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Postgraduate students' experience of a jointly-taught, distance learning degree: The example of a Russell Group university

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a primary data collection exercise conducted with postgraduate students enrolled at a large Russell Group university in the UK. The aim of this study was to gain insights of students' experience of a jointly-taught, distance learning, part-time postgraduate programme. A mixed-methods approach involving an online survey and semi-structured interviews was adopted. The results show that students concentrated their perceptions on three main areas: the academic content of the programme, seen as current, interesting and relevant to the students' professional lives; delivery processes, including the advantages of the flexibility and tailored approach but also the disadvantages of being exposed to different teaching styles and lack of face to face interaction; finally, the administrative and practical aspects, accounting for the majority of complaints and worries due to the discrepancies across the two schools responsible for the delivery of the programme. Differences in experience also emerged depending on gender and year of enrolment within the programme.

Key words: distance learning, jointly-taught programme, postgraduate, student experience

Introduction

Students enrolled on jointly-taught programmes are exposed to challenges unique to the combined nature of such qualifications. Academic benefits, such as broadening of intellectual scope and deeper understanding of the subjects (Hodgson, 2011), are combined with personal growth and enhanced self-reliance (Culver et al., 2011; Jacobs et al., 2017) leading to high student satisfaction ratings (Elliott & Shin, 2002). However, timetabling clashes, different approaches to administrative processes and lack of communication between departments are seen as key hindrances to a smooth running of these programmes (Bennett et al., 2016). These findings have been confirmed by Johnston (2012) in a study conducted on undergraduate dual students at the University of Sheffield. However, the author also reported on the need, for these students, to manage time and resources in a more efficient manner than their 'single-degree' counterparts. A fairly limited body of research has been dedicated to the experience of students belonging to dual degrees in a number of disciplines, in spite of the recognised benefits of both jointly-taught programmes and dual degrees (Crites, Ebert & Schuster, 2008; Collins & Dunne, 2009; Shannon, Bradley-Baker & Truong, 2012) and settings (Fisher, 2006; Asgary & Robbert, 2010). The reasons for the existence of such degrees vary from discipline to discipline, for example in healthcare, Crites, Ebert and Schuster (2008) and Shannon, Bradley-Baker and Truong (2012) discussed the need for undergraduate medical students and pharmacists respectively to gain an education in business management or public health earlier in their careers to increase their competencies and become more competitive in the job market. Collins and Dunne (2009) argued that dual degrees could help stop the decrease in tertiary enrolments in horticulture in Australia by providing the students with more international experience. A recent paper by Dinin, Jaeger and Culpepper (2017) showed how a dual degree can provide female students with additional support in a usually male-oriented discipline such as engineering.

There is no formal definition of postgraduate jointly-taught programmes within many UK universities. For undergraduates, a dual honours degree has the two subjects clearly stated in the course title and the teaching split between them is around 50/50 (Source: <http://www.combinedhonours.ac.uk/>). Some institutions around the country have agreed that a degree programme can qualify informally as 'dual' if there is a substantial pedagogical input (25 per cent or more) from the partner/second department, although only the main (owning) department will appear on the final degree certificate (Bennett et al., 2016). However, similar confusion is experienced in most countries, in fact, as Knight (2011, pp. 299-300) stated that:

Different regions of the world, indeed each country active in this aspect of education, have proposed definitions that relate to the concepts integral to their native languages and to their policy frameworks [...] An analysis of these definitions shows a variety of core concepts or elements used to describe double and joint degrees. They include: 1) number of collaborating institutions, 2) number of qualifications/certificates awarded, 3) completion time, 4) organization of the program, 5) recognition bodies and 6) number of countries involved.

The American Council on Education has defined a 'dual degree' as a degree programme that is designed and delivered by two or more partner institutions and for which students receive a qualification from each of the partner institutions and a 'joint degree' as a degree programme that is designed and delivered by two or more partner institutions but for which students receive a single qualification endorsed by each institution (ACE, 2014). In light of this confusion, the term 'jointly-taught' programme will be used hereafter, based on the definition of such academic provision provided by Knight (2008, p. 15) 'A joint degree program awards one joint qualification upon completion of the collaborative program requirements established

by the partner institutions'. However, the nature of jointly-taught programmes may change if the programme is also taught as a distance learning programme. Unfortunately, no existing literature on distance learning students living this reality has been identified, except for Best and Conceição (2017). Therefore, in light of this gap in the knowledge, this paper aims to gain insights on this unique typology of postgraduate learning and teaching at a large Russell Group university in the UK. In particular, the research objectives are:

RO1. To explore students' experiences of a jointly taught, distance learning programme in relation to its content, delivery and administration.

