

# Implications and Challenges in Studying as a Full Distance Learner on a Masters Programme: Students' Perspectives

Dr David Fincham<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Senior Lecturer and HEA Senior Fellow, MA Catholic School Leadership, School of Education, Theology & Leadership, St Mary's University, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, London TW1 4SX, UK. E-mail: david.fincham@stmarys.ac.uk

Received: August 15, 2016

Accepted: September 8, 2016

Online Published: November 10, 2016

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v6n1p34

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n1p34>

## Abstract

There has been a growing interest in the application of information and communication technology (ICT) as a means of improving and extending participation in Higher Education and in its impact on pedagogy. Six years ago, two students were recruited to a Masters Degree programme at St Mary's University, London, as Full Distance Learners. Full Distance Learning implies that through asynchronous participation, students are not required to be together at the same time but can access course materials and communicate with tutors and other students flexibly at their own time and convenience through a virtual learning environment (VLE). Numbers have grown exponentially and, currently, there are more than fifty Full Distance Learners engaged at some point in the programme. This paper sets out to explore the personal reflections of the experiences of Full Distance Learners who have successfully completed the course. Adopting a phenomenological approach, it was possible for the researcher to explore individual perceptions of students in order to evaluate their particular experiences, which are not often studied. Consequently, it was possible to interpret the benefits and limitations of studying as Full Distance Learners from their own experiences. It was hoped that an examination of the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own personal points of view would indicate to what extent they would support, inform and challenge conventional practice.

**Keywords:** Information Technology, Full Distance Learning, Higher Education, Catholic Education, Phenomenology

## 1. Introduction

This paper sets out to present a case study of the experience of Full Distance Learners studying on a Masters programme at St Mary's University, London, over the past five years. Since it was first inaugurated in 1997, the MA in Catholic School Leadership programme at St Mary's University has attracted increasing interest from a growing number of students – mainly teachers, governors or chaplains working in, or aspiring to work in, Catholic schools and colleges. (Sullivan, Murphy and Fincham; 2015) Amongst other things, it offers an opportunity for those within this community to study for a Masters degree.

Initially, and during its early years, the course was run on the campus at St Mary's in the form of traditional face-to-face classes, either at Saturday Schools or on midweek evenings, which, normally, would conform to a pattern of three hours of teaching, in group sizes of between 15 and 20 students. This traditional model of education is characterised by Jarvis et al. (2003: 117) as 'closed', i.e., learning and teaching is restricted to a time and a space, which is determined by the educational institution. In this case, there is a discrete timetable for the arrangement of classes at particular times and places.

In the course of time, however, it transpired that, with increasing pressures on the time of teachers and school leaders, enrolment to midweek evening classes, in particular, became progressively more difficult to sustain, so other means of provision that were attractive to teachers had to be considered. With major advances in information and communication technologies in general and with the development of internet and online technology in particular, it was feasible to extend learning beyond the boundaries of space and time and to pursue opportunities to develop 'open' and distance learning strategies.

It was considered advantageous to adopt a blended learning approach, exploiting technological developments, which, combined with the promotion of independent learning, would facilitate the further advancement of the course. It

was felt that, whilst, on the one hand, this would reduce the amount of face-to-face contact, on the other hand, it would enable students to manage their own study time in a more efficient way; they would be able to take greater responsibility for their own learning and it would, combined with the opening of regional centres as meeting places for classes, extend the outreach of the course.

Thus, within a blended learning package, students were encouraged to respond to online activities within a 'virtual classroom'. Students responded positively to this development and indicated that they felt that the opportunities provided by online activities enhanced the quality of their learning experience. It was found that they were able to share discussions productively with fellow-students and develop skills as independent learners. (Fincham; 2013) The introduction of online learning, therefore, represented a significant advance, which had a conspicuous impact on learning and assessment.

Subsequently, recognising the potential of these developments, a Full Distance Learning (FDL) mode of learning was introduced in the autumn of 2009. This provided an opportunity for students, who might otherwise have found it difficult to travel to St Mary's or to regional centres at specified times, to pursue their studies from home. Moreover, with access to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), it was possible to offer students the opportunity, wherever they were based, to participate in a cohort of students within one 'learning community' in a virtual classroom.

## **2. Initial Impact**

The development of online access to the course to complement blended learning provision had a significant and practical effect on learning and teaching on the programme. For example, modes of interaction, using computer technologies, placed an increasing emphasis on independent and personalised learning.

