Chapter 81
Experiences of an Online Doctoral Course in Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the benefits and challenges experienced by two students who had completed an online doctoral programme at a popular United Kingdom university. Benefits include accessing courses from anywhere in the world, engaging in synchronous and asynchronous communication, and the development of creative thinking and reflective skills. The most important benefit was the fact that the online programme allowed the students to fulfill the dream of achieving a doctoral degree in teacher education while maintain family and work commitments. Some challenges of online learning include feelings of isolation, balancing family commitment with study, managing time, and coping with additional workload brought on by course requirements. The conclusion was made that the online environment is an excellent way of placing students at the centre of the learning experience, allowing them to have total control of their time and the process of learning. This, however, required an alteration in their thinking and a willingness to change certain attitudes about learning.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

There are benefits and challenges to undertaking a distance or online university programme. These programmes allow students to conveniently complete post and undergraduate studies that meet the challenges of the new century. They help students to develop the ability to work and learn with others who are in different geographical locations, time zones and, more importantly, those with differing life and academic experiences. Riel and Fulton (2001) support this point when they state that online learning communities support and expand socio-cultural links which helps participants to grow intellectually and in understanding cultural differences. Students in online programmes sometimes find it easier to share

their experiences with others than they would, in the traditional learning environment of the university classroom. Challenges of online learning include feelings of isolation, balancing family commitment with study, managing time and coping with additional workload brought on by course requirements.

The aim of this chapter is to identify and discuss these and other benefits and challenges of online learning. This is achieved via a discussion of the shared reflective experiences of two persons who successfully completed doctor of education degrees via a combination of face-to-face and online methods. The degrees were awarded by a very popular United Kingdom University. The experiences shared, illuminate areas of online learning in need of improvement and offer practical insights to those who are currently enrolled, or are thinking of enrolling in an online doctoral education course.

WHY WE CHOOSE THAT PARTICULAR UNIVERSITY AND PROGRAMME

There are four reasons why we choose a United Kingdom University and a doctoral degree programme in teacher education. Firstly, seeming inefficiencies displayed by some international universities to which Despina had applied. For example, not getting a prompt reply to emails, not being given clear ideas regarding the content of the courses they offered and a general sense of disorganization in the type of promotional material sent to perspective students. Also, having completed master's degrees from United Kingdom universities we came to trust the system of higher education there, and were confident of the fact that a UK degree was recognised and accepted in most parts of the world.

Secondly, our university of choice offered overseas students what seemed to be very reasonable fee structures, when compared with other international universities offering similar programmes. The average fee for a doctoral programme in a USA University was approximately $20,000 per annum when converted was approximately £12,000 per annum, while the average fee for a UK doctoral degree was £2,000-£3,000 per annum. What was of particular interest was the 'new deal' for overseas students offered by our chosen university. This allowed students' annual fee to remain the same throughout the duration of their studies. This meant that the fee was not subject to inflation. This was of particular interest to Mark, who at the time was a non-European resident and therefore paid a much higher fee. He paid £3,650 per annum while a local UK or European student paid approximately £1,200 per annum.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we both wanted to become teacher educators therefore a doctoral degree in teacher education was not just ideal, but a way to fulfill a dream. We realized that a doctoral degree was the accepted prerequisite for lecturing at most University and colleges worldwide. For those already lecturing it offered some prestige and recognition, in that, your peers now see you as in command of your field of study and can make a worthwhile contribution to it. In some cases, for example the USA, a doctoral degree is necessary for being tenured and for further promotion. For us, however, the traditional face-to-face method of achieving this degree was inappropriate for two reasons: family and employment commitments. Firstly, both of us had a young family to care for. Despina had two young boys who needed special attention with their studies including attending to problems associated with young growing teenagers. Mark had a young daughter with a 'special need' and who needed his full attention. Taking time away for three to five years of face-to-face studying was not a viable option for us, given these and other family demands and the undue stress that being away would have caused our spouses and children. Secondly, we were both full time employees and needed to keep our jobs so as to contribute to the financial up keep of our families. Being fully employed meant that we had signed contractual agreements and were bound to these agreements for two to three years. Contractual violation

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