

Enhancing online postgraduate orientation: Action research into improving engagement, belonging, and support

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ABSTRACT

This case study reports on an action research project at Abertay University, evaluating and enhancing an orientation module for fully online, asynchronous postgraduate taught learners. Using a mixed methods design, the study analysed 172 student enquiries to the Support Enquiry Zone (SEZ), surveyed 54 students, and planned follow-up interviews which, despite expressed interest, yielded no attendance, highlighting the methodological challenges of engaging asynchronous cohorts. Findings revealed three key areas for improvement: (1) academic flexibility and clarity around mitigating circumstances and assessment procedures, (2) navigation and timely access to orientation and university systems, and (3) opportunities for interaction to foster a sense of belonging.

Targeted updates were implemented, including multimedia guides on extensions and feedback, programme-specific discussion spaces, enhanced information on support services, and earlier release of orientation content. Further refinements addressed structural clarity through revised academic regulations, clearer assessment communication, and time-zone alignment tools within the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE, Canvas). Framed through the Community of Inquiry (Col) framework (Garrison et al., 2000) and Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance, these interventions sought to reduce structural and communicative barriers while strengthening teaching, cognitive, and social presence.

The next phase adopts a continuous improvement model informed by student feedback, engagement analytics, and sector guidance. In alignment with Jisc's *Global education and technology: Digital challenges associated with the effective delivery of transnational education* (Newman, 2025), future developments will focus on digital sustainability, equitable access, and data-driven benchmarking to support international online learners. The study concludes with reflections on researching asynchronous populations and offers practical recommendations for academic developers and institutional leaders seeking inclusive, pedagogically coherent, and digitally sustainable orientation practices for online postgraduate education.

Keywords: orientation, transition, asynchronous, postgraduate taught, action research

Introduction and context

The rise of online distance learning (ODL), for postgraduate taught (PGT) education, particularly asynchronous delivery models, has reshaped the higher education landscape (Ogunmakin, 2024). Internationally, online and distance learning at postgraduate level has grown rapidly over the past decade (Schweighart et al., 2024), with nearly 28% of UK PGT students studying via online distance learning by 2023/24 (Mosely, 2025). These students are often mid-career professionals, balancing work, caregiving responsibilities, and study commitments.

Asynchronous delivery offers flexibility and access, attracting students who value location independence, the ability to self-pace, and the opportunity to learn while working full-time (Hoffman et al., 2020). However, this flexibility also introduces challenges. Students transitioning into an online postgraduate programme frequently report uncertainty about academic expectations, digital tools, time management, and a lack of community (Robb & Moffat, 2020). These challenges are particularly pronounced in asynchronous environments where opportunities for real time interaction are limited.

Orientation modules play a critical role in supporting this transition. Effective orientation can scaffold early engagement, support the development of self-efficacy and digital fluency, and social belonging (Abdous, 2019). Therefore, orientation represents a key intervention point within online programme design, particularly for learners entering complex and flexible study environments.

At Abertay University, the online orientation module serves as the first point of engagement for postgraduate students. Historically, the module was segmented by cohort intake, in line with the block delivery model, with each cohort accessing a separate orientation module. While administratively straightforward, this approach resulted in a fragmented experience and limited opportunities for cross cohort interaction. In October 2024, a unified orientation module was introduced, consolidating all intakes into a single online orientation module, to support consistency and foster a stronger sense of community.

This action research project aimed to evaluate the orientation experience, identify areas for enhancement, and implement improvements aligned with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000) and transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993).

The aims of this article are threefold: to examine the effectiveness of the orientation module as a tool for transition and engagement in an asynchronous postgraduate context; to describe the design, implementation, and results of an action research project that informed enhancements; and to offer evidence-based recommendations for academic developers and institutional leaders seeking to support flexible, inclusive induction practices in online environments to best support postgraduate students.

Literature review: The online asynchronous postgraduate landscape

Globally, asynchronous online learning has become an integral part of postgraduate taught (PGT) education, driven by changing learner demographics, institutional strategies and economic pressures (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020). Universities have increasingly adopted flexible, modular approaches to postgraduate provision in order to widen participation and respond to demand from professionals seeking to upskill while remaining in employment (Ogunmakin, 2024). As a result, the profile of postgraduate learners has shifted significantly, with many students now characterised as “non-traditional”, older than undergraduate cohorts, likely to be employed full-time, and often balancing multiple responsibilities including caregiving (Dennis & Clifton, 2021; Risepoint, 2025). These learners are attracted to asynchronous study because it allows them to engage at times that suit their personal and professional schedules (Risepoint, 2025).

Asynchronous delivery models are particularly attractive to this group, as they enable learners to engage with content at times that align with their personal and professional commitments (Risepoint, 2025). This flexibility supports access and participation but also reconfigures the learning experience, placing greater emphasis on self-regulation, independent learning and sustained motivation (Ogunmakin, 2024). While asynchronous environments remove temporal constraints, they may also reduce opportunities for immediate interaction, which can influence students’ perceptions of support and connection (Garrison et al., 2000).

Transition into online postgraduate study represents a critical phase in shaping student engagement and persistence (Stone, 2017). Unlike campus-based provision, online learners must rapidly adapt to new academic expectations, unfamiliar platforms, and modes of communication that are often text based and asynchronous. Research indicates that students frequently experience uncertainty in relation to academic standards, time management and effective participation in online environments (Brunton et al., 2016; Robb & Moffat, 2020). Transition theory and Vygotskian scaffolding (Moore & Diehl, 2013) emphasise the importance of structured support during early stages of engagement, particularly where learners are adapting not only to academic norms but also to digital platforms and independent study methods.

