

What has eLearning done for missionary training? Two Case Studies of online missionary training

Introduction

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Bulletin 15 continues the current series of Missionary Training Case Studies and focuses on online training. I remember my first conversations almost fifteen years ago about the effectiveness of online training for the kind of ‘whole person learning’ needed to prepare people for cross-cultural ministry. There had already been an explosion of online courses in Higher Education but the debate was whether personal and spiritual formation could happen without a physical learning community. I remember the many hours with a small team figuring out how to design online training that could be transformative. One of those pioneers and online training leaders is Andrea Thomas. She has been instrumental in creating a range of both short courses and Masters level courses.

For more than a decade Andrea has connected people around the world and led them effectively through eLearning courses. Her skills and experience are certainly a vital ingredient in making the eLearning experience rich, so I am particularly delighted that Andrea has written for us in this Bulletin, drawing from her years of experience and sharing with us an honest appraisal of the successes and pitfalls of online missionary training. Andrea’s question, ‘*What has eLearning done for missionary training?*’ puts flesh on the bones of Kate Wiseman’s Bulletins in 2016 which helpfully set out a framework for thinking about effective online learning. Andrea describes the online Explore course which is designed to equip for cross cultural gospel ministry. In this course students are provided with online lessons to read, additional resources to access, workbooks to reflect in, a personal tutor to accompany them and a course facilitator to keep the online community communicating and learning from each other.

In this extended Bulletin we present a second Case Study provided by Richard Reilly, a training pioneer working in Central Asia. Richard’s ‘*eLearning missionary training in Central Asia: Introducing the V Puti course*’ describes a contextualised course being pioneered using Central Asian Russian. The online English language Explore course was not simply translated but also made accessible and relevant for the Central Asian church. Andrea and Richard help us understand the possibilities and pitfalls of effective online equipping and allow us to imagine

how we too, can make use of eLearning to equip God's people for effective participation in His mission.

Case Study 1: What has eLearning done for missionary training?

By Dr Andrea Thomas

The potential of eLearning for missionary training has been discussed in previous bulletins. Please refer to the articles by Dr. Kate Wiseman [IMTN Bulletin 04(a&b), 2016] for a more in-depth analysis of, and a framework for, effective training through eLearning.

It is probably fair to say that even the most sceptical of sceptics will agree that eLearning has its place and can achieve remarkably more than people might imagine.

In this article, I would like to share an empirical analysis of over 10 years of involvement in online missionary training; from conception to development to delivery.

A series of births

I had the privilege of working with Dr. Ruth Wall and others in the development of the All Nations En Route course, an intensive 10-week residential mission training course. This drew on many years' experience from several mission practitioners who had worked in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Of particular value were my husband's and my reflections on our own mission preparation (or, rather, lack of it) and how we dealt with that.

It has been a long-held vision of All Nations (UK) to make training accessible to as many people as possible and so En Route (10 week residential course) gave birth to Explore, a 13-week course delivered entirely online and later to a shorter 4-week / 20-hour course – Express (available either residentially or online). Explore then gave birth to the VPuti course; a contextualised version translated into Central Asian Russian (see Case Study 2 below). Our experience with the online Explore and Express courses led to the birth of All Nations' blended Postgraduate Programme and most recently to EnVision, a missionary training resource for small groups.

The key ingredients of Explore and Express online courses

Academic inclusivity

The online Explore and Express courses are not accredited courses, so we have not been constrained by the same academic requirements as other programmes. We have freedom to include what we, as mission practitioners, believe to be the most helpful information, and deliver it in a way that is not dependent on academic ability. This training does not exclude those who are older and/or have not studied recently but does, of course, depend on a basic level of IT skills and the ability to reflect and engage with challenging topics. The inclusive nature of online Explore and Express courses appeals to a wide audience by enabling them to engage at a level they are comfortable with.

Holistic

Our approach to online course development was built upon the learning ethos of All Nations: that missionary training should engage people through cognition, emotion and interaction i.e. through Head, Heart and Hands or H³ [see Dr. Ruth Wall, IMTN Bulletin 01, 2015]. This is a beautiful example of synergy - much like the cord of three strands [Ecc. 4:12].

The study journey for Explore and Express seeks to answer the following questions: 'Who am I?', 'What is mission?', 'What is culture?' and 'How do I put it into practice'?

