
In their own words:

Experiences of first-time distance learners

M. Brown, M. Keppell, H. Hughes, N. Hard, S. Shillington and L. Smith

dehub *Innovation in distance education*

University of New England

NSW 2351

Australia

Email: dehub@une.edu.au

Worldwide web: <http://dehub.edu.au/publications/reports/>

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the 160 students from Massey University who volunteered to participate in this research. We would particularly like to acknowledge the 20 students who committed to making video diaries throughout their first semester as a distance learner. Their experiences, recorded in their own words, have provided unique insights into the world of distance learning.

We also thank the staff from Charles Sturt University and Massey University who participated in the audit of initiatives designed to support the success of distance learners. Particular thanks go to the 'Bridging the Distance' project team at Massey University whose thinking and conceptual framework helped to shape the current study. In addition, the study would not have been possible without the support provided by both institutions throughout the research process.

We are grateful to the members of the External Advisory Group for being 'critical friends' throughout the life of the project from design to delivery. We would particularly like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Kirsty Weir in her role as evaluator and the valuable insight she brings as Research Manager for Ako Aotearoa (New Zealand's National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence).

Finally, the research team would like to acknowledge the DEHub and DISSRTE for the funding that made this project possible.



List of acronyms

APA	-	American Psychological Association
ASSIST	-	Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students
AUSSE	-	Australian University Survey of Student Engagement
DEHub	-	Distance Education Hub
DEEWR	-	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
EXMSS	-	Extramural Students' Society
EAFI	-	Elite Athlete Friendly Institutions
EARS	-	Extramural Area Representatives
ESOL	-	English for Speakers of Other Languages
DELFA	-	Distance Education and Learning Futures Alliance
FLI	-	Flexible Learning Institute
HEFCE	-	Higher Education Funding Council of England
ICT	-	Information and Communication Technology
JISC	-	Joint Information Steering Committee
LMS	-	Learning Management System
NCEA	-	National Certificate of Educational Attainment
OECD	-	Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development
OWLL	-	Online Writing and Learning Link

Executive summary

This study took place set against a backdrop of significant challenges facing traditional distance education. The conventional ‘pack and post’ or correspondence model of distance education was being threatened by the growth of new technology and increasing concerns about poor retention (attrition), progression and completion rates. In this context, the performance of distance education providers, is increasingly under scrutiny from governments and funding bodies.

Research objective

The research objective for this study was to contribute to the enhancement of services and resources available for first-time distance learners. More specifically:

- To develop a conceptual framework for identifying the most effective use of various intervention tools, supports and resources at early stages of the study lifecycle;
- To investigate the experiences of being a first-time distance learner from a student’s perspective ‘in their own words’; and
- To produce a set of overarching principles to help institutions enhance distance learner engagement and success.

Research design

The study was framed around Design-based Research involving a mixed method approach over three phases.

- Phase One involved an audit of current institutional services and resources supporting distance learners at Charles Sturt University (Australia) and Massey University (New Zealand).
- Phase Two involved the recruitment of a sample of first-time distance learners at Massey University and a pre and post semester survey to establish their goals, intentions and backgrounds.
- Phase Three was the major component of the study, which involved gathering the lived experiences of 20 first-time distance learners, in their own words, using weekly video diaries for data collection.

Research findings

In Phase One, the findings show that a comprehensive suite of institutional services and resources are available at the two participating institutions to support the diverse needs of distance learners. In the early stages of the study lifecycle, both Charles Sturt University and Massey University have a number of particularly innovative and defining initiatives that are likely to be of interest to other distance education providers.

In Phase Two, a pre- and post-semester survey confirmed that many first-time distance learners are in paid employment and that distance study is directly related to their career goals. In terms of seeking support, the most important people are partners, family/whānau and lecturers. Participants report a mix of excitement and apprehension before commencing study, and there was considerable variability in the relationships they developed with staff and fellow students. Notably, the online learning environment was perceived as the most valuable academic resource in supporting study, although this was primarily used for obtaining information as opposed to fostering a stronger sense of belonging. By the end of semester, a higher proportion of students report they succeeded by 'doing what they needed to'; however, the majority of first-time distance learners claim their major achievement was gaining deeper knowledge rather than merely passing.

In Phase Three, the video diaries reveal a rich diversity of participants in terms of demographics, background, study choices and so on. A thematic analysis of over 22 hours of participants' video diaries provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of first-time distance learners in terms of motivations, inhibiting factors, learner support, study approaches, retrospective thoughts and value of reflection. Albeit a small sample, the voices of these 20 students are likely to resonate with many other distance learners.

Seven key takeaways

The report identifies seven key takeaways:

1. Learner stories add flesh to the 'soft factors' of what it means to be a distance learner. Reflections, recorded in student's own words, provide unique insight into the complexity of studying from a distance.
2. Adopting a conceptual framework that maps services and resources across different phases of the study lifecycle can help institutions to better design and coordinate supports which meet the diverse needs of distance learners.
3. Distance learning was perceived to enable tertiary study to fit around other life, work and family commitments. However, first-time distance students have relatively little conception of the actual demands of studying by distance.
4. Distance students who begin with study goals that are aligned with their wider aspirations and realistically balanced alongside life's other commitments also typically report active study orientations.

5. Although learner stories affirm the importance of the first few weeks of study, there are ebbs and flows in the life of a distance student over the semester, and a second critical 'at risk' period was identified in later weeks.
6. Digital literacy is variable among first-time distance learners; age and gender are not strong indicators. Irrespective of the level of digital literacy, insights gained from learner stories reveal that few students know how to be effective online learners.
7. Video diaries coupled with the researcher's role influenced student engagement by providing different learning environments; metaphorically a cave, campfire, watering hole and mountain top for active learning and reflection. Learner stories highlighted the value of institutions supporting opportunities for first-time distance learners to engage in regular interaction and reflection over the initial stages of their study.

Seven lessons learned for institutions

The lessons for distance education providers are encapsulated in seven guiding principles proposed for enhancing the success of distance learners. The following principles recognise the complexity and multifaceted nature of student engagement:

1. Shared goals
2. Personal agency
3. Adaptive empathy
4. Personalisation
5. Transactional engagement
6. Networked learning
7. Spaces for knowledge generation

Seven insights for distance learners

Similarly, adapted from Covey (1989), insights gained for students are presented as Seven Habits of Effective Distance Learners: (i) be proactive, (ii) begin with the end in mind, (iii) put first things first, (iv) think win-win, (v) seek first to understand, (vi) collaborate, and (vii) sharpen the saw. Importantly, both the principles and habits provide a metaphorical anchor in which to think about how to enhance distance learner success. On reflection, the study was successful in meeting its original research objective by providing valuable insights from a student's perspective of how to enhance services and resources to support first-time distance learners.

Deliverables

The following deliverables were achieved:

A full report of the study

Brown, M., Keppell, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., Shillington, S., & Smith, L. (2012). In their own words: *Experiences of first-time distance learners*. Armidale, NSW, Australia: DeHub, University of New England, ISBN, xxx

A short progress report

Brown, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., Keppell, M., & Smith, E. (2011). Enhancing the supports and services for first-time distance learners. *DE Quarterly*, 9, Retrieved from <http://issuu.com/dehub/docs/v_3_dehub_newsletter_no_9_spring_2011-summer_201/7>

Brown, M. (2011). Innovative new research underway at Massey University. *DEANZ Magazine*, May, p. 9. Available from <<http://www.deanz.org.nz/home>>

Conference papers

Brown, M., Keppell, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., Shillington, S., & Smith, L. (2012). *Living the new normal: Reflection on the experiences of first-time distance learners*. Paper presented at the Ascilite Conference. In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewart (Eds.), *Future Challenges | Sustainable Futures*. Proceedings 25-28 November, Wellington (pp. 159-163).

Brown, M., Keppell, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., & Smith, L. (2012, June). *Superficial social inclusion: Reflections from first-time distance learners*. Paper presented at the International Higher Education First Year Experience conference, Brisbane.

Brown, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., Keppell, M., & Smith, L. (2012, June). *The challenges for mature life-long learners: Insights from video dairies of first-time distance students*. Paper presented at the European Distance and eLearning Network (EDEN) conference, Porto, 9th June.

Brown, M., Hughes, H., Shillington, S., Hard, N., Keppell, M., & Smith, L. (2012, April). *Life happens: Experiences of first-time distance learners*. Paper presented at Distance Education Association of New Zealand (DEANZ) Conference, Wellington.

Brown, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., Keppell, M., Shillington, S., & Smith, E. (2011, December). *Lights, camera, action: Gathering experiences of first-time distance learners*. Paper presented at the Ascilite Conference. In G. Williams, N. Brown, M. Pittard, B. Cleland (Eds.) *Changing Demands, Changing Directions*. Proceedings, 4-7 December, Hobart. (pp.194-199), Hobart.

Distance learner colloquium

Brown, M., Keppell, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., & Smith, L. (2012, June). *Distance learner colloquium: Exploring the enigma*. Half-day colloquium hosted at the International Higher Education First Year Experience conference, Brisbane.

Journal article

Brown, M., Keppell, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., & Smith, L. (2012). *The challenges of social inclusion: Reflections from first-time distance learners*. Manuscript accepted for publication in the *International Journal of the First Year Experience*, 3(2), pp. 73-80.

Student guide

Brown, M., Keppell, M., Hughes, H., Hard, N., Shillington, S., & Smith, L. (2012). *Student guide: Seven habits of highly effective distance learners*. Massey University, Palmerston North.

WikiResearcher

<http://wikiresearcher.org/DEHub_Research_Projects/DEHubMassey_University

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Chapter 1 About the Study

1.1. Administration

This research was led by Massey University in New Zealand and supported by Charles Sturt University in Australia. The research leader was Professor Mark Brown, who is Massey University's Director of the National Centre for Teaching and Learning; and the Distance Education and Learning Futures Alliance. Research Team members included Professor Mike Keppell (Charles Sturt University), Helen Hughes (Massey University), Natasha Hard (Charles Sturt University), Dr Sandi Shillington (Massey University) and Liz Smith (Charles Sturt University).

The research was evaluated by Dr Kirsty Weir, Research Manager for Ako Aotearoa (New Zealand's National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence). The research was also guided by an external advisory group whose members included Dr Andrea Crampton (Sub-Dean Learning and Teaching, Faculty of Science, Charles Sturt University), Dr Linda Leach (Senior Lecturer, College of Education, Massey University), Dr Zeffie Nicholas (Charles Sturt University), Ormond Simpson (Fellow of the Centre for Distance Education, University of London), Ralph Springett (President, Massey University Extramural Students' Society), and Associate Professor Marian Tulloch (Executive Director, Division of Learning and Teaching Services, Charles Sturt University).

The research commenced in April 2011 and concluded in June 2012.

1.2. Context of the study

This research is set against the backdrop of significant challenges facing traditional distance education providers in which issues of recruitment, retention (attrition), progression and completion have come into sharp relief. In the context of global economic uncertainty and growing demand for tertiary education in the developing world, governments are increasingly questioning the potential value and return on investment of publically funded distance education.

The study also takes place at a time when new and emerging models of online and blended learning are challenging traditional conceptions of distance education. New digital technologies are opening up new possibilities for teaching and learning beyond the boundaries of the traditional campus. There is increasing recognition that online learning now provides an exciting opportunity for tertiary education to come to students, rather than having to come to universities (Online Learning Task Force, 2011). In many respects, digitally mediated forms of online, blended and distance education have become the 'new normal' as students increasingly expect the flexibility and convenience now possible through new technologies.

Within this wider context, the report offers a window into the range of support services and resources provided by two major distance education providers. It also provides a unique and valuable insight into the experiences of first-time distance learners—in their own words. A defining feature of the participating institutions is their long commitment to a suite of comprehensive, high quality, university-level distance education programs; thereby providing life-long learning opportunities to demographically, culturally and geographically diverse

populations at different stages of the learning pathway. Importantly, both institutions are at the forefront of new developments in the design and delivery of distance education to meet changing student expectations and the rapidly evolving global tertiary environment.

1.3. Significance of the research

The research reported in this report addresses a significant gap in the literature by investigating the experiences of first-time distance learners. The study builds on an extensive body of literature on retention, completion and student engagement in the context of higher education, distance provision and the first year experience. It also takes place in the context of another major externally funded initiative undertaken at Massey University known as 'Bridging the Distance' (Shillington, Brown, Mackay, Paewai, Suddaby & White, 2012), which was aimed to enhance the services and resources provided to distance learners over the initial stages of the study lifestyle.

Both partner institutions have an explicit commitment to distance education over a longstanding history. Amongst other things, the reputation of both institutions has been built on the quality of distance education and strong provision of learner support and development services. However, the performance of traditional distance providers has come under closer attention as concerns mount in both Australia and New Zealand regarding poor retention and completion rates. In the case of New Zealand, completion rates in 'tertiary-type A' study are near the bottom of OECD comparison tables (Scott, 2009). Both institutions involved in this research have national and regional responsibilities to provide quality higher education for diverse and geographically dispersed learners. The research will enable the partner institutions to engage in a comparative process of institutional reflection and action to ensure the best possible intervention strategies are in place for enhancing distance learner success.

The research has wider significance for the tertiary sector and other distance education providers. All institutions have an ethical responsibility to support learners to the best of their capability, and the findings may help to inform the design and delivery of effective distance education and learning development services across the spectrum of provision. While expanding research into an area that has not been well explored, the research also builds on significant closely related work. In particular, it seeks to add more 'flesh' to Simpson's (2000) seminal work on supporting distance students and to build a stronger link and interface with parallel initiatives. For example, it draws on and extends the work of Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005, p. 8.8.6), who conclude:

First year support efforts have tended to be piecemeal in the main, developed and sustained by individuals or small groups who champion the cause of first year transition. We have now reached the stage where universities must recognize the need for institution-wide approaches to enhancing the first year experience).

The research also extends Kift's (2007) ground-breaking work on the first-year experience and initiatives around transition pedagogy by focusing on the increasing provision of distance education. In this regard, it responds to evidence that 'compared to a decade ago, many more first-year students are opting to enroll in external or distance mode courses' (Krause et al., 2005, p. 82). The research is significant for its subgroup focus on a specific and critical student

cohort at high risk of non-completion, where the problem may be exacerbated with respect to retention and continuance with the rapid emergence of new models of online, blended and distance education.

Finally, the literature is clear that the issue of completion in distance education is an international one. As Zepke and Leach (2007, p.237) observe, '[i]mproving retention rates in post-school education has become a focus for policy-makers and researchers throughout the western world'. There is a wealth of literature exploring the individual, social and organisational factors that impact on student recruitment, retention and completion rates in tertiary education (Adams, Banks, Davis & Dickson, 2010; Tinto, 2006-2007). However, there is a dearth of research investigating the relationship between (a) interventions targeted at distance learners and (b) the experiences of distance students, especially from a student's perspective. Thus, the current research explores a strategically important issue for both students and institutions and aims to make a valuable contribution to the international distance education community.

1.4. Research objective

The study was framed around the sub-theme of 'learner support and development' and the following guiding research question identified from a recent Delphi analysis of the field of Distance Education (Zawacki-Richter, 2009):

- What skills, supports and processes are required by learners in the new ICT distance learning environments to ensure successful learner outcomes?

In addressing this broad question, the research objective was to contribute to the enhancement of services and resources available for first-time distance learners. More specifically:

- To develop a conceptual framework for identifying the most effective use of various intervention tools, supports and resources at early stages of the study lifecycle;
- To investigate the experiences of being a first-time distance learner from a student's perspective 'in their own words';
- To produce a set of overarching principles that will help institutions to enhance distance learner engagement and success.

1.5. Structure of the report

There are eleven chapters to the report. This chapter has established the context and significance of the study along with the overarching research objective. Chapter Two provides a brief synthesis of the literature relating to the evolution of distance education, the problem of retention and the importance of the first-year experience. The methodology and research techniques adopted over the three phases of the study are described in Chapter Three. Chapter Four presents an analysis of the different services and resources provided by the two participating institutions for distance learners across the study lifecycle. The findings of each research phase are described in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, with the latter presenting a thematic analysis

of learner stories. Chapter Eight discusses and triangulates the major findings from the three phases based around seven major takeaways. A number of lessons for other distance education providers are offered in Chapter Nine through a set of seven guiding principles. Chapter Ten proposes seven habits of highly effective first-time distance learners based on the present research and contemporary literature. Finally, Chapter Eleven reflects on the extent to which the study met its original objective and the overall significance of the research.

Chapter 2 Synthesis of the Literature

This chapter presents a synthesis of the literature. It describes the evolution of distance education and seminal literature on the problem of student retention. The importance of the first year experience is then considered along with literature on student engagement in the context of distance education. Finally, the dearth of literature exploring the experiences of first-year distance learners is established, and the chapter concludes with the case for more research from a student's perspective of the 'soft factors' that influence distance learner engagement and success. For the purpose of this study, 'soft factors' are understood to be factors that go beyond traditional measures of success; particularly according to learners' own perceptions of progress towards their own and programme goals (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

2.1. Evolution of distance education

The basic assumption in which distance education is grounded is that teaching and learning without student and teacher meeting face-to-face is possible and can be effective (Bernath, Busch, Garz, Hanft, Hulsmann, Moschner, Scholz & Zawacki-Richter, 2008). This assumption has stood the test of time throughout the evolution of thinking about the potential of distance education. Battenberg (1971, as cited in Bernath et al., 2008, p. 44) reports:

The first explicit mention of organised distance education so far known is an advertisement in the Boston Gazette of 20th March 1728, in which 'Caleb Phillips, Teacher of the new method of Short Hand' claims that 'Persons in the Country desirous to Learn this Art, may by having the several Lessons sent Weekly to them, be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston'.

Distance education is historically deeply rooted in the goals of increasing educational access and promoting lifelong learning and development. Simonson, Schlosser and Orellana (2011) describe four characteristics that distinguish distance education: (a) it is carried out through institutions and is not self-study in a nonacademic learning environment; (b) geographic separation is inherent and time might also separate students and teachers; (c) it is interactive with telecommunications usually connecting the learning group with each other and with the teacher; and (d) it establishes a learning group, sometimes called a learning community, which is composed of students, a teacher, and instructional resources. During the 20th century, several generations of distance education (Taylor, 1995) have evolved with these distinguishing features to provide opportunities for study and life-long learning for mature and second chance learners, geographically isolated people and those from minority and lower socio-economic groups, as well as for students with disabilities (Daniel, 2011; Thompson, 1998).

