

Orientation strategies that prepare postgraduate students for online study.

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Introduction/background:

Despite the increasing popularity of online university courses, high non-completion rates are common. An effective orientation program can assist students to prepare for online study.

Aim/objectives:

The focus of this research was to gain an understanding of students' perceptions of: (i) the skills needed for online study; (ii) which skills HPE students feel least confident about at the commencement of their course; and (iii) orientation activities and resources that students find useful when preparing for online study.

Methods

A mixed methods study, including online surveys and telephone interviews, was used.

Results:

Students were confident about their computer skills but were less confident about using the learning management system, in particular, the discussion board and webinar tools. Rusty academic skills, such as writing and referencing, were a challenge for many. Responses to suggested orientation sessions indicate students desire a wide variety of activities and resources to help them transition to online learning including: study tips from experienced online learners; staying motivated in off-campus study, and tips for organising and managing files.

Discussion and Conclusions:

Orientation activities should be delivered in an incremental way so students can progress at their own pace through a structured, but flexible, program that does not overwhelm the novice. Self-evaluation of the skills required for postgraduate online study, flexibility to tailor the orientation program to suit personal learning needs, and time to practise required skills, should underpin the orientation program. Lastly, opportunities for students to connect with other students and faculty should be provided.