Tying everything together are cross-cutting themes that weave through the study journey like golden threads:

- Biblical foundation - Exploring and developing a biblical foundation for our life and work.
- Cultural awareness - Understanding the issues that arise from working in other cultures.
- People skills – Developing our ability to work with others.
- Practical issues – Putting the theory into practice and being equipped with a range of tools for life and work.

This approach (delivered through online lessons, personal reflection, discussion and practical application) has led to some very positive learning experiences as seen in these student responses:

... if I am being totally honest I didn't realise how great it would be and how much I would gain from it! I thought it would be a bit more of an "academic" study, but in actual fact, it has been much more of a mixture of head, heart and mind. I've been so impressed with both the content and the method of delivery...

It really has changed my thinking, given me a new outlook, time to reflect and ponder, time for consideration and evaluation.

I cannot think of any important areas that were not touched on in this course.... I am simply impressed by the balance between academic, spiritual and practical while getting through an enormous topic in very limited time. I really feel I have been supported by true experts.

It is practical, spiritual and changes the thinking process. It helped me to consider questions that I hadn't given much thought to before...

'Less is more' (an ability to discern)

We live in an age where we are awash with information and an effective trainer/course developer is one who can sift through the data and discern what is most beneficial for their audience. Their role is to point the trainee towards what is required for effective learning

while, at the same time, giving trainees the skills they need to find relevant information for themselves. It would be much easier to fill a course with page upon page of useful information, or be tempted to simply upload existing lecture notes. Neither leads to a satisfactory learning experience.

The principle of 'less is more' is one that I endeavour to maintain with our online courses. When people share a testimony, they often recall a simple word or two said at the right moment that had a profound effect on them. These 'golden nuggets' are the reason why daily Bible study notes are so effective. There are also plenty of Biblical examples that demonstrate the 'less is more' principle; David and Goliath, the feeding of the 5,000, the Widow's mite, Jesus appointing only 12 disciples, the mustard seed, etc.

This principle is seen in the opening Explore lesson – a brief study on Elijah where, despite being 'light' in content, students have consistently commented that it had a profound effect on them.

['I found most enjoyable']

Learning from Elijah because it helped to unlock a passage of scripture through which I could learn more about myself and God, and take practical lessons that I can apply to my life.

... The first lesson on Elijah. I love the story but saw more in it this time. I understood more why I feel like he did sometimes!!

... Learning from Elijah was very helpful because it was like God was assuring me of being aware of my own struggles and ready to meet me at the point of my needs.

Learning from Elijah, it was great to be reminded how God reacts to us in a way that meets our needs, spiritually and physically and emotionally. What an awesome God we serve.

Some students have expressed a preference for a more interactive and multimedia approach. However, by keeping our technology 'light', we ensure that everyone has access to the core material regardless of their location and technical infrastructure.

Good sources and good shaping

Another essential ingredient is the production of good, in-house material. The online Explore and Express lessons were written by experienced mission practitioners with a solid foundation of theory and practice. The material alone, however, is not the end of the story. A good course developer needs to take this material and shape it into a good learning experience.

In recognition that different students have different abilities and requirements, we provide additional select readings and recommendations for those who wish to go deeper into the topics.

It's given me a lot of nuggets on how to do mission work, I now have lots of ideas... I have also learnt about where to find all the information I need to help me be equipped. It's changed my perspective of what mission is and I can now see it through God's eyes so have a much better understanding.

The material is further enriched by links to other websites and resources although these are kept to a minimum to avoid problems with broken links or missing web pages.

Community

Ruth Wall presented the value of community as one of the pillars of transformative learning (IMTN Bulletin 01, 2015). So, at the start of our eLearning journey, we committed to designing cohort-based courses and use forums to foster the sense of community. The median group size for the Explore course is 6-7 students (see Appendix) which has proved to be an ideal size for the facilitator and students, both administratively and in terms of building relationships.

The '**Introductions Forum**' enables students to start to get to know one another. There are some fun questions, much like any team-building exercise (e.g. How do you relax? What makes you laugh? Share something unusual about yourself or that has happened to you!).

Students are also encouraged to share insights in the '**Virtual Café**'. There have been creative expressions in the form of poetry, prose, photos and artwork while others share favourite songs and images.