Unlike the traditional classroom, in which participation is limited by time and space, a virtual classroom offers asynchronous opportunities for students to engage in discussions amongst themselves and with their tutors. Consequently, learning becomes more democratic in the sense that students who might otherwise be reticent to engage in traditional classroom discussions are able to offer their contributions to online conversations at any time. Tutors, too, acting as online facilitators, can focus on discussions and add observations in response to student contributions.

Starting their studies at three points in the year – October, February and June – students, once registered, have, in principle, up to six months to complete each module. Moreover, they were able to gain up to 20% of their assessment marks through their responses to online activities and engagement with colleagues in the virtual classroom.

Significantly, by integrating asynchronous computer discussions into course design, it was possible to afford greater authority to the contribution of students. Ironically, though learners, they could also contribute to the learning of others. As Lea (2004: 759) argues, the use of virtual learning environments potentially opens up new perspectives

...by offering the students the opportunity for electronic debate and discussion and, additionally, providing a permanent record of these which can be accessed repeatedly by students throughout their studies.

Consequently, greater emphasis could be attached to learning compared with teaching.

## **3. Recruitment**

The promotion of distance learning methods, broadening both temporal and spatial boundaries, not only increased the focus on learning but also had a positive impact on recruitment. It is interesting, in this respect, to recall that Williams (2005: 330) observed that, as an innovator in the field of distance learning in higher education, the Open University became:

... Britain's largest university by far in terms of student numbers, yet its campus at Milton Keynes is physically the smallest and is rarely visited by students.

In the last five years or so, recruitment for the programme has been enhanced by these developments in online learning. Through the facility of a virtual learning environment (VLE), the extension of the distance learning mode of learning has been facilitated. When this mode of learning was first introduced in 2009, two students were recruited as Full Distance Learners, enabling them to pursue the course from their own homes. One of these two students was a teacher based in Malta, who, proceeding to gain exceptional grades for every assignment and for the research-based dissertation, graduated with distinction in 2012. This experience provided evidence that Full Distance Learning could enable students to achieve an outcome at least as good as students who were taught by traditional methods. On the evidence of this student's achievement and the learning outcomes of other students, it has been demonstrated that distance learning allows the programme to reach more students without any loss in quality.

By the end of 2010, there were six participants following the course as Full Distance Learners. Since then the numbers have grown exponentially. As I write, in 2016, there are more than 50 Full Distance Learners actively engaged at some point in the course.

#### 4. What is the Impact on Learning?

It is, perhaps, a remarkable observation that classrooms and schools have, on the whole, traditionally concentrated more attention on teaching rather than on learning. Sometimes it seems that learning is predicated on teaching and that learning is exclusively the product of teaching. However, when the approach to teaching is oriented towards learners and to enhancing their thinking, they will potentially enjoy richer learning experiences (Trigwell et al; 2009).

A utilitarian approach to learning, in which learning has been regarded as the acquisition of knowledge that is owned by individuals, is well documented, and is satirised by Charles Dickens (1854), through the words of the schoolmaster, Mr Gradgrind, in the opening lines of *Hard Times*:

'NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!'

Accordingly, the traditional view has been that learning is the accumulation of knowledge, which is the result of teaching, and, consequently, its success can be measured by quantified achievement in public examinations or the retention and recall of information at the completion of a course. Yet, palpably, learning is more than assimilating knowledge. Moreover, students learn most effectively through direct personal experience.

There is also an assumption that learning is something that is conducted by and for the benefit of individuals in an autonomous and independent way for instrumental ends. However, learning should not be considered simply as means towards material success and prosperity. Learning does not belong to individuals, but arises from an interrelationship between various people who engage in a shared conversation. Learning takes place through social interaction and our communication with others. It involves the development of personal and social skills. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994), for example, conclude that:

In a learning community the goal is to advance the collective knowledge and, in that way, support the growth of individual knowledge

Everything we learn takes place in a social context.

Elbers and Streefland (2000) endorse this view, asserting that learning arises from relationships between people. Thus, in their research, they found that, in contrast to the peer pressure, fear of criticism and impersonal relationships that characterise many classrooms, learners who collaborate as members of an online community of enquiry are more likely to be motivated to learn from one another.

The complex and constantly changing demands of contemporary society require that teachers and learners come to see themselves as co-learners in a collaborative process. Indeed, most good teachers have always stated that their best lessons are those in which they have learned something from their students. Thus, through the virtual classroom, a programme is able to promote learning by creating an environment in which there are ample opportunities for students to interact and engage in discussions and to collaborate and respond to each other in a constructive way.

