



Transitioning the Team: Supporting Distance Supervised Doctor of Business Administration Students Through Collaborative Online Workshops

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Abstract

Educational transitions are widely recognised as being key points that can influence a student's later success. Transitions are not limited to the beginning of a period of study; they can occur at any stage. The adjustments that come with transitioning can be unsettling and isolating. These feelings can be compounded by the nature of the studies and the distance from the place of study. This paper reflects on the importance of recognising that the transition from being a student within a cohort to being an independent thesis student can be quite isolating for many students, especially those who are studying at a distance. In an attempt to provide extra support and to minimise the effect of isolation, team supervision was trialled for two groups of distance supervised Doctor of Business Administration students based in China. The model incorporated peer groups and research communities for students with similar research topics. Overall, the pilot was successful in supporting the students' transition, but identified the need for flexibility to manage students who progress at different rates.

Keywords: doctoral supervision; group supervision; distance learning; academic transitions

Introduction

Learning is a social undertaking. As well as completing individual assessments, most students tend to undertake their higher education journeys in a social way. They are in classes, cohorts, groups, and teams. They live together and study together. They form a student body and congregate on campus. They may be members of both formal and informal learning communities.

However, this is not the norm for all students. For some who have work or family commitments, studying is more individual and is undertaken at a distance from their learning centre. For these students, the flexibility of distance learning allows them to undertake studies that would otherwise not be accessible to them. However, the opportunities for them to engage socially in their learning environment are more limited, and this can lead to a sense of isolation and not belonging. This feeling can be accentuated for students undertaking a doctoral thesis, which is frequently an isolating experience in itself. Students who are moving from the highly structured, communal learning environment of courses, to an independent thesis environment, can find the transition difficult because of the contrasts between the two learning environments. This paper introduces the first part of a project that integrates the ideas of learning communities, transitions, and the overarching importance of belonging, to examine how to develop an effective way to support distance-based doctoral students to transition successfully from a structured programme of courses to being independent research students.

Context

In 2016 the University of Otago Business School introduced a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree programme with two streams. The first stream is taught from the university's main campus in Dunedin, and the second stream is taught in China in conjunction with Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Overseas Education College. The programme is taught through a mix of online lectures and on-campus workshops. It is aimed at senior executives who have at least 10 years' work experience as middle or senior managers, and have completed their Master's degree. Due to the available resources and the need to develop the sense of a learning community, there is currently only one intake per year for each stream. This learning community approach is especially important as most of the students are studying at a distance, and working for a degree such as a DBA can be quite an isolating experience. Informal feedback from students in the first four intakes has indicated that this approach has helped them to feel well supported and part of a group studying together.

The degree consists of a year of coursework, followed by the production of a substantial thesis based on an applied research project. The coursework has been designed to provide both research-methods skills and scaffolding for the thesis. Students use the first year to refine their ideas and focus their research project. They also come together on campus six times during that year to attend workshops. This integral part of the degree fosters a sense of community and collaboration amongst the students. Overall, this approach to supporting the students works especially well during the coursework component of the degree. But when the students start their thesis component, we identify the potential for an widening gap between their expectations and those of their supervisors, and a more isolating experience for the students.

Postgraduate student isolation is frequently the norm (van der Meer et al., 2013) despite the identified benefits of peer support for these students (Buissink-Smith et al., 2013; Conrad, 2006). The idea of students working collaboratively to support each other's learning is not new, especially in the field of student engagement (Pike et al., 2010). However, as a structured and integrated activity, it is a relatively new notion among thesis students (van der Meer et al., 2013)—despite the recognition that scholars are part of a large research community themselves (Conrad, 2006). Lave and Wenger's concept of "communities of practice", which developed from their work on the social nature of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000), has been used as the foundation for peer-support networks (Masika & Jones, 2016; van der Meer et al., 2013) and to better understand adult learners' transitions to higher education (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; O'Donnell et al., 2009). Theoretically, this concept recognises that learning is not a wholly individual experience, but needs to be understood in the context of the wider lived experience and participation in the social world of the learner (Wenger, 2009). Learners make sense of learning material by engaging with other learners, tutors, and other members of their wider academic community. These engagements help to develop a shared understanding and language (van der Meer et al., 2013). As a result, the concept of communities of practice can provide a framework for understanding how to support students at various stages of their academic journeys.