The '**Prayer Forum**' helps people to connect on a deeper level. Some have found this to be a life-line during challenging times. We have also observed that the anonymity afforded by the computer screen can lead people to share more openly than if they were face-to-face.

With the prayer room etc. there was more intimacy than I was expecting.

A number of our students, however, would prefer face-to-face interactions.

Everything is written, there is a limit in the dynamic of the communication

No face time, limited discussions. Lots of reading (which doesn't suit all learning types)

This is something that developments in technology could improve in the future.

Methods that promote learning (reflection, self-discovery, articulation and practice)

We do not wish to simply hand over the 'golden nuggets'; we want students to discover them for themselves; knowledge and spiritual insights need to be sought (like the 'treasure hidden in a field').

In the beginning it was hard for me to reflect on things, but as the time went by I understood that reflection is one of the most important things in this course in order to benefit as much as possible.

It is said that people retain a relatively small amount of information through reading, hearing and seeing (Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience). Learning increases if they **articulate** their thoughts (verbally or in writing) and even further if they **apply** their learning.

Our students distil their thinking into short pieces of writing through two simple methods:

Weekly workbooks – Throughout the lessons, there are 'Pause for thought' moments and short questions for students to record responses. These are commented on by their online tutor. A simple tick-box style check-list gives the opportunity to audit their learning progress. At the end of the workbook, students further refine their thinking by answering the questions: What I would most like to remember is...; I would like to know more about...; I would like to learn how to...: I would like to develop my character by...

I have done a lot of e-learning before, this was better than most of them I think because of the workbooks and personal contact with tutors.

...the workbooks and feedback were an extra level on what I've experienced in the past and I enjoyed that.

Weekly topical forums - Students are required to write a response (in less than 500 words) to a topical question. They are expected to comment on at least two posts made by other students.

I enjoy making and receiving comments in the discussion area, it feels like one is actually in a class and not half-way round the world.

The word limit, and the fact that other students, the facilitator and tutor will read their posts, encourages students to think carefully about what to say. For some, this can lead to a longer-lasting learning experience than in a classroom setting where the loudest may dominate or people make spontaneous comments without much thought.

At the end of the week the Facilitator writes a **summary** of the forum discussion. This gives the students a copy of the key points along with insights and additional suggestions.

...summaries helped to highlight key points for memory

...helpful because sometimes all the participants discussions were hard to understand/follow

Simple **practical exercises** are incorporated into the material. For example, the 'Build a profile' exercise where the student interviews someone of another culture. In another forum, students share results of personality/team role tests and discuss the dynamic of their 'team'.

I enjoyed the task where we were to interview a friend from another culture, and it was interesting to read about how other people had enjoyed this, too.

...it provided the opportunity to chat with someone from different culture and I found this interesting, made you take time out to do this. Highlighted for me the need to give people time.

Peer learning

Given the maturity of many of our students, there is much to share – particularly from those who already have cross-cultural mission experience. The opportunity to critique is also an important part of learning, hence the requirement to comment on one another's posts. In practice, this is mainly affirmatory but students seem to genuinely appreciate the variety of responses and feedback.

[Most enjoyable was] To see others' thoughts, and what they think about my discussions

Everyone was polite, but there wasn't much debate. I think somebody gently disagreed with me once, on very reasonable grounds.

We are all on a journey and its useful to dip into someone else's world.

Easy-access resources

The lesson material can be copied and there is a selection of recommended downloadable **readings** along with a number of **links** and **book recommendations**. Students receive **automated email copies** of the forum posts. The weekly **workbooks** are submitted to an online tutor for **comments** which are sent back to the student via email.

These media provide an easy-access record of:

- one's thoughts, conclusions and action points at a particular point in time
- the thoughts and conclusions of their peers
- the responses of the All Nations course facilitator
- the responses of the personal online All Nations tutor

Wherever in the world the students end up, they can easily take their learning with them. This is a valuable resource to refer back to and a yardstick against which they can review their progress.

Student support

Students are supported, and guided through their journey, by the **Course Facilitator** and their **Online Tutor** who act as 'Guides on the side' not 'Sages on the stage'. Students come to us at different stages in their mission journey and with different needs. A good tutor and facilitator can discern what is needed and gently help them to get to where they need to go. We are

looking for progress not perfection! We also request students to have a **Local Mentor** for the duration of the course.