Murphy (1997: 137) speaks of developing a 'community of leaders', in which members at all levels of a community are involved in developing a vision and playing an active part in transforming the organisation. Similarly, the notion of a 'community of practice', in which participants engage in a process of collective learning, was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000), as the basis of their social theory of learning. Thus, they suggest, learning is constructed where knowledge and practice are developed and sustained within learners' active participation in social communities. Moreover, in a review of about a hundred texts, Watkins (2005) concludes that the development of learning communities has the potential to enhance social, moral, behavioural, intellectual and performance outcomes.

Consequently, learning can be regarded as a social activity. To learn is to engage and develop as a person within, and as part of, a social framework. Learning is not just about acquiring skills and competencies in isolation, but about expressing skills and competencies for the benefit of society as a whole. Learning, therefore, is about much more than the acquisition of facts. One implication is that the teacher has a responsibility to be a facilitator who encourages and enables students to engage collaboratively in meaningful learning activities. Consequently, in order

to enable learning to take place, pedagogically, teachers should consider the adoption of a variety of appropriate teaching strategies, which would include collaborative participation, group work, managed dialogue, role play and simulations.

## 5. Challenges

An inherent challenge for tutors supervising Full Distance Learners is that there will be an emphasis on personalised learning to support students with their engagement in online discussions and to share good practice. This can be time-consuming. One implication of the growing popularity of distance learning on the programme, therefore, is that, with the focus on individual and personal learning, the workload of tutors potentially increases. Indeed, Wikeley and Muschamp (2004) advise that, in developing distance learning, rather than loosening the structure of teaching, it will allow and ensure that students will enjoy greater attentive supervision by tutors.

Moreover, whilst students on the course are encouraged to be independent learners, there is a danger that they may feel remote and disconnected, detached from the learning process, missing opportunities of meeting tutors and fellow students through attending timetabled seminars or interacting with others in conferences and other research events. Full Distance Learners can easily become isolated learners. Significantly, the first time I met two Full Distance Learners on our programme, who graduated in 2015, was when they attended the graduation ceremony.

Another challenge is that, according to the findings of Minocha and Petra (2012), technologies cannot reproduce the students' experience of face-to-face meetings with their supervisors and colleagues. It was evident, for example, that even if learners regularly interact with their supervisors and colleagues by email, or by engaging with Skype, with virtual learning environments, or through telephone-conferencing, opportunities to travel to the campus or to meet at a convenient location for face-to-face interactions are still generally regarded as preferable for learners and supervisors alike.

Some students can find the process of initial registering and accessing the virtual learning classroom problematic. Other common difficulties experienced by students, which are noted by Zhu and Proctor (2012), for example, include learning how to use online facilities and the investment of time and effort needed to devote to corresponding within the VLE. Marginson (2008: 303), on the other hand, draws attention to the potential universal appeal of online learning:

Although most activity in higher education is nation-bound, a distinctive global dimension is growing in importance, connecting with each national system of higher education while also being external to them all.

The fact that the MA programme has been able to recruit learners from as far afield as the Republic of Ireland and from Malta, as well as from Nepal, Australia and Shanghai, lends credence to this statement. Indeed, this diversity of participation, potentially, leads to a richness in online learning experiences.

## 6. Methodology

The purpose of the enquiry was to investigate the perspectives of students towards their experiences as Full Distance Learners. There is a paucity of literature on the experiences of distance learners in their engagement with online learning and it would be interesting to investigate approaches that would support them in their studies.

The focus of this study was on capturing the 'lived reality' of participants pursuing a Masters course as Full Distance Learners. It was therefore concerned with the authentic and subjective experience of learners within the social medium of an online community. In this sense, it can be characterised as a phenomenological research study, setting out to understand participants' perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation (or phenomenon). A phenomenological approach was considered to be the most suitable method of achieving an understanding of their experiences because it would focus on the reflections of individual learners themselves. (Note 1)

Between 2009 and 2014, seven students had completed their studies and had successfully graduated from the course (see Table 1), so it was proposed to elicit information from them, using semi-structured questionnaires to capture their detailed responses verbatim.

