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Title: 'Mind the gap': the perceptions and expectations of students' introduction to distance learning in higher education

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Abstract

More importance is increasingly being placed on meeting students' learning and support needs in higher education, starting with the induction process. Compared with students studying on-campus, academic staff have restricted contact with distance students and thus may not fully appreciate their particular expectations and perceptions. This study investigated whether a 'gap' existed between students' and academics' expectations and perceptions of induction (in terms of it meeting students' needs as distance learners). Data were collected from undergraduate and postgraduate students at two points in their first year of distance study. A mixed methodological approach was used to collect data. The research also examined the efficacy of applying a conceptual 'gap analysis' model to gauge students' needs as distance learners. The level of student satisfaction with induction revealed specific areas in the induction process where developments could be made to ensure delivery of best practice for students and academic staff.

Key terms: distance learning, induction, higher education, student support, gap analysis

Student induction and support for distance learners

Higher education (HE) institutions are increasingly paying greater attention to the induction process (which in some contexts is referred to as 'orientation'). This is due in part to the growing realisation that providing students with a more comprehensive and integral introduction to their studies helps alleviate potential anxieties, assists in helping students adjust to the university environment and facilitates the effective student integration into studying at HE level (Barker *et al*, 1997; Frame, 2001; Shobrook, 2003). Induction is consequently becoming more 'student-centred' (Edward, 2003: 230) and has led to the development of innovative ways of guiding students through the transitional processes in HE environments. A variety of schema have been piloted and developed (for example, Sackville, 1997; Carter and McNeill, 1998; Stanley, 2001; Edward, 2003.). However, student induction may still typically often involve institutions providing large amounts of information upfront with the focus on content (Edward and Middleton, 1997). Without consistent and reliable student evaluation and feedback, information overload can tend to overwhelm, confuse and dishearten students, particularly in the early days of study.

Laying the foundations for students to take 'greater responsibility for their own learning' is an important enabler of effective induction design (Barton, 2001: 49). The solitary nature of distance learning and the loneliness experienced by distance learners is well documented (Eastmond, 1995; Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap, 2003) and so the facilitation of self-directed, independent learning is crucial as students will be studying alone for the majority of the study period (for a fuller discussion see, Wedemeyer, 1981; Moore, 1973). However, while minimizing the role of the distance teacher and encouraging learner autonomy is one approach adopted by some (Keegan, 1990) others, for example Lewis (1982: 136), prefer to regard the teacher more as a supportive 'friend' who is actively engaged in the student learning process.

Granger (1990) suggests that while distance students may function quite effectively in their own workplace or community, when confronted with the demands of academic study they may feel inadequate or deficient. How therefore, may academic staff best meet distance students' diverse skill and learning requirements during induction?

The development of appropriate support systems for distance students from enrolment, through induction and beyond has grown considerably in recent years (Tait, 1995; 2000; Dearnley, 2003) with student services comprising both 'academic support' and 'non-academic support' (Simpson, 2000: 6-7). The trend of customer care and customer satisfaction from the service sector has been influential in developing support services provided for distance students (Sewart, 1993; Nunan et al, 2000; Kenworthy, 2003).

Students as 'consumers' of educational services

The marketization of HE has led to heightened competitiveness among providers positioning students as 'customers' (Nunan *et al*, 2000) who are aware of their rights as 'consumers' of education (Long *et al*, 1999). They are also more mindful of disparities between their expectations of service delivery and the reality of that service (Darlaston-Jones *et al*, 2003). Consumer satisfaction in terms of value for money is arguably an imperative issue for distance students (or their employers) who are often paying fairly substantial fees for their courses and programmes.

Slack *et al* (2004: 596) suggest that, 'quality needs to be understood from a customer's point of view because, to the customer, the quality of a particular product or service is whatever he or she perceives it to be. This is important because as Parasuraman *et al* (1985: 46) argue 'the key to ensuring good service quality is meeting or exceeding what consumers expect from the service.' Thus it is imperative that what is delivered to students, at least meets their expectations. However, student (customer) and provider expectations may differ because they approach HE from a range of contexts that may shape and inform their expectations and perceptions of academic quality and programme delivery.

Rationale

Orientating students to self-directed study conditions and enabling them to learn effectively at a distance is one of the chief aims of the induction process for all

programmes utilising this mode of teaching. Nevertheless, how we ensure that need is met is often taken for granted or regarded as irrelevant to the main intention of meeting the programmes' over all learning outcomes. Therefore, the main aim of this research was to find a suitable conceptual model which unequivocally demonstrated points of mismatch and concordance in students' expectations and perceptions of their proposed programme of study. It was envisaged that routine application of such a model would ensure accurate and appropriate provision of services offered to distance students from the outset of their studies.