Although there is no evidence that distance students should be regarded as a homogeneous group, it is widely accepted in the literature that the majority are likely to be women who, on average, are older than typical students. In the case of New Zealand, almost 80% of all tertiary level distance students are over 25 years of age and approximately two-thirds are female (Ministry of Education, 2010). There is also evidence, largely qualitative, that distance education is a particularly appealing way for students from disadvantaged socio-economic

groups to enter tertiary education (Thompson, 2008). In this sense, distance education has the potential to address social inclusion by enabling people from diverse backgrounds to participate in continuing and further education.

More recently, anecdotal evidence from distance providers in developed countries shows a shifting profile from undergraduate to postgraduate study as the population ages and mid-career professionals strive to advance their careers. There is also evidence of increasing demand from younger students for the flexibility and convenience that distance education provides through the use of digital technologies (Krause et al., 2005). Since the advent of the World-Wide Web, a dazzling array of new possibilities has emerged, and a new generation of digitally mediated distance education has fundamentally changed the tertiary education landscape (McKee, 2010). Arguably, new and emerging models of online, blended and distance education have become the 'new normal' in today's socially wired and globally connected world.

In contrast to the traditional first generation correspondence model of distance education (Taylor, 1995), or the 'lone wolf' approach to distance learning, Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski (2009) report that online learning is the fastest growing sector of tertiary education. This growth has been driven in part by conventional institutions increasingly adopting new online and blended models of distance education as a 'sunrise industry' with many having established subdivisions to develop it (Simpson, 2000, p. 1). In particular, the enterprise-wide adoption of Learning Management Systems (LMS) in the last decade has helped many institutions to expand into the foray of distance education. As Sir John Daniel (2011) observes, the digital revolution has the potential to transform the 'iron triangle' of distance education 'to achieve wider access, higher quality and lower cost all at the same time'.

Currently, around 26 per cent of students at the tertiary level in New Zealand study by distance education (Ministry of Education, 2010). In 2010, Ministry of Education statistics show that universities account for 25 per cent of total Equivalent Full-time Students (EFTS) studying by distance with 16 per cent of undergraduate degrees being undertaken by distance learners. Australia has been a pioneer in this field. Over the last decade, it is estimated that, each year, 15 per cent of Australian university students have studied by distance education (Nunan, 2005).

By comparison, in the United States, the latest annual survey of online learning claims the number of students taking at least one online course has surpassed six million (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Based on these figures, Allen and Seaman (2011) estimate that 31 per cent of higher education students in the United States now take at least one course online. This claim is further evidence of what is described as 'convergence'—that is, the gradual blurring of the boundaries of the distinction between 'campus-bound' and 'distance learning' paradigms (OECD, 1996).

In the United Kingdom, a recent Online Learning Task Force (2011) encourages universities to seize the opportunities that new forms of online learning provide to enhance student choice and meet learners' expectations of greater flexibility and convenience. The Task Force concludes:

Online learning-however blended with on- or off-campus interactions, whether delivered in the UK or overseas - provides real opportunity for UK institutions to develop responsive, engaging and interactive provision which, if offered at scale, can deliver quality and cost-effectiveness and meet student demands for flexible learning (Online Learning Task Force, 2011, p. 3).

2.2. The problem of retention

Improving retention rates in tertiary education has become a focus for policy-makers throughout the world (Zepke & Leach, 2007); and this is the case for both campus-based and distance modes of education. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (2008) calculate completion (survival) rates as the ratio of the number of students who graduate from a degree programme against the number of students who entered the programme. Historically, it is important to note that institutions offering distance education report lower retention and completion rates than traditional face-to-face tertiary providers (Simpson, 2004). Bourke and Simpson (2011) claim that, at lower qualification levels and in particular disciplines, it can be difficult for distance education programmes to achieve 50 per cent retention. In agreement, Simpson (2010) reports that international distance education graduation rates are very low compared with conventional face-to-face higher education; they are sometimes in single figure percentages. For example, at the Open University in the United Kingdom, a report on part-time first year students reveals that only 22 per cent of distance learners who enter an undergraduate degree actually complete their study within 11 academic years (HEFCE, 2009). Notably, 75 per cent of part-time distance learners commencing a degree through the Open University are no longer active in their study after 11 years (HEFCE, 2009).

In Australasia, OECD data from 2008 reveals that New Zealand was the second lowest ranking country with a completion rate of less than 58 per cent, while Australia's completion rate was 67 per cent, with the OECD average 69 per cent (Scott, 2009). Although speculative, it may be that this poor ranking is a legacy of the market model of higher education in which there was a proliferation of lower-level qualifications from a number of new tertiary providers.

Table 3. Completion rates in tertiary-type A education.

	Qualification completion rate ¹			Mode of study ²	
	All students	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Australia	72			68	32
Austria	71				
Belgium (FL)	76			88	12
Canada (Quebec)	75	79	38	75	25
Czech Republic	68			96	4
Denmark ³	81	81		92	8
Finland	72			57	43
France	64			100	a
Germany	77			96	4
Greece				100	a
Hungary	57	60	54	54	46
Iceland	66			79	21
Ireland				83	17
Italy	45	45		100	n
Japan	91	91	85	89	11
Korea					
Luxembourg					
Mexico	61	61		100	a
Netherlands	71	73	57	83	17
New Zealand	58	73	48	60	40
Norway	67	69	57	73	27
Poland	63	66	61	55	45
Portugal	73				
Slovak Republic	70	64	81	62	38
Spain				88	12
Sweden	69			49	51
Switzerland	70			90	10
Turkey				100	n
United Kingdom	79			72	28
United States ³	56	56		65	35
OECD average	69	68	60	80	20

Source: OECD 2008, Tables A4.1, A4.2, C25

1. Completion rates in tertiary-type A education represent the proportion of those who enter a tertiary-type A programme who go on to graduate from at least a first tertiary-type A programme. Tertiary-type A study is study equivalent to bachelor's level and above, excluding PhD's and other advanced research programmes.

Table 1: OECD comparison of completion rates in tertiary-type A education

Similar figures released in New Zealand rank Massey University, the country's largest university-level distance education provider, at the bottom of the league table in terms of key performance measures including successful course completion and students retained in study. For example, in 2010, around 22 per cent of students (23 per cent in 2009) failed to complete their course of study and 67 per cent were retained in study (69 per cent in 2009) by re-enrolling at Massey University (Tertiary Education Commission, 2011). These figures compare to a national median for universities of 16 per cent for unsuccessful course completion and 83 per cent for students retained in study at the same institution. Like Australian data, the performance measures in New Zealand fail to disaggregate distance learners from campus-based students. Massey University is a dual mode provider with approximately half of its 34,000 students studying by distance.

The key point is that it is problematic to make direct comparisons with traditional universities, as distance learners are known to take longer to complete due to managing other work, life and family commitments. Also, what these data do not show is that anecdotal evidence indicates that the success rates for students with declared disabilities are much higher amongst distance providers. Distance providers typically enrol a larger proportion of these students; evidence from the United Kingdom reports they are 'more likely to continue than those without a declared disability when all other factors are held constant' (National Audit

Office, 2007, p. 20). Another problem in drawing accurate comparisons and establishing an international performance benchmark for effective distance education is that definitions of retention, progression and completion vary between countries. As Nichols (2011, p. 6) observes, 'student retention in tertiary education is universally regarded as a knotty activity'. That said, the problem of retention is real and, in the current financial climate and rapidly changing global higher education environment, distance providers world-wide are likely to come under increasing pressure to enhance distance learner success.

2.3. Promoting student retention

Student retention is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education, the result of which has been an ever more sophisticated understanding of the complex web of events and interactions that shape student learning and persistence (Tinto, 2006-7). Tinto is recognised as the early pioneer in the study of retention, and his work is frequently quoted because of its central notion of integration. Tinto (2009) identifies five conditions supportive of retention: expectations, support, feedback, involvement and relevant learning in settings that are conducive to learning.

The concept of student engagement is a more contemporary proxy for retention and student success. In a recent literature review, Trowler (2010, p. 4) reports that the concept of learner engagement is commonly defined as 'participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom', which leads to a range of measurable outcomes (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup & Gonyea, 2007), and as 'the extent to which students are engaging in activities' that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes (Krause and Coates, 2008).

Importantly, student engagement in educationally purposeful activities has been positively related to academic outcomes, including retention (Kuh, 2007). Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) describe three dimensions of engagement that can exist in combination: behavioural, cognitive and emotional. Students who are involved and participating demonstrate behavioural engagement and are likely to be on task and following instructions. Cognitive engagement manifests at a surface level through a student's ability to describe what they have learned or to complete a task accurately and, also, at a deeper level, when a cognitively engaged student initiates self-directed investigation and solving related challenges. Emotional engagement manifests as signs of enjoyment and means that students find learning sufficiently worthwhile to give it their attention.

With increasing attention on how institutions can influence student engagement, a new line of research has grown in momentum, especially since the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement in the United States (Kuh, 2001). Building on this North American initiative, the Australasian University Survey of Student Engagement has become a standard measure of student engagement in Australian and New Zealand universities (Krause & Coates, 2008). Both surveys are designed to provide valuable information and benchmarking data on student engagement with their learning and the extent to which they make use of available educational opportunities (AUSSE, 2010). From the results of these surveys, it has become increasingly apparent that institutions have a significant role to play in engaging students successfully by establishing cultures that focus on learner success, emphasising student learning in their

mission, holding high academic expectations of students, aiming for continuous improvement, investing money in student support services, valuing diversity and effectively preparing students for learning (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005).

A major study in the United Kingdom of 'what works' in promoting student engagement puts this more succinctly by concluding, '[a]t the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging' (Thomas, 2012, p. 6). In short, the lesson is that institutional learning environments matter.

Traditionally, at the centre of the learning environment is the teacher whose qualities, attitudes and behaviours have a direct and significant effect on students' engagement with learning (Kuh et al., 2007; Parkinson, Hughes, Gardner, Suddaby, Gilling & MacIntyre, 2011) and achievement (Hattie, 2003). Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005, p. 176) go so far as to say that teachers 'play the single-most important role'. Consequently, positive levels of student engagement have been attributed to active, student-centred interactions as opposed to the simple transmission of content from teacher to student (Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006). In addition to the teacher, student engagement has been seen to benefit when students work meaningfully with peers in groups on collaborative tasks (Krause, 2005). Moran and Gonyea (2003) actually found, albeit from a study of campus-based learners, that peer interactions had the strongest predictive capacity for engagement; even more so than interactions with staff.

However, a number of other factors need to be considered, both in the context of engagement and distance education, as distance learners typically manage competing demands on their time due to other work, life and family commitments. Arguably, distance learners have unique and particular needs that require institutions to promote engagement through a range of targeted services. Simpson (2003), a leading international scholar in the context of distance learner retention, argues that distance education providers need to analyse their own retention characteristics and 'spot the leaks'. He claims there are many possible services and interventions available that have been known to successfully support the engagement of distance learners, but these are often applied in a seemingly 'ad hoc' manner. Simpson (2009) describes this problem as a 'goulash approach' to promoting distance learner retention. The lesson here is that student engagement is also influenced by the type and quality of interactions with support staff and learning development services available to distance learners.

In summary, lack of engagement amongst distance learners is influenced by a complex mix of institutional culture, teacher responsiveness, support services, student characteristics and, what Zepke and Leach (2010) describe as, a range of 'soft factors' often overlooked in debates over retention. Zepke and Leach (2010) define 'soft factors' as those which do not measure success precisely using hard data but are particularly related to learners' own perceptions of progress towards their own and programme goals. While institutions play a key role--and so do teachers and support staff--in contributing to student engagement, learners themselves also determine some of their own success depending on personal factors and wider socio-cultural circumstances. However, the definition of engagement remains a messy construct as Kahu (2011) points out in a recent critique of the four dominant research perspectives: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural and holistic. Each perspective offers useful and relevant insights, but individually they only tell part of the story. In proposing a conceptual framework that

helps to weave together the different strands of student engagement, Kahu (2011, p. 12) acknowledges that ‘no single research project can possibly examine all facets of this complex construct’.

The key point is that concerns about retention need to be framed in a complex web of interactions; or as Zepke (2011, as cited in Kahu, 2011, p. 11) proposes, in a ‘dynamic and non-hierarchical network’ in which the factors influencing student engagement are distinct and yet inherently connected.

2.4. Importance of the first year experience

The first year learning experience is very important from a retention and engagement perspective. In Australia and New Zealand, more first-year than returning students withdraw from study (James, Krause & Jennings, 2009; Kift, 2009). From an institutional perspective, the first year is claimed to be the time when the patterns of engagement are set (Pittaway & Moss, 2006) and, therefore, the provision of appropriate supports and interventions in the first year of study have been found to have a positive and sustainable effect on student success (Kift, 2009).

Kift (2009, p. 9) describes an engaging first year curriculum in terms of a ‘transition pedagogy that seeks to mediate the diversity in preparedness and cultural capital of entering students, now so endemic in our mass system’. Kift goes on to promote a ‘third generation’ approach to the first-year experience that moves beyond co-curricular activities to a collaborative and strategic whole-of-institution transformation along six scales:

- Academic challenge
- Active learning
- Student and staff interactions
- Enriching educational experiences
- Supportive learning environment
- Work integrated learning

A major outcome of Kift’s (2009) work was the identification of six generic First Year Curriculum Principles which aim to provide a set of principles that work together across all disciplines to support learning engagement and, ultimately, retention across disciplines’ (Kift, 2009, p. 9). In framing these, Kift’s (2009) principles were informed by existing research and particularly inspired by the following observation from Nichols (2007, as cited in Kift, 2009, p. 11):

Firstly, a good principle should capture a core idea from the published research - that is there should be research evidence to support its implementation. Secondly, a good principle should have broad relevance: it should guide practitioners as they design learning or assessment tasks for students, but it should not be too narrow or specific. In other words, there should be flexibility, that is, there should be many ways of implementing a principle depending on the discipline and the teaching and learning context. Thirdly, where there is a set of principles there should be minimal

overlap across them - as far as possible they should be defined independently. Fourthly, the effectiveness of the principles should be higher when more principles are operationalised in the same learning design. Fifthly, good principles should also help those wishing to evaluate their assessment designs or their implementations in practice.

With the above indicia in mind, Kift (2009) proposed the following six *First Year Curriculum Principles*:

- Transition
- Diversity
- Design
- Engagement
- Assessment
- Evaluation and Monitoring

However, in contrast to campus-based students, there has been minimal focus on how to apply these principles to first year distance learners. To date, strategies and interventions designed to support distance learners have not been as solidly research-informed or robustly grounded in a set of overarching principles. Simpson (2009) confirms that services tend to be ‘thrown’ at distance learners, after which it is assumed that they will find the appropriate support from the available institutional toolbox.

2.5. Engagement of first year distance students

An increasing number of students are studying via distance, but little is known about the differences in how these students learn due to their different mode and location of attendance (AUSSE, 2010). Bourke and Simpson (2011) agree that there is currently a low level of understanding about the motivations for distance learning. Put simply, there is a dearth of literature of what actually happens to first time distance students once they have enrolled in tertiary institutions (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012).

The foundation of what is known is largely based on the learning approaches of distance students. The two main forms of learning approach—deep and surface—were first conceptualised by Marton and Säljö’s (1976) and, later, widened to incorporate the notion of a strategic approach to studying (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). Entwistle and McCune (2004, pp. 8-9) define these dimensions as follows: (a) a deep approach reflects an intention to seek understanding and meaning through relating ideas and using evidence; (b) a strategic approach is characterised by a focus on studying effectively in order to achieve good grades; and (c) a surface approach appears where the learner focuses on getting through the course, reproducing content by memorising and learning isolated facts.

Richardson, Morgan and Woodley (1999) undertook research into the study approaches of almost 3000 post-foundation students taking courses by distance learning at the Open University in the

United Kingdom. They concluded that distance students' approaches were more aligned with the mission of higher education and were affected by background variables such as gender, age, academic discipline and prior education. However, even with variability is taken into account, pass rates and final grades were related to the way distance learners approached study. In particular, there was a strong negative association between 'reproducing (surface) orientation' and academic outcomes (Richardson et al., 1999).

Carnwell (2000) conducted interviews on 20 female distance learners from community nursing disciplines to explore relationships between approaches to study, learning styles and strategies and materials design, and how these impact on the need for support and guidance in distance learning. Although the study was influenced by the literature on learning styles, which attracts considerable debate, the outcome of this research was the identification of three approaches to study, labelled: Systematic Wading, Speedy-focusing, and Global Dipping. The suggestion is that 'Systematic Waders' progress through learning material in a sequential and rigorous manner. Meanwhile, 'Speedy-focusers' adopt a strategic approach, which involves focussing on what is required, thereby limiting deep learning opportunities. In contrast, 'Global Dippers' are disorganised, and their study is characterised by passive engagement with materials, which results in surface learning. While these three approaches are somewhat simplistic in light of the complexity of the factors that influence student engagement, they closely align with the aforementioned deep, strategic and surface approaches respectively (Anderson, Lee, Simpson and Stein, 2011).

Extending this line of research and building on the wealth of literature on study orchestrations (Meyer, 1991), Anderson et al. (2011) explored learning approaches among 176 distance learners in New Zealand. The sample was drawn from the entire population of distance students enrolled during the first semester of an academic year (N = 1609) and ranged from first-year students to those undertaking doctoral coursework, with over two-thirds studying for a postgraduate qualification. The research methodology was quantitative and used a modified version of the ASSIST questionnaire (Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students) (Entwistle, Tait & McCune, 2000), which is grounded in the concept of deep, strategic and surface dimensions to learning. Although the study did not exclusively focus on first-time distance learners and, therefore, does little to address a significant gap in the literature, Anderson et al. (2011) explore a fourth dimension referred to as a 'Dissonant Study Orchestration', which was found among approximately one-fifth of the sample. The researchers highlight that a dissonant orchestration is linked with poor achievement and suggest that 'in conjunction with appropriate curriculum and teaching approaches, metacognitive skill development may work to engender study orchestrations consonant with successful learning in distance education contexts' (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 12).

