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Offline Study in Online Education: Promoting Equity of Access During the Digital Transformation

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Abstract:

The advent of generative-AI has accelerated digital transformation in distance education, including emerging pedagogies for online and blended settings. Despite numerous advantages, one of the ethical questions posed is how to ensure equity of experience for students with limited, or no online access due to disability, digital poverty, or secure confinement?

At the Open University, UK, distance learning students on Earth and Environment modules study on-screen-only materials; printed packs of these material are therefore provided to those unable to study online. Over 80% of students using print packs as an adjustment for a disability spend over half their study time using them; they blend this with the online materials for interactive content and report it to be effective (Aiken and Hutton, 2023). However, those with no online access are unable to adopt a blended approach and have a much poorer experience (Aiken and Hutton, 2023): it is likely this inequity will increase as more digital technologies are introduced. The problem is compounded by ~75% of students receiving no advice on making the best use of their print pack.

Based on the findings of our previous research (Aiken and Hutton, 2023), we designed an intervention for the academic year 22/23. This involved recruiting and training two Associate Lecturer champions, one on each of our large year 1 (“Science: concepts and practice”; ~1800 students) and year 2 (“Environmental Science”; ~800 students) modules. Following training and familiarisation with the content of the print packs, the champions provided support and advice to fellow Associate Lecturers through an asynchronous forum and carried out their own evaluation of the print packs. At the conclusion of the academic year, the champions reported on their experiences and evaluation of the packs. There was a high degree of similarity between the two champions’ reports, including:

- Recognition of the divide between students able to blend print packs with on-screen study and those entirely reliant on a print pack.
- Recommendations to
 - make print pack materials more readily available to Associate Lecturers, and
 - improve print pack organisation and formatting, particularly for those without online access.

In this session, we will report in more detail on the champions’ findings, and on how we have expanded the roles to encompass more Earth and Environmental Science modules for the academic year 23/24. This scaling up is part of a pilot to support a cross-University initiative improving print packs. We are also interested in engaging in discussion on how we can continue to support students equitably if they have limited online access: as generative-AI becomes embedded in our online learning, to what extent can printed materials provide a reasonable adjustment?

How do we promote fairness in digital learning futures?

Keywords: disability; online study; adjustment; digital equity

Reference

Aiken, F.J., and Hutton, C. (2023) *Improving equity of experience in distance education for students with challenges accessing online learning environments*. Paper presented at the European Digital Learning Network Annual Conference 2023, Dublin, Ireland. <https://eden-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EDEN-2023-Annual-Conference-Proceedings.pdf>