RO2. To identify potential gender-specific perceptions in relation to the content, delivery and administration of the programme.

RO3. To assess whether perceptions on the programme change throughout the student's course of study.

Context of the research

Distance learning

Distance learning has been defined as the 'the effort of providing access to learning for those who are geographically distant' (Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011, p. 129). This form of education existed long before the introduction of the internet to provide students with specific skills and knowledge, and is believed to have started with Sir Isaac Pitman, who used to teach his pupils shorthand via correspondence in the 1840s (Simpson, 2018). The advent of the internet and the development of online technologies have contributed to the creation of new terms such as e-learning (Clark, 2002) and online learning (Carliner, 2004), but the absence of face-to-face interactions between students and tutors, at least on a regular basis, remains the main feature of such approaches. A large body of research has been dedicated to students' experience of distance learning. However, a lack of consensus still pervades this topic. A large study conducted in Austria on 27 universities (Paechter & Maier, 2010) showed how students favoured physical interactions with peers and tutors to establish interpersonal relationships and, in particular, to validate their perceptions of personal academic achievements. However, distance learning was preferred for its clear structure, support of self-learning and standardised distribution of information. This is in line with more recent studies, such as those of Fedynich, Bradley and Bradley (2015) and Kauffman (2015). Tichavsky et al. (2015) also found how students' aversion toward distance learning was mostly due to the perception that it would provide much less interaction with peers and, most importantly, with teachers/tutors than face-to-face delivery formats.

On the other hand, Cao and Sakchutchawan (2011) reported how students enrolled in MBA online courses were dissatisfied with their online learning experience while still performing as well as their face-to-face peers. Similar findings were reported by Best and Conceição (2017) in their study on distance interaction in a multi-institutional environment, where the majority of students reported that their experience with distance learning components on the programme did not meet their learning needs as much as the face-to-face ones.

The impact of distance on students' experience can be exacerbated not just by its geographical nature, but also by its psychological one. In other words, the degree of interaction between students and their peers, tutors and environment as a whole can determine the perceived 'distance' (Mbwesa, 2014). Lim and Richardson (2016) highlighted how the use of social media both for educational purposes and for peer interaction can improve the students'

experience of distance learning by attenuating the sense of isolation and reduce this 'distance'. A recent meta-analysis examining the relationship between distance learning and students' ability to perceive the social presence of others in the learning environment (Richardson et al., 2017) showed that satisfaction and improved learning have a strong positive relationship with increased perceived social presence.

Nowadays, many distance learning programmes employ different methods to create interactive online environments, including forums, group activities, live sessions, and more (Tichavsky et al., 2015), so that the actual teacher-student interaction can be more significant than in face-to-face settings. However, when in addition to the well-known issues related to distance learning, part-timing and joint-teaching are added to the delivery mode of a higher education programme, the students' experience becomes exponentially more complex.

Students selecting part time programmes do so in an attempt to reconcile their academic career with working and family commitments (Taylor, Dunn & Winn, 2015) and increasing numbers of institutions around the world offer this typology of delivery, usually in addition to the standard full time option (Grabowski et al., 2016). Conversely, examples of dual or multi-institutional collaborations are still scarce (Best & Conceição, 2017) and involving an additional set of aspects to consider, such as individual decision-making processes, different systems for assessing and grading the students, different financial conditions and different support to the use of technologies (Larsson et al., 2005).

This paper aims to offer some initial insights on the experience of students attending a postgraduate, part-time, jointly-taught programme which is also delivered entirely via distance learning. The relatively small number of students involved in this research on one side, but the very unique typology of the programme on the other contribute to make this study a good starting point on which future research could be expanded and possibly generalised.