Table 1. Numbers of students who have graduated since the inception of the FDL mode of learning on the MA in Catholic School Leadership

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015
FDL graduands	3	1	0	3

The intention, therefore, was to set out to gather data by conducting a small-scale research project during the months of November and December, 2015. Students who had completed the course as Full Distance Learners and had graduated from the course at the end of their studies were contacted. During the five years since the introduction of this mode of learning, seven Full Distance Learner students had graduated, and, although only five were still in contact, all five of them replied. (Note 2)

In order to investigate the experiences of students who had participated in the course as Full Distance Learners, a simple questionnaire was designed. Specifically, the participants were invited to respond to a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix): The advantage of this was that, whilst the questions allowed for expansive responses, the direction of the questions was reasonably focussed. Indeed, the participants were encouraged to develop and elaborate upon their reflections. Significant issues and concerns that appeared in the participants' responses to the questionnaires, which subsequently form the basis of analysis, discussion and interpretation, are set out systematically in following sections of this paper.

### **7. Ethical Considerations**

Any research study needs to conform to ethical guidelines. All methodologies are subject to ethical considerations, which are liable to appear at any point. Ethical approval is required to ensure that participants' dignity and privacy is protected, and to minimise any risk to participants. It was therefore essential, in order to anticipate any potential ethical implications arising from procedures that were adopted, which could confound the results of the investigation, that, prior to conducting the research, the researcher gained approval from St Mary's University Ethics Sub-Committee.

Concern was also given in respect of the confidentiality and the anonymity of respondents. Participants have a right to expect that any information they provide will be respected and treated in a confidential manner and that they will be afforded anonymity. In order to protect their identity, then, all participants were assured that anonymity would be preserved and that all information gathered would be treated with the utmost respect and sensitivity.

All participants were known to the writer personally, so the information they provided needed to be handled with consideration. It was important, therefore, that, as well as wishing to avoid partiality, they would feel confident that they could give their answers honestly and without fear of identification or prejudice. In following ethical guidelines, each participant was assured that information provided in response to the survey was regarded as anonymous and confidential and they were assured that any information that could identify them as an individual would not be disclosed to anyone else under any circumstances.

### **8. Results**

The principal interest of this enquiry was to investigate the personal experiences of students who had participated in the MA in Catholic School Leadership programme as Full Distance Learners. Through careful questioning, it was possible to identify significant themes, which are elaborated systematically with reference to each question as follows:

#### **Question 1: Why did you opt to study the MA as a Full Distance Learner?**

It was important, in the first place, to consider the motivation of students in deciding to apply for a place on the full distance mode of study rather than any other option. On the whole, respondents indicated that their rationale for opting for the Full Distance mode of learning was convenience and related to their domestic circumstances. One respondent, for example, stated that

It was more convenient for me in terms of organising my time. I am a busy working mum of two and so time is precious. I prefer to work in the evening when my children are asleep.

(Respondent 2)

Respondent 1, too, intimated that the situation at home made the Full Distance mode of learning a more attractive option compared with traditional classroom learning:

I chose this option as I have a young family and I could not commit to evening or weekend classes. This option worked best for me as I could manage my family life and work life well.

It is acknowledged that it can be difficult to balance the demands of professional commitments and family life with the challenges of pursuing academic study. These concerns are articulated by other respondents. Thus, Respondent 4 stated:

Full Distance Learning was my preferred option as it allowed me to fit my studies around work and family commitments....

Interestingly, one respondent also indicated that an asynchronous and flexible approach to learning proved to be advantageous where the vicissitudes of life, career and personal circumstances of the student were fluid and unpredictable:

I started off studying as a semi-Full Distance Learner and (attended) Saturday schools. My husband was then transferred to Gibraltar with his company and I was luckily able to continue the course as a Full Distance Learner. Whilst I was still studying, we then decided to emigrate to Australia and so, being a Full Distance Learner, I was able to continue and complete my studies in Australia.

(Respondent 5)

Whilst, admittedly, these were exceptional circumstances, it nevertheless clearly demonstrated that, where students were prepared to be adaptable, the flexibility of the Full Distance Learning approach has proved itself to be advantageous in situations where they experienced unanticipated changes in lifestyle. This perspective was elaborated further in responses to the next question.

### **Question 2: What would you say were the advantages of studying the course as a Full Distance Learner?**

Advantages of studying as a Full Distance Learner included the flexibility of organising study around domestic and professional commitments. This was articulated by Respondent 4, for example, who said that 'I was able to fit my studies around work and family at times that suited me.'