Most recently, Poskitt, Rees, Suddaby and Radloff (2011) analysed data relating to distance students in New Zealand taken from the Australian University Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). These findings focussed less on study approaches and more on factors external to the learning environment that are thought to undermine the engagement of distance learners. For example, distance students reported an average commitment of 17.6 hours per week to paid employment, in contrast to 12.9 hours per week by campus-based students. Notably, Krause et al. (2005) found that first-year students who committed to more than 12.5 hours employment per week tended to be more likely to consider dropping out. In a similar vein, Adams et al.

(2010) claim that over 16 hours of paid work per week can be linked to disengagement. Other external factors placing distance learners under pressure are family commitments with 61 per cent spending at least one hour per week caring for dependents, compared to 37 per cent of campus-based students (Poskitt et al., 2011).

As already discussed, retention and engagement among distance students has previously been attributed from a socio-cultural perspective to these kinds of external pressures (Burtenshaw, Ross, Bathurst, Hoy-Mack & Zajkowski, 2006). For example, according to Kember (as cited in Tyler-Smith, 2006) family circumstances, including the number and age of dependents, housing conditions and the pressures of responsibilities, such as earning an income to support the family, can all have a significant impact on a distance learner's decision to continue or to drop out from their program of study. The key point is that distance learners are likely to study under conditions that are far less common among first year campus-based undergraduates. As Poskitt et al. (2011, p. 70) observe:

Because of the very different learning environment extramural students are exposed to, and the differences in extramural students' demographics, backgrounds and commitments to work and family, it could be argued that external students have a very different student experience, and engage with their study differently.

That said, there remains a dearth of research literature that reports the circumstances under which today's first-time distance learners study. It is important to acknowledge that much of the literature that does exist and anecdotal evidence about the profile of and challenges that distance learners face predates the emergence of new models of online, blended and distance education. Tyler-Smith (2006) makes the point that today's first-time e-learner is confronted with a number of multi-dimensional learning tasks, including (a) negotiating the technology; (b) negotiating the course website; (c) negotiating the course content; (d) becoming an elearner; and (e) negotiating new forms of online interaction. Therefore, it would be particularly valuable to better understand the experiences of being a first-time distance learner while they study through a modern digital-era distance education provider.

2.6. Listening to first-time distance learners

The chapter has shown that the experiences of first-time distance learners are largely unexplored, especially in the context of a new generation of digitally mediated distance education. However, it is worth noting that this gap in the literature may not solely be related to distance learners. Sharpe, Benfield, Lessner and De Cicco (2005) argue that, more generally speaking, there is a scarcity of research that can be characterised as expressing a 'learner voice' in which the learners' own expressions of their experiences are central to the study. Zepke and Leach (2010) assert that more research is required which takes greater account of the 'soft factors' that influence learner success. The present study is grounded on the premise that new insights are likely to emerge from a line of inquiry that listens to what students have to say.

This is not a completely new line of research; a study by JISC (2007) explored the learner voice relating to the experiences in e-learning. The title of the present study is borrowed from this research, which combines both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate investigating

the ‘imperfectly understood world of the learner in a digital age’ (JISC, 2007, p. 3). The first phase of the JISC funded research involved an online survey and the second invited a sub-sample of learners to record their impressions of technology-based learning activities in audio logs. The audio logs were followed by interviews to clarify interpretations and allow learners to describe in more detail the nature of their e-learning activities. Although focused on campus-based students, the findings point to a profound shift in the way in which students are working and suggest a rich and complex inter-relationship between students and the new tools they routinely use to support their learning. The study concludes:

It is only by establishing a culture of listening to learners-including those that represent more individual experiences as well as the general trends-that the full range of possible responses will be recognised. Without this understanding, institutions, practitioners and e-learning developers could fail to help learners achieve their full potential (JISC, 2007, p. 24).

2.7. Summary

This chapter has provided a synthesis of the literature informing the present study. It has established how distance education is in a period of rapid transition due to the emergence of new digital technologies and wider global forces. Also described is increasing concern over the problem of retention, which is particularly acute in the context of distance education. The chapter introduces some of the seminal and contemporary literature exploring the complex web of interactions that influence student engagement. Recent work on the importance of the first year experience is presented from a retention and engagement perspective. The chapter shows that very little is known about the experiences of first year distance learners, particularly in the new digital world of learning and especially from the learner’s perspective. This gap in the literature coupled with the rapidly changing nature of online delivery means that strategies and interventions designed to support distance learners may no longer be effective or well-grounded in research. Finally, the chapter concludes by making the case for more research from a student’s perspective, especially to better understand the ‘soft factors’ that influence distance learner engagement and success.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology. The study was framed around Design-Based Research involving a mixed method approach over three phases. Phase One involved an audit of current institutional services designed for distance learners at the two participating institutions. Phase Two involved the recruitment of first-time distance learners at Massey University and a pre- and post-semester survey. Phase Three was the major component of the study, which involved gathering the experiences of first-time distance learners from their own point of view using video diaries for data collection. The chapter concludes with consideration of the trustworthiness of the research and a brief outline of relevant ethical considerations.

3.1. Research design

In terms of methodological approach, Design-based research has increasingly received attention from researchers in education as an emerging framework that can guide the development of enhanced educational outcomes. This is because design-based research aims to make a grounded connection between educational research and real-world contexts. It is an iterative process that does not just evaluate an innovative product or intervention, but systematically attempts to refine the innovation while also producing design principles that can guide similar research and development endeavours (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Reeves (2006) emphasises the interactive and integrative qualities of this research methodology in his definition of design-based research:

... complex problems in real contexts in collaboration with practitioners; integrating known and hypothetical design principles with technological advances to render plausible solutions to these complex problems; and conducting rigorous and reflective inquiry to test and refine innovative learning environments as well as to define new design principles.

3.2. Phase one

The first phase involved an audit of initiatives designed to enhance the success of distance learners. The audit took place in May 2011 at Charles Sturt University and in June 2011 at Massey University. The primary data collection technique was document analysis. Informal meetings with staff involved in leading the initiatives at both institutions also helped to clarify questions related to specific services and resources. Initiatives were mapped against the conceptual framework developed by MacKay, Shillington, Paewai, Brown, Suddaby and White (2010) to support different interventions across the study lifecycle.

The conceptual framework, informed by a set of key themes identified in the literature, begins with Wilson's (2009) intervention pyramid which identifies different groups of tertiary students with different needs in their first year of study, including (a) all students—refers to what interventions are provided to all students, (b) targeted students—refers to interventions

for specific cohorts such as Gifted, Māori, Pasifika, and people with disclosed disabilities, (c) at-risk students—refers to interventions for students who are at risk of failure, and (d) failing students—refers to interventions for students who have been identified as failing. Figure 1 illustrates how Wilson’s intervention pyramid is combined with the key stages of the study lifecycle proposed by the HEFCE (2001).

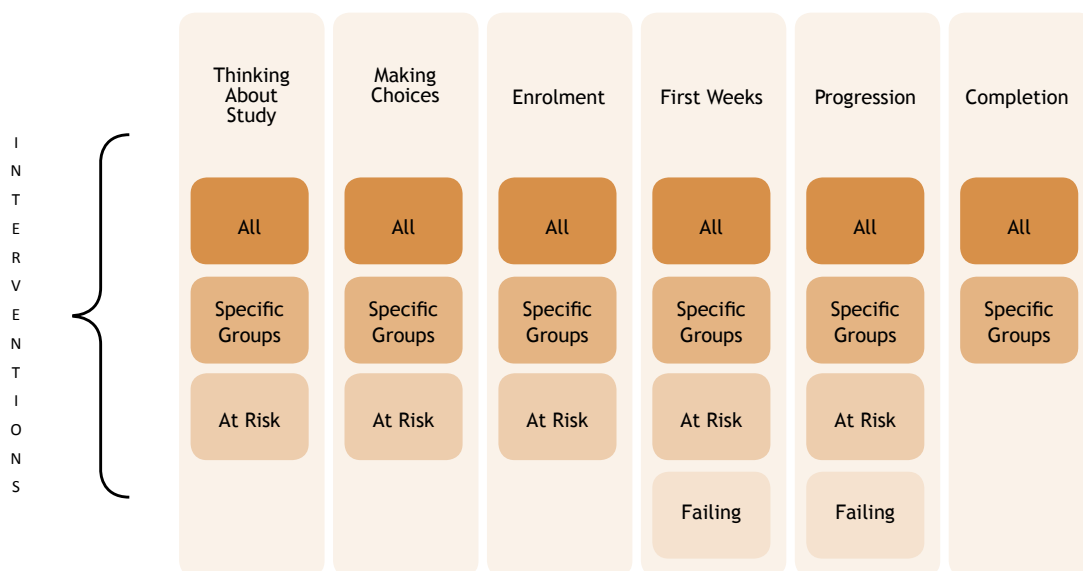


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for student interventions across the study lifecycle

- ‘Thinking about study’ includes initiatives that encourage a variety of people to participate in tertiary education by raising their aspirations, while helping them begin to understand the learning and teaching methods used;
- ‘Making choices’ includes tools that assist potential students to actively gather information that may help them self-assess their readiness, suitability and capacity for study via distance;
- ‘Enrolment’ includes a well-designed admissions process that can not only help to reduce the maze of paperwork, but also contribute to retention, as the student is better informed and more aware of the expectations of tertiary-level study;
- ‘First weeks’ includes orientation initiatives, as well as retention and engagement strategies relating to the first six to eight weeks of study via distance;
- ‘Progression’ includes initiatives that provide ongoing support for student success and review of the appropriateness of teaching and learning approaches during and beyond the first semester;
- ‘Completion’ includes interventions that prepare students for life after their current distance study, which may include strategies to support students as they make the transition to the working environment.

3.3. Phase two

Phase Two was undertaken at Massey University. It involved the recruitment of first-time distance learners, followed by a baseline survey leading up to and during Semester 2, 2011. Originally, the plan was to also include a sample of students from Charles Sturt University in this phase, but this was problematic due to the tight timeframe of the study and feasibility of managing a sample across two institutions. There was, also, a decision of whether greater insights from first-time distance learners would be gained by selecting a larger sample from just one university, as opposed to a smaller sample from both institutions. The original intention was to recruit a sample from which just 10 participants would then be invited to participate in phase three. At the time of this decision, the option was left open to repeat phases two and three at Charles Sturt University at the start of Session 1 in 2012, subject to timing and resourcing.

3.3.1. Recruitment

The recruitment of first-time distance learners was undertaken with the written permission of Massey University. Permission was granted to access enrolment data for students studying via distance for the first time in Semester 2, 2011. Although a larger number of first-time distance learners enrol for study at Massey University in the first semester, the research timeframe meant there was no other option but to recruit those commencing in Semester 2. After securing full ethics approval, the primary method of recruitment was by email invitation from the Project Leader to all potential participants at the point when their enrolment had been approved. The initial invitation included a 'Participant Information Sheet' along with a link to a participant-facing website which included video introductions from the lead researchers using the same Sony Bloggie™ Touch video cameras that were later provided to participants.

The Information Sheet explained that the greatest benefit of participation for the student was likely to be the activity of self-reflection, which is an important factor in supporting student success. In addition, it was highlighted that participant data would be disseminated across the distance education community to help improve the learning experience for future students. To compensate participants for their time, the Information Sheet explained that a token of our appreciation would be provided upon receipt of participants' final diary episodes. This token was permission for students to retain the Sony Bloggie™ cameras used for data collection.

3.3.2. Baseline and follow up survey

The recruitment campaign reached more than 750 potential participants, resulting in 160 first-time distance learner volunteers. Because more students volunteered than anticipated, for both ethical and methodological reasons, all volunteers were invited to complete an anonymous online survey.

Although the survey was not an original project deliverable, the researchers felt ethically obliged to accept the offer of such a large number of volunteers to participate in the study. The addition of the survey meant that volunteers were not rejected from participating and valuable baseline data could be gathered from a sample of first-time distance learners. The survey was not extended to the potential pool of 750+ first-time distance learners as it was assumed that their preference not to participate was implicit in their decision not to respond to the initial invitation.

The survey opened in the week before the official start of semester and remained open for one week. For administrative purposes, it was not possible to make the survey available before this date as not all students had received confirmation of their enrolment, and the University's database of confirmed students was still dynamic. During the period in which the survey was open, the sample of initial volunteers was sent one reminder email message from the Project Manager.

The survey comprised two sections: a reflective section followed by a demographic section (See Appendix A). The reflective section was structured to gather student perceptions of reasons for undertaking distance study and to explore their perceived approach to study drawing on the concept of deep, strategic and surface study orchestrations taken from the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) used by Anderson et al. (2011). It was also designed around the Equivalency of Interaction Theory of student interaction with other students, staff and content (Anderson, 2003). The intention of the survey was to gather basic demographic data along with insights and perceived tendencies towards deep, strategic and surface learning, and student preferences in terms of the way they might interact over the program of their study.

A follow-up survey was sent to the same group of 160 volunteers at the end of Semester 2, 2011 (See Appendix B). The survey comprised the same structure as the pre-semester survey and sought to explore respondents' perceptions of their actual approach to study throughout the preceding semester. It was similarly structured to encompass the concept of deep, strategic and surface study orchestrations (Anderson et al., 2011) alongside the theory of student interaction with other students, staff and content (Anderson, 2003). The objective of the survey was to enable the research team to compare and contrast the pre-semester and post-semester perceptions of respondents. In addition, the post-semester survey also sought to distinguish between respondents who completed their papers and those who withdrew from one or more distance papers. In the New Zealand context, the term 'paper' refers to the individual unit of study, which may, in other countries, be known as unit, module or subject.

3.4. Phase three

Phase Three was the major component of the study. This phase drew on the phenomenological research methods literature to document the lived experiences or stories of first-time distance learners from their own point of view using video diaries for data collection. In essence, a phenomenological approach is concerned with understanding particular phenomena from the perspectives of people involved; or stated more simply, the lived experiences of people (van Manen, 1990). Although this approach is often criticised because researchers can end up retelling other peoples' stories through their own theoretical lens (Casey, 1995), the lifeworld and anti-reductionist principles of phenomenology were applicable to helping to address the gap in the literature from the learner's voice.

3.4.1. Sampling

The sample for phase three was selected from the wider sample of 160 volunteers. The decision was made to select 20 participants, which was greater than the 10 initially proposed, to enhance the range and diversity of learner stories and in light of the larger pool of volunteers and potential withdrawals. However, the sample size was limited to 20 students due to the level of funding and logistics of data collection through the use of video diaries.

The sampling process was based on selection of those who broadly represented the demographic and geographic diversity of first-time distance learners. The profile of diversity shown in Table 2 was informed by a demographic analysis of the University's distance students during the 2010 academic year.

Gender	Female (66%); Male (34%)
Age	< 25 (3%); 25-29 (19%); 30-39 (29%); 40-49 (20%); 50+ (12%)
Ethnicity	European (68%); Māori (12%); Pasifika (3%); Asian (7%); Other (11%)
Location	Overseas (4%); Campus region (51%); Non-campus city (38%); Remote (6%)
Mode	Distance only (75%); Mixed-mode (25%)
Level	Undergraduate (76%); Postgraduate (24%)
College	Business (41%); Humanities (33%); Education (13%); Sciences (13%)
Entry	Adult (99%); NCEA (1%)

Table 2: Profile of demographic diversity of first-time distance learners

Importantly, the sample is not fully representative and was purposively selected to ensure a diversity of first-time distance learners. After careful analysis of the sample of volunteers and background data collected through the baseline survey, 20 participants from phase two received an email request with an attached 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Consent Form' to confirm their willingness to participate in the video diary phase.

3.4.2. Data collection

Upon receipt of signed Consent Forms, participants were sent a Sony Bloggie™ Touch video camera via courier to their home address. The Bloggie™ cameras were selected for ease of use and so participants did not have to rely on using their own equipment. Moreover, the cameras ensured that participants were all using the same equipment, which made it easier to start from similar baseline knowledge and to provide relevant training and technical support.

Participants received an orientation document via email, which was designed to support each student in becoming sufficiently confident with the camera to participate effectively (i.e. operating the camera, uploading and submitting data files, etc.). Those students who required additional assistance were contacted by the Project Manager who then helped them to overcome any technical difficulties. As part of the orientation process, participants were asked to record a practice diary within a week of receiving the camera in response to some initial reflective questions.

Reflections were gathered using a video diary technique adapted from previous studies. Riddle and Arnold (2007) used the 'Day Experience Method' to investigate everyday life situations.

They required participants to record written answers to specific questions sent at irregular intervals (between 30 and 90 minutes) between 8 am and 10 pm on three separate days. By contrast, Cashmore, Green and Scott (2010) adopted a free-form approach to video diaries in a longitudinal study with undergraduate students at the University of Leicester. In light of the experiences of these studies and the desire to explore particular themes related to being a first-time distance learner, the research adopted methods that struck a balance between a structured and free-form approach.

The initial expectation was that students would provide around five minutes worth of video footage per week; although this expectation gradually changed given that the greater issue was not one of duration, but rather the 'relevance' and 'forthcomingness' of information. Of the 20 participants, six were less comfortable or forthcoming in their willingness to reflect deeply on their distance learning experience. However, it needs to be noted that some of these students may not have been as skilled at self-reflection. Conversely, three participants were capable of speaking at length (>10 minutes per week) which presented a challenge due to the unstructured nature of their responses. The research team faced the decision of how to accommodate such diversity while maintaining enough consistency in the questions and experiences being explored to ensure the value of the data.

In response, a 'reflective prompt' protocol was designed to encourage 'free-flow' reflections whilst providing relevant 'fish-hooks' to gather reflections on particular themes in a lightly structured manner. Put another way, key themes were explored on a weekly basis across the semester through posing relevant questions based on a set of reflective prompts. These prompts were personalised according to the previous video diary as each learner's story followed a different trajectory, but essentially they explored the same themes across all participants. Within 48 hours of receiving a participant's video file, the Project Manager would respond via email with the reflective prompts designed to trigger reflections for the next video diary, which were based on the following framework:

- What's on your mind at the moment?
- Fish-hooks for indicators of approach to learning
- Fish-hooks for learning support indicators
- What's on your plate next week?
- Are there things you would like to continue, start and/or stop?