Study setting

This study was conducted at a large research-intensive university in the UK, regularly ranked among the world's top 100 institutions (Source: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>). The university is also a member of the Russell Group, an association of 24 leading universities in the UK committed to delivering the highest standards of research, teaching, and learning. It offers a large number of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes divided across six faculties. The postgraduate programme considered in this study was launched in 2002 as the first distance-learning, part-time, post-graduate programme available at this university. In line with the current neoliberal ideology, which 'refigured relations between government, private enterprise and society, with the economic imperatives of the private sector situated as central to government economic and social policies' (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254), higher education institutions seek to diversify their range of products in a strongly marketised environment (Ingleby, 2015). The delivery model offered by this programme is one such example, seeking to offer both innovation and flexibility. The teaching is shared between two separate Schools, called here A and B to maintain anonymity. School A holds the ownership of the programme and delivers around 70% of the teaching; School B contributes to the delivery of the remaining 30% of the modules. The term module is used here to define an individual unit of study or subject that, together with others, forms a complete course of study. Students completing the programme receive a final degree certificate bearing only the name of School

A. The student cohort on which this study was conducted (2017-18) consists of 37 students whose demographic characteristics are summarised in Table 1. The students' age ranges from 28 to 58 years and all of them are in either full-time or part-time employment. The distance learning nature of the programme implies that the students are in contact with the university and each other only remotely and mostly asynchronously due to their working patterns and time differences.

Methodology

The philosophical assumption of this research starts from a pragmatic/interpretative viewpoint (Goldkuhl, 2012; Moon & Blackman, 2014), reflecting the belief that all topics may be studied from a range of perspectives and that approaches must be compatible with the research questions, aims and overall purpose. Interpretivists elude rigid structural frameworks and embrace more personal and flexible research structures (Carson et al., 2001), which aim to understand meanings in human interaction (Black, 2006) and interpret what is perceived as truth (Carson et al., 2001). Pragmatism and interpretivism are, therefore, not mutually exclusive and may be combined (Goldkuhl, 2012), and for this study, such dual approach has been considered the most appropriate.

The assessment of students' experience was carried out via a mixed-methods approach (Pickard, 2013), adopting both quantitative and qualitative primary data collection tools. An online survey was distributed via email to all enrolled students in January 2018. The survey included two demographic questions (year of enrolment and gender) and nine closed questions relating to the rating of statements such as 'I feel there is a consistent approach to administrative processes across both of my Schools' and 'I feel equally comfortable dealing with staff from both Schools'. Such statements were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) and were selected to provide a measure of three different traits of the students' experience, specifically: 1. *Factual* aspects, related to their direct experience with dual nature of the programme; 2. *Attitudinal* aspects, concerning the students' approach to dual degrees based on their personal experience and 3. *Challenging* aspects, focusing on the extent to which students are at ease with specific aspects of the programme (see Table 2 for the full list of statements). The survey also contained three open ended questions to allow the respondents to express their opinion on the aspects of the programme that work best and worst for them. In light of the small number of students in the cohort, no questions on their nationality and job were asked to avoid the risk of identifying the respondents. The full set of results was analysed using IBM SPSS version 24.

To gain deeper insights of the students' survey responses and conduct further exploration of students' experiences, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely in March 2018. The interview script was composed of nine main prompts designed to guide the respondents through their perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of the programme. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted to identify key common themes to integrate and triangulate the findings from the questionnaire.

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments were piloted with a small sample of other postgraduate students at the same university before implementation to minimise misunderstanding and rectify/clarify ambiguous expressions.

Results

Online survey – Likert scale statements

Of the 37 enrolled students, 19 accessed the survey and 17 responses were deemed valid and complete (response rate 46%). Of the 17 students who completed the online survey correctly, 12 were females and five were males ; in terms of enrolment status, eight students were in their first year, six in their second year and three in their third year (Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Table 2 below reports on the internal consistency of the Factual, Attitudinal and Challenging statements in the survey by means of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. This parameter is used to quantify the degree to which the individual items that compose a scale measure the same underlying concept. The higher the score, the more reliable the generated scale is, but authors have indicated 0.7 to be an acceptable reliability threshold (Bland & Altman, 1997; DeVellis, 2003).

[Insert Table 2 here]

The Kruskal-Wallis One Way Analysis of Variance by Rank test was selected to compare responses across the three years of study on all nine statements in light of the limited sample size (Chan & Walmsley, 1997), which tends to lower the power of the test while still representing a valid hypothesis test. The results revealed statistically significant differences for two statements (the remaining seven returned a p value $>.05$), specifically a) the perceptions of the consistency of the approaches to teaching/assessing and b) administrative processes between the two schools (Table 3). Students in their third year scored the highest mean values (4.33 for both statements); students in their second year scored the lowest values of 2.50 in terms of consistency of approach in teaching and assessing and of 2.83 when it comes to a consistency of approach to administrative processes.