It has to be acknowledged, on the other hand, that there are challenges for mature students who have to balance the responsibilities of professional, family and personal commitments with the demands of academic study. The flexibility of being able to study in a way that suits the circumstances of individual students, though, is one of the biggest advantages. Thus, for example, Respondent 5 added that 'The flexibility of being able to study in a way that suits individual people is one of the biggest advantages.' This is reinforced, too, in the following response:

I could work at my own pace and fit the study in around my commitments.

(Respondent 1)

Respondent 5, confirming that distance learning provided opportunities as well as challenges, maintained that it allowed students to plan and pace their studies around their other commitments:

Planning my own time so that it fitted around school and home life was a definite advantage. Being able to absorb all of the reading at my own pace was also very helpful. I also enjoyed being able to spend time researching around a topic immediately as I was reading.

Respondent 3, furthermore, said that, as there were no 'diarised sessions', the diary was freed up, and, correspondingly, there was no need to travel long distances to classes. Moreover, it was considered that communication with a personal tutor via email allowed for prompt electronic responses to any queries. Indeed, the personal one-to-one supervision was acknowledged to be a significant component of distance learning:

I enjoyed the opportunity to work closely with the course's lecturers and whilst this may also have been the case for those who didn't study full distance, having access to help whenever it was needed was a real strength of the course.

(Respondent 5)

As well as online resources, students are provided with written materials and text books. Respondents regarded the combination of written and online resources as an added advantage of distance learning.

Longer term, another advantage for students pursuing this mode of learning is that skills developed in engaging with online communication can contribute to career development, as acknowledged by Respondent 5:

I also found that studying full distance meant that I had to get used to becoming an 'online learner'. I developed a large array of skills that my undergraduate degree (in 1997) didn't require. This has since helped me in the classroom with my students and I felt that I was able to better transition to this type of learning platform.

From the evidence, too, it seems that students did not feel that studying as Full Distance Learners impeded the quality of their learning. On the contrary, it was proposed that being involved with a wide community of learners

allowed students the opportunity to engage with a diversity of conversations with colleagues which enriched their learning experience. This view was expressed by Respondent 5:

The sharing of different perspectives and experiences is very valuable and adds an extra dimension to the course.

It was also intimated that online learning was considered to be more 'democratic' in that, unlike in real classrooms, all students have the opportunity to contribute to discussions.

As someone who tends to be more of an introvert in a 'classroom study' situation, I found the opportunity to think through my answers in my own time or read responses, process them and then work on my replies better suited how I like to learn (as opposed to being in a room and feeling the need to contribute to a conversation then and there).

(Respondent 5)

Evidently, those who might otherwise have felt reticent in face-to-face classroom discussions felt less inhibited when contributing to online conversations.

### **Question 3: What are the disadvantages?**

Additionally, participants were asked to express the extent to which they had any misgivings or difficulties with regard to their experience of pursuing the course as Full Distance Learners. Perhaps self-evidently, one drawback was that Full Distance Learners must work on their own, physically separated from fellow-students, and therefore must inevitably miss the face-to-face companionship of other students. One respondent, for example, regretted that, whilst it was appreciated that there was access to communication with tutors, opportunities for face-to-face interaction with colleagues, that would have been possible in a conventional classroom setting, was not available for Full Distance Learners:

Sometimes it would have been useful to talk through modules with other people, though the tutors were very useful in this role.

(Respondent 1)

Respondent 5 considered

I did think sometimes though that I would enjoy seeing people face-to-face.

Similarly, Respondent 3 observed that there was

... (a) lack of personal interaction with colleagues to allow for immediate discussion (and) testing of ideas.

This view was endorsed by Respondent 2, who said:

Perhaps the lack of contact with fellow students to be able to share ideas and hear alternative perspectives but online discussion was effective for me.

Two respondents also noted the sense of isolation that can be experienced by Full Distance Learners:

Can become a 'lonely' study.

(Respondent 3)

Sometimes you can feel a little isolated in your studies...

(Respondent 4)

Significantly, on the other hand, Respondent 5 highlighted the importance of tutorial input in support of Full Distance Learners:

In the end, this isn't really a disadvantage because the online community and lecturers always helped to avoid feelings of isolation.

Another difficulty that was expressed, and which should not be overlooked, was that of their experiencing technical problems:

Sometimes the system failed to operate and left one feeling frustrated.

(Respondent 4)

Several participants, however, considered the importance of self-discipline in organising their studies:

On a personal level, full-distance required a lot of self-motivation and discipline.... I do think you need to be a very disciplined person to complete a full-distance (or in my case, make yourself one!) .... having to sit and study, at times, required a great deal of discipline.