A considerable amount of rich qualitative data were collected during the first half of Semester 2. As originally the research was intended to explore just the first few weeks of study, during semester-break, participants were given the opportunity to continue or conclude their involvement in the project. Eight participants chose to conclude at the semester-break, while 12 opted to continue until the end of semester. Although continuation of the video diaries beyond the initial six weeks of the semester was not part of the original plan, the research team was mindful of any sense in which the students felt abandoned on conclusion of the study. In this sense, the researchers believed they had an ethical responsibility to offer to continue the project.

3.4.3. Data management

To mitigate any participant concerns about being identified via their video recordings, data was handled solely by the Project Manager. All data was securely stored on a computer only accessible to the Project Manager and, upon conclusion of the research, participants were given the opportunity to review their video diary transcripts before deciding whether or not to authorise their release for the purpose of research dissemination. Participants were given the option to release a transcript of their data under an identity and to withhold their video recordings. All participants agreed to the release of transcripts and their names are reported as pseudonyms.

3.4.4. Data analysis

Consistent with the intention of drawing on the principles of a phenomenological approach, a grounded strategy was adopted for data analysis. The purpose was to ensure that the student voice was retained at the forefront of the analysis. That said, the researchers' implicit and explicit theories, such as those related to what is already known about distance learners, deep, surface and strategic study orchestrations, and the Equivalency of Interaction Theory, to name a few, meant that student responses and subsequent data analysis were clearly influenced by pre-existing knowledge. To address this issue as much as possible, the Project Manager was responsible for most of the data analysis during this phase. Moreover, the influence of the researchers' theories in influencing data analysis and the interpretation of findings was the subject of considerable discussion throughout this phase.

Thematic analysis was selected as the analytic approach. This is a technique for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2003). A sense of context was retained by describing the experiences, meanings and lived realities of participants as fully as possible. This is known as a 'realist' approach. Within the limitations of grounded theory, an inductive approach ('bottom-up') was also applied, which meant that the major themes arose from the data. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2003) six-step process:

- **Familiarisation:** The Project Manager was familiar with the data having transcribed the video diaries.
- **Generating initial codes:** The Project Manager had neither an extensive pre-existing knowledge of the literature nor a vested interest in the field of distance education; and was, therefore, well placed to generate initial codes in the most impartial sense possible.
- **Searching for themes:** Using an inductive approach, the Project Manager identified groups of data that 'naturally' collated together to form emergent themes.
- **Reviewing themes:** The Project Leader was not involved in the process of data collection and was, therefore, well-placed to review the coded data and emerging themes.

- **Defining and naming themes:** Themes were named and refined in an effort to retain the student voice whilst extending clarity and value for the reader.
- **Reporting content of themes:** Themes are reported in Chapter 7.

3.4.5. Role of the research team

At Massey University, the Project Leader (Professor Mark Brown) and Project Manager (Helen Hughes) communicated at regular intervals to monitor and discuss progress. Regular meetings were also undertaken with partners at Charles Sturt University. These meetings were hosted in Australia, New Zealand and via Skype and teleconference. During the first six months of the project, a regular email update was also sent to members of the research team at Charles Sturt University. The research team were integral in conceptualising and shaping the research design, interpreting and reflecting on the findings, and disseminating results at different stages throughout the research process.

3.4.6. Role of the external advisory group

The research team was supported by an External Advisory Group that was rich with expertise in the fields of blended and distance education. The Advisory Group met via teleconference on five occasions over the duration of the project and contributed to the research design and interpretation of key findings. They also provided valuable feedback on the content and structure of the final report. The External Advisory Group included:

- Dr Linda Leach, School of Educational Studies, Massey University
- Ralph Springett, President of Extramural Students' Society, Massey University
- Ormond Simpson, Visiting Fellow, University of London Centre for Distance Education
- Dr Zeffie Nicholas, School of Education, University of Western Sydney
- Dr Andrea Crampton, Sub-Dean Learning and Teaching, Faculty of Science, Charles Sturt University
- Associate Professor Marion Tulloch, Executive Director, Division of Learning and Teaching Services, Charles Sturt University

3.4.7. Role of the evaluator

The role of the External Evaluator was to provide formative evaluation at three key 'way stations'. Documents relating to the research were frequently shared with the evaluator (below) who played a valuable role in monitoring the 'trustworthiness' of the project and the alignment between research objectives and the project deliverables. The interpretation of findings and final report was greatly enhanced by the input of the External Evaluator who specialises in monitoring research projects.

- Dr Kirsty Weir, Research Manager, Ako Aotearoa (Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence)

3.5. Trustworthiness of the study

The research was designed to ensure that it was a trustworthy study of the services provided by the two institutions and the experiences of first-time distance learners. In this regard, the study sought to satisfy four main criteria of trustworthiness: (a) confirmability, (b) credibility, (c) dependability and, (d) transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1990).

The criterion of confirmability (objectivity) refers to the degree with which the research design and data collection techniques appear to reflect and further the researchers' self-interests. This is an important consideration, especially in phenomenological research, as the researcher can easily become the all-knowing narrator. This criterion was met by ensuring that the researchers' theoretical assumptions were explicit and discussed throughout the research process. The role of the Research Manager and involvement of the External Advisory Group along with the External Evaluator enabled independent input at key decision points, and there remains a record of data such that other researchers could audit the research findings.

The criterion of credibility (internal validity) refers to the findings, analysis and interpretations being found acceptable by the research participants, and by other people who judge the reported results as being faithful to data. In this regard, the audit of support services for distance learners was discussed with key stakeholders and the video diary transcripts were offered to participants for validation. The involvement of an External Advisory Group with different perspectives and the External Evaluator also enhanced the overall credibility of the research process.

The criterion of dependability (reliability) refers to the consistency of the research findings and the fit between the reported data and what actually occurred during data collection. Regular meetings helped to identify and clarify areas of inconsistency and, wherever possible, coding of data was validated by another member of the research team. Once again, the External Advisory Group coupled with the External Evaluator played an important role in ensuring that key decisions were made explicit, and what was being reported was truthful in terms of the research process.

The criterion of transferability (external validity) refers to the researcher giving sufficient descriptive information for other researchers to be able to transfer the research design to similar populations, although there is no guarantee they would find similar results. However, the report provides sufficient information about the research design and recruitment of the sample of first-time distance learners that would allow the study to be replicated in other institutions. Copies of participant information sheets, questionnaires full transcripts, etc. are available from the authors on request. Suffice to say the research design and approach to data collection is generally transferable to other countries and distance providers if researchers want to make comparisons.

Finally, the research was also designed to maximise catalytic validity, which refers to the degree to which the study reorients, focuses and energises participants towards knowing their reality in order to transform it (Lather, 1986). Although it was not the prime objective of the study, it was hoped that the video diary phase would encourage participants to consciously reflect on their experiences in a manner that would facilitate new insights and self-understandings

of what it means to be an effective distance learner. In this respect, the research team was committed to the study having value to the participants.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Approval to conduct the research was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Southern B Application -11/34). In developing the research, a number of ethical considerations needed to be kept in mind, especially in relation to data collection over phase three. As already mentioned, an ethical dilemma was encountered in the recruitment of the sample as more first-time distance learners volunteered to participate in the study than anticipated. As a result of a larger pool of potential participants, the research team sought the advice of the Massey University's Ethics Committee and, subsequently, resubmitted a revised application for approval to undertake a baseline survey as reported in phase two. The main reason to undertake this survey, which was not a project deliverable, was to ensure that students volunteering to participate did not feel excluded from both the present research and the institution in which they had chosen to study.

In Phase Three, consistent with standard ethical protocols, no absolute guarantee of anonymity was given. However, participants were assured in the Participant Information Sheet that the researchers, as legally permitted, would protect their identities and that during data analysis video diaries would only be viewed by members of the research team. They were also informed that wider dissemination of the research transcripts and video dairies would not occur without their explicit written permission. Moreover, participants were under no obligation to continue in the study and had the right to withdraw at any point.

As already discussed, a second ethical dilemma arose in Phase Three when it became clear that participation in a reflective protocol had begun to directly influence some participant's resilience towards study, which led the research team to believe that discontinuing the video diaries in the middle of semester would be unethical. Accordingly, participants were offered the choice of withdrawing from the video diary phase at the original date indicated on the Participant Information Sheet or to continue providing reflections on their experiences as a first-time distance learner through to the end of semester. Notably, 12 participants chose to continue.

3.7. Summary

This chapter described the Design-Based Research methodology that helped to frame the study. It provides a description of the three main research phases which culminated in gathering and reporting stories of first-time distance learners 'in their own words' through weekly video diaries. A description of the phenomenological approach underpinning this line of research is provided along with a detailed account of key decisions throughout the research process, including the challenges of collecting, managing and analysing such qualitative data. Finally, the chapter reflects on the methodological trustworthiness of the study and reports some of the ethical issues that were considered and arose during the course of the research.

Chapter 4 Findings - Phase One

This chapter presents findings of the audit of services and resources for distance learners from Charles Sturt University in Australia and Massey University in New Zealand. The objective of Phase One was to undertake an audit of initiatives designed to support distance learners in the early weeks of the study lifecycle. The investigation was organised around the conceptual framework described in Chapter Three. This chapter sets out the background context of distance education at Charles Sturt University and Massey University; and reports a selection of the core and more innovative initiatives at both institutions designed to enhance distance learner success.

4.1. Background context

A defining feature of the participating institutions is their long commitment to providing comprehensive, high quality, university-level distance education programs; thereby offering life-long learning opportunities to a range of diverse populations at different ages and stages of the learning pathway. Both institutions are recognised as leaders in exploring the potential of new, digitally mediated models of distance education to meet changing student and stakeholder expectations.

4.1.1. Massey University

Massey University is New Zealand's only national university with campuses in Albany, Manawatu and Wellington. As a dual mode university, Massey has a 50-year history of offering distance education; in December 2010 the Massey supported 16,299 distance learners. An additional 18,566 students were spread across its three other campuses. Massey also has a number of offshore initiatives in countries such as Brunei, Singapore, and Vietnam and is currently expanding the range of courses (programs) available by distance to international students living overseas. Currently, four of Massey's academic colleges—Business, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Sciences—provide distance education.

Against this backdrop of Massey's long history as a dual mode provider, the University has made a large investment in new digital media to support new models of online, blended and distance education. In 2009, Massey initiated a NZ \$4.5 million three-year project to establish the Stream online learning platform, which at its core involved the replacement of WebCT with the implementation of Moodle.

In 2011, Massey University established the Distance Education and Learning Futures Alliance (DELFA), which aims to support new models and emerging approaches to tertiary education for today's digitally wired, globally connected and rapidly changing higher education landscape. DELFA brings together a unique mix of leading scholars and tertiary practitioners to create a powerful community of practice to support new innovations in teaching and learning. Its mission is to be a driving force and world leader in defining and transforming the nature of online, blended and distance education for today's digital-era university.

4.1.2. Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt University is a regional, multi-campus university based in New South Wales, Australia. The University has study centres in Melbourne and Sydney, a campus in Ontario, Canada, as well as links with international partner institutions. The multi-campus nature of Charles Sturt University (Bathurst, Wagga Wagga, Albury-Wodonga, Orange, Canberra, Parramatta, Manly, Dubbo and Ontario Canada) creates particular challenges for the logistics of administration, teaching and the support of learning and teaching. Faculties, divisions and institutes must necessarily work across the campuses and all four faculties have at least one fully cross-campus school.

Charles Sturt University is a dual-mode university offering courses (programs) in on-campus and distance education modes. In 2010, the University had approximately 38,000 students of whom approximately two-thirds were enrolled as distance education students. The official enrolment mode choices for students in subjects are either internal (on-campus) or distance education and, from 2006 to 2011, there was an increasing use of blended and flexible learning, in its broadest sense, as a pedagogical approach to enhancing the student learning experience. The introduction in 2007/2008 of a new online learning environment, Interact (the open source Sakai collaborative learning environment), coupled with establishment of the Flexible Learning Institute (FLI) and improved infrastructure (campus spaces) has contributed to the uptake of blended learning approaches.

4.2. Services and resources for distance learners

The institutional audit of distance education services and resources was structured using the conceptual framework described in Chapter 3, which proposes six stages of the study lifecycle: thinking about study; making choices; enrolment; first few weeks; progression and completion (Mackay et al., 2010). While under the umbrella of this broader framework, for ease of reporting the selection of *current* initiatives described in this chapter are collapsed under the following three headings: The path to enrolment (4.2.1); study readiness (4.2.2.); and first few weeks and beyond (4.2.3).

4.2.1. The path to enrolment

The path to enrolment encompasses three stages: thinking about study; making choices; and enrolment. At Massey University, the 'Bridging the Distance' project identified the importance of pre-enrolment stages of a distance learner's study lifecycle (Shillington et al., 2012). In response, over a two-year project with external funding from the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), Massey University created the following suite of online tools and resources:

- **How distance learning works** - Better information on the University's website (Figure 2) about the practical side of studying at a distance to help students consider whether they are suited to distance study.
- **Is distance learning for me** - A short online quiz where each question is followed by personalised feedback (strategies/suggestions) based on the students' responses to give a sense of readiness for studying by distance.

- Finding time for study - Online tools such as a Study/Work Calculator to help students identify how they can fit study into their current routine; or to highlight areas that they may need to give up.
- University academic skills - Exercises designed to provide the student with a baseline of their existing literacy and numeracy skills. The student is provided with personalised feedback at the end of each stage with suggestions as to how they may want to proceed.
- Study previews - Online resources that allow students to view sample study materials, assignments, and tests, as well as learn the expectations of academic study and how they can interact with other students and teaching staff (see Figure 3).
- IT and online learning - Information about online learning, the types of activities students may be expected to complete and the computer requirements. A short quiz also allows students to identify whether their computer will be suitable for distance study.
- Choosing courses - Web pages that include: a checklist of factors to consider before choosing a program; a guide to planning your study and more visible links to key support services and interest areas.



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
 TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
 UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Distance learning at Massey University

Massey University is an exciting and progressive New Zealand university. We offer internationally recognised research-led qualifications that are hugely relevant in today's world. Our qualifications can greatly enhance career prospects and personal development. We are also New Zealand's leading university for distance learning. Our students are studying all over the world.

Why choose distance learning?
[\(/massey/learning/distance-learning/why/why_home.cfm\)](https://massey/learning/distance-learning/why/why_home.cfm) Check out the top ten reasons to study at Massey University via distance learning.

[\(/massey/learning/distance-learning/why/why_home.cfm\)](https://massey/learning/distance-learning/why/why_home.cfm)

How distance learning works [\(/massey/learning/distance-learning/intro/intro_home.cfm\)](https://massey/learning/distance-learning/intro/intro_home.cfm)

Find out all about how distance learning at Massey University works, including our online learning environment (Stream), what you can expect and if it is for you.

[\(/massey/learning/distance-learning/intro/intro_home.cfm\)](https://massey/learning/distance-learning/intro/intro_home.cfm)

Figure 2: Information about distance learning on Massey University's website

In the case of Charles Sturt University, a comprehensive Guide to Study is available to prospective distance learners, which explains how distance learning works and the reasons why students might wish to choose this study mode. It also presents a number of compelling reasons why

distance education is a study mode of choice for many students who seek to enhance their career prospects. Figure 3 illustrates the dedicated website which targets prospective distance learners.

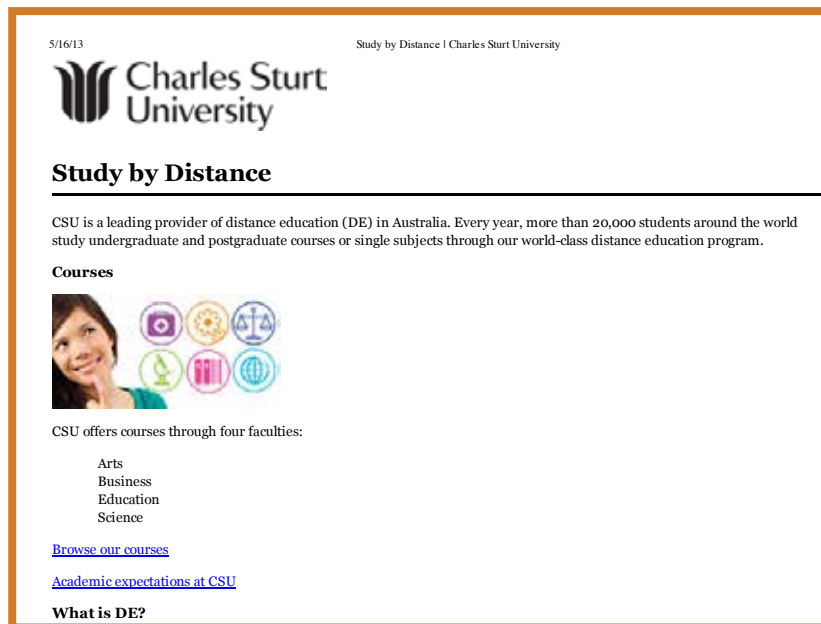


Figure 3: Information about distance learning on the Charles Sturt University's website

4.2.2. Study readiness

In this section, Study Readiness includes the period after 'enrolment' and leading up to and including 'the first few weeks'. In the period between enrolment and the formal start of semester, both Massey University and Charles Sturt University provide a range of initiatives that recognise the importance of enhancing the study readiness and academic skills of distance learners.

Orientation activities

Both institutions provide preparatory services targeted at distance students leading up to and during Orientation Week; which is the week before the formal start of semester. The O-Week Team at Charles Sturt University provides a variety of activities for both on-campus and distance students. In the past, distance orientation sessions were run on campus and were well attended. However, the introduction of an orientation web site significantly impacted on numbers attending these sessions which have since been discontinued. Replicating the on-campus O-Week experience for distance learners continues to present challenges, although various initiatives including student mentors, pod and vod casts are being increasingly utilised with success. Finally, the O-Week website is continually being reviewed and improved and provides tailored information for distance learners relating to study packages, textbooks, health and wellbeing, online learning, residential schools and assessment.

