THE RIGHT BLEND? THE USE OF BLACKBOARD TO SUPPORT POSTGRADUATE DISSERTATION STUDENTS

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Weller (2011) proposes that it is the responsibility of educators to identify which technologies are likely to be significant to their students in their future careers and integrate them into their teaching practices. For some scholars, this will involve a range of activities including blogging, the cultivation of peer and student networks on social media sites such as Twitter, and the creation of Open Educational Resource (OERs) such as podcasts (Pearce et al, 2010; Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012). Despite the reluctance of many academics to engage in these forms of 'digital scholarship' (Procter et al, 2010; Weller, 2011), there has been an increasing interest in how information and communication technologies (ICTs) might be used by teachers to facilitate student learning. There have been two major conceptual frameworks that have emerged from the widespread adoption of technology by HE institutions in the past decade. First, there is the concept of e-learning, which has focused predominantly on the use of ICTs and institutional Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in the teaching of distance learning students (Sangra et al, 2012, Conole, 2010). Second, the 'blending' of online and face-to-face pedagogic approaches has been conceptualised as an appropriate response to the varying learning styles of an increasingly cosmopolitan student body (see Sharpe et al, 2006 for an overview). A critique of this 'blended learning' approach has emerged that suggests that it is 'ill-defined,' focusing on the resources made available to students rather than their actual learning experiences (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005). Nevertheless, there has been some evidence to suggest that online resources have high pedagogic value for both campus-based and distance learning students. Recent research has indicated that the use of e-tivities for the purposes of formative assessment can help students develop more effective learning strategies (Armellini and Aiyegbayo, 2009). Podcasts have also been found to be effective in supporting students during the preparation of their assessed work and reducing the number of non-academic enquiries sent to academic members of staff (Fothergill, 2008; Nie et al, 2010; Sutton-Brady et al,

2009). This paper sets out to provide further empirical data on 'blended' pedagogic approaches through a focus group and questionnaire-based study of students who had received support for their PGT dissertations via a combination of face-to-face meetings with their supervisor and a series of resources uploaded to the institutional VLE at appropriate milestones during their projects. It does so by reviewing the issues raised by staff and students in relation to learning materials in 2010/11, outlining the resources created for the revamped MS7012 Dissertation Blackboard site, and presenting the results from the questionnaire and focus groups conducted between June and July 2012.

1. BACKGROUND

This Teaching Enhancement project focused on how 'blended' learning approaches, involving the creation of 'little Open Educational Resources' (Weller, 2011) such as screencasts, could help address the learning needs of our predominantly international student cohort, the majority of whom have English as a second language and find it difficult to follow lectures in real-time. This issue was first identified in the context of the Department of Media and Communication during the Away Day in June 2011. Analysis of module evaluation data showed that many students wanted their lecturers to speak more slowly to allow them to take notes during the classes. They also requested that powerpoints be made available on the relevant Blackboard site several days prior to the lecture and wanted more learning resources to be made available online. This was an issue that was identified at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels in 2011. Results from the National Student Survey (2011) indicated that only 68% of our students felt that they had resources 'good enough for their needs,' and colleagues felt that more innovative methods of delivering teaching resources e.g. social media should be piloted in a number of modules. This was also evident in the feedback from the PGT cohort, who felt that the MS7012 Dissertation Blackboard site needed more resources than the dissertation handbook and the dissertation examples available in 2010/11. Specifically, they requested more links to websites about specific research methodologies and a suggested timetable for completion of each stage of their projects. Many supervisors felt that the MS7012 site needed to be revamped in light of this feedback. The traditional approach towards the PGT supervision within the Department had centred on the relationship between the student and the supervisor. However, with each supervisor having as many as 22 students to supervise each year they were keen to reduce the number of generic queries, such as questions about presentation and word counts, they received. The links between the MS7004/5 Research Methods classes and the dissertation module did not always appear to be clear to students, especially in relation to issues such as research ethics. Many supervisors felt that students did not take ownership of their projects and often left substantive work until the summer term when time and supervisor availability were limited.

2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Specifically, there were two research questions in the study:
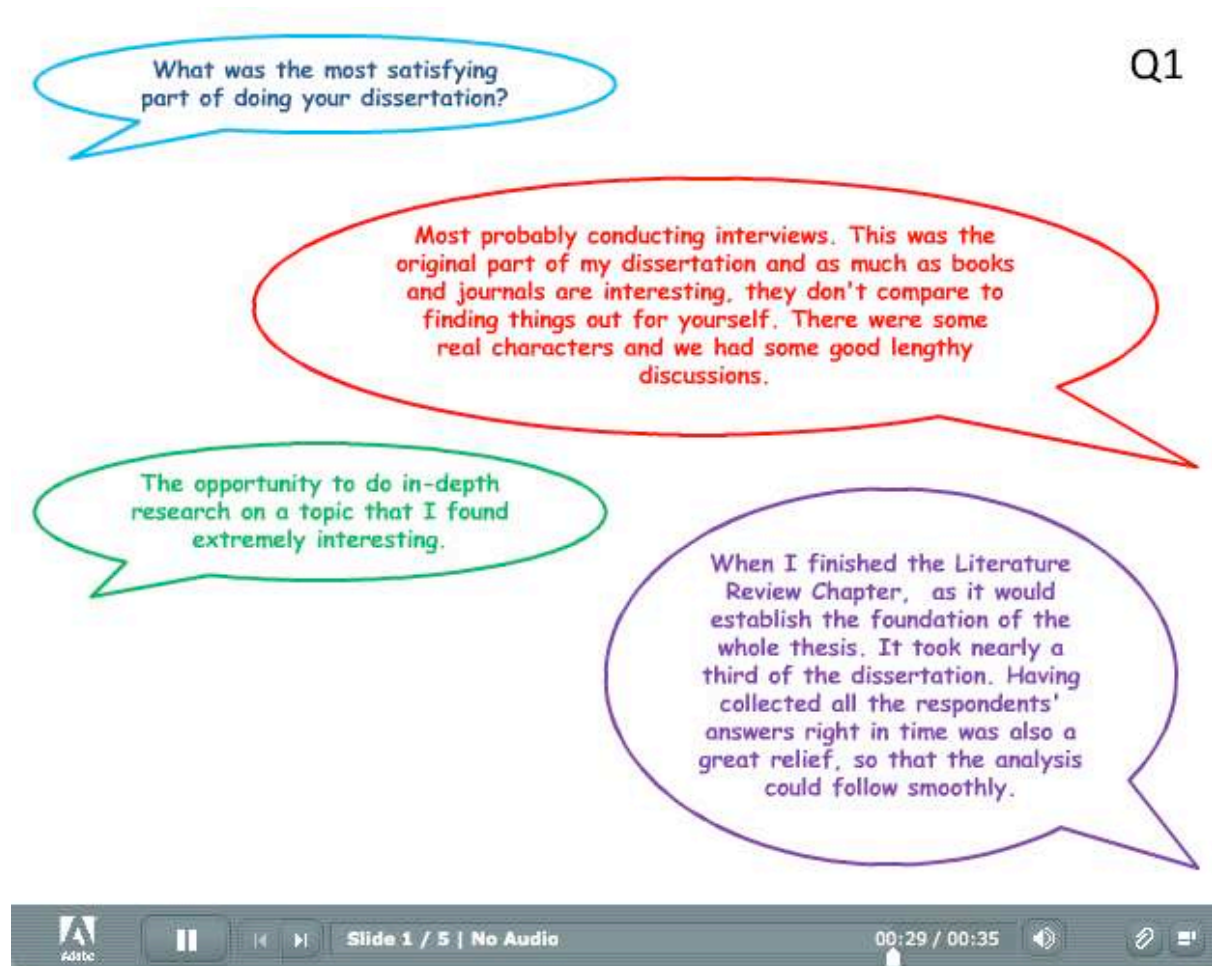
To what extent did the provision of resources at appropriate milestones encourage students to take greater ownership of their projects?

