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Extended Abstract for ECEL (European Conference on e-Learning)
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E-environment Enablement for Final Year Re-integration Following a Period of Placement/Exchange

<http://academic-conferences.org/pdfs/ECEL/ECEL2014-Abstract-booklet.pdf> (pp98-100)

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Key words:

e-learning; time-out; exchange; re-integration; research methods; dissertation

Aim:

This research identifies issues surrounding returning final year students in the process of re-instatement to their home academic environment after a period on placement or exchange with the view to introducing a blended e-learning approach for the introduction to research methods and dissertation preparation. The results of this research will be of interest to academics involved in the teaching of research methods or dissertation support and for any academic institution which is involved in student placements and/or exchange programmes.

Background:

Literature has identified issues experienced by students returning to their studies after a time-out period which can contribute to an achievement gap compared to their static peer group. These issues can be ostensible in relation to final year dissertation preparation. Auburn (2007) identified a concern with the 'shifting social identities of students' on return from their placement year and feelings of alienation within their home institution. These can include a feeling of alienation from their university due to time away (Auburn 2007) and a lack of focus on their research topic which can lead them to experience lower levels of confidence with their academic studies on return which can lead to them falling behind in their dissertation process. There is also evidence that the level of support experienced by students on exchange differs between home and host institutions with Raikou & Karalis (2007) identifying that the majority of students would rate the support offered by the host institution as 'better' than that offered by their own (pg. 349). Alfaro et al. (2009) investigated students' evaluations of information sources in relation to exchanges and found that the majority rated the information they gained from peers higher than that from internal sources of their own Universities.

Indeed, the level of content of support from the home institution has also been questioned: 'UK universities could do more to provide clear and accurate information to prospective students about studying abroad. This could include highlighting the support they offer, and the benefits study abroad can bring.' (HEFCE 2010). Some authors have identified this support as a necessary element of the supervision process stating: 'As we have noted elsewhere, in order to best facilitate students' progress through the waves of 'chaos' and 'cosmos', it is imperative that they are not left to flounder alone and that they receive adequate supervision, making the transition from dependence to self-directed learning smoother' (Todd et al., 2006, pg. 5).

Although the academic literature on placements and exchange initiatives normally addresses such issues as language difficulties in the exchange partner institution (Camiciottoli, 2010) and funding (Raikou & Karalis, 2007), there have been few studies which seek to identify student centred issues which may stem from the placement/exchange year and the adjustment back into the home institution especially with regard to Final Year Dissertation/Project preparation. With a record number of students studying or working abroad (British Council, 2012), this is an area ripe for further investigation.

Methodology:

Qualitative data was gathered through focus groups (x2) with level 4 business students who had recently returned from overseas exchange or placement and triangulated with focus group data from relevant module delivery staff for research methods and dissertation supervisors. The data was transcribed and

thematically analysed to inform a quantitative questionnaire which was subsequently distributed to all 4th year students (within the undergraduate business suite programmes at Glasgow Caledonian University) who had participated in a placement or exchange (n=30 from 45 population).

Initial Results:

Preliminary results evidence that students within the focus group believed they were treated differently in the process of topic identification than their peers who remained on campus. Conversely, 40% of students within the survey identified their own colleagues who remained within the host institution as the least effective source of information. The cohort also placed a high expectation on the home institution's formal role in ensuring a structured approach to preparation for their return, whilst also identifying confusion with the nature and aim of the communication received over their time off campus. Although the home institution did use e-mails as an attempt to retain contact throughout the time away, students did not differentiate e-mail messages from the home institution presuming any information would be generalist in nature. This evidences a need for further clarification of type, format of contact communication channels and related terminology. This could reduce the feelings voiced that the cohort felt 'overwhelmed and under-prepared' on their return.

The quantitative results identify that although the majority of students stated they would access an on-line resource whilst on placement or exchange only if it had an element of home staff interaction. However, 27% did not consider any preparation for their return to studies to be appropriate during their time away. A formal summative assessment element was ruled out by staff and students as being outwith their requirements whilst out of their home university but that a staff- and student-facilitated discussion group where relevant support and advice may be offered could help reduce their feelings of alienation. Although 40% of respondents stated they would utilise on-line academic support in the form of tailored readings, case studies and tutorial support with regard to dissertation preparation, 20% stated they would not access any resources during their time away. The most effective form of support identified would be a mixture of pre-placement/exchange support, contact during the time away and again at the end of the placement/exchange. Interestingly, these three levels of support mechanisms are already in place within the home institution for this cohort.

In conclusion, the study evidences a possible mis-match between student expectations of the use of e-learning from their home institution whilst on placement/exchange and staff perception of the most effective method of formative information dissemination.

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