

# Critical success factors for postgraduate distance education courses in the UK: a systematic review of the literature.

The 11th annual Learning at City Conference 2021:  
Teach to Inspire: Showcasing good practice in higher education

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# MA Academic Practice : City, University of London

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# Unique – the only MSc in Food Policy in the world!

- Set up by the godfather of food policy
- Professor Tim Lang
- Running for 25 years
- Wants to attract wide range of students
- Widening participation globally and socially

- Attracts students who want to understand how to change the food system using food policy. Focus on sustainability: environmental and social, and equity: health and economic



# MSc Food Policy : City, University of London

- You can study with us:
  - Full Time (one year)
  - Part Time (two years)
  - Part-Time by distance learning (two years)
- <https://www.city.ac.uk/prospective-students/courses/postgraduate/food-policy>



# Distance Learning Programme Re-instated

- Distance Learning route been part of the programme since its inception in the 1990s
- Suspended in 2017/18
  - Technological improvements
  - Additional student support
  - Building a Community of Practice
- Reinstated in 2020/21
- What further improvements can be made/developed
- Evidence base?

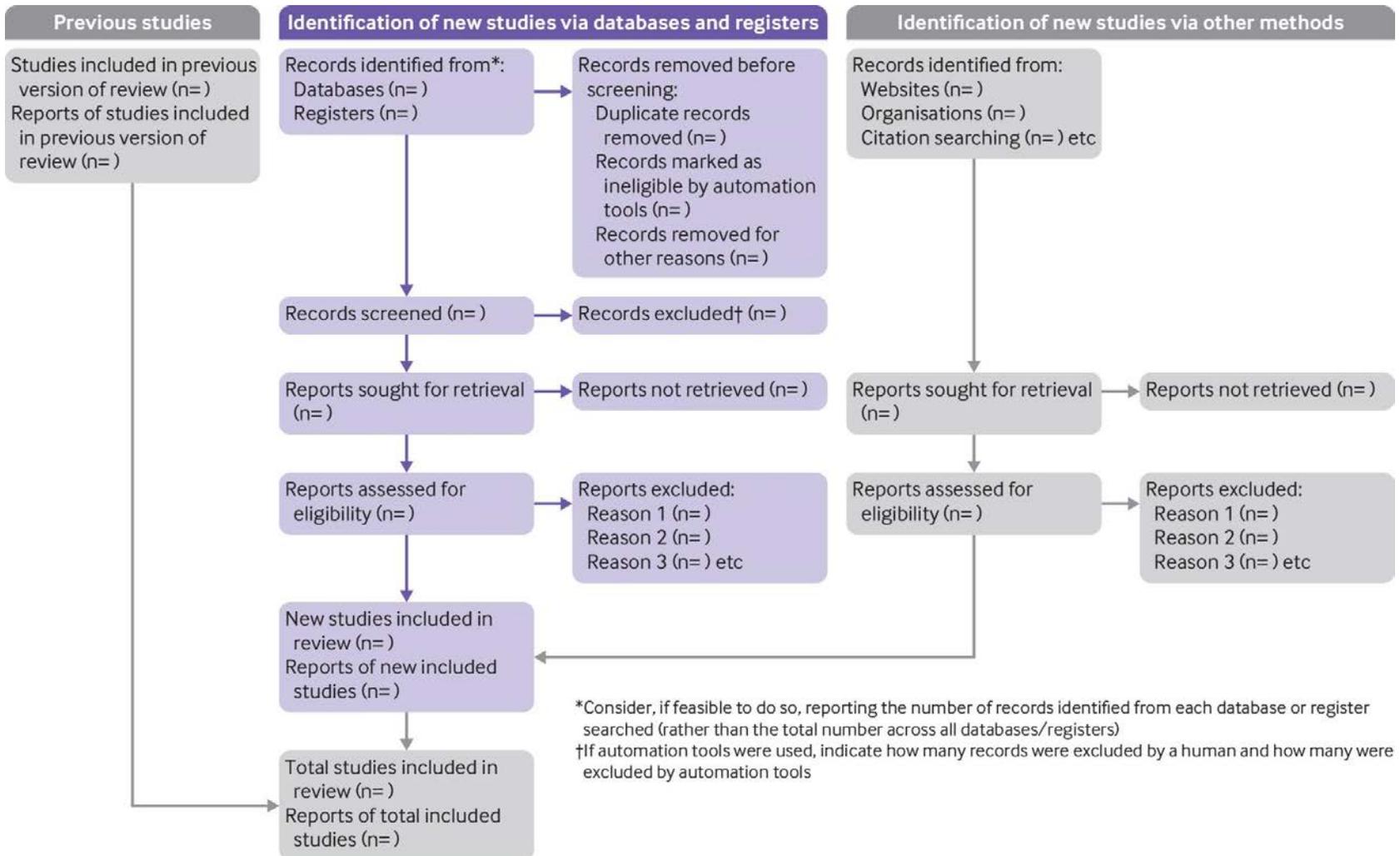
## Research Questions

- RQ1 what are the key successful teaching and learning approaches for distance learning students at PGT level and how can these be implemented?
- RQ2 what activities and strategies support student progression for those on PG distance learning programmes, and how can these be introduced?
- RQ3 what are the implications for policy at university level?
- Preliminary Results presented today

# Systematic Literature Review

- PRISMA
- Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)
- First published in 2009
- “designed to help systematic reviewers transparently report why the review was done, what the authors did, and what they found.”
- Updated in 2020
- Page, M.J., McKenzie, J.E., Bossuyt, P.M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T.C., Mulrow, C.D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J.M., Akl, E.A., Brennan, S.E. and Chou, R., 2021. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *Bmj*, 372.