[Insert Table 3 here]

This finding is also corroborated by the graphical representation of the responses to the survey statements by year of study (Figure 1). In most cases, there is agreement on the perceptions across the three years of the programme. However, the major difference across the three groups of students is recorded for the factual aspects, which show the lowest mean scores across the distribution for first and second year students; students in their final year are the least critical of the different approaches to teaching and administration between the Schools and, conversely, they perceive a good level of consistency in both (mean value of 4.33 for both).

All year groups feel equally comfortable in dealing with staff from both Schools, and this statement reports the highest means among all groups, but for first (mean=4.75) and third year (mean=4.67) students this is particularly true. There are also similar levels of agreement between first and third year students on viewing a jointly-taught as equally challenging to tackle for distance learners and face-to-face students.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 2 shows how the nine statements are viewed by males and females in the student cohort. Mann-Whitney U tests have been performed to detect statistically significant differences due to gender (Table 3). In the majority of cases, there is strong agreement between males and females on the programme (p values $>.05$), however, when it comes to dealing with members of staff from both Schools, the test has returned a statistically significant result and males are much more uncomfortable than females. The lowest overall mean score (3.06) was that related to the perception of a consistent approach to teaching and assessing across both Schools.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Online survey – open-ended questions

The survey also contained three open-ended questions, where responses have been manually categorised to extract key points and summarised in Table 4.

Three main aspects were identified from the analyses of the students' comments, i.e. content and knowledge sharing, delivery processes and administrative/practical aspects.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Aspects of the programme that work best - when asked about this, students focused mostly on content and knowledge sharing, reporting on the value of the different teaching and expertise perspectives offered by academics from the two Schools. A few comments were made about the flexibility of the delivery and the fact that students have the freedom to work at their own pace. No comments were made about administrative/practical aspects.

Aspects of the programme that work the least - when asked about this, only two comments were made about the content (specifically about the lack of up-to-date material in some instances and the lack of links across topics), while the majority were about the delivery modalities and the practicalities. In the first case, comments revolved mostly around the logistic difficulties due to lack of physical interaction and, in the second case, about the inconsistencies in submission rules, marking and assessing between the two Schools. The problem, highlighted earlier, with the inconsistent approach to teaching and assessing between the two Schools is very well reflected here as five out of 17 of them remarked on this:

‘Teaching delivery style varies in my experience so it can be a struggle via distance learning if a student doesn’t connect easily with the topic and needs more support’.

‘The marking levels varied between the two Schools’.

‘It can be frustrating that there are two varying referencing methods required for each School’.

‘The inconsistency is frustrating especially in year 1 when we have no experience and are feeling our way through’.

‘The 10% leeway in one School on assignment word count as opposed to only 5% in the other. This could potentially trip people up and lead to points deducted for honest, genuine mistakes if students muddle up the two’.

Further comments - finally, when asked if they had anything further to add, the content aspect was not mentioned at all, as the students only focused on delivery issues and administrative/practical aspects, mostly reiterating aspects already discussed in the previous two questions.

In summary, it appears that students are satisfied with the intellectual content of the programme coming from the contribution of both Schools and they see it as beneficial that skill sets from two very different disciplines are merged together; they are also satisfied with the freedom and flexibility that a distance learning, part-time degree can offer. However, a different picture emerges when looking at more practical aspects. In this respect, students are very aware of discrepancies between the Schools in what they perceive as very important aspects, such as different referencing styles, different word count allocations and even different submission rules. Students find surprising and definitely unjustifiable that such

inconsistencies still exist and worry that they might not be aware of other discrepancies between the guidelines from each school and impact their marks negatively.

Semi-structured interviews

Four students agreed to be interviewed to discuss further their views and experiences of the programme. The interviews were conducted with the four students from the first and second year of the programme by an independent member of staff and lasted on average 23 minutes. Confidentiality concerns prevented cross-referencing survey responses with interview responses; however, the two data collection methods were used in conjunction to allow for the triangulation and convergence of findings (Creswell, 2014). A thematic analysis of the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified the same three key themes emerged from the survey open-ended questions and already defined in the section above. The coding of data was carried out inductively, in that there was no predetermined framework of codes/themes to be followed.