A key dimension of this transition is the development of a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993; Peacock et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012). Belonging has been identified as a significant factor in student engagement, satisfaction and retention within higher education. However fostering belonging in asynchronous online environments presents particular challenges, as learners may experience isolation or a lack of visibility within the learning community (Peacock et al., 2020). The absence of real time interaction can limit opportunities for informal social connection, making it more difficult for students to establish relationships with peers and staff. Therefore, early learning experiences, including orientation, play a crucial role in shaping students’ perceptions of inclusion, support and academic identity (Moore & Diehl, 2013).

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework provides a widely used model for online learning experiences, identifying the need for a balance of teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Teaching presence relates to the design, facilitation and direction of learning; cognitive presence reflects the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning; and social presence refers to the ability of participants to present themselves as real and engage in purposeful communication.

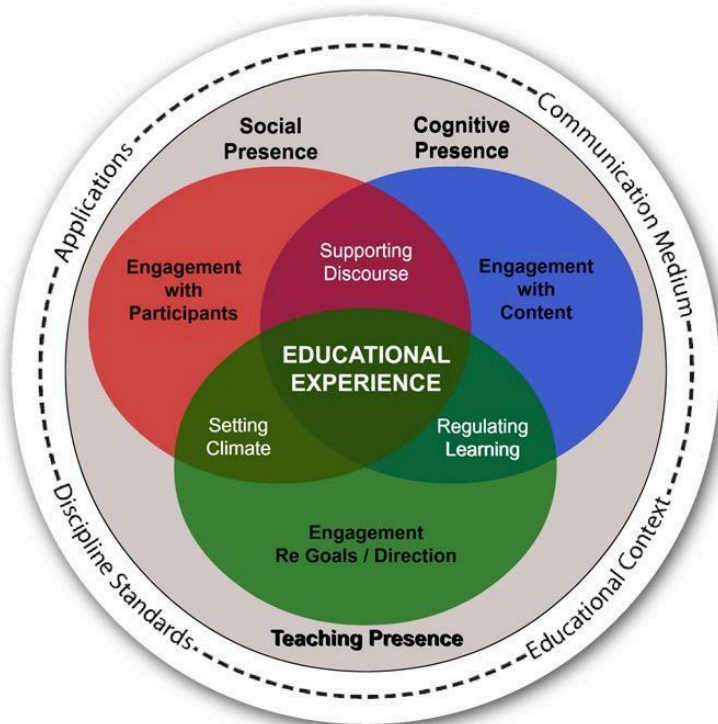


Figure 1 Community of Inquiry Framework (Community of Inquiry, 2022)

While the Col framework offers a useful structure for analysing engagement in online environments, it has been critiqued for its limited attention to affective dimensions of the student experience, particularly sense of belonging (Garrison, 2007). This limitation may be especially pronounced in fully asynchronous context, where social presence is mediated through delayed and often text based interaction.

Complementing this, Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory conceptualises the psychological and communicative space between learners and instructors, shaped but the interplay of dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. In highly structured asynchronous environments, where dialogue may be constrained, transactional distance can increase, potentially leading to reduced engagement and feelings of disconnection (Greenhow et al., 2022). Together, these frameworks provide a useful lens for examining how learning design, including orientation, can influence early student experiences.

Orientation and induction processes are widely recognised as critical mechanisms for supporting student transition online learning environments (Tinto, 2012). These interventions are designed to familiarise students with institutional systems, clarify academic expectations and support the development of skills required for successful study (Elliott & Frost, 2018). Research suggests that effective orientation can enhance students' confidence, reduce uncertainty and promote early engagement with both the learning platform and wider academic community (Abdous, 2019; Robb & Moffat, 2020).

However, the effectiveness of orientation is closely linked to its design. Orientation that focuses solely on administrative or technical information may fail to address the broader social and academic dimensions of transition (Swan, 2001). There is increasing recognition that orientation should also support the development of community, encourage interaction and provide opportunities for learners to begin constructing their academic identity (Cooper, 2021). Despite this, much of the existing literature focuses on general online or blended contexts, with limited exploration of orientation design within fully asynchronous postgraduate taught provision.

Despite the growing importance of asynchronous online postgraduate taught education, there remains a lack of empirical research examining how orientation design supports student transition, engagement and belonging within this context. While existing studies have explored student engagement and interaction in online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000) and more recent work has highlighted the role of belonging in shaping online learner experience (Peacock et al. 2020), these studies tend to focus on synchronous or blended delivery models, where opportunities for real time interaction may mitigate some of the challenges associated with transition. Consequently, there is limited understanding of what constitutes effective orientation practice for learners studying fully asynchronously at postgraduate level.

Furthermore, while theoretical frameworks such as Col (Garrison et al., 2000) and transactional distance (Moore, 1993) provide insights into online learning processes, there is a need for empirical work that applies these frameworks specifically to orientation design and education. Addressing this gap is particularly important given the increasing prevalence of asynchronous delivery models and the complex and diverse needs of postgraduate taught students.

This study addresses this gap through an action research project that evaluates and enhances an online orientation module within a fully asynchronous context. By applying established theoretical frameworks to the design and evaluation of orientation, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how early learning experiences can support transition, engagement and belonging in online distance education.

Method

Abertay Online context

This study was conducted within Abertay Online, the fully online asynchronous provision at Abertay University. The programmes are delivered using a fully asynchronous model with no scheduled live teaching sessions, enabling students to engage flexibly across time zones alongside professional and personal commitments. Teaching is structured through a block delivery model with modules typically delivered over seven-week teaching periods and six entry points throughout the academic year.

The student cohort is predominantly composed of postgraduate learners who are in full time employment and often balancing additional responsibilities including caregiving. Therefore, students are typically engaging with their studies in fragmented time periods and rely on clear structure, accessible materials and responsive support.

Within this context, the orientation module represents a critical point of entry into the learning environment. It introduces students to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE, Canvas), academic expectations and key processes, while also providing initial opportunities to establish connections with peers and develop a sense of belonging. The fully asynchronous nature of the provision means that this early engagement and preparedness for study.

