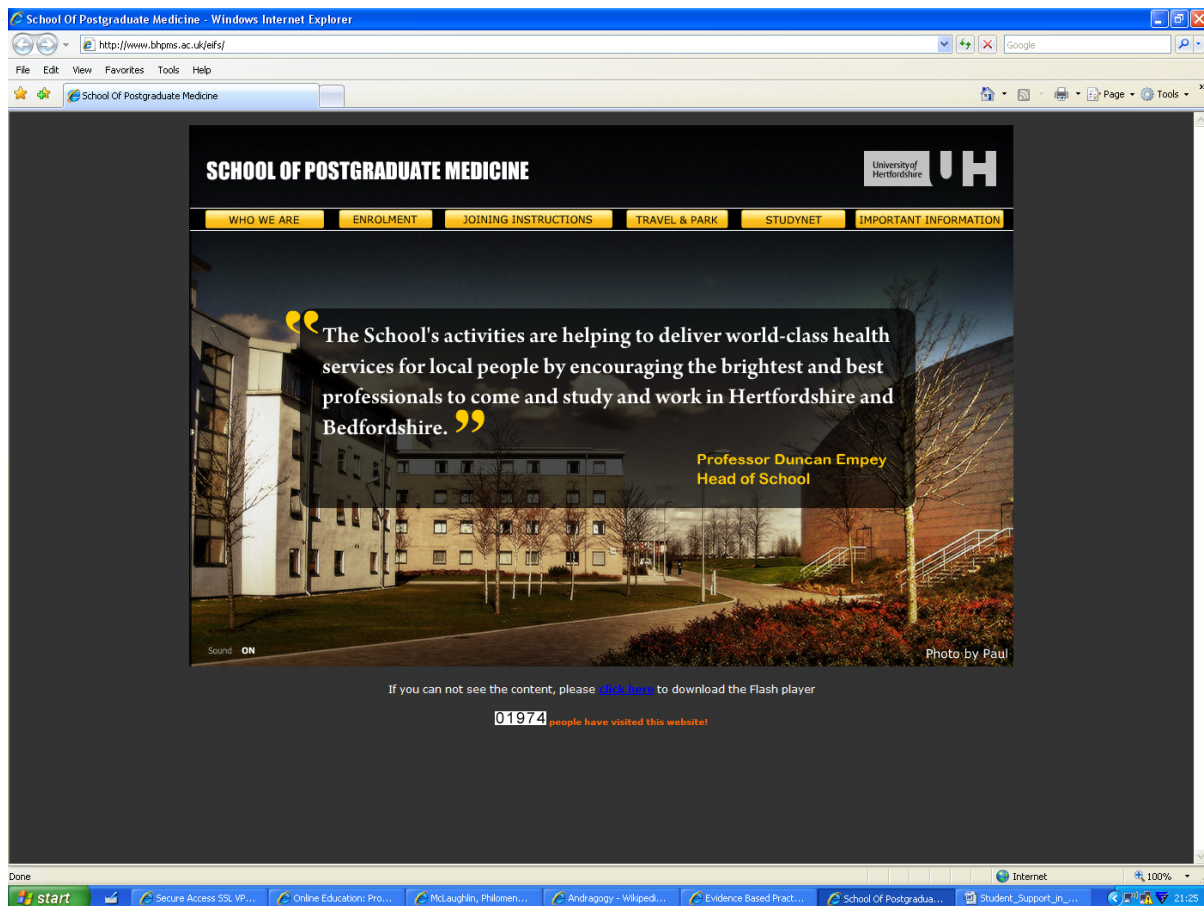


Fig 1. Title page of the EIFS website.

3. Innovation

The EIFS website was originally created in order to provide information on enrolment; induction and orientation for students of the School of Postgraduate Medicine. But due to student demand, and in line with the growing e-learning delivery of the school, has been developed to include a range of information on the use of our virtual learning environment – StudyNet; information on assessment, regulations and other issues which are the subject of regular student queries.

Previously students have had to attend induction days (or weeks) and have only had access to programme handbooks for programme information. However there was no one place where students could find all the information that they might need from enrolment through to completion of their programme of study.

This innovative website provides all of this information in an easily accessible place that is available to all students (and staff) who are either enrolled on a programme or a module provided by the School of Postgraduate Medicine.

In addition faculty are able to use the website as a point of reference for most student queries which has decreased the amount of academic time spent repeatedly addressing frequently raised issues. The site is easily updatable which ensures that it remains relevant throughout the academic year.

We are currently working on introducing an interactive component to the website. Students (and prospective students) will be able to post messages and video clips onto a discussion board which is part of the website and expect an answer within 24 hours. This discussion board will have the heading “What else? Your questions for us.” This will be presented at the ICODL conference in November.

4. Evidence of Impact

The website has been very well received, with students stating that they have found the information invaluable:

“I wish I had had all this information when I started the programme, I can’t believe what I didn’t know and how that limited what I was able to do!”

“ This has completely changed the way that I interact with the University....why don’t all the other Schools do this?”

“ I have saved myself so much time.....and you guys so much grief by being able to get really important information to me in one place....and without having to wade through loads of boring documents!”

Statements from qualitative evaluation 2009

Students are able to access the information on the website at any time and can use the information throughout their programme of study.

Since its launch in September 2008 there have been 1920 visitors to the website. There has been extensive interest in this resource nationally. In addition academic staff have noticed a vast reduction in calls and emails about procedural and academic issues covered by the site. This means that academic time is available for other more productive teaching and learning activities.

5. Conclusion

This initiative has been developed in response to some of the challenges created by a rapid change in delivery from mainly face to face contact with students to student request for distance and e-learning provision. In addition the philosophical stance of andragogy is one on which faculty is built, therefore it is essential to enable adult learners to make best use of limited contact time with faculty. Although there has been increased interest in delivering the subject matter suitable for distance and e-learning, little or no attention has been focussed on how to facilitate this. This paper has focussed on this issue and identified early and very positive student response to this. Future planned developments include interactive facilities so that students can pose questions and have them answered by faculty in a timely manner.

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