Which of these resources were perceived to be the most helpful during their projects? Which were the least helpful? Why?

Resources were released to the students throughout the six - month duration of their projects. Based on the feedback from the previous cohort, an emphasis was placed on providing resources

that would help students plan their work and reduce their dependence upon their supervisors for generic queries. Hence, a workload planner was provided for the students to download and monitor their progress towards certain milestones. For example, it was suggested that students should submit their ethics approval form no later than the end of March. The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section defined key terms such as 'research ethics' and provided links to the Departmental guidelines on referencing and submission requirements. Students were also able to access examples of dissertations from the previous academic year that had been awarded distinctions. A presentation entitled 'Advice from former students' saw those responsible for these projects reflect on their experiences and provide guidance for the 2011/12 cohort (see Figure 1). WebLinks directing students towards third-party websites, such as ThesisWhisperer (www.thesiswhisperer.com), were grouped under relevant categories such as 'Literature Review,' Dissertation Planning and 'Research Ethics'.

Figure 1: Screenshot from Advice from Former Students adobe presentation

There was also content created specifically for release at certain milestones during the dissertation process. E-tivities were designed to help the students reflect upon the ethical implications of their work and how they located sources for their literature reviews, using a similar framework to that devised by Salmon (2002). They were asked to upload a brief report (no more than 50 words), identifying any issues they had encountered, to the MS7012 site (See Figure 2). The dissertation tutor had responsibility for addressing the questions left by posters via email and the monthly dissertation bulletin.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Research Ethics e-tivity

Author:	Paul Reilly	Total views:	185 (Your views: 17)
Posted Date:	Tuesday, 7 February 2012 14:56:51 o'clock GMT		
Edited Date:	Friday, 9 March 2012 14:53:13 o'clock GMT		

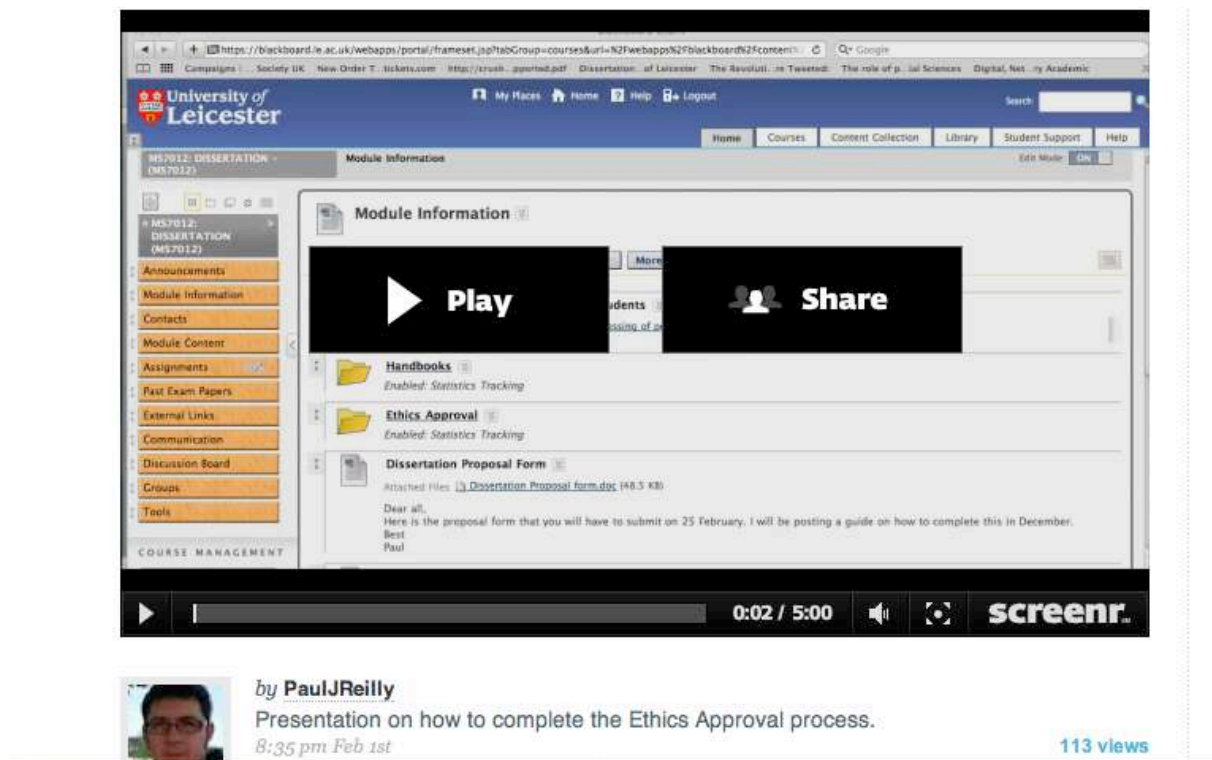**E-tivity 2: Research Ethics (March 2012)**

PURPOSE	To help you understand the University of code of research ethics and consider how this applies to your research project.
	The output of this task will help your supervisor to provide you with appropriate support.
	The output (after discussion with your supervisor) can be used to help you reflect on your research design and should help you prepare the method chapter in the final version of your dissertation.
Time	Approximately 30 - 45 minutes.
Task	1. First go to the University's code of ethics at (http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics) and read the university guidelines.
	2. Consult the research methods section of the dissertation proposal form that you have submitted in February 2012.
	3. Identify whether there are any ethical issues that may arise from your chosen method and the proposed subject(s) of your study
Recommended time-scale to do this task	No later than mid-April. The earlier you complete this e-tivity, the more beneficial it will be for your project.
Response / Output	Write in less than 100 words the ethical issues you have identified and post this summary to the discussion forum below. Please also email it to your supervisor ahead of your next meeting.