The design and evaluation of orientation within this context therefore requires careful consideration of both pedagogical and structural factors, including the balance between flexibility and support and the extent to which opportunities for interaction and community building can be facilitated without reliance on synchronous engagement.

Research design

The study adopted a mixed methods action research design in line with educational practitioner inquiry principles (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). The action research was grounded in a pragmatist philosophy, using a sequential explanatory mixed methods design. The approach adopts a sequential mixed methods design in which an initial quantitative phase is followed by a qualitative phase that is given greater priority in addressing the research aims (quan → QUAL) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by Abertay University (EMS9394). Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered. Informed consent was obtained through online forms. Anonymity and data protection protocols were followed according to the university's ethical guidelines and United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).

Data Collection

Data collection was planned across three strands:

Study 1a and 1b – Quantitative phase

Study 1 included two concurrent strands:

Study 1a (Survey): A structured survey (Appendix A: Orientation survey instrument) was distributed to Abertay Online students using a refined version of the institution's module evaluation survey. Questions focused specifically on students' experiences of the orientation module, including navigation, clarity, timing, and community-building. This provided baseline data on satisfaction and areas for improvement.

Survey (n=54): A survey embedded in the orientation module collected feedback on clarity, navigation, usefulness, and belonging. Likert-scale and open-ended items provided quantitative and qualitative insights. A total of 318 students were invited to participate, with 54 responses received, yielding a response rate of 17%.

Study 1b (SEZ Email Review): 172 emails submitted to the Support Enquiry Zone (SEZ) between June–December 2024 were analysed. Using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014), the messages were coded inductively to identify dominant themes in student concerns and support needs. This strand helped identify structural or procedural barriers triggering help-seeking behaviours.

Email analysis (n=172): All emails sent to the SEZ from online postgraduate students between June–December 2024 were reviewed. Emails were categorised using inductive coding to identify recurring themes.

Inductive coding was used to analyse qualitative data from both survey response and student emails. Initial codes were generated directly from the data and iteratively grouped into broader categories. Illustrative examples of this coding process are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Examples of inductive coding

Data source	Raw data extract	Category	Theme
Survey	"Additionally, we could have a live chat with students if we need to work in a group or ask some questions."	Peer communication	Engagement and communication in online learning
Survey	"When we signup, having a clear understanding of the series of events - really important; I have these modules only today and my whole 2 scheduled 2 days went in waiting."	Module, assessment and re-sit queries	Academic flexibility and support needs
Email	"I am stuck in a loop on OASIS and cannot complete registration, can you please help?"	Registration issue	Administrative processes and technical support
Email	"I have been given my grades and feedback, I will need to re-sit. What is the process for this? Will my grade be capped? And do I have to pay to re-sit?"	Module, assessment and re-sit queries	Assessment and academic Processes
Email	"I am going to be traveling with work so I cannot take the next module. Can I take a study break and return at the intake following this in September?"	Study break/Suspension of studies	Academic flexibility and support needs

Study 2 – Qualitative phase

Informed by quantitative findings, Study 2 aimed to deepen understanding of patterns, anomalies, or unexpected results:

Semi-structured interviews: Students who indicated willingness to participate via the survey were invited to a brief (approx. 15-minute) virtual interview to discuss their orientation experience. Interviews were intended to clarify survey outliers and generate richer insights into how students perceived belonging, clarity, and preparedness. Students were invited to take part in short follow-up interviews. Despite expressed interest from 11 students, none attended their scheduled sessions, suggesting difficulty aligning synchronous research with asynchronous student lifestyles.

Data from the surveys and emails to SEZ were triangulated alongside theory to generate actionable insights, and descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyse survey and email data respectively.

Throughout the process, integration of data was essential. The quantitative phase generated trend data and identified focal areas, while the qualitative phase was designed to contextualise and deepen findings. The absence of interview data prompted reflection on method flexibility, suggesting a need for asynchronous qualitative techniques such as self-administered interviews or embedded feedback prompts (De Leeuw et al., 2003).

The pragmatic, iterative methodology aligned with the ethos of action research and allowed the orientation module to be evaluated, adapted, and continually improved in response to student feedback and engagement patterns.

Emerging Findings

Study 1a: Survey

Most respondents (93%) expressed overall satisfaction with the orientation module, with 93% agreeing that it effectively explained key aspects of their studies. The module was perceived as well organised (81%) and easy to navigate with IT and electronic resources rated highly (85%).

While satisfaction was high, those who provided a neutral or disagreeing responses highlighted potential enhancements:

- **Content additions:** Some students requested information on re-assessment procedures, hardware specifications, and a clearer step by step guide from application through to graduation process. Additional information that students requested information on included; “re-sit exams procedure”, “history of the university”, “specs for hardware required to complete the course”.
- **Navigation and access:** A recurring theme was the need for improved navigation explanations, quick access links to university systems such as My Abertay and Online Abertay Student Information System (OASIS) from the orientation module that is hosted in the VLE, and earlier access to the orientation module to allow sufficient time ahead of the taught modules starting. With respondents noting; “navigation steps should be more interactive rather than text”, “I do not yet see how I can communicate with other students”, “Additionally, we could have a live chat with students if we need to work in a group or ask some questions.”, and “a list with functional links for most useful resources students might need (My Abertay, OASIS, etc.)”.
- **Resource Availability:** Additional study resources including course specific texts and websites were requested, as well as scheduling information to understand module intake dates and when holidays would fall. Students highlighted points such as; “calendar schedule of term begin/ending dates and holidays”, “what resources books to purchase prior to starting modules that can be helpful before and during” and “books/links to useful websites”.

The survey findings indicate that while the module effectively introduces university processes (91%) and provides necessary guidance (78%) enhancements in navigation, resource accessibility and communication features could further support student engagement and readiness for online study.

Study 1b: Emails

A total 172 emails enquiries were received by the SEZ between 05 June 2024 and 09 December 2024 from Abertay Online students were evaluated. Analysis of these enquiries reveals key trends in student concerns and support needs.

