Challenges with Engagement of an E-Learning Part Time Course

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Abstract

The global pandemic is changing teaching and learning structures and patterns in higher education. With learning and teaching activities relying on digital and physical infrastructures in varying ways, the higher education institutions have put the implementation and refinement of digital learning and teaching on the high agenda, which leads to transforming traditional face-to-face learning to digital learning.

We have run an eLearning and part-time MSc course on Renewable Energy and Energy Management for nine years in Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment at Ulster University. We have experienced the advantages of an eLearning course with its flexibility of location and time and high demanding of “green skills”. Meanwhile we also have developed a clear understanding of challenges faced by team members and students. To make the course effective operation, we have conducted a range of studies, in particular relating to the following aspects:

- 1) the effect of e-learning methods compared with conventional face-to-face methods;
- 2) part-time student challenges with engagement which are typically associated with the stress from their job, personal life and time management;
- 3) ensuring immediate relevance of the course (e.g. state of the art) to facilitate student employment/career advancement.

In order to address these aspects we have studied the impact of electronic facilities support on the students’ academic performance and students’ class attendance in person, introduced a new research-led methodology in module delivery, assignment setting and selecting MSc research dissertation topics, thereby inspiring the students to think of real-world energy issues in their own workplaces /regions /countries. Importantly we have continuously reviewed the professional bodies approaches, to incorporate the latest policies, newest research and pedagogy in course design and teaching practices, ensuring the leaning outcome reflects the support of students’ careers. This paper will present our pragmatic approaches to address the challenges encountered during running this course and empirical results, which could be beneficial to practitioners in higher education.

Keywords: e-learning; digital learning; engagement; research-led methodology