The Quizzes on Ethics and Plagiarism were designed to complement these e-tivities.

The screencasts uploaded to in-browser recording platform Screenr were designed to provide brief summaries of the dissertation lectures attended by the student in the first semester. There were four in total: Introduction to the MS7012 Blackboard site, How to plan your dissertation, How to start your literature review, and How to complete the ethics approval process (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Screenshot of How to complete the ethics approval process screencast

These were five-minute videos, usually containing no more than five slides from the lecture with narration, which could be streamed on devices such as mobile phones, laptops, and PCs. These screencasts were released at appropriate milestones during the dissertation project and highlighted to students in the monthly dissertation bulletin.

Data collected by the researchers found that use of the MS7012 site indicated that there had been a significant increase in the volume of traffic through it, with 38096 hits between 1 March and 1 July compared to 4178 for the same period in the previous academic year.

Questionnaire

Our 2011/12 PGT dissertation cohort (397 students) was asked to complete an online questionnaire and participate in three focus groups held between June and July 2012. The first phase of data collection began with the creation of an online questionnaire via the Bristol Online Surveys (BoS) portal in June 2012. The decision was taken to host this questionnaire online, as it would allow the researchers to reach students who were involved in fieldwork overseas and were unable to complete these questionnaires in person (Taylor, 2000). The expense of having participants send postal questionnaires to the researchers would be avoided and the automatic documentation of online responses would reduce the need for further transcription costs (Llieva et al, 2002). The survey consisted of 15 questions and it was estimated that it would take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Participants were asked to evaluate how helpful they felt each of the resources created for the MS7012 Blackboard site (examples of dissertations, FAQs, planner, screencasts, quizzes and e-tivities) had been during their projects on a likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly

Disagree.' The questionnaire was devised by the two researchers and piloted by a colleague with extensive experience in qualitative research design prior to use.

Participants were encouraged to complete the survey via a series of email bulletins that were sent to students prior to the submission of their projects in August and the release of their grades in September. The response rate for the survey was 20.15% and this was comparable to previous studies that have used online questionnaires (add reference). Although this was a self-selected sample, there were no systematic differences between those who responded and those who did not. The majority of respondents were female (88.8%) and reported that they were from China (93.8%). The other participants reported that they were from Cyprus, India, Italy and the United States.

<u>Focus Groups</u>

The questions used for the focus groups examined how students used these resources during their projects. They were asked to discuss which resources, if any, had proven particularly helpful and those that had proven less so. The study focused on whether the provision of these resources at appropriate milestones had reduced their dependence upon their supervisor. It was anticipated that resources such as the FAQs might reduce the number of times students contacted their supervisors to discuss generic issues such as the department guidelines on referencing. Hence, the participants were also asked to provide feedback on how their supervisors used the MS7012 site as part of their dissertation tutorials. Finally, students were asked to provide suggestions on how these resources could be improved for future cohorts.

An email was sent to the entire PGT student cohort in May 2012 asking for volunteers to participate in three focus groups. A £10 book token was offered as an incentive for student participation. A total of 16 participants were identified and three focus groups were held in June 2012. This was a self-selected sample that appeared to share similar characteristics to those who completed the online questionnaire. A thematic approach was adopted to analyse the focus group data after transcription (Boyatzis, 1998). These were identified and discussed by both researchers until agreement was reached. Quotations are provided below in order to illustrate these themes.
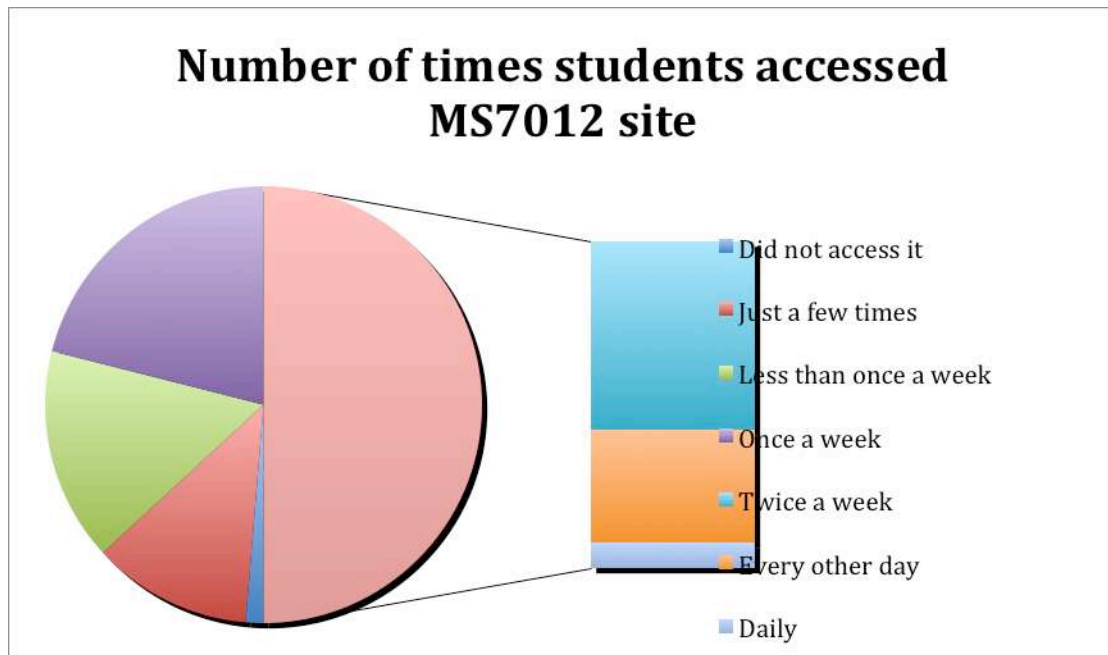
3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