The research was based on a modified version of a 'gap analysis' model designed originally by Parasuraman *et al* (1985) to explore potential 'gaps' between service providers and consumer expectation. This model has already been used as a satisfaction measure in an HE context (see Engelland *et al*, 2000; Mac-Keogh and Stevenson, 2001; Darlaston-Jones *et al*, 2003). Gap analysis can be applied to investigate not only consumer-perceived quality, but also to diagnose issues surrounding the quality and appropriateness of service delivery. This is achieved by identifying and measuring 'gaps' in the provision of services between users expectations and perceptions of service quality and highlights aspects of a service that could be developed to increase 'consumer' satisfaction.

The design and structure of the programmes to be investigated in this research were based on the traditional UK Open University model, which incorporates study schools with independent study. Students attended 2 compulsory three-day residential study schools each year located on the University campus. The first Study School is looked upon as the primary induction for newly registered students.

Methodology

The model and the methodology underpinning it were adapted by the authors to explore the presence or absence of gaps between expectations and perceptions of distance learners and using the induction process as our point of reference. Using the original gap analysis model (Parasuraman *et al*, 1985), we designed our research instruments to assist in answering the main research question, 'How may academic staff ensure distance students' diverse needs and expectations are met during the induction process?'

The aims of the study were to:

1. Examine the application of a conceptual model to demonstrate points of mismatch and concordance in students' and academic staff's perceptions and expectations of students' induction needs.
2. Establish potential 'gaps' between students' and academic staff's views of the induction process.
3. Identify ways in which the gaps might be addressed through appropriate adjustments to induction planning.

In order to answer the above we devised a working model (see Figure 1) which assisted in rationalising the research enquiry and for data analysis.

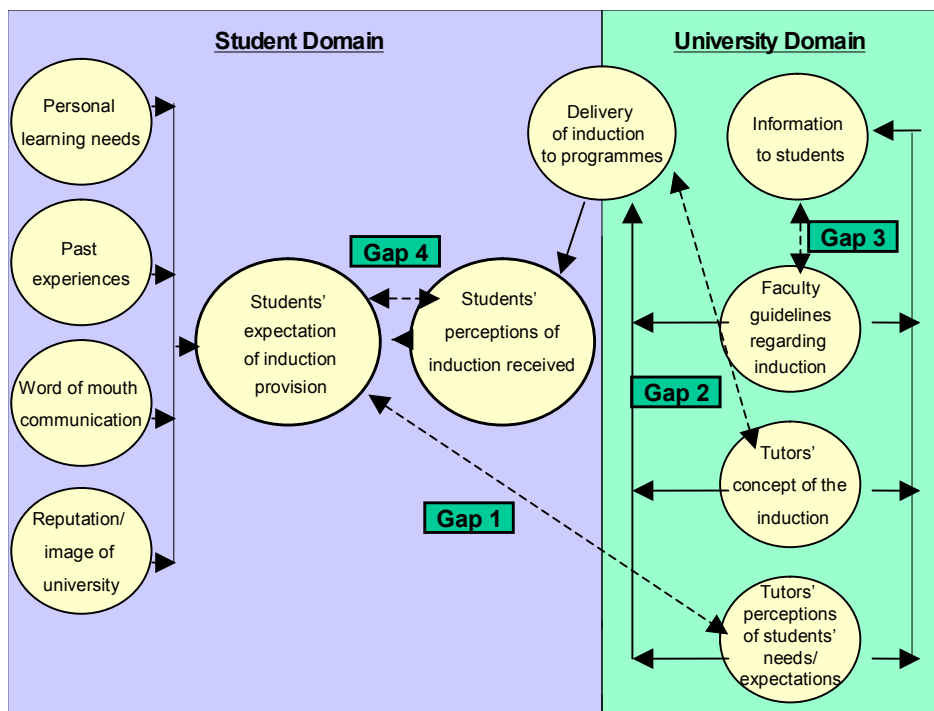


Figure 1: Gap analysis model for exploring any disparity between students' expectations and perceptions of induction provision

The model is divided into two 'domains'. The left domain allows for the exploration of a student's expectations. These may be shaped and informed by a number of factors including personal learning needs, past experiences (education, work, training, prior knowledge), any word-of-mouth communication about the programme or university (through informal networks) and the pre-conceived reputation or image they had of the university. Slack *et al* (2004: 597) consider that such 'expectations are internalised as a set of quality characteristics'. The right side of the model represents the university's domain. Within this academic staff, (tutors) are responsible for designing the induction and, in some instances, may be required to address faculty or institutional guidelines, specifications or policies regarding the induction of students. Tutors will invariably have perceptions of students' needs and expectations and these may also inform the conceptualisation and design of an appropriate induction. The two 'domains' converge at the point of induction to the programme itself, when the student actively engages in this process.

