Title of case study
Using webinars to promote student engagement and confidence

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School/ Department
Liverpool Doctoral College Development Team

Name of course and module (if applicable) case study took place within
Liverpool Doctoral College Development programme

Please briefly describe the activity undertaken for the case study
I have created a programme of interactive webinars for postgraduate researchers that form part of the Liverpool Doctoral College (LDC) Development programme. The online format is required to provide access to the programme for researchers based away from the University campus. It is important that the webinars contain a strong element of participant engagement so that off campus students have an equitable experience to those on campus attending workshops.

The webinars include sessions on writing and motivation, presentations, time management, careers advice, well-being and facilitation. The delivery of advice in these areas to a diverse audience from a range of subject areas, is challenging. The use of the online discussion area creates an effective solution that enhances the session and ensures that the webinars do not become online lectures. Consequently, the sessions deliberately take a more conversational approach to encourage audience participation through inviting questions and additional comments and give the researchers an opportunity to review their own practice and compare it with that in other areas. We have many regular participants who are aware of the format, and who have become at ease with posting comments and responses.

The LDC Development programme is open to all 2000 plus postgraduate researchers at the University, from all three faculties, and webinars are also advertised to those undertaking educational doctorates in the Laureate programme. All sessions in the programme are optional and participants register on a per session basis. Learning outcomes are made clear in the registration for each session. Typical attendance at a webinar is 20-30 students, significantly higher than at our face-to-face workshops. The webinars are widely attended by those both on and off-campus and we feel that the shorter timing, compared to workshops, and ease of location suit many researchers' demands for development.

How was the activity implemented?

The webinars are one hour sessions delivered through a web conferencing platform (used to be via Adobe Connect but, as we do not have this at Liverpool any longer, Microsoft Teams or Zoom can be used as an alternative). Email reminders are sent to all participants in advance and the link to the online meeting room is sent half an hour before the session begins. The last email also contains information on making the connection and further technical advice.

Most sessions involve myself, or an external tutor, speaking to PowerPoint within the software, while the participants interact through a text-based chat area where the comments are visible to all attendees. Most sessions have a co-deliverer, a fellow tutor or postgraduate researcher who can address questions and interact through the chat area. The sessions are planned with frequent breaks in the formal presentation to allow attendee participant interaction in the chat area.

The discussions are initiated by several means. Before the presentation begins we ask participants to introduce themselves, their research or department and then at the start of the session we may ask an initial question to find out their motivations for attendance, or concerns on the webinar subject matter. Participants can also ask questions and comments during the dialogue, or when we pause for questions, and add to others' responses, in some cases generating longer discussion threads.

The sessions are recorded where possible and a link to the recording is sent to all attendees through a post-webinar email with further information and resources as relevant.

Has this activity improved programme provision and student experience, if so how?

The webinars supplement the LDC programme in terms of providing an alternative form of delivery and a range of additional titles. Some researchers have also developed their own webinars, using their personal expertise to supplement that of the Development team. The delivery style provides a less challenging framework than if they were asked to deliver a more formal, and authoritatively delivered online lecture.

Many researchers attend webinars repeatedly and so create an online community amongst themselves, helping to decrease the isolation often felt by doctoral students and providing peer support and academic discussion outside of the supervisory relationship. Informal feedback has suggested that this is an important part of the session. Many researchers do share useful tips, particularly on software and practices relevant to their PhD, and find that they have common interests between differing subject areas. The recording of all the discussion in text means that participants who are not directly contributing can follow at their own pace. Those who might take a short break can still catch up with the text-based discussion. One webinar resulted in so many suggestions in the chat area that we produced an online resource with these suggestions as a resource for other webinars.

The timing of webinars provides not only a wider accessibility for distant researchers but also provides flexibility to local research students who may lack time to attend workshops. The recordings ensure that students who miss part of the session can gain access to it afterwards.

We have also had some success in delivering a dual combination of a webinar followed by a workshop, where the webinar delivers the main subject matter, and the following workshop provides an opportunity for practice. While the webinar has the much higher attendance, those attending the workshop report gain from the personal interaction.

Did you experience any challenges in implementation, if so how did you overcome these?

The main challenges are technical, and there have been some reliability issues with the software, although this has improved. Recording the webinars is useful as sometimes attendees experience loss of connectivity.

Which Liverpool University Hallmarks and Attributes does this case study relate to (tick all boxes that apply)

Research-connected Teaching   X
Active Learning   X
Authentic Assessment
Confidence   X
Digital Fluency   X
Global Citizenship   X

How does this case study relate to the Hallmarks and Attributes you have selected?

Research-connected Teaching
Our webinars cover basic research skills and encourage students to present and share their own research.

Active Learning
All webinars aim to achieve active learning through promoting text-based conversations in the chat area, where attendees can share their opinions and experiences.

Confidence
Confidence is a known issue for many new researchers and the webinars are designed to help address this issue. A common theme in the informal feedback is in how helpful it is to realise that other postgraduate researchers have similar problems to their own. Contributions are not forced in our sessions and the environment allows participants to hide when they are not comfortable and then to contribute as their confidence grows. The subject matter, being at a level for all first year researchers, will be partially familiar to many, and that allows them to easily add to the discussions building their self efficacy.

Digital Fluency

Students' digital fluency is developed as a result of using the webinar software to contribute, and sometimes to lead discussions. The discussions in the chat area also allow participants to support each other to develop their skills, through sharing of web-links, software systems and information sources.

Global Citizenship

The webinars contribute to global citizenship through the sharing of knowledge and experience from the diverse contexts of those attending. Attendees may be based in non-traditional academic environments, in workplaces and across the globe in different academic institutions and cultures. This diversity allows students the opportunity to explore the differences and similarities in how research is conceptualised and practiced across the world. We have even managed a joint webinar with postgraduates at XJTLU that focussed on language and cultural barriers in research, and which helped all students review and share the difficulties of international research.

How could this case study be transferred to other disciplines?

Our webinars are delivered to a mixed audience of researchers from all three faculties of the University, so webinars can be used by any discipline as a way of engaging students in active learning online.

If someone else were to implement the activity within your case study what advice would you give them?

Promoting engagement is vital in this environment, and should be encouraged from the start, while the session plan should allow ample time to facilitate discussions.

However, after asking a question, you should be prepared for a minute or two of silence, as attendees must both consider the question and then type an answer. Once someone starts, others will usually follow. Be patient and don't rush.