- **Mitigating circumstances:** Most enquiries related to requests for mitigating circumstances (60%). This suggests that a significant proportion of students require flexibility in their academic schedules due to personal or professional commitments.
- **Module, assessment and re-sit queries:** Queries regarding assessment deadlines, re-assessments, grading and appeals accounted for 10% of enquiries highlighting the importance of clear assessment policies and guidance.

- Registration issues: A further 9% of students sought assistance with registration processes, indicating potential areas for streamlining enrolment procedures or improving guidance materials.

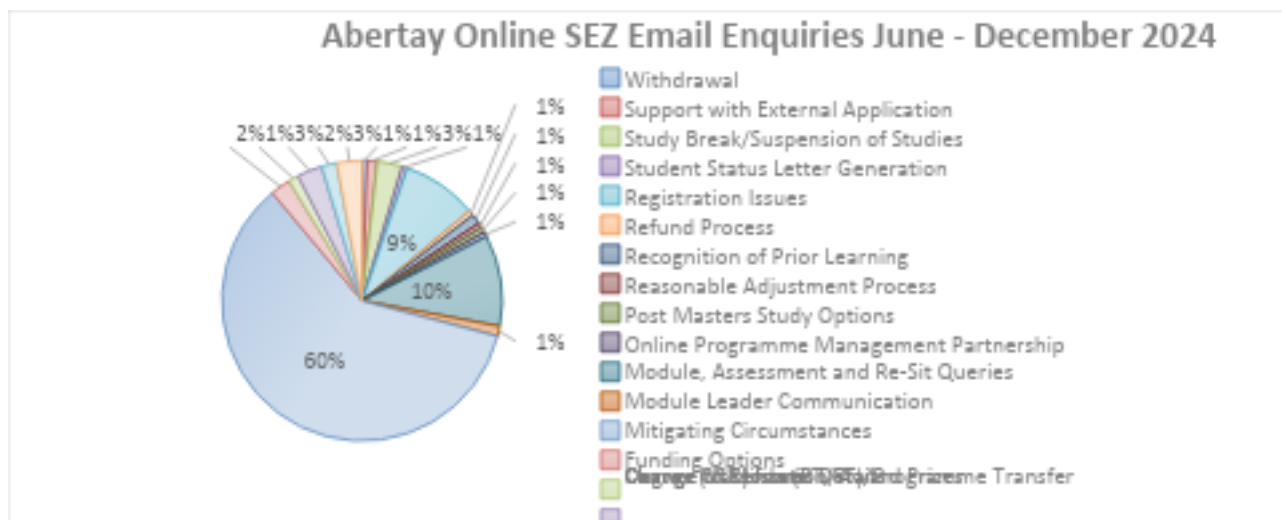


Figure 2 Abertay Online Student Email Enquiries to Support Enquiry Zone (SEZ) (Study 1b)

The data indicates a reactive support environment, where students were contacting SEZ predominantly at points of stress or confusion, particularly related to assessment management and extensions. The very high proportion of mitigating circumstance queries suggests students had a limited awareness or accessibility to guidance materials. This may stem from insufficient clarity around academic expectations and timelines early in the programme or module. The data indicates that academic flexibility, clear communication of assessment processes and administrative support for enrolment are key areas requiring attention. Enhancing proactive guidance on mitigating circumstances, assessments and registration may reduce the volume of reactive support requests, thereby improving the student experience.

Discussion

The findings from both the survey and email enquiry analysis highlight several recurring themes in the student experience and support needs of Abertay Online students. While overall satisfaction with the orientation module was high, the data revealed continued challenges related to academic flexibility, assessment clarity, student engagement and administrative processes. These themes collectively reflect the complex interplay between structure, communication and autonomy within asynchronous online postgraduate taught education.

Academic flexibility and support needs

The most predominant concern among students, reflected in the email analysis, was the need for mitigating circumstances (60% of email enquiries). This aligns with the survey responses indicating that while students found the orientation module informative, some required additional resources related to assessment procedures and university policies. The demand for flexibility reflects the realities of online postgraduate study, where learners often balance professional responsibilities, family commitments and academic workloads. Previous research has highlighted the importance of institutional responsiveness to these competing priorities, arguing that supportive academic policies are essential to sustaining engagement and retention (Dennis & Clifton, 2021; Lang, 2002).

This pattern also reinforces Moore's (1993) concept of transactional distance, where a lack of structural clarity or adaptability can widen the psychological gap between students and their institution. Proactive communication about extensions, self-certification, and mitigating circumstances therefore serves not only a procedural function, but also a relational one, signaling to students that the institution recognises and accommodates their diverse contexts.

Assessment and academic processes

Assessment related queries, made up 10% of emails and survey feedback, indicated that students require greater transparency and predictable academic communication. Survey feedback indicated that students sought greater clarity around deadlines, grading criteria and reassessment procedures. While the orientation module provided foundational information, qualitative comments suggested that some ambiguity persisted regarding university processes.

This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that assessment is a central source of anxiety and confusion for online learners (Henderson et al., 2019). Transparent assessment design and consistent communication about feedback cycles can reduce uncertainty and promote a stronger sense of academic control. Within the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000), this clarity enhances teaching presence by reinforcing the instructor's role as a guide and facilitator, thereby supporting students' cognitive presence and confidence in their academic progress.

Engagement and communication in online learning

A persistent challenge in online learning is fostering a sense of belonging and community. Although 76% of respondents felt a sense of belonging, 24% remained neutral or uncertain. This may, however, reflect a degree of response bias, as students who feel more connected are generally more likely to participate in surveys (Couper, 2000; Thorpe, 2002). Email enquiries referencing module leader communication and student interaction suggest that while Abertay Online's learning environment provides strong structural support, it offers fewer mechanisms for informal or peer-based connection.