Based on feedback, we know that the tutor support is a highly valued aspect of the learning process – but it needs to be done well:

I most enjoyed... the personal feedback from my tutor. I don't know if I have ever felt this level of personal attention and support to my learning process since home schooling in second grade.

What I have most enjoyed is having access to the expert knowledge and realistic advice of tutors from All Nations.

I have been surprised by the way you all were able to make it feel like a very personal contact; that was above expectations... It has enriched my life...It has influenced my relationship with God.

Responsiveness

Students are motivated by the knowledge that someone is reading their work and taking a genuine interest. An essential aspect is, therefore, the responsiveness of the Facilitator to any enquiries, and the timeliness of the Tutor comments (usually within a week of the workbook submission). The facilitator summaries further reinforce the view that someone is actually taking notice of what they write! As the facilitator, I usual try to refer to each student by name. This is, however, challenging with larger group sizes.

...so impressed with the efficiency of getting back to me and with detailed comments/notes which have greatly helped me.

Appreciated prompt responses to workbook while subject matter was still fresh.

Tutor comments

The student will learn most from the Tutor if comments contain the following elements:

- Sensitivity
- Relevance
- Critique and corrections
- Personal identification
- Affirmation and encouragements

...comments were insightful, helpful, fairly detailed and personal. It was obvious that my tutor had spent time and effort into reading my workbook... was encouraging and helped to spur me on to keep working hard on the course.

My tutor was sensitive but also concerned and encouraging in a helpful and constructive way.

...it really made me feel like someone cared about my education.

Personal tutor comments were insightful and inspired further thought and reflection.

‘Sticks and carrots’ [punishment and reward as methods of persuasion] – the benefit of routine

Initially, some students dislike the rigid nature of the weekly activities but learn to appreciate the ‘pressure’ that helps them to get into a routine. We do not really have sticks and carrots except that if they do not meet 80% of the requirements, they will not receive a certificate. In reality, this is flexible as, frequently, there are mitigating circumstances (such as ill health, family problems, travel).

For me it is good to have the pressure to work through the lessons early in the week.

[Weekly routine] Excellent and kept me mostly on track and on schedule.

Although the courses are not academically accredited [a ‘reward’], they have been endorsed by leading mission organisations:

Explore is excellent! It fills the gaps in knowledge, even for mature Christians with little experience of cross-cultural mission issues. As well as learning, students appreciate the on-line community and mentoring aspects. Studying at home is a bonus as our applicants juggle with family life and a full-time job. [Interserve England & Wales]

I recommend this course for those who are beginning to explore the Mission of God in greater depth. Though not residential, the course includes regular online community learning, providing a sense of belonging and the real challenge and richness of learning with others. The course curriculum is well thought through. It demands personal reflection, real application and covers a wide range of very relevant issues. [OMF International]

What else have we learned?

The importance of personal motivation

Effective learning is not only dependent on the delivery method but also on individual **personality, learning preference, motivation** and **self-discipline**. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those who have independently decided to take the course and/or paid for it personally, engage better. They are more determined to get the most out of it and perhaps, this is why the drop-out/incompletion rate is under 5%.

Ultimately, those with a genuine desire to learn, generally do well.

A person, even one with extensive mission experience, may not have considered all the different aspects covered by this course. I think everyone would find something to learn from this course that would improve the way they did mission.

Synchronous vs asynchronous communication

A lot of our students struggle with conversations that are not live. However, asynchronicity provides space for people to think carefully about their response and gives time for non-English first language students to formulate their answer in an unpressurised environment. In a classroom setting, it is easy for the more extrovert people in the group to dominate or skew the discussion while the more reflective students struggle to speak. Classroom discussions may be spontaneous and simulating but there may be limited time to think carefully about what to say. There is no record of the discussion unless it is recorded or people take notes. This can be a challenging environment for those who are not proficient in the language.

In a number of Explore courses, we have met in real time via **Skype**. This can be an encouraging and uplifting experience, but there are often difficulties with time zones, individual commitments and bad internet connections.

The benefits of a safe space

Virtual learning has the potential to build confidence. It provides a safe, and relatively anonymous, environment for students to explore ideas and assumptions. The distance afforded by the geographical separation, and the asynchronous nature of discussions, enables students to engage more freely in their postings.