We were not concerned with attempting to offer any objective measurement of quality of service provision. Rather, we were seeking descriptive data which would enable us to gain an understanding of students' experiences and give insight into the process of this particular aspect of distance education. We were attracted to generating expressions of student views and preferences in order to inform the induction activities.

Participants

Participants were drawn from one cohort of thirty-six undergraduate and postgraduate students at the beginning of their studies on programmes in

Profound Learning Disability and Multi-Sensory Impairment. The majority of students on the programmes are women and the age range was 18 to 64 years.

Data collection

Data was collected through the combined use of,

- Semi-structured interviews (5 students and 2 tutors)
- Questionnaires (distributed to 36 students)
- A focus group (5 students)

Students were also provided with a consent form and information sheet, explaining the purpose of the study, method of data collection, issues surrounding client confidentiality, data storage and 'rules of engagement' – including unconditional withdrawal from the study at any time. Data were collected at two points - Time 1 (T1), 4 weeks post registration, and Time 2 (T2), 12 weeks later.

The T1 questionnaire distributed at the Autumn Study School was designed to elicit students' initial needs, expectations, concerns and anxieties as distance learners. The questionnaire comprised 5 closed questions to ascertain social demographic information and a series of 12 open-ended questions allowing students considerable scope to express their points of view regarding learning at a distance. Students were asked about the following:

- their expectations of the programme
- preparations they had made prior to beginning the programme
- Students' primary concerns and worries about studying at a distance
- The important or necessary skills and attributes required by distance learners, and
- Support found to be most helpful or unhelpful since joining the programme.

Twenty-seven forms (n = 25 female, n = 2 male) were completed and returned, (response rate = 75%). A formal focus group was also held with five student volunteers (n = 4 female, n = 1 male).

The intention was that data collected at T2 would allow a deeper exploration of the issues raised in T1, identify emerging areas of particular relevance to the students and to guide the formulation of questions for inclusion in the follow-up questionnaire and interview schedule. The second questionnaire, (requiring more reflective responses from students), was distributed at the Spring Study School (T2). Students were asked to:

- describe their needs as distance learners and how, on reflection, the induction helped to meet these needs
- what kind of support they expected from their induction
- how their expectations were met (or not met)
- the kind of support they have required from tutors, and
- how satisfied they were with the support provided.

Twenty-two students completed the second questionnaire (n = 21 females, n = 1 male; response rate = 61%). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students (all female). This provided an opportunity for students to expand

further upon the issues raised in their questionnaires. Interviews with the programme director and tutor were undertaken to establish their views on the current induction, the induction process and their perception of students' needs and expectations as distance learners.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using QSR NVivo (Qualitative Solutions and Research Software: Version 2). Questionnaire responses were entered onto Rich Text Format (RTF) files and loaded to NVivo (Gibbs, 2002) together with full transcriptions from the staff interviews (n=2), student interviews (n=5) and student focus group (n=1). The first stage of analysis, using NVivo's coding facility, brought together sections of data that indicated similar perceptions, experiences, ideas and concepts with the intention of exploring the general questions, themes and objectives embedded in the research rationale. This process allowed the data to be organised in a logical and easily retrievable form preparatory to more detailed analysis of content and location of emergent themes. The second stage of analysis explored the presence or absence of potential 'gaps' between X and Y. Guided by the conceptual model, responses were coded and collated so that constructive comparisons could be made for each individual 'gap' explored.

Findings and Discussion

Findings are presented as in the model shown in Figure 1. Staff and students' actual responses are given in italics.

Students' learning needs

Ascertaining students' learning needs was of paramount importance to this research as we considered that students' expectations of support during induction would be fuelled by perceived learning needs (as identified in Table 1). Our results confirm findings of research undertaken elsewhere (Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap, 2003) with over 50% of students reporting their feelings of isolation as distance learners, the lack of contact and social interaction, their physical distance from the university and being able to '*sustain the motivation*' or '*willpower*' to study. The data generated illustrated the wide-ranging and various needs of distance learners. These are presented below, not in any order of priority, but have been assembled under either 'the need to' or 'the need for'.

