# Online Learning and Research-Informed Teaching on the MA Character Education

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*Research Led and Research Orientated:* *Learning how to be a researcher in an applied field through interactive synchronous and asynchronous online learning whilst ensuring that students' own research can contribute to advancing knowledge.*

The MA Character Education is a three year distance learning programme for postgraduate students which is taught online through the virtual learning environment, Canvas. The majority of our students work in schools or universities and study alongside full-time work commitments and outside of regular teaching timetables.

Within the context of online education, student satisfaction is seen as a predictor of student learning outcomes (Eom, Wen and Ashill, 2006).[20] Effective online learning is dependent on *teaching*, *cognitive* and *social* elements of online education (Swan, 2014)[21] and student satisfaction with each of these elements is likely to affect motivation and engagement with learning materials. To help to meet each of these elements and to help to ensure that our students are supported, motivated and engaged, tutors on the MA Character Education adapt engagement processes with students and vary the teaching methods.

The MA Character Education seeks to enable students to apply critical thinking in the development of their own research ideas and to understand how these might be implemented in the social world. In order for our students to develop a foundational knowledge of research methods within the social sciences, and to understand how research methods can be applied within the context of character education research, tutors created a bespoke *Research Methods in Character Education* module for first year students. The *Research Methods* module utilises the full range of available technologies on Canvas, such the discussion boards, online quizzes and web conferencing software. Through the use of different software, tutors ensure that students have varied means through which to engage with the programme and regular opportunities to "meet" virtually with tutors and fellow students.

Tutors on the *Research Methods* module utilise online discussion platforms such as the Canvas discussion boards and the Canvas Conference software. Online seminars seek to replicate the small group teaching and discussion afforded within campus-based, face-to-face seminars. Opportunities for students to communicate and share good practice is considered vital for the effectiveness of online learning programmes within professional education at postgraduate level (McPherson and Bacow, 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that student collaboration within an online context can be beneficial to student learning (Tee and Karney, 2010)[22]. One of the opportunities for discussion within this module centres on different research designs. Students are asked to review character education research and outline examples of at least two different research designs being used in the field of Character Education. Students are encouraged to reflect specifically on the research methodology. In this way, the focus is placed on the research design and methodology and a greater awareness and understanding of the methodology of existing research is enabled; through tutors' and other students' contributions, questions and reflections, students are able to engage with a greater number of different research designs and are supported in reflecting critically on the ways in which research has been planned and conducted.

Quizzes are used as a formative tool in which students can test their knowledge and understanding of the topics contained within each unit, prior to and following each unit. Given the broad range of experience and expertise that our postgraduate students enter the programme with, the *Research Methods* module offers two 'learning pathways': one for students who are new to research methods used within the social sciences and one for students who already have an in-depth understanding of research methods. Students are encouraged to use the interactive quizzes to check their existing knowledge on each unit of learning in order to identify any gaps in their knowledge and to enable them to tailor their subsequent engagement and learning accordingly.

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20    Eom, S. B., Wen, H. J. and Ashill, N. (2006) 'The Determinants of Students' Perceived Learning Outcomes and Satisfaction in University Online Education: An Empirical Investigation', *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 4 (2), pp. 215-235. McPherson, M. S. and Bacow, L. S. (2015) 'Online Higher Education: Beyond the Hype Cycle', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 29 (4), pp. 135-154.

21    Swan, K. (2014) 'Enhancing E-learning Effectiveness', in Miller, G. (*ed*.) *Leading the E-learning Transformation of Higher Education: Meeting the Challenges of Technology and Distance Education*. Sterling, Va: Stylus Publishing.

22    Tee, M. Y. and Karney, D. (2010) 'Sharing and cultivating tacit knowledge in an online learning environment', Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning, 5, pp. 385-413.