I liked studying online because I felt free to be myself and write what was on my heart. Maybe in a classroom situation I wouldn't have been so free to express myself for fear of judgement.

The surprise factor

Some of the students start the course without high expectations of the learning environment but are pleasantly surprised.

I was dreading online learning as I thought it would be dry and dusty and I would not be able to concentrate. So it has been really great to feel so involved and have interactive things to complete. Each week was stimulating and challenging.

It has been better than I expected from an online course. The response from other participants and tutor has been very beneficial and encouraging.

I have studied online before in a similar format, but this was better than I expected.

Having never participated in an online course before, this definitely beat my expectations, and I'd definitely do one again.

A development principle that we have taken from this is to endeavour to **give people more than they are expecting.**

The God factor

I have lost count of the times that I have been overwhelmed by the students' contributions and by their comments on the course; accounts of how God has been speaking to them through the material. The courses continue to exceed my expectations and I truly believe this to be the work of our gracious Father who, time and again, brings people together for this short journey to shape them and prepare them for His purposes.

A good course, therefore, must be developed and run on a foundation of **prayer.**

The single biggest thing which directed me spiritually which then helped most practically was the explore course. [Thailand]

...this course has been a God-send, and in many ways, a lifeline.

This course has been a big challenging turning point for me to be moulded by God's hand to be equipped for His mission.

Doing the course work helped me get my vision back. [Brazil]

Mission now feels less like my obligation and more like an expression of who I am in Christ.

Its turning to be exceedingly more than what I expected. It's just so different and life changing. I can tell even at this early stage that I will never be the same after this course.

What have been the biggest challenges?

Distractions and responsibilities

The single biggest challenge that our students face is the distraction from their other responsibilities that, most of the time, they continue during their study period. We have had many comments stating that they could have participated more (and, by implication, learnt more from the course) if they had not had other things competing with their time.

Learning is only effective if students give **quality** time to their studies. While we encourage students to schedule time specifically for the course, we cannot make them do it.

...the Wednesday deadline for the forum post was unachievable because my Monday-Thursday is jam packed with barely any free moments to do the course

...if I had more time to devote to the course it would have been just right.

...it was too much and too fast. I had to rush through the contents... I am still working 100%, we have 3 children and will leave in 3 months.

There were difficulties in everyone making the discussion deadlines which stifled discussion.

The knock-on effect is less engagement with other students which has an impact on everyone's overall learning experience.

Group dynamics

Sometimes groups gel and sometimes they do not, even when encouraged by the facilitator. However, this does not seem to negatively affect overall perceptions of the course, perhaps because expectations may not be especially high at the start (as discussed above). Many of the Express course students study alone and are happy with the experience.

Numbers lower than expected

Given that eLearning breaks down the barriers of geographical distance, visa difficulties, and work/time constraints, our expectation during the development phase was that that we would be overwhelmed with applications. Interestingly, this has not been the case. Several factors may contribute to the number of students being lower than initially anticipated, for example:

1. Lack of belief in the effectiveness of eLearning ('How can eLearning possibly prepare me [or our mission personnel] for mission?')
2. Cost ('Why should I spend this amount of money when so much is available online for free?')
3. Lack of accreditation ('What's the point of doing this if it's not validated by a University and/or not recognised by my organisation or visa awarding office?')

We are not discouraged by the numbers as we know that God will multiply the learning impact beyond the course.

[What is the main way that Explore prepared you...?]

...I have been able by the grace of God to train missionaries from most districts of the country in member care as well as self-care.

Language limitations

Students who do not speak English as their first language often spend considerably longer on the course than the time quoted in the course information. However, the self-study aspect of the course means that they can still do well.

... Because English is my second language, it's been important that I have had enough time to go through the material as many times as I needed to think and reflect on the

material and the workbook. In face-to-face teaching style, I might have struggled with the pace the lessons would have been presented.

Sometimes, however, the language is too difficult for certain individuals.

The literature added is in English, what is too complicated for me.

'One size does not fit all'

Not everyone is a good fit for these courses, including those who struggle with the virtual environment. For this reason, we have an 'eLearning suitability' questionnaire in the downloadable information on the All Nations website.

Sometimes students, or their agency, choose a course that is not the best fit for their requirements. For example, a number of students going on longer-term placements have taken the short four-week online Express course.