Peer support for postgraduate students (especially distance students) undertaking study while working, can be a "significant and effective contributor" to postgraduate study experience (Devenish et al., 2009, p. 60). When the DBA programme was established, a strategic decision was made to use a learning community or cohort approach to help the students feel they were part of a group studying together. As a result, students begin the programme together, online teaching is synchronous, and opportunities for getting together as a cohort and with other doctoral students are fostered.

Literature review

Sense of belonging

Traditional face-to-face delivery of teaching material is the norm for many students; however, the increase in online delivery has highlighted challenges faced by distance students studying for a considerable length of time. These challenges are perhaps exacerbated by the need for students to upskill with the latest information technology and student learning platforms. Anxiety, frustration, and an increased sense of isolation are not uncommon (Peacock et al., 2020). What practical steps can a university, or even departments within a university, take to counteract these issues? Research supports the concept that peer support or belonging to a peer group will positively contribute to postgraduate student success (Buissink-Smith et al., 2013; Conrad, 2006; Fisher, 2006). This sense of belonging can be even more critical for specific cohorts of students, such as distance learning students and those learning in online environments (Garrison et al., 2010).

“Belonging” is an ambiguous notion in higher education research. Even in the context of learning there appears to be at least two approaches. The first relates to an individual’s feelings of being accepted and valued in their class, and the second relates to feelings of fitting in and being connected (Peacock et al., 2020). The most frequently cited definition is that proposed by Goodenow (1993), which describes the feelings of:

being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teaching and peers) in the academic classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25)

Goodenow stresses that this sense should encompass more than a “perceived liking or warmth”; it should include support and respect, not just of personal autonomy but also for the student as an individual (Goodenow, 1993).

Much of the research associated with student belonging focuses on the importance of student retention and success (Kuh, 2009). This concept that belonging helps with engagement and retention is underpinned by significant research in this area (Tinto, 2006). Indeed, a number of studies have shown that postgraduate students have benefitted in a number of ways from student-initiated, bottom-up groups (Conrad, 2006; Devenish et al., 2009; Fisher, 2006), and institutionally initiated, top-down groups (Buissink-Smith et al., 2013; van der Meer et al., 2013). However, this reinforces an institutional focus on student retention and completion, and overlooks the importance of belonging to a student’s own sense of worth and achievement of their own goals, as reflected in Goodenow’s definition above (Peacock et al., 2020). From the students’ perspective, collaborative peer support has been reported as “one of the most valuable enablers to our progress” (Devenish et al., 2009, p. 61). It can also overcome issues associated with distance, especially for postgraduate research students (Bireda, 2019). As such, the student should be at the centre of any project designed to enhance their sense of belonging.

Belonging underpins not only how the students perceive their academic journey but also how effectively they can transition between parts of that journey, moving between one learning community and another.

Educational transitions

There is a considerable body of work on student transitions, especially the transition from secondary to tertiary education (see for example Briggs et al., 2012; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Walker et al., 2004). There is generally strong institutional support for first-year undergraduate students in recognition of the challenges associated with this transition. However, the transition

to postgraduate study remains under-assessed and, for transitions within postgraduate study, the research is very limited (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Tobbell et al., 2010). As O'Donnell et al. posit, this may be due to an assumption that postgraduate study is a continuation (“more of the same”) for students who have already experienced higher education and completed their first degree (O'Donnell et al., 2009, p. 27). However, transitions are recognised as a time of uncertainty for students (Turner & Tobbell, 2018), and this applies equally to postgraduate and undergraduate students (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Students who are studying via distance learning for the first time will find the transition even more pronounced because their postgraduate studies may bear very little resemblance to their undergraduate experience.