(Respondent 5)

It can be easy to put off studying – organisation is key!

(Respondent 4)

It was clear that, if they were to complete the course successfully as distance learners, self-discipline and self-motivation were important characteristics that students needed to cultivate and develop.

**Question 4: How would you describe your experience as a Full Distance Learner on the MA CSL programme?**

Respondents indicated that one of the most significant advantages of pursuing the course as a Full Distance Learner was that it had enhanced their continuing professional and personal development. Its impact on both the theoretical and practical aspects of their work was consistently affirmed. Respondent 1, for example, stated that

I really enjoyed the course and I felt better equipped to undertake the headship in a Catholic school having completed this MA.

(Respondent 1)

Respondent 2 maintained that

I enjoyed the challenge and the exposure to new concepts and ideas. I also enjoyed being able to apply the theory to my professional experience in school. ... (I) gained a great deal professionally and personally from the experience.

Respondent 5 endorsed the view that Full Distance Learning had been beneficial in terms of professional and personal development:

I feel that it helped me to grow as a professional as well as a person. It taught me many new skills and opened up a whole world of theory and practice with regards to Catholic Education.

Indeed, Respondent 5, in particular, commented that the experience had made a significant impression on their own career development:

I have been wanting to ... let you know how much my qualification has meant to me and supported me in establishing myself in teaching and leadership here in Australia. Quite frankly, I don't know what I would have done without it!

In the context of lifelong learning, an important consideration in supporting students in pursuing a Masters programme is that it will also provide opportunities for further learning. It was reassuring, therefore, that the experience of studying as a Full Distance Learner also encouraged the view that it provided the basis for further research. Thus, according to Respondent 3,

With regard to the content of the course it was excellent, created lots of stretch and challenge, helped me develop a number of ideas and theories, some of which I would like to pursue to doctoral level, highlighted many of the challenges and problems facing Catholic education, something of which I should like to be a part of the solutions

The benefits of distance learning in contributing to the development of qualities such as of self-discipline and organisation were also specifically endorsed:

As a Full Distance Learner you have to be disciplined and organised but I found that this method of study suited me personally.

(Respondent 4)

On reflection, the overall impression was that the experience of Full Distance Learners as expressed by those who participated in this investigation was that, whilst they found it a demanding means of learning that required a great deal of self-discipline and organisational qualities, it had made a substantial impact on their career development. This is, perhaps, epitomised by the comments of Respondent 5:

In all honesty, I used to, at times, say that I had a 'love-hate' relationship with my studies. I loved all that I was learning but found having to be so disciplined in my approach, difficult.



**Question 5: In retrospect, what impact, if any, did your studies for the MA in Catholic School Leadership have on your professional career and or personally?**

This proved to be a question that elicited general information about the course rather than particular aspects of studying as a Full Distance Learner. All respondents, to a greater or lesser degree, indicated that the experience of studying for this Masters programme provided a foundation for continuing professional development and/or career progression.

Thus, Respondent 2, for example, said that

I have developed my confidence in articulating my vision for Catholic education and now feel ready to apply for headship in a Catholic school.

Respondent 4 said that

... the course has helped me to understand that as a middle manager I have an important role (to play) within the school.

Two respondents indicated that the course contributed to their work as Section 48 Inspectors:

It has provided me with the language needed to lead effectively in a Catholic school and has supported my work as a Diocesan Section 48 Inspector.

(Respondent 2)

... I was able to bring the outcomes to my work in Section 48 inspection in the Diocese of Westminster and have trained as an inspector.

(Respondent 3)

Additionally, Respondent 3 commented on

...keynote speeches ... to colleagues at conferences and as part of programmes for senior leaders from Australia.

**Question 6: If you have any other helpful comments or advice about studying as a Full Distance Learner, I should be grateful if you would provide them below:**

A number of reflections were presented by participants with regard to the experience of studying as a Full Distance Learner. In the first place, it was emphasised that the quality of the experience was enhanced by the support provided by tutors:

The programme worked for me because of the dedication of my tutors. I was given full and detailed support via email which was excellent.

(Respondent 2)

Furthermore, the commitment of tutors in maintaining communication and contact were considered to be essential for the successful completion of the course:

Detailed advice and suggestions were offered promptly and regularly and I felt that the contacts really promoted an effective dialogue.