At Massey University, the academic component of the orientation programme for distance students is the same as that for internal students. In 2010, approximately 100 distance students attended each of the on-campus orientation days in Albany, Palmerston North and Wellington. In addition, 550 distance students attended one of 12 regional events. Despite being a shorter event, the academic content of the regional programme remained the same. This includes a 20-minute introduction to learning services for distance learners. Following this, undergraduates attend a session with a learning consultant while postgraduates meet with a librarian. Undergraduates wishing to meet with a librarian are invited to make individual appointments. When students register to attend an orientation event, they are sent a trial assignment to attempt. There are a variety of trial assignments including Business, Humanities and Sciences. These assignments are then used as the basis of discussion with the learning consultant.

Regional events are also attended by the Extramural Students' Society (EXMSS) Extramural Area Representatives (EARs) who give an introduction to the services provided by this independent student body. At the time of data collection, the New Zealand Government was proposing to remove legislation permitting compulsory student membership, which had been disestablished in Australia in 2006.

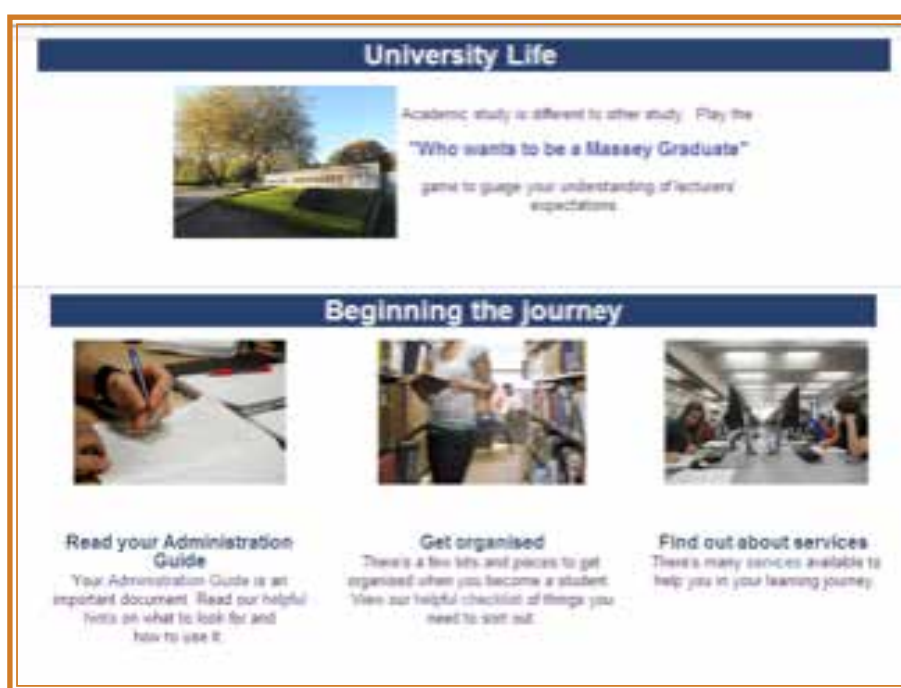


Figure 4: Massey University's online welcome and orientation program

As an outcome of the 'Bridging the Distance Project', all distance learners at Massey University are automatically enrolled in an online Welcome and Orientation Program (Figure 4), which is hosted through the online learning environment—Stream.

The Stream environment has been designed to address distance learner's information needs at each stage of the study lifecycle and includes:

- Welcome video
- Who wants to be a Massey graduate quiz
- Introduction to administration guides
- First week checklists
- Introduction to support services
- Literacy and numeracy skills
- Hints for written assignments
- Using the library
- Preparing for exams
- Sitting exams
- Need help videos

To avoid information overload, different modules appear at timely intervals during the semester. For example, information on assignment writing appears early on in the semester, whereas examination preparation appears towards the end of the semester. Most of the online environment is self-directed, although a 'Q & A' forum is also available where students can post questions related to their study. A learning consultant, who usually responds within several hours of a message being posted, maintains the forum. In Semester 1, 2011, 63 per cent of new distance students accessed the orientation environment and 55 per cent went on to access one or more of the resources available.

University preparation

STUDY LINK is an award winning enabling program offered by Charles Sturt University. The non-credit bearing, voluntary program is free to Commonwealth supported enrolled students and offers 14 different subjects via flexible delivery. The suite of subjects covers areas like 'Transition to University Study', 'Foundation Mathematics' and 'Writing at University'. Designed to increase students' skills and confidence, along with developing a better understanding of the expectations of studying at University, a feature of the program is the way it is delivered via flexible, online delivery, thereby not only preparing students for the discipline pre-requisites, but also the environment that they will be situated within. A subject of particular importance to distance learners is 'Introduction to Learning Online', which focuses on web tools and how best to use them to enhance learning. STUDY LINK has been offered for more than a decade and in excess of 30 000 students have enrolled in the program. Many students report great gains in skills and confidence as a result of completing these subjects. The program has received an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Program award for 'Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning' as well as a citation. The STUDY LINK Team were also the inaugural winners of Charles Sturt University's Vice-Chancellor's Award for 'Programs that Enhance Learning'.

At Massey University, the Centre for Professional and Continuing Education (PaCE) offers a number of university preparation courses, some of which contribute to a Certificate of University Preparation. However, most of these courses target campus-based students (often international students), and they attract a fee.

All first-time distance learners at Massey University receive a welcome letter from the Manawatu Campus Registrar, including a Distance Learner Guide containing valuable information about a range of support services. Also, enclosed with this letter is a Stream Guide that introduces students to the features of the University's online learning environment.

4.2.3. First few weeks and beyond

Both Charles Sturt University and Massey University recognise the 'first few weeks' as a high-risk stage for attrition among distance learners. In response, both institutions provide a suite of support services and interventions designed to make a difference in the first few weeks and beyond, as students progress with their studies.

Telephone campaigns

Both institutions contact first-time distance learners during the initial few weeks through targeted telephone campaigns. In the case of Charles Stuart University, a group of students are employed to contact new students to check on their progress. At Massey, this work is done through the University's Contact Centre and usually targets students in the initial weeks who are the first in a family to study at university and/or have high academic workloads. A second phone call in week 4/5 will often target students who fall within an 'at risk' category according to their profile and level of engagement with university services.

Charles Sturt University proactively initiates contact with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds via the Student Success Team. As mentioned above, a group of trained students make contact with targeted students via phone, email and SMS in a number of 'campaigns' to encourage persistence, provide information, support and referral. The program begins with a 'welcome campaign', followed by a second outreach to those students who do not access their online subject outlines in the first few weeks. The third phase is extended to students who are flagged on the basis of an 'at-risk trigger', which is identified by faculty and specific to each individual paper. The final phase of communication is with those students who appear to be failing a subject as they progress through semester.

The online learning environment

Charles Sturt University's online learning environment is based on the Sakai platform and is called 'Interact'. Massey University's equivalent is Moodle and the wider online learning platform is known as 'Stream', which is a metaphor for life-long learning and the stream of knowledge. These platforms are designed to provide distance students with a scholarly online environment that helps them feel part of a learning community by allowing them to exchange ideas with fellow students and staff.

At Charles Sturt University, students are encouraged to access their subject site regularly. Fourteen days before the start of session (semester), Subject Outlines are published on

Interact, which allows students to access their Subject Coordinators' contact procedures, study schedules, assessment tasks and prescribed text books, among other things. Throughout the session, Subject Coordinators regularly post learning resources, announcements and calendar entries; along with being available for online chat via Interact. The use of Interact varies according to Subject Coordinators and the discipline.

At Massey University, Stream is designed to support new and more engaging forms of online interactions between students, staff and study resources. The majority of Paper Coordinators at the undergraduate level use Stream to support their teaching by uploading course administration information, study notes, recent journal articles, podcasts, online presentations, interactive activities (e.g. quizzes) and by initiating online discussion forums. At the time of the institutional audit, there was no official date before the start of semester when Stream environments are made available to students. Evidence so far suggests that students have embraced the opportunities that Stream provides to enhance learning with high levels of satisfaction in both internal and external surveys.

Like Charles Sturt University, Massey University is continuing to invest in opportunities for online learning through an expanded suite of electronic tools—for example, Adobe Connect for synchronous interaction. The strategic goal for teaching and learning at Massey University is to provide a distinctive and exceptional experience for all learners and increasing use of rich digital media is a key feature of this goal. Both institutions have an institutional commitment to providing all students with a fully integrated digital learning experience, which incorporates the best of conventional study methods with new forms of blended and flexible delivery. However, at the time of the audit both universities were still in a transition stage in supporting the digital delivery of papers and subjects to distance learners.

Learning development

Both Charles Sturt University and Massey University provide learning development services for distance students. In the first instance, both universities encourage students to begin by helping themselves through a suite of online resources. The Massey University Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL) includes support on: Academic Writing, Assignment Types; Referencing; Study Skills; Tests and Exams; Computer Skills; Stream; Postgraduate study; ESOL Study and Maths and Statistics (Figure 5). It also includes a specific area of support on Distance Study. This section includes: getting started, how to study, online study techniques and distance support.

Within the OWLL website, originally inspired by Purdue University's Online Writing Lab, much of the support is text. For example, there is a free 114-page e-book on essay and report writing, referencing, and academic study. However, there are also innovative interactive tools, such as the 'APA Referencing Tool' and the 'Assignment planning calculator'. In addition, there are 16 video lectures, which are approximately 15 minutes in length and can be viewed via YouTube. Titles include: 'Time Management for University Students' and 'Editing your Work'. In addition, each semester, a series of around 10 online workshops are scheduled via the OWLL website. These are mainly directed at postgraduate students and are delivered via Adobe Connect by a variety of Massey academics and student support staff.

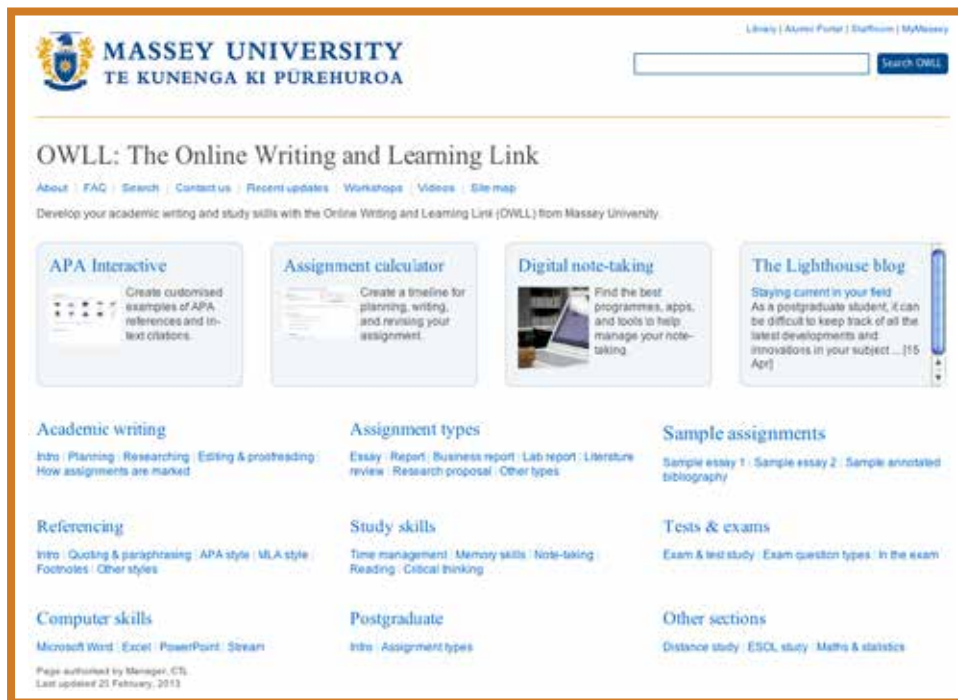


Figure 5: Massey University's Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL) website

OWLL has seen consistent growth in usage since 2005. There was a 19 per cent increase in unique visits between 2010 and 2011, which can be partly attributed to a 76 per cent increase in the number of hits by students coming directly from Massey's Stream environment which embeds OWLL in most papers. Another online resource available to distance learners is the 'Stream4students' website, which can be accessed through OWLL or directly from the Stream login page. This resource aims to provide students with everything they need to know in terms of making effective use of the online learning environment, including information on how to post messages to discussion fora, complete online quizzes and tests and successfully submit assignments electronically.


At Massey University, if questions cannot be answered via Stream4students or the OWLL website, students have several other avenues of distance support. For example, a discussion forum is hosted on Stream where distance students are encouraged to seek support from fellow students under the supervision of a dedicated learning consultant. Alternatively, students can request academic support directly from the relevant campus Centre for Teaching and Learning through an online request form. An interesting tool available to distance learners at Charles Sturt University is an online 'Knowledge Base' that allows students to search for relevant information or submit a question if they cannot find what they are looking for.

The 'Pre-reading Service', is one of Massey University's major services designed to support learning development beyond the first few weeks. This service is free for all distance learners and enables students to submit two assignments per semester to a learning consultant who reviews focus, structure, style and presentation prior to the assignment due date. Importantly, this is not a proof-reading service, as targeted feedback that responds directly to the assessment topic


is provided. Students are encouraged to identify specific areas where they require assistance as the time allocated to each assignment is one hour and feedback is given within three working days. Reviewed assignments along with the feedback are returned through a dedicated Stream environment. The Pre-reading Service is used extensively by distance learners and is frequently cited in institutional student surveys as a flagship initiative.

At Charles Sturt University, the Academic Support Unit provides online resources addressing study skills, referencing, academic writing, maths and statistics, e-learning and support for research students. Students looking for interactive support may utilise a Learning Support Forum where staff and students can post and discuss pertinent issues. All enrolled students may request feedback on assignment drafts, either via a face-to-face appointment or online. In excess of 1800 distance students took advantage of individual appointments with learning skills advisers in 2011.

5/16/13 Regional and Remote Learning Support | Student Support | Study by Distance | Charles Sturt University

 **Charles Sturt University**

Regional and Remote Learning Support



At CSU we understand how isolating studying via distance can be. The Regional and Remote Learning Support Team knows what it's like to study via distance education in some of the most remote areas of New South Wales.

Our aim is to make study at CSU a successful experience for students, no matter where you live..

What we do

The Regional and Remote Learning Support Team offers regular one-on-one and group sessions in various parts of the state. Some of the areas we can help you with include:

- assignment writing
- note-taking
- online learning
- reading skills
- time management

Where we do it

Figure 6: Charles Sturt University's regional and remote learning support

A recent addition to learning development at Charles Sturt University is the Regional and Remote Learning Support Team. This team make personal contact with students studying by distance through site visits to regional areas, then make follow-up contact via connected classrooms and Skype (Figure 6).

On-campus residential schools

Both universities offer distance students the opportunity to attend on-campus contact courses (Massey) or residential schools (Charles Sturt). These are designed to provide an opportunity for students to interact with other distance learners taking the same paper/subject, to receive face-to-face tuition and to use campus services such as the library. They vary from one to

five days in duration and attendance may be compulsory. At Massey University each year, the contact course coordination team administers and coordinates approximately 700 courses across Auckland, Wellington, Palmerston North and Christchurch. At Charles Sturt University, compulsory and voluntary weekend schools may be held for some subjects throughout the year in Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Wagga Wagga and Sydney or other centers in New South Wales and Victoria.

Library Services

Both Charles Sturt University and Massey University have dedicated library services catering for the needs of distance learners. In June 2011, to celebrate fifty years of distance library services, Massey University library published a book entitled, *Your books are in The mail* by Bruce White (2011). This book followed a more general publication a year earlier celebrating Massey's 50th Jubilee of Distance Learning (Prebble, 2010).

Both institutions appreciate that their library websites are the library for distance learners. Consequently, both library websites boast dedicated areas for distance learners, which provide support on how to leverage library services irrespective of study location, both nationally and internationally. In the first instance, distance students are encouraged to refer to a set of distance-specific 'Frequently Asked Questions', along with a range of online tutorials that guide students step-by-step through library services (e.g., how to access online databases; how to request scanned copies of book chapters and journal articles; how to request library books to be sent to your home). For further assistance, Charles Sturt University offers a librarian 'Live Chat' service, which is available from 09:00 - 19:00 from Monday to Thursday and 09:00 - 17:00 from Friday to Sunday. Responsibility for the service is shared among librarians from each campus. At Massey University, distance students are invited to phone a toll-free 0800 number during library opening hours. An alternative option is to schedule a meeting via Adobe Connect in one of the library's five virtual meeting rooms.

At both institutions, a 'Dispatch Service' is the piece de resistance in the provision of distance library services. This is a postal service that is offered at no cost to distance students, which gives them equitable access to books as their on-campus counterparts. At each Charles Sturt University campus, books are dispatched every day, five days per week. At Massey University's Manawatu Campus, the same happens three times a day by courier from Monday to Friday; and once a day from Albany and Wellington. In 2010, 13,142 journal articles and 135,620 books were requested by distance learners at Massey University, although, increasingly, requests for library resources are being sent to students electronically.

Student facilitated study sessions

Both Charles Sturt University and Massey University operate student-facilitated study groups. Massey University's programme focuses on training student leaders and the sessions are focused on peer mentoring. At both institutions, the sessions are voluntary. At Massey University, the original programme started in 2003 and, in Semester 1 2011, there were 14 papers with student-facilitated study groups. One of these papers was Programming Fundamentals, which was a distance paper and, therefore, the study group was hosted online via Adobe Connect.

At both institutions, as a general rule, first-year students from a particular subject or discipline gather with a facilitator to cover course content and learning techniques. These groups are typically organised for high-risk papers/subjects where elevated attrition and failure rates have been identified. Wherever possible, facilitators are experienced students (or ex-students) from these high-risk disciplines. They are selected based on their subject mastery, study skills and communication skills; and are paid in return for their leadership. At both Charles Sturt University and Massey University, they receive two days of training that covers how to effectively plan and facilitate study sessions during the first 12 weeks of participant's first semester.

Advocacy services

Both universities provide advocacy services for distance learners. Advocacy can be defined as the provision of advice in response to student concerns and appeals regarding academic matters. Advocacy among distance learners often requires flexibility and sensitivity because the life circumstances of a distance learner are often more complex than for the average on-campus student.