The support provided to postgraduate students as they transition into their studies appears to be prefaced by assumptions about their prior learning (O'Donnell et al., 2009). It has also been suggested that universities do not always recognise the challenges and complexities faced by mature, postgraduate students (Tobbell et al., 2010). As a result, it's critical to ensure that such students are adequately supported, that gaps in their knowledge or understanding can be addressed appropriately, and that the approach taken recognises both their challenges and their potential for success.

The practice under scrutiny

One of the post-doctoral fellows involved in the Otago DBA programme proposed the concept of team or group supervision as a way to support DBA students more cooperatively. The process was informed by lab-style supervisions, which are common in science and health sciences, but uncommon in commerce disciplines. This type of peer support aligns well with the cultural expectations and norms of many of our distance-based Chinese DBA students (Cadman, 2000; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Zhou & Todman, 2008). Specific research domains in the Business School were identified from the students' research proposals, resulting in two supervision groups—one in marketing and one in management. Each group had nine Chinese students.

Guidelines for this model of supervision were developed, focusing on how to operationalise the model for a discipline that does not use laboratory experiments. Each group was initially supervised by one or two primary supervisors and two post-doctoral fellows who were actively researching in those areas. The post-docs had relatively close working relationships with the students at all stages of their research and were involved in teaching delivery during the first year of the degree. The primary supervisor had oversight of the supervision process, academic rigour, and quality of the final thesis for each student in the group. Following the departure of one of the post-docs, the other was appointed to a permanent lecturing position with another lecturer. Both now have secondary supervision responsibilities, one for each group.

The marketing supervision group was established at the beginning of November 2018 and the response from the students was very positive. Students and supervisors met as an online group fortnightly for the first 6 months, with two in-person meetings, to discuss aspects of the research process, research methods, and design that were common to all students. The sessions built on the research-methods courses taught in the first year; specifically the skills required for critical literature reviews, and to understand and use theories in applied research. In these meetings students could discuss areas of difficulty in a constructive, supportive, and empathetic atmosphere. They also presented their progress informally, on a monthly basis, in short presentations to the rest of the group. The students were given submission deadlines to work towards for sections of their theses—such as a review of the industry background and their literature review. After the first 6 months the fortnightly online meetings became monthly. Students were also encouraged to use the supervisors' online office hours to meet one-on-one to focus on their individual supervision needs. This ensured that individuals were not subsumed by the needs of the group, and group sessions could focus on common research challenges. All of

the students were familiar with WeChat, so they established a closed WeChat group to which the Chinese-speaking post-doctoral fellows had access. This ensured that students had a range of communication methods.

In addition to supervisory support, all students on the programme have access to a range of academic workshops, including academic writing, developing literature reviews, and writing research proposals. For the Chinese students, these workshops are delivered face-to-face or online by university staff. Students have also been introduced to the idea of “shut up and write” and “shut up and read” sessions. The students fully understand the need to take responsibility for their research progress and to manage their time well. The process for monitoring the students was designed to be supportive rather than punitive, because all of them are working full time. Every 6 months, the university has formal progress meetings for DBA students to track progress and to intervene or put additional support in place if they are not achieving their progress objectives. These meetings are based on the university’s PhD progress meeting structure, but are held more frequently to help ensure that any potential problems are identified early.

Discussion

Initially this method worked very well to help transition the students from the group learning associated with the coursework component of the degree, to more independent thesis research. Students in the marketing group found the supervision process very supportive. However, as personal circumstances impinged more on their progress, the group’s supervision model was noticeably less successful. Some students stopped attending the fortnightly meetings as often, and several missed submission deadlines. We found that autonomous students tended to meet deadlines, regardless of workshop attendance. These students made time to meet their supervisors outside the workshops, and initiated their own deadlines. It may be that students felt no peer pressure to make progress in the group as long as they do not see the others making significant progress. We noticed that the two students in the marketing group who were making the most progress had similar topics and worked together regularly. This suggests that, as well as the larger workshops, smaller groups of two or three might be effective in helping students to work more autonomously.