<u>Questionnaire Results</u>

1) Frequency of use

The study found that 21.1 percent of the participants had accessed the website once a week with 28.9 percent accessing it twice a week (see Figure 4). Some students had also followed the advice given by the PGT Dissertation Tutor during the MS7004 Research Methods classes, with some accessing the site daily (3.9 percent) and every other day (17.1 percent). A minority of participants reported that they had not accessed the MS7012 site at all (1.3 percent).
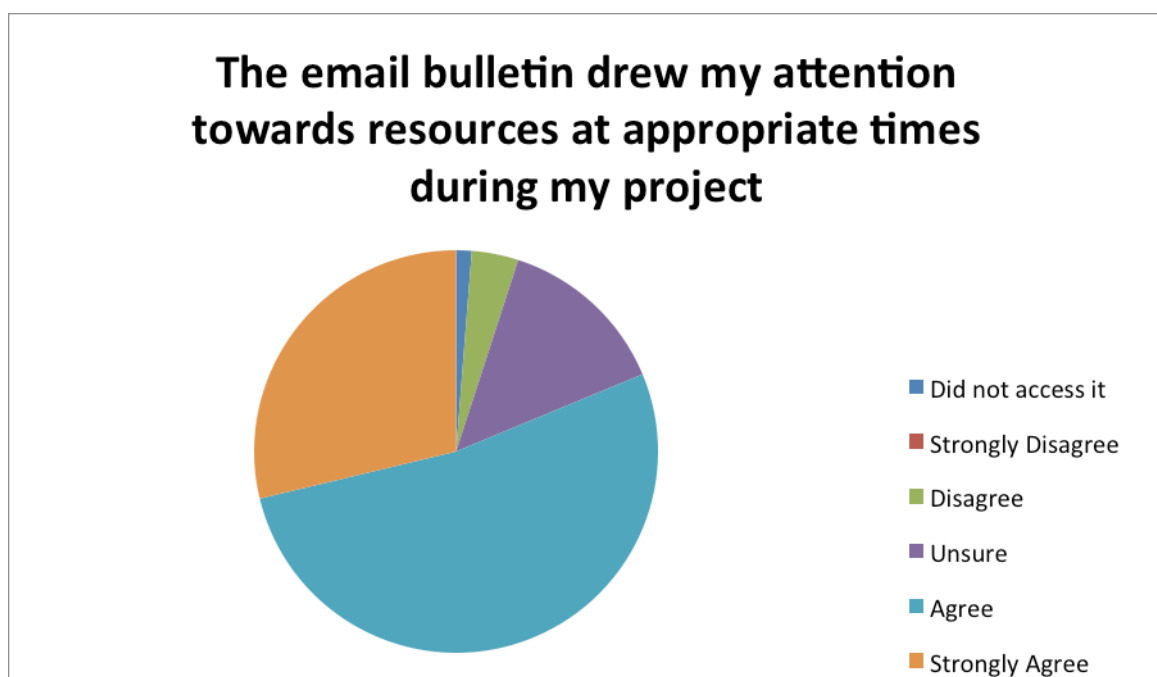
Figure 4: Number of Times students accessed MS7012 site

Number of times students accessed MS7012 site

Legend:
- Did not access it
- Just a few times
- Less than once a week
- Once a week
- Twice a week
- Every other day
- Daily

2) Email Bulletin

A clear majority of students (81.2 percent) felt that the monthly email bulletin had drew their attention towards the resources on the MS7012 site at appropriate times during their projects (see Figure 5). Some participants were unsure about how useful these resources had been (13.8 percent) and one student stated that they could not comment, as they had not accessed the email bulletin. This was an expected finding given the frequency with which the participants had used the Blackboard site during their dissertation projects.
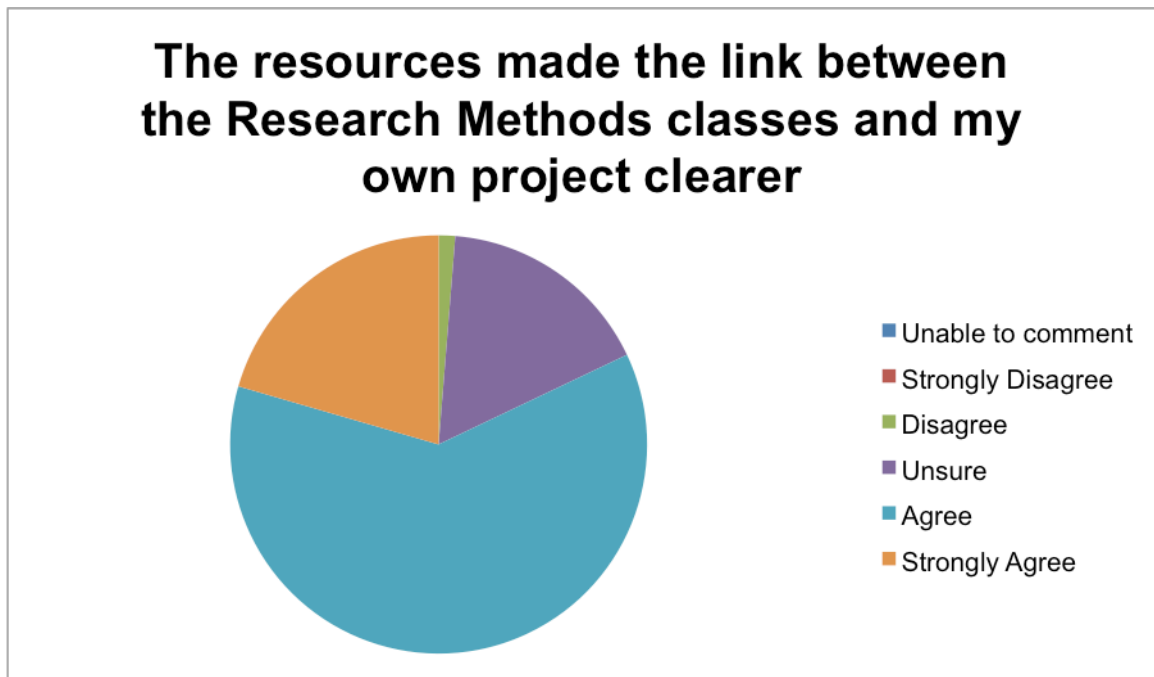
Figure 5: Student perceptions of resources highlighted in email bulletin

The email bulletin drew my attention towards resources at appropriate times during my project

Legend:
- Did not access it
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Unsure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