Content/knowledge sharing. The interviewees all agreed that the currency and relevance of the programme are of high standards. This theme was the least controversial and all interviewed students had very similar opinions in this respect, which can be summarised in this quote:

‘Overall, I am pretty happy with the course as it delivers really interesting concepts, [...] it is working for me, so that is fine’ (Respondent 1)

One student commented on some aspects of similarity across modules which should be addressed and optimised both for the benefit of the student cohort and the programme overall:

‘...the programme itself especially the sub modules to identify any similarities and where they could be combined and optimised. So, I think that could be more beneficial and easier for us’ (Respondent 4)

‘Likewise, the shared reading resources as well, I think that also can be optimised to be shared across both Schools’ (Respondent 4)

The students also agreed that there is a good balance in terms of the number and nature of the modules being taught across the two Schools, with maybe slightly more modules being delivered by School A:

‘I think it is about 50-50 split between the two, and you can see there is difference of specialist’s topics which have been delivered by people who know stuffs in their fields, so it seems to have the right balance’ (Respondent 1)

‘I think there is a good balance’ (Respondent 2)

‘The balance seems a little skewed towards School A but I guess that is because it’s their programme. I personally don’t mind because I’m a techy person so I like information data’ (Respondent 3)

Delivery processes. There were not many remarks about this specific aspect emerging from the interviews as only two respondents referred to potential issues:

‘I felt there were differences in how the tutors used the Virtual Learning Environment, in the sense that for the reflective diary you could use the Google+ community and got used to different forms of interaction’ (Respondent 3)

‘...from the way the program is structured to the way resources are shared, to the way how it is actually being submitted, and finally the overall technicalities of it’ (Respondent 4)

Administrative/practical aspects. As for the questionnaire, these aspects were the most critical for the students:

‘...it felt like there is a set of rules for one School and another set of rules for another School’ (Respondent 1)

‘...a lot of the eBooks, we kept having off and on challenges assessing them here and there, sometimes because there are not exactly downloadable-friendly, meaning, one can download them for one day to two maximum and you can’t exactly highlight them...’ (Respondent 4)

In terms of the impact of distance-learning on students’ experience of a jointly-taught programme, the overall impression is that such aspect is very dependent on the personal involvement of individual students:

‘I think distance learning is always going to have that sort of possibility of being lost in translation or difficulties in getting the answer you need in the time you need because you are not there basically, you are at the end of the computer, and you have some of the technical glitches that go along with the delivery of the materials and sessions over the Internet, which just I guess part of the course the way is but I think mostly they are offset by the benefits that distance learning gives you’ (Respondent 1)

‘I feel a lot of disconnect from the university because I feel like I’m missing out on critical information, the opportunity to ask questions’ (Respondent 2)

‘No, distance learning did not play, did not have any significant impact or role’ (Respondent 4)

Surprisingly, none of the interviewees was aware of the dual nature of their degree until after enrolment on the programme:

‘When I did the initial browsing, it did not stand out to me, it was only when I went to the details of the modules to see what interested me, what I wanted to do, that I can have said it was a difference in how it was delivered’ (Respondent 1)

‘To be honest I didn’t find that out. I saw the email last week when the programme coordinator mentioned it. I didn’t know to be honest. I only saw on the website that some modules had different codes before the module’s name, but I only thought that each module wasn’t designed by a different department as such, I didn’t realise that it was a dual delivery’ (Respondent 2)

‘I found out after registration. When I had my classes I saw that one had a code and another had a different code and when I got to the first one I saw that it was a School B class which led me to ask what School B was’ (Respondent 3)

‘I basically found out sometimes in the middle of the programme, [...] I must have missed it [...] but not to forget I was one of the latest to be admitted into the programme I was I think three weeks late at being admitted into the programme that was why I probably I missed it’ (Respondent 4)

However, this lack of awareness had seemingly no effect on the overall students’ experience.