... the course was a bit too basic for the length/type of trip I am doing, but it was the one [X] told me to do. It definitely fulfilled what it promised, but maybe wasn't the right level for me.

Even in situations when Explore and Express are not the ideal form of training for a student (or vice versa), they can act as useful tools for reflection:

... it forced me to set aside time to think about my trip and my expectations, and to remind myself why I am going.

Conclusion

Despite some of the challenges, our experience has shown that when done in the right way eLearning is a valuable and effective medium for delivering transformational mission training. The online Explore and Express courses have enabled over 300 students to be trained who may not have been otherwise.

Most importantly, we have seen God's hand at work throughout each course; that inexplicable, supernatural dimension that is beyond our understanding. Perhaps we could add 'His hand' as an additional 'H' to our H³ model?

Case Study 2: eLearning mission training in Central Asia: Introducing the *V Puti* course

By Richard Reilly MA

Introduction

In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a remarkable conversion movement took place when tens of thousands of Central Asians came to Christ across the newly formed Central Asian states including Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. By the late 2000s many of the new churches had begun to engage in cross-cultural mission. God was starting to raise up the young church in Central Asia to be part of his global mission to the nations. In response to the growing need for missionary training in the region, an inter-agency group looked for innovative approaches to missionary training beyond residential options, and approached ANCC (All Nations Christian College, UK) about developing a contextualized Russian version of the online Explore course. The aim of this initiative was to help equip Central Asians for mission, with a particular focus on reaching Muslim peoples in near-neighbour countries where there are commonalities in language and culture, and access is relatively easy.

The online Explore course is based on the ANCC En route course, which is an established learner-centred 10 week residential mission training course developed by Ruth Wall (2015)¹ and other mission educators, and is based on principles of transformative learning and a holistic approach to mission (head-heart-hands). Following development of the En route course, ANCC developed the 13 week online Explore course to respond to the growing demand for technology-enhanced mission training using modern e-learning approaches.² In January 2015, the translation of the Explore course to Russian was completed, and the first *V Puti* course commenced (*'V Puti'* means *'on the way'*). The online *V Puti* course offers an affordable and flexible option for cross-cultural missionary training to individuals and church groups across Central Asia and the wider Russian-speaking world. To date, five *V Puti* courses have been run, with a total of 41 student enrolments. The backgrounds of the students mainly include those who are seeking to reflect on current or past mission experience and looking ahead, and those who are active in local church leadership and ministry seeking to be equipped further for cross-cultural mission locally or for future mission ventures.

This article discusses key aspects of the *V Puti* course including the contextualization of course content, the relevance of using the contextualized form of Russian scriptures (CARS), the effectiveness of the course delivery method, and sustainability issues.

¹ Wall, RM 2015, 'A transformative model of mission training: a case study from All Nations Christian College, UK' in SB Bevans et al (eds), *Reflecting on and equipping for Christian mission*, Regnum, Oxford, pp. 188-192.

² Wiseman, LK 2016, 'E-quipped to serve? A journey into mission training delivered by e-learning', *IMTN Bulletin*, vol. 4(a), pp. 2-3.

Contextualization of the *V Puti* course content for Central Asia

One of the main strengths of the *V Puti* course for missionary training in Central Asia is the foundational course content translated from the online Explore course, which was developed by experienced mission educators and practitioners over many years. However, a limitation of the course content is that it was largely developed for an established Western mission context with a strong presence of mission agencies, and does not have a strong focus on issues related to training in new mission movement contexts, such as Central Asia, where the church is developing under restrictive state laws and pressures.³ To address this limitation, a number of new lessons were developed for the *V Puti* course. These include a new lesson on the history of Christianity and mission in Central Asia, and a new lesson on mission sending models appropriate to the Central Asian context. The value of these new lessons is reflected by student comments (translated from Russian)⁴:

'A really rich lesson on history, terms and questions' (Samira, V Puti student).

'The history of mission in Central Asia is useful information' (Marina, V Puti student).

'From this module, it was most useful for me to understand the different types of activities in mission' (Murat, V Puti student).

Other resources including Muslim evangelism materials have also been incorporated. These additions help students to sense a greater purpose and relevance of the training for their own mission sending context, and are part of an ongoing refining and adapting process of the course content.