3) Link between Research Methods classes and PGT Dissertation

There was some evidence to suggest that the resources provided on the MS7012 site had made students more aware of the link between the Research Methods modules and their own projects (see Figure 6). The study found that 61.5 percent of participants agreed that the link was clearer with 20.5 percent strongly agreeing with this statement. As per the previous category, some participants were unsure (16.7 percent) and only one disagreed with the suggestion that the resources had made the link clearer.
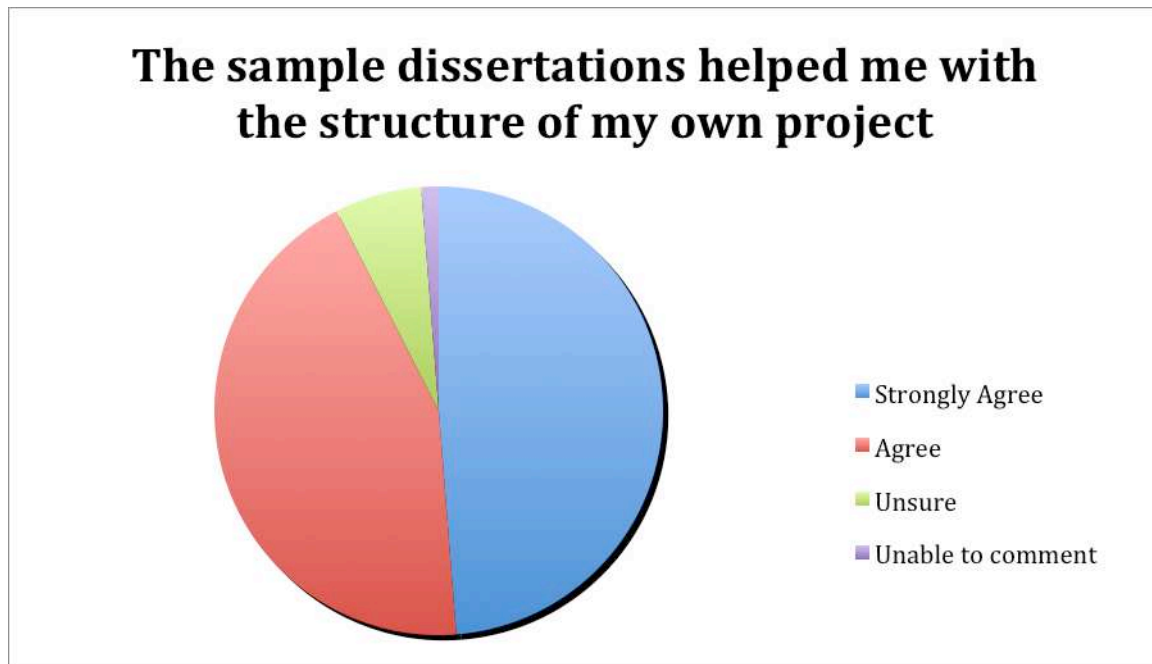
Figure 6: Student perceptions of links between Research Methods modules and their projects after use of resources on MS7012 site

4) Sample Dissertations

The sample dissertations were by far the most popular resource provided on the MS7012 site, as demonstrated by the 48.8 percent of participants who strongly agreed that they had helped them with the structure of their own projects (see Figure 7). There were no negative responses to this question and it was reasonable to assume that the student who was unable to comment had not accessed the MS7012 site during their project.
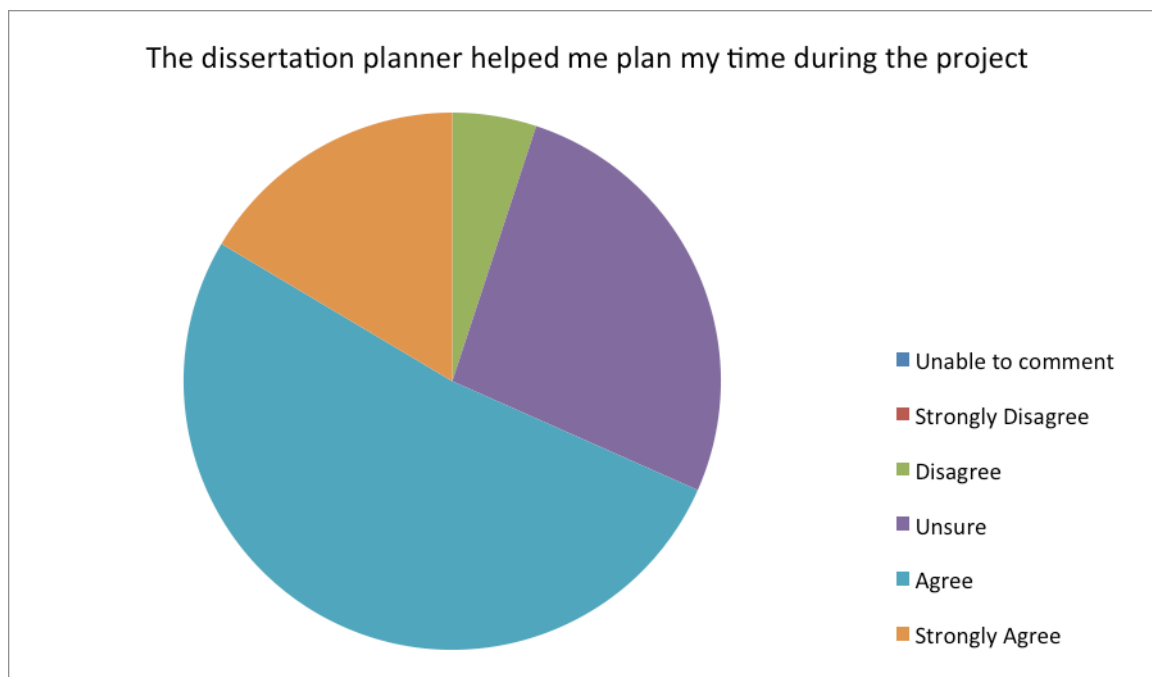
Figure 7: Student perceptions of sample dissertations on MS7012 site