(Respondent 2)

Equally, there was also a responsibility on the part of students to maintain regular communication with tutors and students alike by frequently engaging with online conversations. It was important, in the first place, that students did not leave it too long before contacting their supervisor and it was strongly recommended, for the best results that, from the start, students engage regularly with the online virtual classroom:

I would say the most important advice is it must be made clear that an important element of Full Distance learning is taking part in the online discussions on a regular basis; ensure that one sets up contacts with other Full Distance Learners and arrange seminars through skypeing/conference calls so that one is able to interact with people.

(Respondent 3)

Respondents also believed that distance learning actually provided them with more personalised, direct and focussed tuition than they would have received in a conventional classroom

I think that I had more one to one support time as part of this programme that I would have had if I had attended face to face sessions.

(Respondent 2)

Another important consideration that was presented was that Full Distance Learning afforded greater flexibility for learners.

Whilst self-discipline was an issue for me at times, I don't think I would have been able to finish the course if I wasn't able to access the flexibility of full-distance learning.

(Respondent 5)

Respondents also gave encouragement to others who might be considering taking up this mode of learning, providing direct recommendations:

I would recommend this form of study to anyone who needed to fit study around the busy demands of family and vocation.

(Respondent 5)

I would say to anyone considering full distance learning – Go for it! I found it to be a very rewarding and enjoyable experience.

(Respondent 4)

Lastly – though not least – it must be added that it was observed that a significant benefit for Full Distance Learners was that this form of learning had the capacity to improve Information and communication technology (ICT) skills:

It teaches you some very valuable online/computer/internet skills too, particularly if one's are a bit rusty or limited as mine were...

(Respondent 5)

## 9. Limitations

It has to be acknowledged that there were a number of potential limitations within the conduct of this enquiry, which must be taken into account when analysing the results. A disadvantage of adopting a phenomenological approach, for example, is that generalising from particular experiences or individual perspectives is problematic. Moreover, it could be argued that, as only those who had successfully completed the programme were invited to provide feedback, the responses might be to be positive. As a small-scale enquiry, it might also be added that it would be problematic to draw broad conclusions from the number of students who participated.

However, whilst no numerical or statistical data was employed for the purpose of analysis, five out of seven (71%) of those who were eligible to participate in the survey (i.e., Full Distance Learners who had graduated from the MA in Catholic School Leadership programme between 2009 and 2015), represented a majority of the population. As the focus of the study was to elicit the views of the participants, the study was qualitative by nature and the overall approach evaluative and interpretive.

Indeed, although it might be argued that this investigation is based on personal value judgements and that, as a result, the findings are limited, it does not invalidate reflections on participants' individual experiences of the programme. Indeed, it was felt that, if some understanding of how Full Distance Learners perceived their engagement with this mode of study could be elicited, it would help to inform the planning for the continuing development of the course and that, in order to capture perceptions of students' experience, it was necessary to engage with those who had completed the course. A follow-up enquiry into the views of those who were ongoing students could be conducted at a later date for comparative purposes. The findings would also, potentially, be of interest to a wider audience involved in, or anticipating involvement in, similar programmes.

## 10. Interpretation of Results

It is still too early to make presumptive or conclusive statements about the experience of students pursuing their studies as Full Distance Learners. However, the overall impression from broadly positive comments elicited by this initial enquiry is that students who have studied in this way and have completed the course are satisfied with their experience.

Admittedly, all respondents to the questionnaires were students who had graduated and were therefore the 'successful' students. Other students who are still in the process of completing their studies, or who have taken a temporary leave of absence due to professional or personal commitments, may possibly have provided a different

'slant' on their experiences. Nevertheless, informal conversations would indicate that Full Distance Learners provide generally positive feedback on their experiences.

Evidence elicited from participants who contributed to this research provided a number of salient points about the experience of studying as a Full Distance Learner. Advantages articulated by participants in this study include the flexibility, independence and convenience that allows Full Distance Learners to balance professional and career commitments with their academic studies. Whilst a significant investment of time has to be made to keep up with the demands of academic study, there was a feeling that Full Distance Learners had greater control and direction over the way they allocated their time.

It might be inferred from this study that the critical challenge is that, whilst some students are more comfortable than others, studying as a Full Distance Learner required self-motivation, self-discipline and organisation skills. This is not to say that all students, to some extent, will need to develop these qualities but evidence from this enquiry would indicate that they were of particular importance. It appears that lack of face-to-face contact was considered to be the most significant limitation.