One issue that arose was that some students began to try to problem-solve in their peer group, excluding their supervisors. This approach has been noted in other research on Chinese postgraduate students at Anglophone universities (Zhou & Todman, 2008). As a result, the supervisors did not necessarily identify students’ problems until they became significant. Because the students are disjunct from the university not only by distance, but also language, it appears that few feel sufficiently engaged with the university to use academic and other support services. In contrast, the Dunedin stream of students were more proactive in seeking support (e.g., from the library). Both streams of students had met people from support services during their on-campus orientation and had details (including contact details) of the services available. Experience suggests that the students in the Shanghai stream directed questions to their supervisors or the programme director, whereas the Dunedin students may have directed their questions to the specific part of the university that provides the support. At least a third of the Dunedin-stream students have English as an additional language so confidence in using English is likely to be only a minor factor. This appears to apply to students both within the team supervision model and the more traditional individual supervision model, suggesting that students are more comfortable working within and through the programme to engage with the rest of the university. Therefore, enhancing their sense of belonging in the programme, and recognising that (for these students) the programme is their “home”, needs to be a key aspect of supporting their studies.

The supervisors' most significant finding was that, by creating a group to support the students' supervision, the group itself became a means for the students to support each other outside the university's formal mechanisms. The students in the marketing group meet socially, both online and in person. The group has become a mutual peer-support mechanism that provides understanding and empathy in a way that the official processes and supervisors cannot. The strength of this informal support has developed in a way that was not envisaged when the group supervision model was established. This outcome highlights the importance of peer support to the learning journey of postgraduate distance students.

One of the main factors in supporting the students is recognising that they are all working while studying. The programme is a professional degree, so at times their work takes priority over their studies. The programme director convenes 6-monthly meetings to keep track of their progress and to help them to stay on course. The purpose of these meetings is to find solutions to any challenges, rather than castigating them for lack of progress. Clear expectations, goals, and deadlines are important for these students. Giving them the sense that they are being supported by both their supervisors and the wider staff of the programme helps them to be more successful in their studies. However, encouraging students to become autonomous and to take responsibility for their own progress while providing group-focused transitional support is most likely to lead to higher levels of success.

Limitations

Success in a project such as this is difficult to judge, especially as it is being evaluated by the supervisors and programme director rather than the students themselves. For ethical reasons, and to remove any potential conflict of interest, the student perspective will be gathered after their theses are examined. It needs to be recognised that each of the students in the supervision group has their own objectives and path to achieve these objectives. This means that the individual's supervision needs should be given as much priority as the transition support provided by the group. They also face a range of challenges associated with being mature postgraduate students who are generally working full time while studying. Furthermore, the team supervision trial is ongoing—the first students in the supervision teams to submit their theses for examination are planning to complete towards the middle of 2021. As we grapple with supporting distance supervised students post-Covid-19, the model will continue to be refined to find best practice for all students on the programme. When the students have completed their studies, further research will be undertaken to capture their perspective. They will be asked to reflect on their experience so we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the model.

Conclusion

The team supervision model requires considerable organisation to set up the roles and responsibilities of the supervisors, to manage the meeting structure, and to manage student expectations. It is a way to supervise a number of students with similar research projects. It has great potential for supporting the transition to independent study for distance students, but has a limited time of effectiveness if students do not progress at a similar rate. This could affect the supervisors' ability to provide quality supervisory support to the students both individually and as part of a group.

The model continues to evolve to meet the needs of students. Combining regular online group meetings alongside other students, with other models of supervision, and additional online workshops and support, can help to overcome isolation for these distance students (Conrad, 2006).

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