These findings align with existing literature in online education, emphasising that belonging is fostered not solely through institutional resources but through relational engagement (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011; Thomas, 2012). Opportunities for informal discussion, personalised tutor communication and community spaces are crucial for bridging the social and psychological distance that characterises asynchronous learning. Within the CoI framework such strategies enhance social presence and mitigate the isolation that can undermine motivation and persistence (Garrison et al., 2000).

Administrative processes and technical support

Administrative and technical factors also play a significant role in shaping the overall student experience. Registration issues, made up 9% of email enquiries and 3% VLE related concerns, point to gaps in the onboarding and digital support processes. Although 85% of survey respondents found IT resources easy to use, qualitative feedback revealed that some learners still required additional assistance, highlighting the need for pre-emptive troubleshooting and more intuitive design of system interfaces.

These findings align with the argument that institutional systems must be designed for accessibility and simplicity, particularly for students who are new to online education (Edwards & Hardie, 2024). The

principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2024) provides a useful lens here, advocating for multiple means of engagement and representation to accommodate diverse learner needs. Furthermore, as with the survey response bias observed earlier, there remains a possibility that students who engaged successfully with digital tools were overrepresented among respondents (Couper, 2000; Thorpe, 2002).

Collectively these findings indicate that while Abertay Online's foundation is robust, opportunities remain to enhance the proactivity and inclusivity of its support systems. Improving communication channels, embedding self-service resources and streamlining administrative processes can reduce transactional distance and create a more cohesive and responsive digital learning ecosystem.

Updates

Based on the findings from Study 1a (survey) and Study 1b (email enquiry analysis), a number of targeted improvements were implemented to address key challenges identified in the data. These updates align directly with the themes highlighted in the literature concerning academic flexibility, clarity of communication, student engagement, and digital navigation (Brunton et al., 2016; Dennis & Clifton, 2021). The updates were intentionally multimodal, combining visual, textual, and interactive guidance to accommodate diverse learning preferences and accessibility needs (CAST, 2024). This inclusive approach aligns with UDL principles, ensuring that all students, regardless of prior digital literacy, could navigate assessment procedures effectively.

Clarifying policies and academic flexibility

The overwhelming volume of queries related to mitigating circumstances and assessment processes indicated a pressing need to enhance transparency and support in these areas. In response, various enhancements were implemented to support students. New videos and guides explaining mitigating circumstances, self-certification, and extension procedures were embedded into the orientation module. Step-by-step walkthroughs were created for common academic processes including accessing grades, understanding feedback, and navigating re-assessment routes.

These updates not only addressed procedural clarity but also supported a culture of academic compassion by making policies easier to understand and apply. In doing so, they directly reduce the transactional distance (Moore, 1993) between students and the institution by improving structural transparency and predictability. They also reinforce the teaching presence dimension of the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000), ensuring that institutional guidance is embedded as part of the ongoing learning journey.

Within the wider context of rapid online expansion, these changes reflect sector-wide calls for greater academic transparency and digital equity (Hill et al., 2023). The initiative also aligns with Abertay University's institutional focus on reducing procedural barriers and promoting a sense of belonging for distance learners.

Streamlining navigation and access

Feedback from both data sources suggested students required earlier and easier access to orientation and university systems. Where broken links or media errors were identified, these were corrected across the

orientation module, and a quality assurance checklist (Appendix B: Orientation module quality assurance checklist) was introduced to ensure such issues are proactively sought out and resolved.

Quick access menus and deep links to student intranet and student record systems were embedded directly into the orientation module, allowing students to move seamlessly between key platforms. In addition, earlier access to the orientation module was granted as soon as the student had registered and paid for their first module, rather than the first day of the taught module, allowing students to explore the module at their own pace and reduce first-week overload. This approach is consistent with best practice in online transition pedagogy (Hoffman et al., 2020).

Enhancing belonging and social presence

Although 76% of respondents indicated a strong sense of belonging, the remaining neutral responses and email data underscored the need for stronger social scaffolding. A unified asynchronous orientation module replaced individual modules for each cohort of new students, enabling cross-cohort interaction, peer visibility, and informal mentoring. Programme-specific discussion boards were introduced to foster relevance and community within academic pathways.

Tutors were encouraged to adopt strategies to welcome students, respond to introductory posts, and signal active presence during induction, practices known to support social presence and reduce dropout (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011).

The commercially available real-time student feedback tool, Unitu, was also promoted as a mechanism for continuous dialogue between students and staff. Plans are in development to introduce dedicated programme spaces within the orientation module where programme and module leaders can maintain visible presence and engage directly with students in a centralised, asynchronous environment.

Expanding support and resource visibility

To address gaps in awareness of support services, the orientation module content was expanded to include detailed, multimedia-supported information on Counselling and Mental Health Services, Disability Support, and the Careers Service. New content was added to the graduation section, clarifying timelines and expectations and demystifying the final stage of the student journey. This is particularly important for international students who may be visiting the country for the first time.

These additions not only enhanced information access but also signalled a holistic approach to student wellbeing and success, reinforcing the connection between academic, personal, and professional support.

Policy and curriculum alignment

Insights from this project also informed institutional policy and regulations. Feedback was incorporated into updates to the *Academic Regulations for Taught Postgraduate Programmes*, providing further clarity in assessment language and extension policies.

In taught modules, all assessments now display deadlines with a note it is in UK time zone, addressing confusion among international learners about time zones. Within the VLE, a clock feature has been embedded in each module to display what the current time in the UK, supporting students studying globally can synchronise submission times accurately. This practical adjustment illustrates how small design features can significantly reduce transactional distance by removing avoidable sources of uncertainty.

Pedagogical framing

These improvements support a more cohesive application of the CoI framework. Teaching presence has been bolstered by clearer regulation explanations and consistent guidance structures. Cognitive presence is supported through multimedia explanations and scaffolded interactions. Social presence is enhanced through peer forums and cross-cohort orientation design. These enhancements also reflect the principles of transition theory, ensuring that the orientation module functions as a low-risk environment where students can develop confidence and digital literacy before entering credit bearing modules (Moore & Diehl, 2013).