At Charles Sturt, advocacy is provided by the University's centralised Student Support Team, which is based on the Bathurst Campus. At Massey University, advocacy is provided by an independent Extramural Students' Society (EXMSS), which prides itself in providing the opportunity for distance students to raise concerns without the fear of bias. In 2010, EXMSS dealt with 183 advocacy issues. At Massey University, advocacy is also provided by 22 EXMSS Area Representatives (EARs) who are volunteers with past experience as distance students. The EARs send a welcome email to new distance learners and then meet those who attend regional orientation meetings hosted by the University. The University also supports distance learners through a complaints service with the goal of resolving most issues through negotiation.

Athlete support

Both Charles Sturt University and Massey University are members of the Elite Athlete Friendly University Network. In Australia, Charles Sturt University is recognised by the Australian Sports Commission, the Australian Institute of Sport and the New South Wales Institute of Sport. In New Zealand, Massey University works in conjunction with Sport New Zealand (the national governing sports body). As Elite Athlete Friendly Institutions (EAFIs), both Charles Sturt University and Massey University assist elite and emerging elite student athletes via the provision of a flexible study structure, which allows them to continue training, competing and studying simultaneously. This means that elite athletes are supported through enrolment, academic scheduling, workload planning, negotiation with lecturers, and sitting exams overseas. In addition, Massey University works with the New Zealand Academy of Sport's Athlete life advisors who are assigned to all carded athletes to help with life balance, which includes education.

In 2011, the Charles Sturt University elite athlete program incorporated eight students, of which six were studying via distance. At Massey University, over 200 students were enrolled in the programme, of which many were studying via distance. At the 2010 Commonwealth Games, 56 New Zealand students attended, 37 were Massey University students of whom 35 were distance learners. Also, in 2010, of the 346 national recipients of the Prime Minister's Athlete Scholarships, 99 were awarded to Massey University students across 18 different sporting codes. Notably, Massey University has 56 elite athletes selected to participate at the 2012 London Olympics.

Cultural support

Massey University recognises its responsibility under the Treaty of Waitangi to support Māori students and has a dedicated Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Māori and Pasifika). It aims to embrace diversity and extend culturally sensitive support to Māori learners via the Te Rau Whakaara (Creating Pathways) initiative. Also known as the Accelerated Academic Advancement—or Triple A—program, its main goal is to increase the number of Māori students passing papers and completing degrees. Currently, there are more than 2700 Māori students enrolled, the highest number of Māori studying at any New Zealand university, with 55 per cent studying at a distance.

Supporting the Pasifika learning community is a high priority for Massey University through the Pasifika@Massey strategy, under the leadership of the Pasifika Directorate. The guiding statement is that Massey University is a place ‘where success is the norm and achievement is celebrated’. At a regional level, the Centres for Teaching and Learning provide Pasifika students with learning advisors in Albany, Manawatu and Wellington. These learning advisors have a strong knowledge base to support Pasifika students to be successful at university level. All Pasifika distance learners are contacted in a campaign to raise their awareness of the Pasifika support services available and to invite them to join the Pasifika online learning community in Stream.

At Charles Sturt University, support is extended to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through Indigenous Support Services that include financial, cultural and academic advice. The main campuses of Charles Sturt University are located on the traditional country of the Wiradjuri peoples and targeted initiatives include the Djirruwang Program and Darrambal Skills Assessment Program. Indigenous students, including those studying through distance education, may take advantage of individual tutoring in each subject at no cost.

4.3. Summary

This chapter reports a range of services and resources available to first-time distance learners through the two participating universities. Figure 7 illustrates how the core services and more innovative activities at Charles Sturt University and Massey University sit under the umbrella of a conceptual framework that endeavours to identify the needs of students at different stages of the study lifecycle. Both major providers offer an impressive suite of dedicated services and resources for distance learners, from thinking about study through to the first few weeks and beyond; the chapter provides a valuable institutional context for Phase Two and Phase Three of the research.

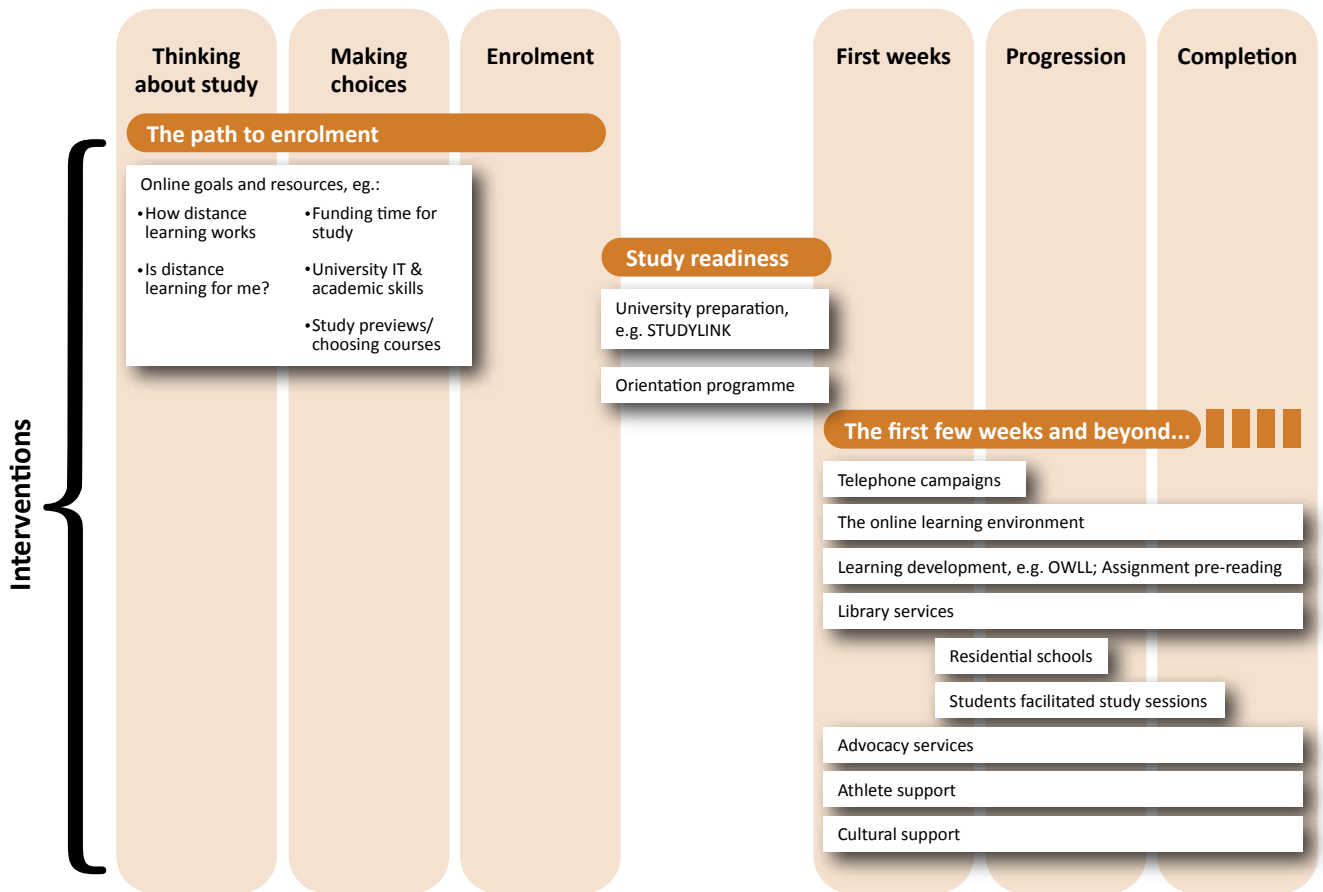


Figure 7: Summary of interventions at Massey University and Charles Sturt University

Chapter 5 Findings - Phase Two

This chapter presents findings from a sample of first-time distance learners enrolled at Massey University, New Zealand. The main objective of Phase Two was to gather baseline demographic data on the diversity of first-time distance learners, as well as students' perceptions about their study intentions and expectations for the semester ahead. A secondary objective was to gather information that could be used in the sample selection for Phase Three and, for comparative purposes, with results from an end of semester survey of first-time distance learners.

5.1. Pre-semester survey

The survey generated a 39 per cent response rate (n=62). The majority of respondents were female (78%) and identified themselves as Pakeha/European (77%). However, the sample included other ethnic groups including Maori, Pasifika, Asian and others. Respondents were mainly located across New Zealand, with 83 per cent living within 60 minutes from a university orientation event. However, only 36 per cent planned to attend an orientation event with a further 23 per cent considering attendance.

The majority of respondents (81%) were distance-only students. When asked about the number of distance papers (i.e., units, subjects or modules) they were studying, more than half (57%) were enrolled in only one paper, while 26 per cent were enrolled in two papers and 15 per cent were enrolled in three or four distance papers. The survey did not reveal the total number of papers that students had enrolled in.

The largest number of distance papers was hosted in the College of Business (38%), closely followed by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (30 per cent), the College of Sciences (15%) and the College of Education (11%). Around half of participants were enrolled in first-year papers (51%), while only six per cent were postgraduate enrolments.

The majority of respondents had enrolled in distance papers as adult admissions (57%), with only six per cent qualifying for admission based on their high-school certificate. Almost two-thirds of respondents (60%) were not the first person in their family to have enrolled in a tertiary education, but only a minority (23%) came from a family who had previous experience in distance education.

What is your main reason for studying?	%
I want to gain skills and knowledge for personal interest	20.7
I want to improve my career	36.2
I want to change my career direction	24.1
I want to enter the workforce	34.1
I'm not ready to commit to a career yet	0.0
Constructive use of time while seeking employment	1.7
Constructive use of time between family commitments	5.2

Table 3: Main reasons given for studying

Participants' main reasons for studying were strongly career-related with a majority (60%) wanting to either improve their current career or change their career direction (Table 3). This finding shows how distance education is centrally linked to helping people develop skills and capabilities related to the workplace. A common reason that respondents enrolled via distance was because they had daytime commitments (51%), which were either professional or childcare related. A further 15 per cent lived too far from campus, and 15 per cent wanted to enrol on papers that were only offered via distance. Notably, only two per cent enrolled in distance education because it was better suited to their learning style.

In terms of other commitments on their time, three-quarters of respondents were employed, with 45% employed more than 33 hours per week. The majority of participants (62%) had a partner, while 43 per cent had dependent children.

How are you feeling about your distance study?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Confident about studying via distance mode	24.1% (14)	39.7% (23)	24.1% (14)	10.3% (6)	1.7% (1)
Confident about coping with the workload	13.8% (8)	39.7% (23)	34.5% (20)	10.3% (6)	1.7% (1)
Confident about my study skills	13.8% (8)	43.1% (25)	31% (18)	10.3% (6)	1.7% (1)

Table 4: Main reasons given for studying

Table 4 shows that the majority of participants were confident about studying via distance-mode (65%). However, they were slightly less confident about their ability to cope with the workload, with around half reporting they ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the relevant statement. In a similar vein, only 55 per cent of participants reported that they were confident about their study skills. This finding suggests there is clearly a role for providing study skills and more information about the requirements of university-level study before students commence their first semester. As one student reported:

I'd like to think that I'm prepared for my studying. But I'm not really sure what to expect at the same time.

Notably, when asked where they expect to find the most valuable content for their study, 95 per cent of students reported through their core study materials, although 68 per cent also identified the value of resources they identify themselves.

Respondents seemed to think that fellow students would ‘add value’ to their learning with over 80 per cent expecting this would occur through debate and discussion and 71 per cent by offering tips and strategies. Notably, 79 per cent of participants perceived that the Stream online learning environment would help them to interact with other students. Thus, relatively few respondents expected distance education would involve little or no interaction with fellow students.

However, a higher proportion of students expected that Stream would help them interact with lecturers (86%) and provide online content that would enhance their learning (95%). The key finding here is that most participants expected to use the Stream environment to support their learning.

Adapting questions from the ASSIST survey, when asked about how they see themselves studying, 43 per cent of respondents ‘strongly agree’ that they tend to organise their commitments. A similar number of participants ‘agree’ with this statement.

The following student reported:

Knowing that a big workload is coming, I have tidied up a lot of loose ends and got things and people organised. People are more responsive to my organising because it is to make room for study rather than me just trying ‘to be organised’.

Similarly, 39 per cent ‘strongly agree’ and 37 per cent ‘agree’ that they tend to immerse themselves in tasks. In contrast, less than 30 per cent of respondents ‘strongly agree’ that they tend to do what they need to.

Following on the theme of approach to study, as depicted in Table 5, over 95 per cent of participants want to gain deep knowledge with 86 per cent reporting they would be pleased if they pass. Far fewer participants appear to be concerned about being rewarded for their efforts (75%). Although insightful, the responses to this set of questions do not provide a solid basis on which to draw trustworthy conclusions about a respondent’s particular study orchestrations.

How would you best describe your goal for Semester 2?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I want to gain deeper knowledge	64.3% (36)	32.1% (18)	3.6% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)
I'd be pleased if I pass	56.1% (32)	29.8% (17)	8.8% (5)	3.5% (2)	1.8% (1)
I expect my efforts to be rewarded	29.1% (16)	45.5% (25)	21.8% (12)	3.5% (2)	0% (0)

Table 5: Indication of deep, surface and strategic learning approach

However, the following comments offer a sense of the mix of excitement and apprehension the sample of first-time distance learners perceived as they wait to begin the semester through distance study.

“Am very excited! To tell the truth, have already started studying!”

“I’m mildly apprehensive but very excited about studying. It will be quite a change in my current life style and will need discipline.”

“As a first timer everything is new. Even applying is a minefield. I feel totally at the mercy of the computer, waiting for something to happen.”

5.2. Post-semester survey

The post-semester survey generated a 37 per cent response rate (n=57). Although the second survey generated a similar number of respondents as the first, both surveys were anonymous, and it is unknown how many respondents were the same. Demographic data indicates that at least some respondents were different, but that they represented a similar diversity.

The majority of respondents were female (77%), and most identified themselves as Pakeha/ European decent (92%). The majority of respondents were distance-only students (80%), while 20 per cent were mixed-mode. Around half of respondents studied only one distance paper (51%), while 33 per cent studied two papers and 11 per cent three or four papers. In terms of other commitments on their time, 79 per cent of respondents were employed, with 43 per cent employed more than 33 hours per week. The majority of participants (69%) had a partner, while fewer (37%) had dependent childcare responsibilities.

Against this background, on the basis of self-report and retrospective recall, only 35 per cent of respondents matched or exceeded the recommended 10 to 12 hours of study per week, per distance paper. Another 25 per cent reported they studied between eight and 10 hours per week per distance paper, while 40 per cent studied less than eight hours per week. Notably, only 24

per cent felt unsatisfied with the hours they had studied per distance paper, although only 17 per cent wish they had studied fewer papers. Put another way, 75 per cent of respondents, when taking everything into consideration, report they had studied about the right number of papers.

The majority of respondents (91%) did not withdraw from any distance papers, which indicates the somewhat unique and skewed nature of the sample. The low number of respondents who did withdraw from distance paper(s) (n=5) makes it difficult to draw conclusions on the data they provided. However, it is noteworthy that withdrawals occurred across the study lifecycle (i.e., before semester, as well as during the first and second halves of semester). The primary reason for withdrawal was cited as, 'I just didn't have enough time to study' by four of the five who withdrew. Also, notable is that only one student who withdrew was subsequently contacted by the University.

Who supported your decision to study distance paper(s)?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree	NA
My partner	28.6% (16)	19% (11)	18% (1)	8.9% (2)	3.6% (2)	37.5% (21)
My family/whanau	30.9% (32)	41.8% (17)	1.8% (2)	10.9% (5)	3.6% (2)	10.9% (6)
My friends	24.5% (13)	41.5% (25)	5.7% (3)	20.8% (11)	0% (0)	7.5% (4)
My work colleagues	9.4% (16)	18.9% (25)	1.9% (12)	26.4% (2)	0% (0)	43.4% (23)
My employer	15.4% (8)	17.3% (9)	1.9% (1)	25% (13)	1.9% (1)	38.5% (20)
A student studying via distance	7.8% (4)	5.9% (3)	3.9% (2)	11.8% (6)	2.0% (1)	68.6% (35)
A student studying on-campus	3.9% (2)	3.9% (2)	5.9% (3)	11.8% (6)	2.0% (1)	72.5% (37)
Massey University staff	9.6% (5)	23.1% (12)	3.8% (2)	9.6% (5)	0% (0)	53.8% (28)

Table 6: Groups who supported the decision to study by distance education

It is also noteworthy that some first-time distance learners found it difficult starting in the second semester, as indicated by the following comment:

‘That not all students start in Semester 1. A lot of information was assumed that I knew because it was Semester 2. This held me up a bit as not only did I not know I was missing info, when I did I didn’t know what to ask for, whereas Semester 1 students had been given that info as part of the intro to the subject.’

When asked about the people who had supported their decision to study by distance education, the highest-ranking groups were partners, family/whanau and friends (Table 6). However, around 30 per cent of respondents also identified their employer as an important influence in the decision to study. Similarly, when asked to rank the people who most supported their study over the course of the semester, the top ranking support were partners followed by family/whanau and lecturers.

The sources of most useful study-related information were perceived to be the Stream environment, the library and the Internet. Notably, the major advantage of Stream was perceived to be providing access to content (70%) as opposed to interacting with staff (17%) and other students (13%). That said, the importance of Stream overall was a feature of the responses, and the following student commented on the value of providing a course that helps first-time distance learners develop their computer skills:

‘What a lot of students would undoubtedly like is a good online resource that updates computer skills. It could almost be a basic additional paper (not mandatory) that allows those who left school some years ago and haven’t kept up to speed, to climb back on board.’

Notably, when asked how other students added value to their learning 44 per cent reported they did not. The value of the lecturer(s) was overwhelmingly related to ‘providing information’ (61%) as opposed to ‘offering feedback to go forward’ (30%) and ‘challenging their thinking’ (9%). However, the students reported considerable variability in the type of relationship and interactions they had with academic staff, as the following comments illustrate:

‘I was disappointed at the lack of teaching from the lecturer and dismissive attitude towards struggling students.’

‘I found my lecturer unhelpful in response to questions, as she never returned emails, however her feedback on assignments was good.’

‘One lecturer was amazing, the other wasn’t so great, which definitely impacts on some of the answers provided.’