The need to...	The need for...
<i>belong</i>	<i>clear information</i>
<i>interact with other students</i>	<i>guidance</i>
<i>be self-directed</i>	<i>study skills support</i>
<i>be part of a community</i>	<i>technical support</i>
<i>understand how to access resources (library, e-journals, databases)</i>	<i>reassurance</i>
<i>understand how to use resources (library, e-journals, databases)</i>	<i>advice</i>
<i>know what facilitates are available</i>	<i>clear precise instructions of what is expected</i>
<i>share experiences</i>	<i>resources (human and material)</i>
<i>communicate with tutors</i>	<i>support and direction</i>
<i>develop study skills</i>	<i>a student support network</i>
<i>manage own time</i>	<i>computer access</i>
<i>be determined to complete</i>	<i>an understanding family/employer</i>
<i>be self-disciplined</i>	<i>space to study</i>
<i>be self-motivated</i>	<i>flexibility</i>

Table 1: Students perceived personal learning needs

In addition, students reported that their attendance at the Autumn Study School had highlighted some previously undefined or unacknowledged needs. For example, this comment illustrates difficulties students may face when they are required to use technology for unfamiliar purposes:

'I've never felt stupider in all my life. I thought I was computer literate...I think we should have had more hands on...It's frustrating. And then you think 'oh well I've failed again'. A negative feeling comes out...it was exasperating not being able to get into any journals at all. Could not get in...I did register [for the forum] by the date, but I couldn't get in again. I only registered and got sent a number. That was it...I can't get anywhere. I'm not blaming the university; it was certainly my fault'.

These kinds of comments clearly illustrate the points made by Granger (1990) where distance students may be particularly prone to feelings of inadequacy or skills-deficiency. Feelings of ineptitude are however not restricted to distance learners but are also found in mature students returning to study after a long period of time (Rogers, 2002; Toynton, 2005).

We also investigated principle potential areas of influence including:

- students' past experiences (education, work, training, prior knowledge),
- any word-of-mouth communications about the programme (through informal networks), and
- the image they had of the university and the support during induction they expected to receive.

Exploring the 'gaps'

The conceptual model (in Figure 1), enabled us to identify a number of areas in induction provision, worthy of further exploration. Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) argue that any mismatch between expectations and perceptions (our gap 4) results in consumer dissatisfaction and perceived poor quality and can be explained by other gaps elsewhere in the model. Accordingly, the existence of any gap depicted in the conceptual model (i.e. gaps 1 to 3) manifests itself in gap 4. Gap 4 therefore, represents the most significant gap in terms of perceived service quality provision and it is the nature of this particular gap, which was the concern of this research.

The areas investigated were as follows:

- Students' expectation of support - tutors perceptions of students' needs and expectations of support (Gap 1)
- Tutors conception of induction - actual delivery of the programme (Gap 2)
- Faculty guidelines – programme documentation communicated to students (Gap 3)
- Students' expectations - students' perceptions of induction provision received (Gap 4)

Responses were categorized and coded under the headings; 'social expectations' 'academic expectations' 'technical expectations' and 'pastoral expectations'.

Gap 1: Students' expectation of support - tutors perceptions of students' needs and expectations of support

Students' responses indicated, as anticipated, an assortment of expectations. Most students had clearly conceptualised and articulated expectations while others (n=3) were *'uncertain'* or had *'no specific expectations'*. Some students indicated that they expected the opportunity during induction to become formally acquainted with their fellow students and tutors. Such responses were expressed as:

'Getting to know people, faces and places'

'Longer 'getting to know others' session when first arrive with time to discuss backgrounds etc.'

Programme-related responses were coded as 'academic expectations',

'Meeting tutor and having questions answered'

'Some practice skill workshop for assignments or something'

Some responses were IT specific and coded as 'technical expectations'

'How to access literature once back home'

'Library system – checking out books, using e-journals'

Some responses were humanistic relating more to 'pastoral expectations' of support, for example:

'Reassurance regarding the availability of tutors for any support required'

'Meeting 2nd year students, gaining reassurance of what to expect'

Tutors' perceptions of students' needs and expectations were generally comparable. Tutors anticipated a *'wide variation'* of student expectations largely because of the different study routes and academic levels (UG and PG) of the three programmes. Generally it was considered that *'many of their needs are in common to any mature student returning to learning'* though distance students have *'fewer opportunities'* to be together with other learners and to support each other. Providing appropriate levels of guidance and support not only to a culturally and intellectually diverse cohort of distance students during induction but also to academically diverse range of students, was a complex challenge for tutors. Hence the need for a model that could conceptualise and rationalise the complexity of student needs to be met over a shorter than usual contact time period (3 days on campus).

