



Evaluation of a virtual learning environment (VLE) to support the delivery of the European Certificate in Essential Palliative Care

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Background

E-Life was the first hospice-led virtual learning environment set up to support candidates doing the European Certificate in Essential Palliative Care (ECEPC) programme. The ECEPC is an eight-week distance learning course, aimed at doctors, nurses and pharmacists. Students need different types of support and guidance as they experience distance learning in different ways (Carnwell 2000). The pilot aimed to provide additional support to candidates studying the ECEPC by providing a virtual learning environment called E-Life.

Learning is assessed by completion of a portfolio, written and oral examination. Course candidates receive a course handbook, guidelines, accompanying DVDs, palliative care guidelines and have the option of attending additional study days. Each candidate is allocated to a facilitator who is a senior member of staff working in specialist palliative care. The facilitator is available to candidates if they require support and feedback on their portfolios. Feedback from previous evaluations of the course indicated that some candidates felt isolated and would have liked additional support. This is echoed in other studies of learners experience with distance learning (Carnwell, 1998a; Price 2000; Hyde 2004).



Aims

This study aimed to evaluate the initial phase of the development of E-Life, a VLE designed, developed and evaluated to support the delivery of the ECEPC.

Objective

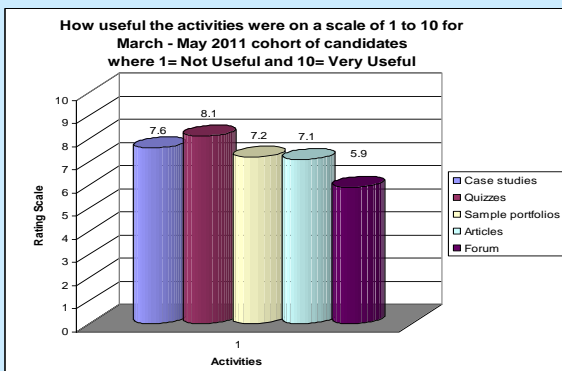
- To examine candidate activity on E-Life.
- To understand candidate experience and perception of E-Life
- To explore the education team's experience of using the E-Life site.

Methodology

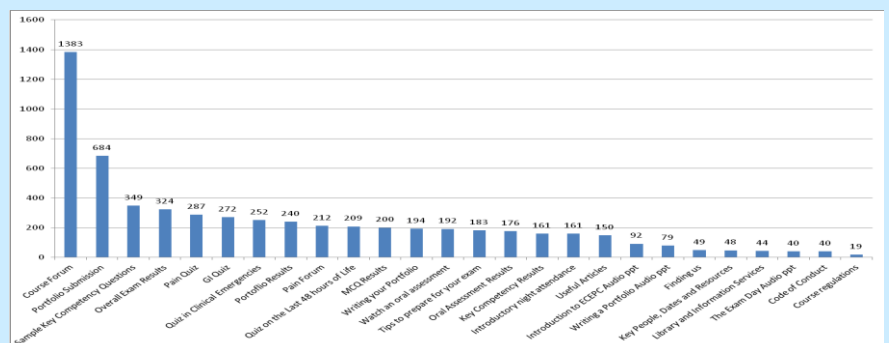
A specific section was set up on E-Life for each topic in the ECEPC course. Forums, quizzes, presentations, podcasts, articles, relevant websites, guidelines, course handbook, videos and information on the portfolio, key competency and the assessment day were on E-Life. Candidates submit their portfolios for assessment online and the portfolio template, sample portfolios, referencing guide and tips on how to write the portfolio are available on E-Life.

The evaluation was conducted quantitatively and qualitatively with candidates, facilitators and the course administration team. A questionnaire was administered to all candidates and facilitators on the exam day and candidates also completed a questionnaire at the start of the course. The online activity of candidates was monitored throughout the course on E-Life.

Results



Number of times an activity was viewed



Of the 63 candidates who were provided with access during one intake period, a total of 54 (86%) logged into the E-Life site. Approximately half of all candidate logins to the website occurred outside 9-5pm. The quizzes were heavily used by the candidates. Candidates and facilitators liked the user-friendly interface of E-Life and it enabled the provision of support to candidates outside normal working hours. A Mann Whitney U Test indicated that whilst candidates who had access to E-Life had higher mean rank scores of agreement suggesting that they felt less isolated, more supported and could ask questions, the differences were not statistically significant.

We asked candidates to rate their confidence using computers and their I.T. skills on a scale of 1 – 10, where 1=Poor and 10= Excellent. All of these candidates had access to E-Life. The results showed an increase in confidence using I.T. skills as well as an increase in candidate's perception of their I.T. skills from before to after doing the course. Findings from the focus group consisting of the course administration team indicated there were few queries from candidates on how to upload their portfolios for submission. This was likely to be due to the provision of a podcast and a Word document on E-Life.

Conclusion

Recommendations from candidates included having additional resources such as quizzes and case studies and these were incorporated into E-Life in subsequent intakes.

Similar to other studies using Moodle, there was poor uptake of the public forums (Burgess 2010 & Kirkpatrick 2006).