The sample dissertations helped me with the structure of my own project

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Unsure
- Unable to comment

5) Dissertation Planner

The Dissertation Planner was the next most popular resource with 51.9 percent of participants agreeing, and 16.5 percent strongly agreeing, that it had helped them during the project (see Figure 8). A significant proportion of the participants (26.6 percent) were unsure whether it had been useful during their dissertations. There were also a small number of negative responses to this question with 5.1 percent of participants disagreeing that the planner had helped them.
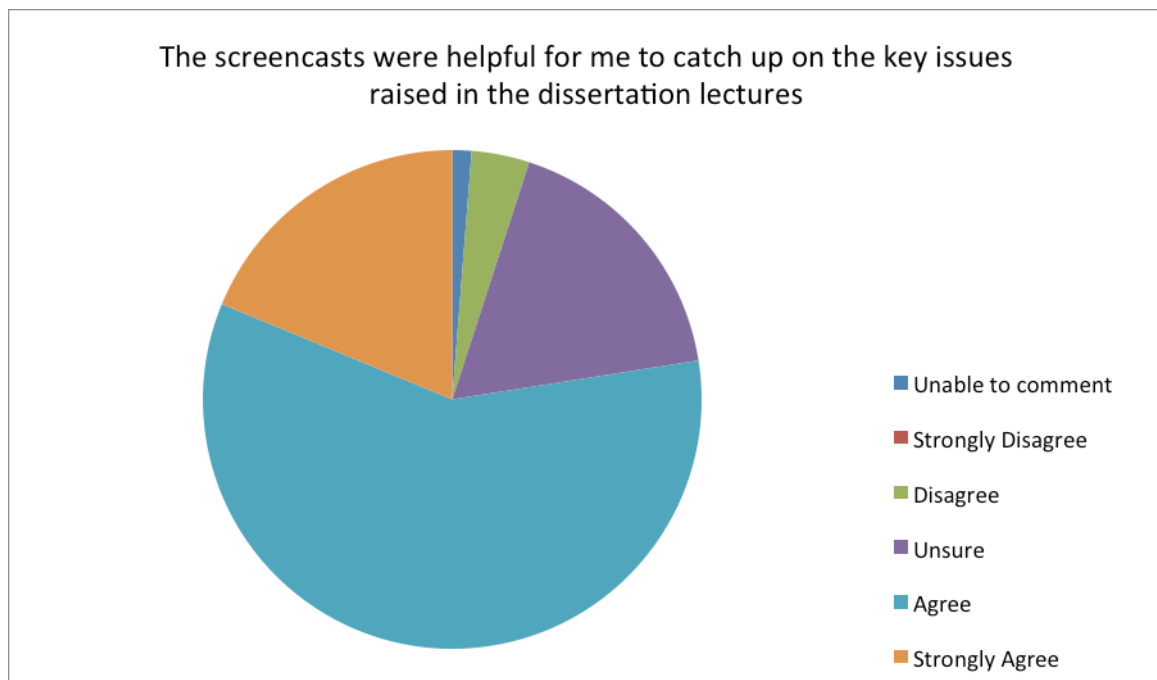
Figure 8: Student perceptions of how useful Dissertation Planner was during their projects

The dissertation planner helped me plan my time during the project

- Unable to comment
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Unsure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

6) Screencasts

The screencasts appeared to have helped students learn about key issues such as research ethics and allowed them to revise key points from the dissertation lectures in the first semester (see Figure 9). Hence, 58.8 percent of participants agreed that they had been useful for their projects with a further 18.8 percent strongly agreeing with this statement. Like the Dissertation Planner, a significant number (17.5 percent) were unsure about the value of these videos. There were also a small number of participants who felt they had not been helpful (3.8 percent).
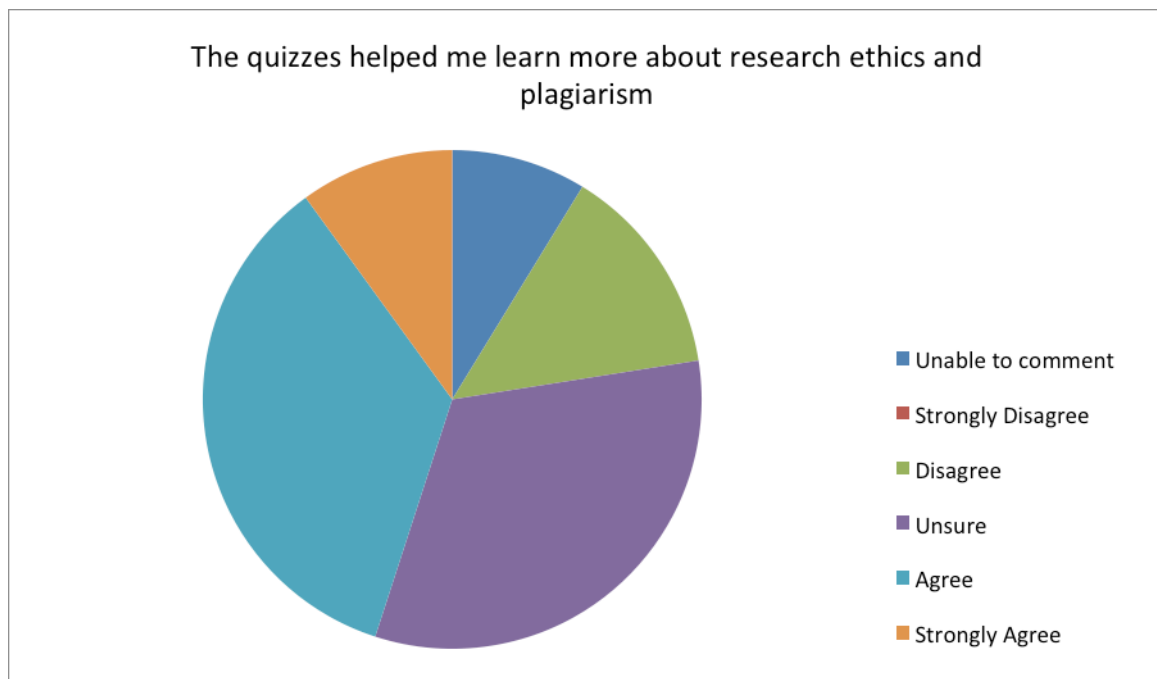
Figure 9: Student perceptions of whether screencasts helped them catch up on dissertation lectures
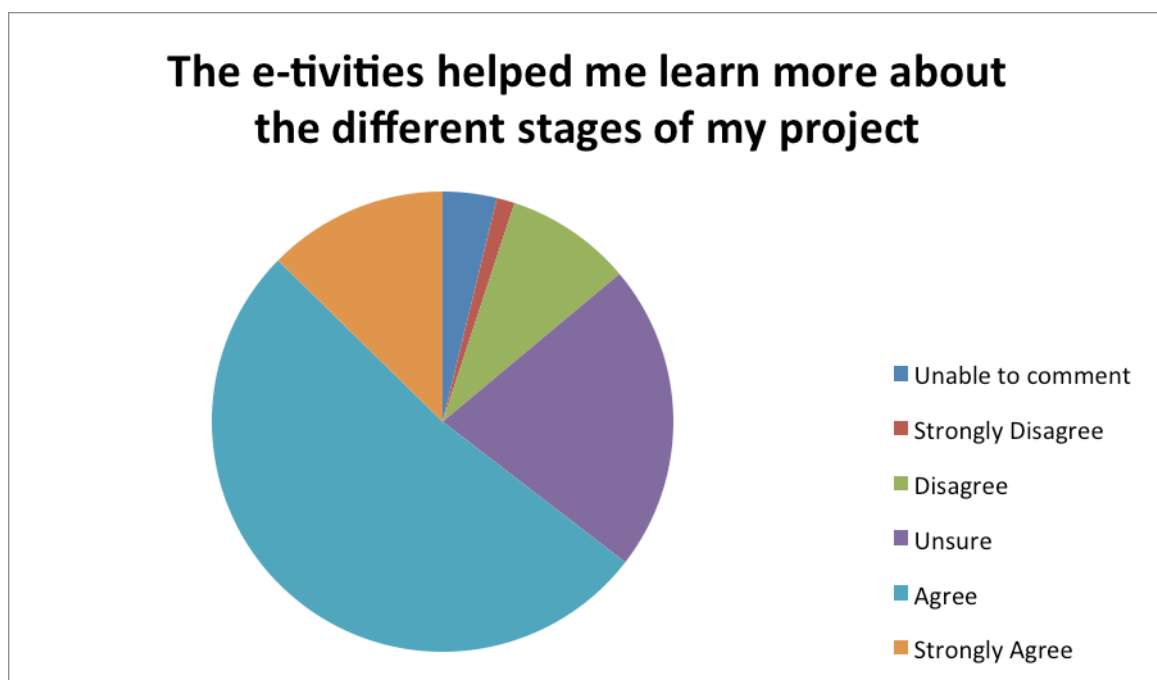