Discussion

Students are any university’s greatest asset and delivering a successful jointly-taught degree requires meaningful and constant interactions with individual cohorts, to guarantee a timely response to changes in needs. In spite of the growing popularity of dual and jointly-taught degrees, research exploring students’ views is limited, but a study conducted in Australia by Russell, Dolnicar and Ayoub (2008) showed how one of the main reasons for dissatisfaction

was assessment incongruences and how ten years later this is still the main problem to tackle (Steel and Huggins, 2016). The distance learning aspect amplifies any issue arising in a jointly-taught degree, due to delayed or asynchronous feedback from and interaction with peers and instructors and a much more delicate and fragile sense of community than that on-campus students (Vayre & Vonthron, 2017). Hence, effective organisation and curriculum delivery of a jointly-taught programme require being proactive and fostering dialogue among all stakeholders involved (El-Mansour, 2011). This section will discuss the finding of the research by addressing the individual research objectives listed at the beginning of this paper.

RO1: To explore students' experiences of a jointly taught, distance learning programme in relation to its content, delivery and administration. From the results of both the online survey and interviews, it is evident that students on the programme value the academic content of the modules, regardless of them being delivered from School A or School B. They appreciate the different ideological angle on the topics offered by staff with very different skill sets and knowledge base. Many students undertake this postgraduate programme for employment-related reasons, particularly career advancements, as they see the opportunity to gain skills in an area “across disciplines” which is in high demand in several employment sectors. This is very much in line with previous research on dual and/or jointly-taught degrees (Jacobs et al., 2017; Theodosakis, White & Encandela, 2017). Nevertheless, it can be difficult to ensure that the content does not overlap between the two Schools while, at the same time, provide enough connections to promote a sense of continuity and unity (Botchwey, 2009). In this study, students in their third year seem to have overcome the module-related issues and focus more on the dissertation stage which, by nature, involves much less interaction with individual lecturers or administrative staff; this is in opposition to the second year students who are coming to the end of their taught part and feel deeply affected by the discrepancies across the Schools. The delivery aspect has been both criticised and praised by the students. On one side, students appreciate that part-time delivery facilitates the attendance of working people and the asynchronous lectures and tutorials offer a continuous access to the learning material (Kupczynski et al., 2014), which the students can browse in their own time and at their own pace. On the other hand, however, some activities can be hindered by the virtual environment (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015), in particular face-to-face interactions and group work, which can be particularly challenging when students do not know each other and/or are in different continents and time zones. Also, the technologies deployed in distance learning can be difficult to familiarise with and cause lower levels of student engagement (Henrie, Halverson & Graham, 2015). All students on the programme, even those more familiar with technologies, tend to need a period of adjustment at the beginning of the course to become acquainted with the learning platform and communications between staff and students are also encouraged through other means such as Skype, telephone or email. The administrative process of the programme and, more generally, its practical aspects, have been the subject of the majority of the students' criticism. The issues arisen are largely due to the dual nature of the programme and the fact that the two delivering Schools follow different departmental rules on marking and assessment.

RO2. To identify potential gender-specific perceptions in relation to the content, delivery and administration of the programme. Recent research demonstrates a link between student evaluation of academic staff depending on the gender of both students and staff (Winchester & Browning, 2015; Boring, 2017). The Mann-Whitney U tests performed to identify differences in the perception of the programme between male and female students showed an overarching uniformity across the sample, with the exception of the level of comfort they feel when dealing with staff from both Schools, in which case females have scored higher than males. The existing literature is void of research on the specific topic of gender bias in jointly-

taught, distance learning university programmes, with a small window opened on how male and female students rate the quality of teaching received online (MacNell, Driscoll & Hunt, 2015) and gender modalities of adoption of e-learning from a technology acceptance viewpoint (Ramírez-Correa, Arenas-Gaitán & Rondán-Cataluña, 2015). In a more general context, gender is considered a cornerstone to explain inequalities and identities in society (Walby, 2016) as, despite their quantitative increase in cultural institutions or programmes of higher education, women are perceived differently from men (Wani & Dastidar, 2018). Within the context of this research, the high correlation between males and females' views on all aspects of the programme except one, leads to believe that the higher number of female staff in one of the two Schools might have played a role on male students' perceptions of student-staff interactions. A significant body of research has shown that there is still a persistent form of gender inequality in students' rating and interaction with teachers (e.g. MacNell, Driscoll & Hunt, 2015; Boring, Ottoboni & Stark, 2016; Boring, 2017; Bagilhole, 2017) so that male students tend to favour male teachers. However, not enough data has been collected for the present research to fully corroborate this theory.