Taken together, the updates represent a deliberate move from reactive to proactive student support, embedding flexibility, transparency, and social connection at the earliest stage of the learner journey. They exemplify how orientation design can operationalise the theoretical tenets of the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000) and Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory to create an inclusive, responsive, and pedagogically coherent online ecosystem.

Fixing broken links and media, and providing clear explanations of university regulations, policies and procedures reduces the transactional distance by ensuring structured and accessible content. Content updates to support services and policy guidance enhance teaching presence, while detailed information on assessment and graduation supports a cognitive presence. This is particularly important within online asynchronous postgraduate education, where early clarity, visible support structures and opportunities for interaction can positively influence engagement, confidence and students' sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012).

Next Steps

Building on the initial cycle of enhancements, the next phase will adopt a continuous improvement model that draws on feedback, student engagement patterns, and best practices from the literature on online learning design and student transitions. These planned developments aim to reinforce the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000), reduce transactional distance (Moore, 1993), and scaffold learners as they move from orientation into the main programme (Moore & Diehl, 2013).

In alignment with the findings of Jisc's *The global education and technology: Digital challenges associated with the effective delivery of transnational education report* (Newman 2025), this phase will also prioritise digital sustainability, equitable access and the development of coherent online ecosystems that support learners across geographical and temporal boundaries. This approach positions Abertay Online within current sector-wide efforts to strengthen institutional digital resilience and student-centred provision which is key to the Scottish Tertiary Quality Standards Framework (Scottish Funding Council, 2024).

Enhanced academic and administrative clarity

To address ongoing concerns around mitigating circumstances, academic policies, and procedural understanding:

- Additional multimedia guides will be developed in collaboration with academic and professional services teams to clarify regulations, self-certification steps, and escalation processes. Visual guidance has been shown to increase comprehension and reduce help-seeking delays (Hoffman et al., 2020).

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- Templates and walkthroughs for reassessment, appeals, and academic progress will be made accessible within the orientation module, aligning with evidence that early demystification of academic processes reduces anxiety and enhances self-efficacy (Abdous, 2019).

Drawing on the Newman's (2025) report, these developments will also be evaluated against digital accessibility benchmarks to ensure that guidance materials are not only clear but also inclusive and interoperable across global learning contexts.

Strengthened teaching and cognitive presence

To ensure consistency and structure across taught modules:

- An assessment brief template will be piloted to provide assessment and reassessment information and related policies and procedures such as extensions, mitigating circumstances and study skills support available in a standardised format across the online portfolio. Standardisation of assessment communication has been linked to increased student satisfaction and reduced procedural confusion (Schweighart et al., 2024).
- Academic staff will be supported to integrate references to orientation content within their taught modules, reinforcing scaffolding and transfer of learning (Moore & Diehl, 2013).

These activities also respond to Newman's (2025) recommendation to strengthen academic digital fluency and alignment between teaching practices and institutional systems, ensuring that technology enhances rather than fragments the learning experience.

Personalised and programme-relevant orientation

To enhance relevance and belonging:

- Orientation will include dedicated programme-specific pages co-created with academic teams. These spaces will include discipline-specific expectations, technical specifications, academic timelines, and curated FAQs, supporting situated learning and community formation (Robb & Moffat, 2020).
- These pages will also facilitate informal peer interaction, fostering social presence and reducing the isolation that can challenge retention in online postgraduate environments (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011).

Consistent with Newman's (2025) findings on the Transnational Education (TNE) digital engagement, the development of programme level digital communities will ensure that online students experience authentic connection to their academic discipline and institutional culture, irrespective of location.

Asynchronous feedback and evaluation

To ensure inclusive, ongoing evaluation:

- A Unitu-based asynchronous survey will be distributed to capture student reflections on the revised orientation experience. Such mechanisms support equity by accommodating the flexible engagement of online learners (De Leeuw et al., 2003).

- Continuous data from LMS analytics, forum engagement, and survey trends will be triangulated to inform future iterations, in line with action research cycles and participatory design principles (Kemmis et al., 2013).

The integration of Newman's (2025) proposed digital experience metrics will allow benchmarking of Abertay Online's developments against national and international standards for effective delivery, strengthening the evidence base for strategic decision making.

Strategic outlook

Collectively, these steps will position Abertay Online as a model of digital sustainable, student informed online provision. By embedding continuous evaluation, standardised communication, and inclusive design, the university can strengthen its capacity to deliver a coherent and equitable digital learning environment.

The structured developments will reinforce the orientation module as a critical infrastructure for online postgraduate taught success, prioritising access relevance and learner confidence as foundations for sustained engagement and academic progression. Through an interactive, data informed enhanced ethos, Abertay Online can continue to close transactional gaps, strengthen social, cognitive and teaching presence and ensure alignment with emerging sector standards for high quality online asynchronous taught postgraduate education.

While the enhancements identified through this study offer clear benefits for student transition and engagement, their implementation has implications for staff workload and operational capacity. In asynchronous online contexts, where provision is often delivered at scale and across multiple intakes, additional demands on academic professional services and technical staff must be carefully considered. However, many of the proposed improvements, such as embedding self-service resources are designed to reduce repetitive enquiries over time and therefore have the potential to offset initial workload increases.

A proactive and iterative approach to module enhancement, supported by structured review processes and shared ownership across teams may enable institutions to balance quality improvement with sustainability. Therefore, these findings are not only pedagogically relevant but also offer practical insights for colleagues involved in the design and delivery of online programmes, particularly in relation to managing workload while maintaining a high-quality student experience.

Researching asynchronous population

This study encountered significant difficulties in engaging asynchronous online postgraduate students in follow-up qualitative research. Despite 11 students opting in for interviews via the survey (Study 2), none attended their scheduled sessions. This pattern of non-attendance, even among consenting participants, highlights the methodological challenge of aligning research approaches with the lived realities of this student population.