Relevance of using a contextualized form of Russian scriptures (CARS)

The *V Puti* course is run in Russian, and incorporates a contextualized Muslim-friendly version of the Russian scriptures known as CARS (Central Asian Russian Scriptures).⁵ During the Soviet Union, the Russian language became dominant across Central Asia, and continues to be the first language of many Central Asians today. The reason for using CARS is primarily to equip Russian-speaking Central Asians for mission to the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and beyond. CARS uses spiritual terminology that is familiar to the cultural and religious backgrounds of Central Asians. For example, throughout the course, the name for Jesus is translated as 'Isa' instead of the traditional Russian usage which is 'Isus', and the word for New Testament is translated as 'Injil' instead of the usual Russian term 'Novi Zavet'. CARS terminology is also woven into weekly forum discussions, and interactions between online tutors and students.

³ Peyrouse, S 2009 'Christians in Central Asia', East-West Church and Ministry Report, vol. 17, no. 4, pp 9-10.

⁴ For security reasons, real names have been replaced with other names.

⁵ See website www.slovocars.org for more details about the CARS project.

The incorporation of CARS into *V Puti* also carries benefits for ethnic Russians and other non-Central Asians who are engaged in or preparing for mission in Muslim contexts, particularly in providing familiarization with a contextualized reading of Scripture and increasing understanding of language and culture in Muslim contexts. However, one of the limitations of using CARS in *V Puti* is that it focuses on missionary training for the Muslim world, and is therefore less attractive to Russian speakers preparing for mission in Hindu, Buddhist or other mission contexts.

Effectiveness of the *V Puti* course delivery method

The method of delivery of the *V Puti* course is based on the online Explore course. In this Bulletin Andrea Thomas has outlined 10 course development principles of effective e-learning incorporated into the Explore course including academic inclusivity, holistic, 'less is more' (relates to content selection), good sources and good shaping, community, methods that promote learning, peer learning, easy-access resources, student support, and 'sticks and carrots'.

The *V Puti* course requires a minimum commitment of 6-8 hours per week, and the key elements include weekly workbook assignments, weekly topical forums, practical exercises, a virtual café and prayer forum. The course is run by course facilitators and each student has an online tutor (course mentor) and, where possible, a local mentor. IT support and hosting of the course is provided by a mission agency partner. Occasional coaching sessions are provided by the Explore course leadership to support the ongoing development of *V Puti*.

Appreciation of the course content and delivery is reflected by student comments (translated from Russian):

'This is a good resource for those who want to become a missionary or already are. There are many topics that are useful to any Christian. Most of all I liked the fact that the course encouraged me to think, and not just study materials. This was different from our local approach to learning which is based on memorizing information' (Elmira, V Puti student).

'I am glad that such a course exists in Russian and that there is something to offer those who are interested. Good topics and interesting forum discussions' (Natalie, V Puti student).

As mentioned, the benefits of the online delivery method include flexibility and affordability for individuals and churches across Central Asia and Russia, who would otherwise not be able to access quality missionary training due to work/ministry commitments and cost factors. There are also very limited options for similar cross-cultural missionary training available across the Russian-speaking world. An added advantage of the online delivery method is the minimal security risk for students who can participate in the course from the privacy of their own homes through secure internet and email access.

There are also significant limitations to the *V Puti* delivery method. These relate to individual learning preferences, lack of personal motivation, emphasis on reflection more than practical tasks, distractions and responsibilities, and asynchronous communication. Graduation is based on students completing 70% of assignments, and the above limitations have contributed to a high drop-out rate of 45%. These limitations concur with the observations of Insur Shamgunov (2009)⁶, in his study of non-traditional theological education training in Central Asia. Shamgunov noted that high drop-out rates are often linked to insufficient diligence, poor independent study skills, and lack of practical ministry tasks. To improve results, Shamgunov suggests that students should spend more time in practical ministry, and teachers should have more personal contact with students, helping them to reflect, and to provide more accountability. Measures to lower drop-out rates in the *V Puti* course have been attempted in a number of ways. These measures include the use of more synchronous ('live') communication through Skype, shortening the course from 13 to 10 weeks to fit better with church schedules, and seeking to increase promotion of the course to church groups as well as individuals. In relation to this final measure, it is interesting to note that the two best attended *V Puti* courses to date consisted of church groups pre-arranged and hand-picked by pastors. Wiseman (2016) also highlights limitations of e-learning courses for contexts with oral traditions and lower levels of literacy, which is applicable to traditional Central Asian cultures. In order to improve effective delivery, Wiseman suggests incorporating more multimedia resources.