7) Quizzes and E-tivities

The quizzes appeared to have polarised opinion amongst the participants (Figure 10). The study found that 35 percent agreed that they had helped them learn more about research ethics while 32.5 percent were unsure about their pedagogic value. There were also significantly more students who disagreed (13.8 percent) compared to the other resources evaluated above.

Figure 10: Student perceptions of whether quizzes helped them learn more about research ethics

The e-tivities proved more popular amongst the students with 12.7 percent strongly agreeing and 51.9 percent agreeing that they had helped them learn more about the different stages of the dissertation process (Figure 11). Like the quizzes, some of the students were unsure about the value of completing these tasks (21.5 percent) and some disagreed that they had been beneficial for their projects (8.9 percent). This was also the only resource to generate a response of 'strongly disagree.'

Figure 11: Student perceptions about whether e-tivities helped them learn more about different stages of their projects

Focus Group Results

1) Sample dissertations helped students structure their own projects

The focus groups also suggested that the sample dissertations were the most popular resource on the MS7012 site amongst the students. A recurring theme that emerged from the study was that these examples had helped the participants with the organisation of their dissertations. Few of the students had written a dissertation before and the sample dissertations were said to not only show them how to structure their projects but also how to achieve a distinction:

The past papers is [sic] very useful because we can have very clear structure of what we should do in our report

(Focus Group 1, Participant 5,)

I always want to see what kind of a paper can get a high mark, always want to compare it, what kind of a paper can get a high mark and what, what can get a low mark

(Focus Group 1, Participant 2)

There were both positive and negative aspects raised by the participants in relation to how closely students might follow these examples. The dissertations themselves were critiqued by some of the participants. For example, one of the students in the second focus group suggested that the literature review and methodology chapters in one of the sample dissertations were too long. They stressed that they intended to 'avoid this problem' in their own projects. However, there were also concerns raised about the validity of copying the structure of these examples. Several students felt that these examples might limit the 'diversity' of dissertations produced by the 2011/12 PGT cohort:

For students I think it is not good, they can maybe copy the example of most like it, they don't have their mind [sic] in the dissertation (Focus Group 1, Participant 6)

It doesn't help students to think independently so therefore it sticks everyone to basic structure which is provided by students from the previous year. And I think I have a feeling that every student in this year has the same structure for the methodology (Focus Group 1, Participant 2)

While some students stressed how important it was that their peers took ownership of their projects, there were also many participants who felt that they needed more guidance on the MS7012 site. It was suggested that more dissertations should be uploaded to the site in order to provide guidance for students who use methods that did not feature in these examples. One participant went as far as to suggest that an example of a dissertation that had received the 'F' grade should be made available in order to show students the marking criteria applied to their projects.

2) Monthly Bulletin and Dissertation Planner as an 'alarm clock'

There were some signs that the both the monthly bulletin and dissertation planner had prompted students to take responsibility for managing their own projects. The focus groups provided further evidence of how the former had lead students to access resources on the MS7012 site at

appropriate milestones. One of the participants suggested that they might not have checked Blackboard if it were not for the email they had received from the PGT Dissertation Tutor:

It is really helpful because I won't actively go to the Blackboard to see dissertation part (Focus Group 2, Participant 2)

Several participants described the latter as an 'alarm clock' that reminded them to keep working on their projects alongside other pieces of coursework due in the second semester. Some of the students felt that the suggested schedule had made them feel more independent and pushed them towards meeting deadlines during their projects:

It's good and very easy to understand and I also look at the schedule about when should we, what should we do at what time (Focus Group 3, Participant 3)

I think the timeline is really like a clock, it asks, it reminds your classmates, your friends have finished it and when you view the Blackboard you feel the pressure, the pressure will push you to finish your dissertation (Focus Group 2, Participant 1)

There were two caveats to these findings that merit further discussion. The focus groups suggested that this blended learning approach was only likely to be successful if the supervisor integrated the Blackboard resources into their supervision model. Several students stated that their supervisor had provided them with a proposed timeline for completion of their dissertations. This often meant that the resources available on the MS7012 site were of less relevance to them:

I sort of use my supervisor's deadlines because obviously I need to submit all the parts to her directly, so I need to follow hers (Focus Group 2, Participant 1)

However, there were many students who felt that this was not necessarily a problem as the resources provided by both their own supervisor and the dissertation tutor had pushed them to complete their project. It was suggested by some that the frequency of contact might be more important than who provided the information:

I always check email frequently so I think is a very good way, no matter if it sent by Blackboard or by supervisor, both is important for me (Focus Group 1, Participant 5)

The other caveat relates to how postgraduate students managed their own workloads. While some students had worked on their projects alongside the coursework required for other modules, there inevitably were a few that had not accessed the MS7012 site nor met the deadlines set by their supervisor. They acknowledged that they had fallen behind many of their classmates and were concerned that they would not be able to submit the dissertation on time:

I didn't follow the schedule. Therefore I started my dissertation too late, so many things handed in a rush (Focus Group 3, Participant 6)

The results suggested that the MS7012 monthly email and planner may have had some positive effect in terms of encouraging students to start their projects early but that it couldn't force all students to do so.