Several factors likely contributed to this issue:

- Use of personal communication channels: Many online learners use personal email addresses and alternative calendar tools rather than their institutional accounts. As a result, university email invitations and booking reminders may go unnoticed or be deprioritised (De Leeuw et al., 2003).

- **Schedule complexity and limited flexibility:** Students often juggle work, caregiving responsibilities, and study, making it difficult to commit to synchronous engagements, even brief ones. Time-bound interviews may be perceived as intrusive or logistically unmanageable (Dennis & Clifton, 2021).
- **Time zone variation:** The international distribution of students means institutional timeframes may not align with students' availability, further complicating scheduling.
- **Low perceived benefit:** For time-constrained students, voluntary research participation, especially when unrelated to academic credit, may be viewed as low priority.
- **Social and institutional distance:** Students who have not yet formed a sense of connection with the institution may be less inclined to engage in voluntary activities like interviews. As Couper (2000) and Thorpe (2002) argue, weaker institutional identification correlates with lower survey and research participation.

These insights highlight the need to design research methods that reflect the ethos of asynchronous learning. Future research could adopt alternative data collection methods, such as asynchronous self-interviews, voice-note submissions, or embedded reflection prompts within orientation or VLE activities (James, 2007; Meho, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2008; Salmons, 2022). These methods align with the autonomy and flexibility online students seek, while potentially yielding richer, more authentic data.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, this action research project, which conducted an evaluation of the Abertay Online orientation module, provided valuable insights into the needs and experiences of Abertay Online students. The mixed methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis of emails and surveys proved to be effective in gathering comprehensive data. However, the low participation in scheduled interviews highlighted a significant challenge in engaging online asynchronous students for synchronous research activities. This outcome could suggest the need for alternative data collection methods that better accommodate the busy schedules and engagement preferences of this student population. It is important to acknowledge potential biases in the data, as it is likely that respondents who were confident in the technology use and held a greater sense of belonging to the university were perhaps more likely to participate in this research. Despite these biases the changes made to the orientation module have been designed to enhance, rather than detract from the overall experience. All suggestions have been carefully considered to ensure the orientation module can best serve to meet the needs of this student population.

The findings revealed key areas for improvement in pedagogic practice. The high volume of email enquiries related to mitigating circumstances and assessment issues underscores the importance of academic flexibility and clear communication of assessment processes. By proactively addressing these concerns through expanded orientation content and targeted communications should support the students more and reduce the frequency of support requests.

The application of the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000) and transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993) in the orientation module could better support the fostering of a sense of community and belonging among students. However, the survey responses indicate that further enhancements are needed to strengthen peer to peer communication and instructor-students interaction. Implementing strategies such as programme-specific discussion boards, promoting platforms like Unitu to encourage student feedback that can be discussed anonymously between the students ahead of being escalated if required to resolve

issues and exploit opportunities in real time, may help address these challenges and support students in feeling more connected to the university community.

Reflecting on the administrative processes, the findings highlight the need for streamlined enrolment procedures and improved navigation tools. Enhancing proactive guidance on registration, funding and programme changes can improve the student experience and reduce the volume of support requests. Consideration should be given to how institutional systems can facilitate earlier access to the orientation module, as this may enhance the student experience and support students in preparing effectively for their studies.

Moving forward, continuous improvement in the orientation module and other support mechanisms will be based on future research, such as annual Unitu surveys. Collaborating with various university services to integrate multimedia content and developing programme specific pages within the orientation module are steps in this process. Additionally exploring alternative data collection methods such as computer assisted or self-administered interviews may be crucial in engaging this student population more effectively in future research.

Biography

Nicola Brown BA (Hons) PGCert, PgDip, FHEA, CMgr MCMI, MAPM is Lecturer and Programme Leader within Dundee Business School at Abertay University. She previously served as Head of Abertay Online Programmes, where she led the strategic development and delivery of fully online postgraduate provision. Her background spans senior roles in programme and project management across higher education and industry. Nicola's teaching centres on project management and related disciplines, informed by both academic research and professional practice. Her research focuses on a sense of belonging and student success within fully online, asynchronous postgraduate education, with particular interest in how learning design and institutional structures shape student engagement and retention. She is currently undertaking doctoral research in this area.

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Appendix A: Orientation Survey Instrument

All questions marked with * use a 5-point Likert scale: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree.

Consent

Abertay University attaches high priority to the ethical conduct of research. Please consider the following before indicating your consent on this form. Indicating your consent confirms that you are willing to participate in the research, however, indicating consent does not commit you to anything you do not wish to do, and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time. You are indicating consent under the following assumptions: · I understand the contents of the participant information sheet and consent form. · I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and have had them answered satisfactorily. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research (parts of the project or the entire project) at any time without penalty and without having to provide an explanation. · I understand who has access to my data and how it will be handled at all stages of the research project.

For further details or any questions, please contact the principal investigator, Nicola Brown (nicola.brown@abertay.ac.uk). **By completing and submitting this survey, you are consenting to take part in this study conducted by Nicola Brown & the AbLE Academy who intend to use your data for further research examining student perspectives on the Abertay Online orientation module with the use of such data within that research group.**

You can find our procedure for complaints (regarding research projects) and our privacy notice and legal basis for processing research data at: <https://www.abertay.ac.uk/legal/privacy-notice-for-research-participants/>

Do you consent to participate in this survey? (Yes / No)

Survey Questions

- 1*. The orientation module explains things well.
- 2*. The orientation module covers all the areas I anticipate needing support with throughout my studies.
3. What additional topics or resources would you find helpful?
- 4*. When I have contacted staff with questions about the orientation module, I have received timely feedback.
- 5*. I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to the orientation module.
- 6*. The orientation module is well organised and running smoothly.
- 7*. The IT resources such as the online course delivery platform (Canvas) and tools (e.g. quizzes, discussions) have been effective.
- 8*. The readings and resources on the module (e.g. e-books, journal articles, regulations, policies, online services) are useful.
- 9*. I feel part of a community of staff and students.
- 10*. The orientation module explains university processes and policies well, allowing me to find support when needed.
- 11*. I feel able to effectively communicate online with other students.
- 12*. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the orientation module.
13. Please provide any further comments on what you particularly liked about the module and/or aspects that could be added or improved.
14. Please provide your name and student number if you are willing to be contacted for a short (maximum 15 minute) interview.