Contrary to pre-semester survey findings, post-semester results indicate that more participants report they tended to ‘do what they needed to’ (46%) in order to keep up with their study as opposed to ‘organising their commitments’ (37%) or ‘immersing themselves in tasks’ (17%). Notably, Table 7 shows that 64% of students report that their most notable achievement over

semester was gaining deeper knowledge; only a quarter of participants perceive their main achievement was passing their paper(s), which suggests a high level of intrinsic motivation.

Thinking about your distance paper(s), what has been your main achievement?	%
I think I've gained deeper knowledge	64.3%
I think I've passed	25%
I think my efforts have been rewarded	10.7%

Table 7: Main achievement perceived over the course of semester

Finally, several students commented on the positive nature of their experience as a first-time distance learner, as reflected in the following statements:

'I love learning by myself, in my own time, and at my own pace, so this form of learning really suits me.'

'Absolutely loved studying via Massey distance learning. I wish I could have had more time to study. Thoroughly enjoying my course of study. Can't wait for next semester.'

'I really enjoyed the distance learning experience. I felt supported through the entire term. I will continue to study through the distance learning program. Well done and thanks.'

5.3. Summary

This chapter reports the findings of a pre- and post-semester survey of a sample of first-time distance learners. It shows that the majority of respondents were likely to be employed, with as many as half in full-time work. The main reason for embarking on distance study relates to improving their current career or changing their career direction. The unique nature of the sample is apparent by the low number of students who self-reported they had withdrawn from study. The role of partners and family/whanau, in particular, in supporting distance study is a notable feature of the findings, along with the importance of the online learning environment. That said, the Stream environment was primarily used for obtaining information and study resources, rather than interacting with staff and fellow students in a manner that might develop a stronger sense of belonging. The sample of first-time distance learners began their study with a mix of excitement and apprehension, and despite variability over semester in the types of interactions and relationships they developed, the majority report their major achievement was gaining deeper knowledge as opposed to merely passing, although a higher proportion also indicate they did what they needed to in order to survive. For some students distance education was clearly something they enjoyed, and their experience was personally rewarding. Set against the wider context of being a first-time distance learner, the chapter provides valuable baseline data for Phase Three of the research.

Chapter 6 Findings - Phase Three

This chapter presents a profile of the 20 first-time distance students from Massey University who participated in Phase Three of the research. The initial objective was to select a sample of 20 participants that broadly represented the diversity of distance learners at Massey University. In their first video instalment, each participant introduced themselves during which they provided varying additional demographic and background information. Chapter Six provides a brief introduction and portrait of each participant ahead of an in-depth thematic analysis of their data in Chapter Seven.

6.1. Overview of sample

Table 8 presents a summary of the participant sample in terms of demographic variables, some background information, as well as indicators of their family and employment commitments:

Gender	Male (7), Female (13)
Age	Under 25 (4), 25-29 (4), 30-39 (6), 40-49 (4), 50-59 (2)
Ethnicity	Pakeha (11), Māori and/or Pasifika (8), Israeli (1)
Location	A campus town (11), Other urban town (3), Remote (4), Overseas (2)
Mode	Distance only (17), Mixed mode (3)
Total papers	Undergraduate: One (6), Two (6), Three (0), Four (6) Postgraduate: One (2)
Subject	Business (8), Humanities (6), Education (3), Sciences (3)
Prior education	High school (8), Diploma (2), Degree papers (5), Degree (5)
Employment	Full time (11), Part time (3), Casual (1), None (3), Full time mother (2)
Dependents	None (11), One (1), Two or three (5), Four or more (3)

Table 8: Summary of participant sample

6.2. Participant introductions

Participant introductions are organised in ascending order of age. Real names are not used and all names are pseudonyms. Each profile provides some introductory demographic and background information as well as indicators of their approach to study, the period of their participation and the outcome of their semester.

6.2.1. Andy

“This mid-semester break has been good to get some readings done. So I’m up to date for my extramural paper” (Week 7).

Andy was in his early twenties and of Fijian-Indian-Pakeha (European) descent. He lived near a campus in accommodation that he shared with other students. Andy was not employed and studying full-time. His rationale for study via distance was because he had selected a paper that was only offered via distance mode. He was enrolled in three internal papers and one distance paper. He was a bachelor degree student in his third-year of study in Sciences. He interacted with other students via on-campus study groups. Andy’s story contained examples of a strategic approach to study, and he reported that he organised his study time effectively and was ‘good at following-up on suggested readings’. The result of his first assignment was 60 per cent. He participated until the middle of semester and submitted 28 minutes of video. In the future, Andy planned to complete the four remaining papers of his degree by distance.

6.2.2. Beth

“I need to read some chapter and get up to speed. I’m not falling behind, but I like to stay ahead of myself and make sure I’m understanding what I’m learning” (Week 12).

Beth was in her early twenties and of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived near a campus in accommodation that she did not share. She was employed full-time in a job that was not related to her studies. Her rationale for study via distance was because she was engaged in full-time employment for financial reasons. She was enrolled in four entry-level distance papers. She was a student in Business studying towards a Diploma. She interacted with other students via online discussion forums (Stream and Facebook) and also studied for one paper with a colleague. She tried to interact with lecturers via email, but was somewhat dissatisfied with their engagement. She also attended a Contact Course. The University contacted Beth several times on the phone during the first few weeks, which she did not find especially valuable at the time. Beth’s story contained examples of a strategic approach to study, and she worked steadily through semester and ‘did not find it difficult to motivate herself’. Beth participated until the end of semester and submitted 1 hour and 44 minutes of video. She later reported that she passed three papers and failed one. Her future plan was to complete her diploma via distance and, to that end, enrolled in one distance paper during summer school.

6.2.3. Chris

“I needed more time to understand what was taught so basically, that means this paper was too advanced” (Week 13).

Chris was in his early twenties and of Pasifika descent. He lived near a campus. Chris was not employed as he was studying full-time. His rationale for study via distance was because he had selected a paper that was only offered via distance mode. He was enrolled in three

internal papers and one distance paper in Computer Science. He had previously failed papers at a different New Zealand university. He did not interact with other students or lecturers and reported that he did not know how to seek support. Chris's story began with good intentions, but also contained examples of surface approaches to study. In his own words, he had 'trouble making sense of some aspects of his study'. He withdrew from one internal paper in Week 2 and had given up on another by Week 13; at which point the University did not contact him. However, he did believe that he had passed his distance paper. Chris participated until the end of semester and submitted 26 minutes of video. He was uncertain about his future, as he believed he could no longer secure a student loan with a failed paper on his record.

6.2.4. Deborah

"The fact is I don't have that much free time. It's been a struggle to fit in exams and things and even assignments" (Week 13).

Deborah was in her mid-twenties and of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived in an urban town in a house that she shared with her parents. She was employed in a full-time job that was not directly related to her study. She was resuming study via distance having previously studied on-campus at a different New Zealand university. This change was motivated by the desire to live in her hometown where her boyfriend lived. She was enrolled in two distance papers in Humanities. She did not interact with other students or lecturers; although she occasionally followed discussion forums on Stream. Deborah reported evidence of a strategic approach to study, but her story also contained examples of surface approaches. In her own words, she did not 'find some of her study very interesting' and began to question whether her study was really worthwhile. In relation to one paper, Deborah reported serious withdrawal intentions in Week 13; although it is thought that she sat the exam. Deborah participated until just before exams and submitted 1 hour and 29 minutes of video. Her plan for the next semester was to re-evaluate her goals.

6.2.5. Emma

"I've been doubting the reasons why I'm doing this. I'm finding the material dry" (Week 4).

Emma was in her mid-twenties and of Pakeha-Fijian descent. She lived in a campus town. She was employed four days a week in a job that was not directly related to her study. Her rationale for study via distance was because she was engaged in employment that she enjoyed while she developed her professional skills. She was studying towards a postgraduate diploma and was enrolled on one distance paper in Business. She already had a bachelor degree in a field of Arts. She did not interact with other students and procrastinated over seeking support from her lecturer. Instead, she welcomed academic support from her parents and partner who were all employed in the education industry. She also appreciated communication from the University's Pasifika team. Emma reported some strategic approaches to study, but her story also contained examples of surface approaches. In her own words, she did not 'find much of her study very interesting'. She seriously doubted her reasons for study in Week 4. The result of her first assignment was a 'restricted pass'. She participated until the middle of semester and submitted 29 minutes of video. Her plan for the next semester was to re-evaluate her choice of subject.

6.2.6. Fiona

“Study went on the back-burner and was something that was frustrating and it got in the way of, um, well, life got in the way of the paper really” (Week 16).

Fiona was in her late twenties and of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived in London in a flat that she shared with professionals. She was employed full-time in a job that was related to her study; her objective was career progression. She was enrolled in one distance paper in Business that was a prerequisite for the paper that really interested her and would then potentially lead to diploma. She already had a bachelor degree in a field of Humanities. She did not interact with other students and said the time lapse with New Zealand prevented her from taking part in meaningful discussion via Stream. Instead, she welcomed moral support from her partner, until they separated mid-semester. Fiona reported some strategic approaches to study, but her story also contained examples of surface approaches. In her own words, she found herself ‘wondering whether her study was really worthwhile’. She mentioned doubts as early as Week 3 and reported serious withdrawal intentions in Week 9. Nevertheless, Fiona sat the exam. She participated until the end of semester and submitted 1 hour and 6 minutes of video. Fiona’s plan for the future was to postpone further study until she returned to New Zealand.

6.2.7. Geraldine

“I didn’t get off to the best start. This distance learning thing is a lot harder than it seems” (Week 2).

Geraldine was in her late twenties and of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived in a campus town. She was employed in a full-time job to which she was committed more than 40 hours per week. Her rationale for study via distance was because she was passionate about her job but needed a degree to further her career. She was enrolled in two distance paper in Business. She welcomed support from her mother and brother who were both distance students. Geraldine reported some strategic approaches to study, but her story also contained examples of surface approaches. In her own words, she found herself ‘overwhelmed with what was required’. She withdrew from one paper in Week 2 at which point she was contacted by the University. Geraldine participated for four weeks and submitted 10 minutes of video.

6.2.8. Hannah

“It was so exciting to learn about it [Science] and now I feel like I’m starting to learn about it in my everyday life too and I’m starting to talk to people about it” (Week 2).

Hannah was a 28-year old female of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived remote from an urban town in a house that she shared with her husband and pre-school daughter. She was not employed but was a full-time mother. She was returning to study for the first time since high school and was enrolled on one distance paper in Sciences. Her rationale for study via distance was mainly because her family was stationed remotely. She followed discussion forums on Stream but preferred to use the forums to identify other students with whom she felt a sense of relatedness and then email them. She reported that her lecturer’s tone was terse and Hannah subsequently avoided interaction. Instead, she enjoyed self-help academic resources

online, including the library website and the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL). She also reported using the University's Assignment Pre-Reading Service and the University's telephone helpline. She welcomed moral support from her husband who once read aloud chapters from her textbook to help her overcome a period of apathy. Hannah's story contained good examples of a strategic approach to study, as well as a peppering of deep examples. In her own words, she found her topics 'exciting' and found herself 'thinking about them in daily life'. She participated until the end of semester and submitted 1 hour and 10 minutes of video. She passed her two assignments with 70% and 89% and subsequently her paper. Her plan for the next semester was to study another distance paper and contemplate becoming a full-time student in the future.

6.2.9. Ian

"It really opens your eyes about [something] you thought you knew pretty well. It's quite eye opening to hear someone else's point of view, so that was really good and I can't wait to write the essay" (Week 11).

Ian was in his early thirties and from Israel. He lived remote from an urban town in a house that he shared with his wife and pre-school twins. He was employed on a very casual basis and contributed towards the childcare of his twins when they were not in kindergarten. He was returning to study for the first time since high school and was enrolled on four distance papers in Humanities. His rationale for study via distance was mainly because his family were settled in their home. He followed discussion forums on Stream, but his preferred method of interaction was with lecturers via email. The University is not known to have contacted Ian, and he felt remote from the institution; although he did attend a University-run Careers Event in his closest urban town. Instead, he welcomed moral support from his wife who sometimes engaged in subject-level discussion. Ian's story contained plentiful examples of a strategic approach to study; as well as several deep examples. In his own words, he found his subjects 'quite exciting at times'. He participated until the end of semester and submitted 1 hour and 13 minutes of video. Ian later reported that he passed all four papers with good grades. His plan for 2012 was to spread eight distance papers across two semesters and Summer School.

6.2.10. Jack

"The last couple of weeks, I've been inconsistent. There are obviously just heaps of distractions and there are challenges of life: tiredness just from work, family life and all that kind of stuff" (Week 13).

Jack was in his early thirties and of Pasifika descent. He lived in a campus town in a house that he shared with his niece (for whom he was guardian), his mother and other members of his whānau. He was employed in a full-time job to which he was committed at least 40 hours per week. His job was related to his study, and his objective was career progression. He was returning to study for the first time since high school and was enrolled on four distance papers in Business. His rationale for study via distance was because study needed to fit around family and employment. He followed discussion forums on Stream but did not interact with other students or lecturers. The University is not known to have contacted Jack. Instead, he welcomed moral support from his Pastor and gained strength from his faith. Jack reported some strategic approaches to study, but his story also contained examples of surface approaches. In his own words, he was 'determined to do well, but he did not study much beyond the minimum'.

He participated until the end of semester and submitted 2 hours and 27 minutes of video. He completed all four papers; but later reported that his results were not as good as he had hoped. His plan for the next semester was to study only one paper and then two the following semester.

6.2.11. Kane

“I’m right on track with my study routine. I think I’ve been a bit hard with myself over the last couple of weeks thinking I wasn’t as far ahead as I should be” (Week 11).

Kane was in his early thirties and of Pakeha (European) descent. He lived in an urban town that did not have a campus in a house that he shared with his wife and four pre-school children. He was employed in a full-time job that involved working four nights each week from 8pm to 6am, and that was not related to his study. He was returning to study for the first time since high school and was enrolled in two distance papers in Humanities. His rationale for study via distance was because study needed to fit around family and employment. He followed discussion forums on Stream, but his preferred method of interaction was with lecturers via email. The University is not known to have contacted Kane. Instead, he welcomed moral support and substantial encouragement from his wife. Kane’s story contained examples of strategic approaches to study, as well as some surface examples. In his own words, he ‘worked steadily through semester’, but seemed to ‘panic and procrastinate’ if he got behind. Kane reported a period of apathy for around five weeks in the middle of semester, which notably coincided with his interest in the Rugby World Cup. He participated until the end of semester and submitted 1 hour and 32 minutes of video. He later reported that he passed both papers. Kane’s future plan was to complete his degree via distance and, to that end, enrolled in one distance paper during summer school.

6.2.12. Libby

“I’ve just been cramming in the study and I will continue. My goal is to be a social worker and I’m not ready to give up” (Week 6).

Libby was in her early thirties and of Māori-Pasifika descent. She lived remote from an urban town in a house that she shared with her husband and seven children; the youngest of whom was one year old. Her terminally ill mother-in-law moved in the house in Week 6. Libby was not employed but was a full-time mother. She was returning to study for the first time since high school and was enrolled in four distance papers in Social Work. Her rationale for study via distance was because her family was stationed remotely. She did not interact with other students but did correspond via email with a tutor who tersely suggested that she was not taking study seriously enough. She used Stream to request academic support from the University’s learning consultants and pursued her request via the University’s telephone helpline. Although she was told someone would contact her, she did not receive a response. Libby reported some strategic approaches to study, but her story also contained examples of surface approaches. In her own words, she was ‘determined to do well but did not do much beyond the minimum’. She participated for six weeks and submitted 24 minutes of video. She later reported that she failed her exams and was not sure if she was still studying.

6.2.13. Maggie

“I had my test on Friday and it was tricky, but I felt suitably prepared and I think I will have done quite well. I spent every evening last week studying from about 6 or 7pm” (Week 12).

Maggie was in her early thirties and was British. She lived in a campus town in a house that she shared with her husband and three daughters aged two, four and seven. Both she and her husband were employed full-time. She was returning to study for the first time since high school but had completed the first semester of her studies as an internal student. She was enrolled in one distance paper in Business. Her rationale for study via distance was because study needed to fit around family and employment. She interacted with other students and lecturers via discussion forums on Stream and received new posts as messages on her phone. She also participated in a campus-based study group, used the campus library on a regular basis and attended a Contact Course. Maggie’s story contained plentiful examples of a strategic approach to study. In her own words, she was ‘pretty good at getting down to work when she needed to’. She participated until the end of semester and submitted 1 hour and 22 minutes of video. She later reported that she had earned an A-grade for her paper. Maggie’s future plan was to complete her degree via distance and, to that end, enrolled in one distance paper during summer school.

6.2.14. Nathan

“Life does get busy, but study is a priority for me mainly because I’m learning so much from the readings. It’s amazing studying at this level again” (Week 5).

Nathan was in his mid-thirties and of Pakeha (European) descent. He lived in China in a house that he shared with his wife and two children. He was employed full-time in a job that was directly related to his study. He was returning to study for the first time in more than a decade since completing his bachelor degree in Arts and was enrolled in one postgraduate paper in Education. His rationale for study via distance was mainly because his family were settled in China. Nathan enjoyed following discussion forums on Stream, but his preferred method of interaction was with lecturers via email. He also enjoyed self-help academic resources online, including the library website and the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL). He was disappointed that he could not attend the Contact Course. Instead, he welcomed academic discussion, support and peer review from colleagues. Nathan’s story contained plentiful examples of a strategic approach to study; as well as several deep examples. In his own words, his ‘life was busy’, but ‘he found his readings really gripping’. He participated for 15 weeks and submitted 47 minutes of video—after which China’s firewall restricted Nathan’s internet access. He later reported that he had passed his paper. Nathan planned to complete his postgraduate qualification via distance and resolved to travel from China to attend his next Contact Course.

6.2.15. Olivia

“I have a joy of learning and that can be utilised in a study situation. I’ll end up following a little thread here and then go on somewhere else because I’m interested” (Week 8).