3) Screencasts may have unintended pedagogic value for international students

The focus groups provided further evidence of how 'little OERs' such as screencasts may be used to provide content in ways that address educational needs of students. Although the study could not verify the claims made by participants, there was a suggestion that the screencasts deepened learning about key issues. The videos were said to have helped students take notes and follow the points made in the two dissertation lectures from the MS7004 module in the first semester. They often watched these videos at home and this was seen as a 'convenient way for students to learn.' In particular, students felt that they were more familiar with the online research ethics form after watching one of the screencasts:

You gave me the link to the screencast so I found it useful for something such as how to apply for ethical approval like there is a process, it is helpful because it is easy to know first I should do the steps. It's clear (Focus Group 3, Participant 2)

For me the screencasts were the only help for me and they were so useful as well […] Basically if there are screencasts or something on the Blackboard it will help us to take notes and listen to lectures later on (Focus Group 1, Participant 2)

The screencasts were criticised by a few participants due to the difficulties they had in understanding the narrator. Two students felt that the voice of the narrator was hard to understand and that the videos were too short. However, these students tended to watch the videos a few times in order to make sure they understood the main points:

Sometimes it's fast, maybe I need to listen again to understand (Focus Group 3, Participant 2)

This was an expected finding given the predominantly Chinese postgraduate cohort in 2011/12. However, the fact that these participants chose to view this content several times raises the possibility that screencasts might help improve the listening skills of international students. One student stated that they had not only replayed the video but also accessed the original powerpoint presentation that had been the subject of the screencast. Moreover, one of the students showed an implicit understanding of how individual learning styles may determine how useful students perceive screencasts to be:

The thing is everyone just learns the different places and ways. Someone prefer reading, someone prefer listening and watching so that is the point of the screencasts to me (Focus Group 3, Participant 4)

Hence, the study suggested that screencasts had the potential to facilitate student learning not only through their content but also their format. Further research is needed on whether lecture summaries posted on sites such as Screenr can improve the English language proficiency of international students.

4) Students want more interaction with academic staff on Blackboard

The feedback on the e-tivities suggested that the students wanted more engagement with their supervisors on Blackboard. For some, the research ethics e-tivity was not relevant to their study, as they had not planned to carry out research involving focus groups, questionnaires or interviews. The literature review e-tivity drew more mixed responses from the focus group participants. Several students noted that several of their classmates had posted their entire reading list under the

literature review e-tivity in error. They felt that the lack of a response from the dissertation tutor on the forum meant that there was little point in them completing the task. The perception amongst some of the participants was that this information would be better shared with their supervisor than their peers on Blackboard:

For me, the supervisor is more important and her style of what she wants and what she don't want in the literature review is very important because she is the first marker (Focus Group 1, Participant 2)

Nevertheless, the e-tivities did appear to have succeeded insofar as students were able to see that their peers had experienced similar problems with their projects. Several students felt reassured by the number of references that had been posted by students on the literature review e-tivity in error. Once again, the alarm clock analogy was used to describe how the e-tivity had 'pushed' some of the participants to work on their projects:

The e-tivity, the most important part was that you can see your classmates, how did they go, before I start my literature review I found that most of my classmates have started and posted their part (Focus Group 2, Participant 1)

A similar finding emerged from the discussion about the research ethics e-tivity. Those who had completed this task felt that their peers had raised similar issues about their projects:

Everyone had the same questions so I think it did work, yeah (Focus Group 1, Participant 3)

There were two suggestions made during the focus groups as to how the e-tivities might be improved for the 2012/13 cohort. Firstly, it was felt by many that the PGT Dissertation Tutor should post their responses to individual students in the forum. It was anticipated that more students would complete the two tasks if the tutor had a more visible presence on the forums. Second, several participants felt that their supervisors should take a more active role in responding to issues raised by the e-tivities. One student suggested that a weekly rota might be created in order to allow each supervisor to take a turn at responding to the e-tivities. However, they acknowledged that this might prove problematic given the number of queries that supervisors may have to deal with in addition to those raised by their own tutees.

5) Generic resources on Blackboard are more useful to students at the start of their projects

A recurring theme during the focus group discussions was that the resources created for the MS7012 site were generic and often did not directly address problems experienced by dissertation students during their projects. This was particularly evident in the responses of students towards the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Quizzes. The FAQs were said to have proven particularly useful for students who did not wish to repeatedly ask their supervisor questions during their projects:

The things that I got on the FAQs I don't want to bog down my supervisor with those questions because I do ask a lot of questions (Focus Group 1, Participant 2)

I think for me it is very useful at the beginning because I have no idea about how to do a dissertation (Focus Group 1, Participant 1)

The Quizzes proved less popular with several students choosing not to complete them because their work did not involve human participants. However, one student was very enthusiastic about the Research Ethics Quiz and stated that it had 'answered a lot of questions' they had about this topic.

The consensus was that these resources should be consulted at the start rather than the end of the dissertation process. There were inevitable limitations to the generic resources available on the MS7012 site and students were still likely to rely upon their supervisor for advice relating to their projects. However, many of the participants felt that the MS7012 site promoted a greater sense of ownership of the dissertation process amongst the students. While the supervisor was still the most important point of contact, the Blackboard resources engendered a greater sense of 'independence' amongst students by allowing them to learn about key issues such as research ethics at their own convenience:

I find that blackboard is very as you say independent that can show us when we like have no clue about how to do this, do that (Focus Group 2, Participant 2)

4. EVALUATION

See above

5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

The study provided some evidence to support the notion that blended learning approaches might help universities respond to the varied learning styles of an increasingly cosmopolitan student cohort. This was demonstrated by the generally positive responses to the screencasts, with some using these resources to improve their English language listening skills. Some students demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the different ways in which learning is facilitated and were aware of the inevitable limitations of the 'generic' content posted on Blackboard. There were very few negative responses in the questionnaire to the variety of resources provided on Blackboard. Most students felt that the MS7012 site had made the link between the Research Methods classes and their own projects much clearer. There were also some suggestions as to how this blended learning approach might be improved for future cohorts. The focus group participants wanted greater interactivity with both the PGT Dissertation tutor and their own supervisors on Blackboard. It was suggested that students would be more likely to complete the e-tivities if members of staff were seen to be responding to their queries in the Dissertation Forum.

However, not all of the participants had used these resources to 'deepen' their learning about key issues relating to the dissertation process. Some felt there was no need to complete e-tivities about research ethics, as their project did not involve human participants. There was arguably a more important factor that determined the extent to which students accessed the MS7012 site, namely the model of supervision model. Understandably, students relied upon their supervisors for advice and resources during their projects, which meant that they were less likely to use Blackboard to seek out answers to their questions. This raises the question as to how these resources might be better integrated into the model of supervision favoured by tutors in the Department of Media and Communication. Nevertheless, the questionnaire and focus group data suggest that the resources were very well received by students and engendered some sense of ownership and independence amongst those who used them regularly.

The use of blended learning approaches for the supervision of international dissertation students clearly merits further investigation. Future research should focus on the feasibility of standardising this model of supervision within the context of an academic department. This might involve supervisors coming together to create content such as a dissertation schedule, FAQs, and little OERs such as screencasts. The supervisors could then agree to adhere to the same set of deadlines and direct students towards these resources at appropriate milestones during their projects. The proposed project could evaluate both staff and student experiences of this blended learning approach towards PGT dissertation supervision. What is clear from this pilot study is that there may be unexpected pedagogical benefits in using Blackboard in this way.

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