Appendix B: Orientation Module Quality Assurance Checklist

This checklist is designed to support the proactive identification and resolution of issues within the Orientation module. It ensures that content remains:

- accurate and up to date.
- fully accessible (aligned with Blackboard Ally).
- functionally reliable (e.g. no broken links or missing content).

The checklist is intended to move quality assurance from a reactive approach (fixing issues after student complaints) to a planned, preventative process embedded within module delivery cycles.

This checklist is not a one-off compliance exercise. It is a cyclical quality enhancement tool, embedded within each delivery cycle to ensure that issues are proactively sought out, addressed, and prevented, rather than identified retrospectively through student difficulty or dissatisfaction.

A full QA review of the orientation module should be completed prior to each intake.

Process

Step 1: Preparation

Access the Orientation module in Canvas (Student View recommended)

Open the Blackboard Ally accessibility report

Open the QA checklist and tracking document

Step 2: Technical and functional review

Systematically work through the checklist to:

- test all links (internal and external);
- open all files and media;
- confirm all activities and tools are accessible.

identify:

- broken links;
- missing or empty pages;
- incorrect or outdated content.

All issues should be logged and assigned for resolution.

Step 3: Accessibility review (Blackboard Ally)

Using Ally's RAG indicators:

Red items - Must be resolved before the module is released.

Amber items - Should be improved where feasible, prioritising high-use content.

Green items - No action required.

Particular attention should be given to:

- missing ALT text;

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- inaccessible documents;
- colour contrast issues;
- lack of captions or transcripts.

Step 4: Content and pedagogic review

Review the module from a student experience perspective, ensuring; clear navigation and starting points and explicit instructions for all activities.

Visibility of:

- support services;
- communication expectations;
- assessment and submission guidance;
- opportunities for early engagement and community building.

Where issues are identified, content should be revised for clarity, alignment, and inclusivity.

Step 5: Record and resolve actions

All identified issues should be recorded in a QA tracker, including:

- description of issue;
- severity (High, Medium, Low);
- assigned owner;
- deadline for resolution.

High-priority issues (e.g. broken links, inaccessible content, missing instructions) must be resolved before student access.

Step 6: Final review and sign-off

Before each intake it is important to confirm all critical issues have been resolved and ensure no outstanding Red Ally items. Verify that:

- navigation is clear;
- all links and materials function correctly;
- the module presents a coherent and supportive orientation experience.

Continuous improvement

Findings from each QA cycle should be used to:

- inform ongoing module enhancement;
- identify recurring issues or systemic gaps;
- update orientation content in response to:
 - student feedback (e.g. Unitu feedback, student queries);
 - changes in systems or processes.

This ensures the orientation module remains current, inclusive, and aligned with best practice in online learning design.

Checklist

Module overview and structure

Check	What to Review	Action if Issue
Clear starting point	“Start Here” page visible and accurate	Update instructions and links
Navigation clarity	Students know where to go first and next	Add signposting or sequencing
Orientation flow	Logical progression across units	Reorder or group content
Policies	All institutional links working and current	Replace broken/outdated links
Contact information	Tutor / support contact visible	Add or correct details
Self-introduction activity	Instructions clear and visible	Add prompt, expectations, and purpose

B. Links, media and technical functionality

Check	What to Review	Action if Issue
Broken links	All internal and external links	Fix or replace immediately
Embedded media	Videos load and play correctly	Re-embed or replace
Empty pages	No blank or placeholder pages	Remove or populate
File access	Documents open without error	Re-upload or convert
Tool access	All tools (discussion boards, quizzes) available	Publish and test
Submission points	Clear where assessments are submitted	Add explicit instructions

C. Accessibility review (Blackboard Ally)

Key:

Status	Required Action
Red (High risk)	Must be fixed before module release
Amber (Medium)	Improve where feasible, prioritise high-traffic pages
Green (Good)	No action required

Check	What to Review	Action if Issue
ALT text	All images have meaningful ALT text	Add descriptive ALT text
Document accessibility	PDFs, Word, PPT files accessible	Reformat using styles, headings
Colour contrast	Text readable (no low contrast highlights)	Adjust colours
Headings structure	Proper use of headings (H1, H2, etc.)	Apply consistent formatting
Tables	Tables structured correctly	Add headers and simplify
Multimedia captions	Videos have captions or transcripts	Add captions/transcripts
File formats	Avoid scanned PDFs	Replace with accessible versions

D. Learning design and alignment

Check	What to Review	Action if Issue
Learning outcomes	Measurable verbs used	Replace vague terms (e.g. understand → explain)
Alignment	Activities linked to outcomes	Add mapping or narrative
Instructions clarity	Activities clearly explained	Rewrite for clarity
Interaction expectations	Participation requirements clear	Add frequency and expectations
Instructor presence	Response times stated	Add communication policy

E. Technology requirements

Check	What to Review	Action if Issue
Minimum requirements	Hardware and software specified	Add Canvas system requirements
Digital skills	Expectations clearly stated	Expand guidance if needed
Privacy information	Data protection guidance included	Add or update links

F. Learning support and belonging

Check	What to Review	Action if Issue
Support visibility	Academic, technical, wellbeing support visible	Add links or summaries
Community building	Opportunities for interaction present	Add introductions/discussions
Tone and inclusivity	Welcoming and supportive language	Revise tone if needed
Orientation purpose	Clear value of orientation explained	Add framing narrative