It was considered that the development of information technology skills and engagement in the virtual classroom was an advantage in terms of work. Moreover, studying as a Full Distance Learner did not impair professional and career progression.

Above all, the quality of experience as a Full Distance Learner was considered to be dependent on the quality of tutor supervision. Indeed, it is incumbent on supervisors to engage with students on a regular basis.

From the evidence of this study, providing access to a virtual classroom lends scope for the increase of numbers of students involved in courses. Moreover, by enabling students to pursue their studies 'at a distance', universities can greatly encourage individuals to develop a commitment to lifelong learning.

### Acknowledgements

I take this opportunity to thank all participants who generously gave their time and consideration in contributing to this enquiry.

### References

- Dickens, C. (1854). *Hard Times*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Elbers, E. & Streefland L. (2000). Collaborative learning and the construction of common knowledge, *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 15(2000), 479–490. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF03172989>
- Fincham, D. (2013). 'Introducing Online Learning in Higher Education: An Evaluation' in *Creative Education*, 4(9), 540-548. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ce.2013.49079>
- Jarvis, P., Holford, J. & Griffin, C. (2003). *The theory & practice of learning*, London and Sterling VA: Kogan Page.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>
- Lea, M. R. (2004). Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(6). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0307507042000287230>
- Minocha, Shailey & Petre, Marian. (2012). *Handbook of Social Media for Researchers and Supervisors*, The Open University.
- Murphy, A. (1997). Leadership for the few, or for all? in: Davies, B and West-Burnham, J. *Re-engineering and Total Quality in Schools*. London: Pitman pp. 133-149.
- Scardamalia, M. & Bereiter, C. (1994). Computer support for knowledge-building communities. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 3(3), 265-283. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327809jls0303\\_3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327809jls0303_3)
- Sullivan, J., Murphy, A. & Fincham, D. (2015). The story of an educational innovation: the MA in Catholic School Leadership at St Mary's University College, Twickenham, 1997–2013: Principles, pedagogy and research studies. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 7(1), March 2015, 28-45. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2014.998497>
- Trigwell, K, Prosser, M. & Waterhouse, F. (1999). Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning, *Higher Education*, 37, 57-70. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1003548313194>

- Watkins, C. (2005). *Classrooms as Learning Communities: what's in it for schools?* London: RoutledgeFalmer. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203390719>
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems. *Organization*, 7(2), 225-246. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/135050840072002>
- Wikeley, F. & Muschamp, Y. (2004). Pedagogical implications of working with doctoral students at a distance. *Distance Education*, 25(1), 125-142. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0158791042000212495>
- Williams, P. (2005). Lessons from the future: ICT scenarios and the education of teachers. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 31, 319-339. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02607470500280209>

## Notes

Note 1. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) developed the notion of phenomenology, in which conscious experience is studied from a subjective or first person point of view. Epistemologically, a phenomenological approach draws on a qualitative paradigm, which emphasises the significance of personal experiences. As a form of interpretive methodology, therefore, the experience of participants is central to the research and their perceptions, whilst subjective, provide valid perspectives for critical consideration.

Note 2. In 2016, following the conduct of this research, another seven Distance Learners (including two from Malta) graduated, two of them with an award at Distinction level.

## Appendix

### QUESTIONNAIRE

I should be grateful if you would complete and return to me your responses to the following questions.

Please complete it as honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers – just your own views. Your responses will be kept confidential and will not be used for anything other than for the purposes of this enquiry.

What is your current role in your school?

Why did you opt to study the MA as a Full Distance Learner?

When did you start and when do you intend to finish the course?

Start: ..... (Month) ..... (Year)

Finish: ..... (Month) ..... (Year)

What would you say were the advantages of studying the course as a Full Distance Learner?

What are the disadvantages?

How would you describe your experience as a Full Distance Learner on the MA CSL programme?

In retrospect, what impact, if any, did your studies for the MA in Catholic School Leadership have on your professional career and or personally?

If you have any other helpful comments or advice about studying as a Full Distance Learner, I should be grateful if you would provide them below:

Would you be willing to arrange a conversation with me as a follow-up to this questionnaire? If so, please provide me with your telephone number or Skype address:

Phone number:

Skype address:

**This survey is anonymous and confidential and I assure you that any information that could identify you as an individual will not be disclosed under any circumstances.**

**Thank you for your support and valued opinions.**

Please return the completed form to [david.fincham@stmarys.ac.uk](mailto:david.fincham@stmarys.ac.uk)