RO3. To understand whether perceptions on the programme change throughout the student's course of study. As for RO2, no literature is available on the topic of students' perceptions of a course of study depending on their year of enrolment. The programme considered in this research is delivered part-time over the course of three years and data were collected from respondents belonging to each of the three years of enrolment. Kruskal-Wallis tests conducted on the three groups showed high levels of consistency throughout the majority of the survey statements with the exception of two, specifically those about the consistency of the teaching, assessing and administrative processes across the two Schools. The major differences detected were between students in their third year (usually quite satisfied with both Schools) and students in their second year (definitely disappointed with the level of consistency). A paper reporting student progress throughout a Pharmacy degree discussed how students in their final year experiences a 'massive difference' (i.e. improvement) compared to their first year in terms of pedagogical, social and professional development (Taylor & Harding, 2018, p. 86). Other studies focused on the burnt out effect due to length and intensity, particularly in medical courses (Dyrbye & Shanafelt, 2016). The third year students in the current study seem to attribute less importance to issues related to module attendance and coursework submission, which are shared between the two Schools for the first two years and focus more on their dissertation, which involves interactions with only one member of staff from one of the Schools. This is obviously very different from the experience of a second year student who is still undertaking their taught part and feels deeply affected by the discrepancies across the Schools. On the other hand, students in their first year, and for whom the Kruskal-Wallis test results showed intermediate mean values, are still at the beginning of their journey and have had marginal interaction with both sets of regulations.

From a pragmatic point of view, based on the results of this study, which have already been fed back to the cohort of students, the MSc programme is currently undergoing changes to guarantee that the conflicting points emphasised by the students are addressed and solved. For example, the word count allowance for coursework has been set at 10% in both Schools and coversheets are no longer required for coursework submission. Written communications are shared more consistently between the administrative staff of the Schools and academic staff are also more involved with the implementation of new rules and regulations, through the establishment of a 'module leader sub-committee' with members meeting once every semester. Finally, the jointly-taught aspect of the programme is now made clear from 'Welcome Week', together with an outline of the set of expertise offered by the two Schools.

However, although some practical benefits were the immediate response to this study, other, more general and long term steps should be taken. First, universities delivering this typology of programmes should collaborate with all stakeholders, including students, to design a unified policy clearly stating individual roles and responsibilities. Second, in light of their heavy reliance on IT resources, distance learning programmes should keep investing in technological innovations to guarantee efficiency and student satisfaction. Finally, the administrative departments managing the distance learning, jointly-taught programmes should be given the autonomy required to make appropriate, timely changes; in other words, these programmes cannot fit within standard university policies and need recognition of and support for the complex and distinctive challenges they face to be able to deliver high quality education.

Limitations

Although this study contributes to increase the scant body of research existing on distance learning, jointly-taught programmes and the personal experiences and views of students undertaking them, it has a number of limitations. Firstly, the sample size is very small and, although almost 50% of the enrolled students participated in the survey, it does not allow for generalisation of the findings beyond the scope of the MSc in question. However, it could be considered as a pilot study on which to build future, more extensive research. Secondly, the students who have participated to the survey and the interviews might have been motivated by their personal reasons, in the sense that some of the students might have wanted a platform to vent issues experienced at the time of the research. In this respect, however, the authors are aware that some of the issues raised in this research have also emerged in the past, although they were never recorded systematically. Thirdly, the typology of postgraduate course considered for this study is very unusual, and further research would be needed to triangulate the results presented here.

Conclusions

This paper presented the results of a study conducted on students' experience of a jointly-taught, distance learning and part-time postgraduate programme at a large research-intensive university in the UK. The students reported on the high quality and relevance of the academic content delivered by the two collaborating departments and highlighted the importance of having different Schools of thought and viewpoints to stimulate learning. However, administrative and practical barriers, particularly with respect to different marking schemes, referencing styles and word count allowances have been perceived by the students as potential hindrances to their experience as learners. Differences have also arisen in terms of gender and year on the programme. Female students seem to be dealing better with the staff from the Schools than their male counterpart and students in their second year are those who resent the most the lack of consistency in teaching and assessment strategies and administrative processes. To maintain high standards of teaching and learning, similar programmes should be provided with university support through a clear policy defining departments' roles and responsibilities, but also allowing for some degree of independence in light of their managerial complexity.

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