# PRISMA – flow chart and checklist



# Systematic Literature Review

- PICO

<b>P - Problem</b>	Distance learning	Students study course online from a distance
<b>I - Interest</b>	Success factors	Learning outcomes Student Progression Student satisfaction Academic success Economic success? Popularity of course? Employer response?
<b>CO - Context</b>	Higher Education Post Graduate Taught Students Distance Learning Courses	Last 5 years

# Searches and Search Terms

“distance learning” OR “distance education” OR  
“distance teaching” OR “remote learning” OR  
“remote education” OR “remote teaching” OR  
“online learning” OR “online education” OR “online  
teaching” OR “e-learning”

“learning outcomes” OR “learning objectives” OR  
“results” OR “grades” OR “success” OR “progress\*”  
“post graduate” OR “masters” OR “post-graduate”  
OR “postgraduate” OR “graduate”

“higher education” OR university OR “tertiary  
education” OR “HEI”

- Ebscohost (Ebscohost (Academic Search Complete and SocINDEX with Full Text and Teacher Reference Center)
- Web of Science Core Collection
- SCOPUS
- Title/Abstract/Key words
- Academic Journal Articles
- Peer Reviewed Articles
- English Language

## Results

- 475 articles → spreadsheet
- Delete duplicates – 313 articles – review abstracts
- INCLUSION CRITERIA
  - PGT courses (not PhD)
  - Formally taught courses - not MOOCs
  - Not blended learning – distance learning
  - Distance learning – not only e-learning (e.g VLEs Moodle etc)
  - Empirical research not literature reviews or reviews
- 78 articles – review full articles to check for inclusion

## Results

- 39 articles included for analysis
- Qualitative approach – not RCTs!
- Thomas, J. and Harden, A., 2008. Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC medical research methodology*, 8(1), pp.1-10.

## Landscape of literature

- International – but clear difference in concerns between high income countries and low and middle-income countries.
- Studies carried out across a range of disciplines (from Business, Education, Land Management, Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Infomatics and more)
- Results can be divided into two periods: pre-COVID and COVID
- About 1/3 of articles published from 2020 relate to COVID, have different concerns: mainly about emergency online provision

## Research Questions - reminder

- RQ1 what are the key successful teaching and learning approaches for distance learning students at PGT level and how can these be implemented?
- RQ2 what activities and strategies support student progression for those on PG distance learning programmes, and how can these be introduced?
- RQ3 what are the implications for policy at university level?
- Thematic Analysis – reported by Success Factor

## Results: SF1. Interaction

- **Staff Interaction** – most commonly mentioned factor for student satisfaction and success
- ‘quality interaction’ (Cara and Can 2019) ‘Purposeful Interpersonal Interaction’ (Meehall, 2021) Teacher Presence (Kucuk and Richardson 2019)
- Tutor presence in online discussions and synchronous sessions. Timely and quality feedback. Positive engagement with students.
- Quality over Quantity
- Students valued tutor-authored opinion pieces or critical blogs as this spoke to the key critical thinking skills associated with PG study.
- Tutor support for pastoral issues

## Results: SF1. Interaction

- **Student interaction** – not so clear cut
- Student dissatisfaction with lack of face to face interaction (Sbaffi and Bennett, 2019) and student community
- **But** evidence that distance learning students traded flexibility for peer-to-peer relationships (Jamison and Bolliger, 2020) and did not have time to invest in these
- Some studies reported students were not keen on group work (Harlan et al 2021) – preferred traditional lectures and readings they could engage with in their own time
- Students choosing online-only programmes self-selecting?

# Results: SF2. Student context

- Awareness of this is key to success
- Online only students have competing demands, as more likely to be:
  - working
  - have family commitments
  - from older age group
- So: Early contact, consistency, clear personal communication. (Detres et al 2020)
- Ethnicity, age and gender – particularly ethnicity - strongest predictor of student outcome (Gemmell, 2020) Need to develop additional support for these students.
- DL students require support from family and workplace as well as tutors, but don't forget to engage other university services e.g library, professional services
- During COVID additional stress

## Results: SF3. Technical infrastructure

- Particularly problematic in LMIC
- Access to internet connection and appropriate devices has been linked to completion rates (Schyma et al 2019)
- Use of additional platforms can be helpful – e.g. whatsapp or social media (Ahmed et al 2020)
- When technical infrastructure exists - use of LMS analytics to monitor student progress – possible and useful on DL courses.
- Exacerbated in COVID
  - Lack of LMS (Dogar et al 2020)
  - Students and staff unfamiliar with technology in emergency transition to online
  - Internet access problematic and limited data plans
  - Essel et al (2021) found Audio better than Video teleconferencing in Ghana

## Results: SF4. Content

- Student satisfaction linked to engaging, interesting and relevant content (Sbaffi and Bennett 2019)
- Task Value –why is the task relevant and valuable? (Alanazi et al 2020)
- Increase in time online and engagement with e.g. webinars = slight increase in scores (Toro-Troconis 2019)
- How to increase engaging content?
  - multi-media resources
  - ‘experiential learning’ e.g. group projects developing tools or frameworks or problem based learning.
  - group assignments can be good, but also have challenges e.g. working with international students in different time zones

## Results: SF5. Investment

- Don't assume that online is better or easier.
- Increase in student enrolment, but requires increase in staff training, investment in creating and updating content (Weissman et al 2019)
- Online courses have been introduced widely without proper preparation and investment (Pineda and Celis 2018)
- Walsh et al (2020) outlines PPP public private partnership to develop learning analytics and offer 24/7 student support.
- Introduction of 'academic coaches' (additional staff) to support students on DL courses (Park and Robinson 2021)
- Difference between choosing to study online and having to study online (COVID-19)

# Questions?

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# Centre for Food Policy

Shaping an effective food system