Tutors expected students wanted to know,

- the requirements of the programme
- how it operates in practice
- who tutors were, and
- that they will be supported throughout their studies.

Tutors also considered that students would expect more interaction with their peers, more opportunities to formally socialise and possibly less specialist content than was offered in reality. Therefore, on the one hand, it may be reasonable to say that tutors' perceptions of students' expectations matched. Tutors demonstrated an awareness of students' needs and expectations. However, there was a realisation that what was actually delivered to students at induction was passive and different to what students had anticipated. This evidence supports our assertion that there should not be an automatic presumption of alignment of staff and students' views regarding what students want, need or prefer to receive as part of their induction

Gap 2: Tutors conception of induction - actual delivery of the programme

In the past the induction has been considered successful in introducing students to the programmes; in providing appropriate and detailed course information, *'in generating a positive ethos'* and ensuring that students *'feel they get attentive service'* and support. Previously, the induction had been a passive event. This involved the dissemination of necessary information so that students had all the particulars about the programmes and associated course units, how to obtain support and from whom, the assignment criteria and submission and so on. This procedure was considered important by tutors in enabling students to make *'informed choices'* during their studies. However, too much information distributed in a short space of time can be overwhelming resulting in some students being unable to comprehend and retain little more than the essentials. This comment from an undergraduate student exemplifies this particular concern:

'A lot of information bombarded on to us and what I'd taken in didn't help'

Tutors were keen to create a *'supportive atmosphere'* and so welcoming and encouraging students and making them feel at ease was part of the introductory session

Induction included a standard library tour provided for all new students. It included an introduction to its services, a support session on study skills and individual tutorials. This session had no previous evaluation procedure in place, so results were considered to be of particular interest, in terms of matching perceptions of the University of student support and guidance, when compared with the reality of students' expectations and experiences. While topics chosen by library staff were clearly designed to serve specific purposes, tutors considered that the induction was perhaps lacking in terms of providing opportunities for students to informally interact, create informal support networks and assist one another in coming to terms with the library's electronic services – particularly important for off-campus users. Feedback demonstrated that tutors had an *'implicit and explicit awareness'* that more introductory sessions concentrating on the process of learning with greater student participation might be more beneficial to students (incorporating planned opportunities to develop study skills). However, because time is at a premium, a balance needs to be struck between providing students with 'survival' skills while still permitting them an introduction to subject specific academic work. These more specialist lectures and workshops were highly valued by students. Therefore there had hitherto been a reluctance to change the format of the induction. The model used in this project provided the necessary unambiguous evidence of a mismatch between what tutors considered induction should comprise, when compared with a) students' expectations and b) their actual experiences of the induction that was delivered. It is arguable that this mismatch might not have come to light had it not been for the opportunity for applying the rationale of the 'gap' model to clarify not only what tutors *felt* students wanted but what was *felt* to be needed by the students –and what in reality was actually delivered.

Gap 3: Faculty guidelines – programme information communicated to students

The University does not have a consolidated or specific institutional policy for student induction. It prefers guidelines for induction procedures to be issued at faculty or school levels, although it is clear from the QAA guidance that there is the potential for conflicts of interest here. Time management, the desire to inform but not overwhelm, to re-assure but nevertheless make students aware of their academic commitments in order to pass the programme is common to all programme and course directors. However, when student contact is so concentrated (only three days face to face contact in the first instance), it becomes vitally important that potential gaps where students' academic and support needs are not being met, are picked up and acted upon in a very tight time frame. We would argue that the proposed gap analysis model used in this research enables university staff to 'bridge' identified gaps quickly, thus reducing the risk of student withdrawal in the early stages of a course – always a potential risk; (Yorke, 2000).