Organizational structure and sustainability of the *V Puti* course

As previously stated, the online *V Puti* course was the initiative of an inter-agency group in Central Asia, and the current standalone organizational structure of the course carries advantages as well as disadvantages related to sustainability. The main advantage of the current structure relates to its simplicity. The leadership team consists of four facilitators made up of expats and locals, and there is no formal board structure. This allows ease and flexibility in decision-making. In terms of financial viability, the course is self-sustainable through a strong component of volunteerism and support from partner agencies. However, there are certain disadvantages of the current structure. For example, the structure lacks benefits that could come from being part of an established theological education provider including stronger organizational and academic oversight, wider access to resources such as technical support and funding, and more scope for promotion.

Summary and future outlook for the *V Puti* course

The development of the online *V Puti* cross-cultural missionary training course is an innovative venture in learner-centred online mission training for the Central Asian region. Churches in Central Asia are at an early stage of cross-cultural mission engagement, and the aim of the *V Puti* course is to contribute to training cross-cultural workers, particularly those with a focus

⁶ Shamgunov, I 2009 'Protestant theological education in Central Asia: embattled but resilient', CACI Analyst, pp. 3-4

on reaching near-neighbour Muslim countries and regions. To date, the course has produced 22 graduates who have all expressed a positive learning experience. The future of the *V Puti* course depends on how it continues to develop and adapt to the missionary training needs of the Central Asian church, particularly in terms of its content, use of contextualized language, delivery methods and organizational structure.

To comment on this bulletin, please use the IMTN Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/imtnetwork/> This is a closed group but any missionary trainer can join.

APPENDIX 1: Explore and Express Courses in numbers

Explore course (14 weeks)

The following table gives a summary of the key statistics.

Number of cohorts to date	30
Group size	2 – 14
Median group size	6-7
Nationalities	28*
Different countries (place of study)	34

* 64% British, 8% Dutch, 5% Swiss, 3% Kazak, 2% Kenyan, 2% NZ, 16% other (Europe: Finland, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, Austria, Spain, Cyprus; Africa: S. Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe; Asia: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Nepal, S. Korea, Thailand; S. America: Brazil, Argentina, Peru; the USA)

Interestingly, my ideal group size for interactions, etc. is 6-8 and this is what we mostly have.

Course review, 2016 (an analysis of 21 courses)

Reason for taking Explore	%
In process/en route to mission placement	55
Exploring mission	15
In situ (catch-up or exploring)	11
Agency/church support/coordinator	6
Short visits	4
With mission experience – exploring	3
Cross-cultural mission at home	4
Secular cross-cultural work	2

Average rating for whole course is: **4.4 / 5**

Highest: Facilitator input 4.7, tutor input 4.6, Teaching content 4.6, Course as expected, 4.6 and Fulfilled stated learning objectives 4.6

Lowest: Discussions 4.0, Length 4.2, weekly routine 4.2

The content was: 'About right' (81%), 'Too much' (15%), Too little (4%)

Express course (4 weeks)

Express is run on a different basis in that students can take the course without being part of a cohort. This does not seem to have any negative impact on the course rating.

Largest cohort size = 10

Course review, 2017

Nationalities	16*
Different countries (place of study)	18
Reason for taking Express	%
> 12 months service	41**
< 2 months	32
>2 < 6 months	8
Home support	7
Home-based mission	5
ANCC staff	4
Exploring mission	1
>6 < 12 months	1

*63% British, 8% Swiss, 29% other (Europe: Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway; Africa: S. Africa; Asia: Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, India; USA, Canada, New Zealand).

**61% of these were from one organisation

Without the one organisation sending long term, the majority of students were those going for less than 2 months, which is what the course is designed for.

Overall course rating **4.4 / 5**

APPENDIX 2: V Puti course in numbers

Course start date	Group size	No. of Muslim background students	Different countries	No. of graduates
January 2015	8	3	2	5
September 2015	7	5	3	3
February 2017	11	5	2	8

September 2017	12	7	1	5
January 2019	3	3	1	1
TOTALS	41	23	3	22