Gap 4: **Students' expectations - students' perceptions of induction provision received**

With few, exceptions, students attending the study schools gained immensely from them. Certainly by the Spring (T2), there was evidence of students feeling much more comfortable with their learning, their understanding of how the programme operated and some acquaintance with peers had been made. Many students reported that their expectations had been met and were generally favourable of the induction they had received, stating:

'It was somewhat reassuring'

'Tutor support and support from department is very good'

Of students' expectations those relating to the academic and pastoral side of the induction were perceived well:

'I became a lot clearer about the structure of the course and the support structure'

'Staff were very supportive and approachable, friendly and positive'

Of students' expectations those relating to the social and technical side of the induction were perceived as falling short:

'Nothing organised socially for new students. Quite daunting to be on first induction weekend not knowing anyone or anywhere'

'More introductions to each other would have been helpful'

The social integration of students is looked upon as important to programme tutors though they felt students were *'mature adults'* who should be able to mix reasonably well with other people. However, this seemed a daunting prospect for some students. The research highlighted a gap where more could be done at the point of induction to facilitate the process of peer support and networking despite time restrictions and full timetables. On-site students tend to have similar events but spread over a *'Freshers' Week'*.

Ensuring that distance learners can and know how to obtain relevant resources is also a high priority for tutors. The development of IT has made it possible for library materials to be accessed from anywhere with the proliferation of online databases, e-journals and e-books, for example. It is thus crucial that an induction equips distance students with these access skills. It was unfortunate that when this cohort of students was timetabled to attend the library that the computer system was down temporarily. Students were unable to receive suitable instruction on that occasion, but student comments suggest that that would also prefer a practical hands-on session in order to use the library and information facilities more purposefully and productively.

Students' comments regarding their needs, expectations, perceptions and experiences of induction were taken very seriously by tutors who were also made aware of the *'gaps'* in provision identified by this research. Defining the nature

and extent of this type of gap is important for all HE/FE staff involved in programme planning. We tend to think that all (mature) students are computer literate, have unlimited access to computer facilities, when in fact the opposite may be the case. Early identification of mismatches between tutors' expectations and students' prior knowledge and experience is vital if students are to find the learning experience both positive and rewarding. We would therefore argue that gap analysis provides a model that acts as an effective diagnostic tool to meet the support needs for the individual student, and larger student cohorts. It enables the mapping out of strengths, weaknesses and areas requiring adjustment by tutors to meet students previously undefined or unrecognised needs.

Recommendations for induction

Recommendations for how gap analysis may be applied are based on the responses of students, discussions and interviews with academic staff and a review of relevant research literature. Use of gap analysis as a model for rationalising the expectations, perceptions and experiences of both students and academic staff has demonstrated that a range of academic and more personal student support requirements are addressed. These include for instance ensuring a significant element of **active student participation** occurs. Students should be invited to work in small groups as part of an opening icebreaker session and given orchestrated opportunities to develop peer relationships and support networks. More specifically, the session should involve students exploring their own role as learners, together with reflecting on their expectations of the programme and of tutors.

Gap analysis allowed the authors to not only **make diagnoses of individual students' IT skills** but also enabled an analysis of potential mismatches in provision and how to address such issues, to ensure that students know not only how to access online resources, but also are comfortable navigating relevant websites, and navigating appropriate resources.

Analysis proved particularly useful in identifying the extent of support required by students to **develop a sense of social cohesion and peer support networks**. This will help to combat the sense of loneliness and isolation known to be a feature common to distance students.

Facilitating a sense of identity with and becoming valued participants of the programme and the wider university is probably the most difficult aspect to measure and also to achieve with students who are studying at a distance. This is arguably one of the most important aspects of their early development as learners in an HE environment. Such matters may be overlooked in general evaluation instruments because these methods do not necessarily allow for comparison between expectation and experience at both staff and student levels – which is why this model was found to be so beneficial in exploring this particular aspect of distance education.

Conclusion

The gap analysis model was found useful in revealing gaps between expectation and experience. The research illuminated students' needs and concerns. It also

provided tutors with a clearer understanding of students' engagement with distance education and their perspectives of induction to distance learning. We would assert that use of gap analysis reduces the risk of a mismatch and increases concordance of students' and academics' expectations and perceptions of student induction. It allows identification of the nature of potential gaps between students' and academic staff's views of the induction process and ways in which these gaps may be sensitively addressed. Recommendations for induction offered in this paper may serve as a useful checklist for other education providers. It should be noted however that it is not always possible to make changes, or desirable to react spontaneously to student needs and preferences. Given the economic constraints in HE, it might be difficult to formulate desired developments in induction activities, especially if substantial, extra resources are required. Thus it may be that programme providers look instead to sensitively managing students' expectations at the outset of their studies to a more realistic or appropriate level. In both instances HE providers should be enabled to enhance students' learning experiences and improve the quality of their induction programmes.

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