Olivia was in her early forties and of Māori-Pasifika descent. She lived in a campus town in a flat that she did not share. She was employed part-time and was able to dedicate two ‘working days’ each week to study. She was an experienced student with two bachelor degrees in Humanities and was enrolled in one internal paper and one distance paper in Sciences. Both were prerequisite papers for a Nursing degree. Her rationale for study via distance was because one paper was only available via distance. She interacted with other students via online discussion forums (Stream and Facebook) and tried to interact with lecturers via email but was dissatisfied with their engagement. Instead, she enjoyed self-help academic resources online, including the library website and the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL). She also reported using the University’s Assignment Pre-Reading Service; she attended two meetings with Learning Consultants and participated in a Contact Course. Olivia’s story exemplified deep and strategic approaches to study. In her own words, she often found herself ‘hooked on topics that she wanted to keep studying’. She participated until the end of semester and submitted 2 hours and 52 minutes of video. She later reported that she had earned two A-grades. Olivia qualified for the Nursing degree and, to that end, enrolled in one distance paper during summer school.

6.2.16. Penny

“I read the books and then I come to a part that I’m stuck on - I understand what the words are saying, but I can’t quite finish the gap to make the solid connection. I need someone to talk to” (Week 4).

Penny was in her early forties and of Māori descent. She lived near a campus town in a house that she shared with her husband and six children. She was self-employed part-time in a field that was directly related to her study; her objective was professional development. She alluded to some experience of previous diploma level education and was enrolled in one distance paper in Humanities. Her rationale for study via distance was because the internal delivery of her selected paper clashed with her consultancy hours. She did not interact with anyone via online discussion forums because she did not see herself as computer savvy. Instead, she used email to initiate an on-campus study group. She also sought support from librarians who walked her through the online journal database; and attended several meetings with a Learning Consultant who, she reported, was especially considerate of her dyslexia. In the third week, Penny started attending on-campus lectures and meeting with her lecturer. Penny reported some strategic approaches to study, but her story also contained examples of surface approaches. In her own words, she had ‘trouble making sense of things’. She reported serious withdrawal intentions in Week 4 citing the pressure of six dependent children. She participated for eight weeks and submitted 1 hour and 7 minutes of video. Her success thereafter is unknown.

6.2.17. Rachel

“The week has been a struggle. At the beginning of the week I was doubting my ability to complete my paper or even begin it, really. Didn’t know what was expected; didn’t know where to start” (Week 1).

Rachel was in her early forties and of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived in an urban town that did not have a Massey University campus and in a house that she shared with her husband and three school-aged children. She was employed full-time in a job that was related to her study; her objective was professional development. She was returning to study for the first time in more than a decade since completing her bachelor degree; and was enrolled in one postgraduate paper in Humanities. Her rationale for study via distance was because study needed to fit around family and employment. She interacted with other students via discussion forums on Stream. She also attended an Orientation event in her town and connected early with the distance library service. Rachel’s story began with a strategic approach although, in her own words, she was ‘worried about whether she would cope with study amid other demands’. Rachel participated for two weeks and submitted 6 minutes of video; after which she withdrew from her paper due to unforeseen medical complications. Her future plan was to recover from surgery and re-enrol on her distance paper during summer school.

6.2.18. Susan

“I have a lot of reading to do and I’m not sure how I am going to cope. It’s been a horrendous month and I have to work hard to get on top of things, which I hope I am going to do” (Week 9).

Susan was in her late forties and of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived in a campus town in accommodation that she shared. She was employed full-time in a job that was related to her study; her study objective was career progression. She was returning to study for the first time since high school and was enrolled in two distance papers in Education. Her rationale for study via distance was because study needed to fit around employment. She interacted with other students and lecturers via discussion forums on Stream. She found one of her lecturers had a better online presence than the other. She also reported using the University’s Assignment Pre-Reading Service; she attended meetings with a Counsellor and a Learning Consultant; and participated in a Contact Course. She also welcomed academic support from her children who were also tertiary students. Susan’s story contained examples of strategic approaches to study; as well as some surface examples. In her own words, she ‘worked steadily through semester’, but often found herself ‘overwhelmed by the amount of material’ she needed to cope with. She participated until the end of semester and submitted 2 hours and 32 minutes of video. She later reported that she passed both papers towards a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Education. To that end, she enrolled in four distance papers in the next semester and transitioned to part-time employment.

6.2.19. Tom

“The idea to get a degree came about from the need to have a degree to be considered in the same league as other applicants, which we already know is a bit bizarre, but that’s how it is these days” (Week 0).

Tom was in his early fifties and of Māori descent. He lived in a campus town in a house that he shared with his wife. He was seeking employment; his study objective was to broaden his employment options. He was tertiary qualified in engineering and was enrolled in two distance papers in Business. He did not interact with other students or lecturers. However, he did attend an Orientation event and a Contact Course. He received a number of phone calls from the University, which he interpreted as supportive. Tom reported some strategic approaches to study, but his story also contained examples of surface approaches. In his own words, he often ‘questioned whether his study was worthwhile’. He mentioned doubts in Week 1 and reported serious withdrawal intentions in Week 2. Nevertheless, he reported reasonable mid-semester test results for both papers. Tom participated sporadically over eight weeks and submitted 12 minutes of video. His intention was to continue with his degree via distance and to study one paper per semester.

6.2.20. Ursula

“Oh, I got my results back. I passed. I should have done better because it’s my field of experience. But a pass is a pass and this is really where I’m at in this leg of my journey” (Week 7).

Ursula was in her late fifties and of Pakeha (European) descent. She lived remotely in a house that she shared with her husband. She was employed three days per week in a job that was related to her subject. She was enrolled in one distance paper in Education; her objective was to upgrade from a diploma to a degree. Her rationale for study via distance was because she was settled in a remote location. She did not interact with anyone via online discussion forums because she did not enjoy the dynamics. She explored the self-help academic resources online, including the library website and the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL), but she did not feel compatible with technology. However, she welcomed academic support from her daughter, who was also a tertiary student. Ursula reported some strategic approaches to study, but her story also contained examples of surface approaches. In her own words, she was ‘interested in the field but did not study much beyond the minimum’. She participated for 10 weeks and submitted 27 minutes of video. Her success thereafter was unknown.

6.3. Summary

This chapter has described the 20 first-time distance learners who participated in Phase Three of the research. Their descriptions and background experiences highlight the extent to which the sample was rich in diversity in terms of demographics, background experiences, study choices, motivations, interactions, support networks, approaches to study, academic outcomes and future plans for distance learning. Albeit a small sample, the voices of these 20 participants are highly likely to resonate with a wide audience of distance learners in other institutions

Chapter 7 Thematic Analysis

This chapter provides an analysis of 22 hours of participants' video diaries aggregated over the course of the study. Although set against the backdrop of the literature and the findings from the two earlier phases, a grounded approach was adopted to data analysis to ensure that the student's voice was retained at the forefront of the analysis. Six themes are reported in this chapter: motivating factors, inhibiting factors, importance of support, study approaches, retrospective thoughts and value of reflection.

7.1 Motivating factors

Participants reported a variety of drivers that had initially motivated them to embark on distance study alongside their other life commitments typical of mature-aged students. Driving and motivating factors were reported during participant's orientation-week recording and continued to linger in the background of their thoughts throughout semester, often re-surfacing upon reflection during challenging periods.

7.1.1. Career progression

Participants were commonly motivated to invest time and money in study by the prospect of career progression. Some sought professional development within their current field and in this sense distance education was a form of applied learning relevant to the needs of their employer. Professional development could simply lead to expansion and refinement of knowledge; or could potentially result in career acceleration. For example, Geraldine reported, *"I love my career, but I am at a point that I can't move any further without tertiary qualification"*.

Others hoped to broaden their career prospects beyond their current vocation. Some had a specific career in mind: Chris wanted to be a software developer; Libby wanted to be a social worker, and Olivia wanted to be a nurse. Others had not yet committed to a specific career, but were nonetheless motivated to study by the desire to raise their employment prospects. For example, Hanna reported, *"I've only ever done jobs like admin or hospitality, and I've only done them because I had to and they were there"*.

Among those with specific career goals, their study choices were closely associated. For example, Rachael explained, *"My paper is Contemporary Issues in Health Service Management, and I currently work in the health field so thought it would open up a whole new world of health for me"*. Participants whose study choices were well aligned with clear career goals were well motivated. Those without specific career goals, but whose subject choices were well-aligned with their interests were also motivated. Ian was one of those people evidenced by his comments that: *"I find it very interesting to do linguistics as well so I'm going to do a few papers in that as well as anthropology because I enjoy anything to do with people"*.

Most participants remained highly driven by the prospect of attaining their career goals. For example, even in the toughest of times, Libby said, *"My goal is to be a social worker and I'm not ready to give up"*, and Jack said, *"When I come home I stay focussed and I use my future dreams as motivation"*. However, one observation was that some of those who enjoyed

their current employment were among the least motivated by career-oriented goals. In many respects, this is an interesting paradox worthy of further research.

7.1.2. A brighter future

Some participants associated the attainment of a degree with moving on from past experiences towards a brighter future. They regretted their high school education and, as Hannah described, “I was terrible at school and I failed miserably, and I left school with nothing”. In this sense, their aspirations were motivated by a desire for a fresh start, and this proved a very powerful driver. Jack captured this point by saying, “*I am more determined, more focused and more driven to succeed in life, which is a contrast to the attitude I had between the ages of 13 to 24 where I was quite reckless with my life*”. In this sense, the decision to study by distance was linked to a desire for self-betterment for both themselves personally and their families.

7.1.3. Sense of worthiness

A handful of participants revealed a deep-seated motivation that was associated with further education providing a sense of self-worth. This sub-theme was prominent among female participants who were dedicated to the care of preschool children. For example, Hannah reported, “*I just want to achieve something really good for me inside instead of just being a mum and sitting at home waiting for my husband*”. Fulfilment of self-worth also arose less explicitly among some participants who reported they had a history of battling symptoms of depression. This driver fuelled a strong level of intrinsic motivation among the participants, and studying by distance was a valuable form of ‘self-help’ to address their current personal circumstances.

7.2. Inhibiting ‘soft factors’

Participants frequently reported a number of inhibiting ‘soft factors’ that influenced the motivation and time available for study. In some cases, these factors, forced participants to carefully evaluate the reasons they had decided to embark on university-level study via distance education in the first instance.

7.2.1. Employment

Not surprisingly, many of the participants were studying while in some form of employment. Andy and Chris, both school-leavers were the exception having each enrolled in three internal papers and one distance paper. Also, Ian was a full-time distance student. In the case of Hannah and Libby, they were full-time mothers; and Tom was job seeking. The remaining fourteen participants were employed, of which four (Emma, Olivia, Penny and Ursula) were employed approximately three days per week; and ten were employed full-time. Notably, none of the participants reported they made use of the University’s ‘Finding Time for Study’ tool before embarking on distance study.

For some, juggling study with full-time work proved incredibly taxing. Working more than 50 hours each week, Geraldine reported, “*I was disorganised getting my text book then looking at my schedule I decided that I was putting myself under too much pressure so I withdrew from one of my papers*”. For most, the limitation of employment was simply time away from the opportunity to study. This was compounded for a few who were required to commute

long distances or undertake business travel. Within the first few weeks of semester, several participants began to report feelings of being cognitively and emotionally drained upon returning home either due to the nature of their work and/or demands of workplace politics. Jack made the point, *“My mind is not as functional at night when coming from work; takes it out of me mentally”*.

7.2.2. Dependent children

Almost half the participants lived with dependent children, which seemed to affect men and women differently. Those who were fathers claimed to be active parents, but on their own admission enjoyed supportive wives/partners (or whānau) who assumed primary responsibility for childcare. In subtle contrast, the participants who were mothers—even the working mothers—seemed to perceive themselves as the primary child caregiver; with that role not as apparent among their partners. Penny, who was juggling one paper with part-time self-employment and six dependent children, described the kind of conflict that touched many of the mothers at some point: *“I have also had thoughts that this is not the right time to study because I can’t get my children around giving me the time to study; my family is not on the same page as me”*.

A particular challenge for parents was the first two weeks of semester, which coincided with school holidays. Most of these parents found themselves embarking on study in a rush and at a time when normal routines were already disrupted; which was particularly the case among the mothers but also somewhat unsettling for fathers. For example, in the midst of school holidays, Kane reported, *“Thankfully the kids go back to school this week because I’ve been helping my wife during the days and then working at nights”*.

7.2.3. Partners

The influence of partners was complex. Most described their partners as supportive and some even engaged in scholarly discussion and offered assistance with academic tasks. For example, Hannah reported, *“I had to get my husband to read four pages out loud today as a different style of learning to get back in to it”*. More often than not, however, partners offered their support by taking an interest and offering the occasional word of motivation. For a few, encouragement from their partner was pivotal in moments of serious self-doubt and/or apathy. For example, Rob reported, *“thankfully I have a wonderful wife who talked me into doing it because I was feeling so flat and let down that I lost it that I considered not doing it at all”*.

However, the level of interest and support from partners seemed to experience ebbs and flows over the semester. Even though some partners were supportive in principle, reports suggested that sometimes they struggled to get used to the change in dynamic at home. For example, Maggie shared some frustration when her husband extended his skiing holiday and again when he suggested that they should tidy the house before she settled down to study for the night. Other cases highlighted that, sometimes, it was just difficult for partners to understand what students are going through. For example, even though her husband was extremely supportive, Hannah reported, *“When I finished my first quiz, my husband wasn’t as proud as I would have liked him to be; I mean he was good, but I don’t think he quite understood how fantastic it was for me deep down”*.

Participant stories highlighted that the support of partners was influential. A couple of participants experienced relationship troubles during the course of semester, and this was

emotionally distracting for them. Fiona was a good example of someone who had reported high levels of encouragement from her partner in the first instance and, therefore, found it quite difficult to remain motivated when they separated. She said, *“Unfortunately I’m going through a relationship break-up, which involves changing everything in my life so, university study is far, far away in my mind”*. This is an example of a factor that affects a student’s ability to engage in their study largely outside of the learning support services provided by distance education providers.

7.2.4. Health

Almost all participants experienced unforeseen health issues over the course of semester. This was particularly the case among parents whose time was compromised not only by their own health concerns, but also those of their children and extended family. Some reported winter colds, which were often associated with exhaustion having been ‘burning the candle’ at both ends for various reasons, including distance study. Others found themselves and their families stalled by more serious viruses like influenza or gastroenteritis; as well as longer-term health concerns such as allergies and depression. Two participants reported that their children had been hospitalised, while a couple more reflected on their involvement with family and friends who were losing their battle to live. In Rachel’s case, health complications led her to withdraw in the second week. She reported, *“My surgery has taken a bigger toll on me than I thought, and I am now looking at further surgery before the end of the semester”*. This finding confirms the claim in the literature that many distance learners have to cope with issues that do not arise to the same extent in the lives of campus-based students.

7.2.5. Home environment

The home environment challenged many participants’ capacity for distance study. Those who shared their homes with other students found this constructive, whereas those with professional flatmates found them a distraction, especially when a dedicated study space was not available. This was also true for those striving to study around family/whānau who added another dynamic to the home environment. Susan reflected upon how much living in not only a distracting, but also hostile, environment had impacted negatively upon her resolve to study. She revealed, *“The move to the new flat has been extremely positive, and it means that I’ve enjoyed knuckling down and getting study done whereas, if it had been my old flat, I wouldn’t have wanted to”*.

Including Susan, one quarter of participants moved house during the course of semester. Mostly, it was unforeseen that relocation would be necessary during this period and, therefore, the time consuming activity of house-hunting and moving was a hindrance and major inhibiting factor to effective study. Arguably, this is a problem less likely to affect first year students embarking on study in a campus-based environment.

7.2.6. Leisure

Most participants tried to maintain a balance between employment, study and leisure. Exercise was often cited as a constructive pursuit although, for Jack, regular gym sessions became unmanageable alongside full-time employment and four papers. Socialising was a major source of distraction for Deborah and Fiona, who both admitted that the temptation to relax and take timeout with their friends frequently overpowered their resolve to study.

Data collection took place during the Rugby World Cup 2011, which was hosted in New Zealand. This became a major talking point among participants, especially in the final weeks of the tournament. Participants who may have otherwise dedicated a couple of hours to study in the evenings found themselves engrossed in rugby. This was particularly the case for Kane who was acutely aware that rugby was consuming his attention. He admitted, *“I have picked up my books once and put them down to turn on the rugby, and I knew this would happen, but I was hoping that I would not fall victim to it; unfortunately things have not worked out too well”*.

7.2.7. Distance and digital technology

Even among those participants who lived in a campus town—some visited campus and some did not—digital spaces were important places for learning. A few participants were limited by access and ability to use digital technology. An important limitation was adequate internet access, which was restricted for various reasons, including an absence of broadband in a rural location, re-connecting with broadband after moving house, sharing the broadband download quota with flatmates and, finally, restrictions imposed by the Chinese government that prevented reliable access to the University website and Stream.

Additional limitations and inhibitors arose among those with relatively low levels of digital learning fluency—that is, those who knew how to use technology but did not necessarily perceive the digital environment as an important place for learning. Many of the participants across several generations admitted that the online learning environment (Stream and the university website, including online library services and the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL)) was a new experience. However, typically most of the participants reported they were reasonably comfortable with using these online resources and environments after an initial orientation period. That said, two participants, both older than 45, consistently felt overwhelmed by digital technology (which included the Sony Bloggie™ touch video camera), as Ursula described:

‘I’m having trouble. Bloggie can’t get it to send. Go in to Stream, “blaaa” too much information. Then in to Pairwise. There’s all this technology, all these sites and I’m not really too sure what I’m supposed to be doing in any of them. It’s like overload’.

Both Ursula and Penny reported that the digital mode of learning placed them at a disadvantage because they could not ‘keep up with the play’, which often translated to overlooking critical information. Due to the University’s partial transition to an online environment, some participants received hardcopy study guides while other student’s information was hosted online. For Penny, this caused some confusion and she admitted, *“I was waiting for information, and I was expecting booklets so when my Learning Consultant said, ‘well maybe you aren’t going to receive anything, maybe it’s all online’, the penny dropped”*.

Both Ursula and Penny also reported episodes of intense frustration while searching for journal articles and, even when assisted by other people, felt completely lost. Upon reflection, they both referred to a lack of intuitiveness with digital technology and largely attributed this to lack of experience among their generation. However, other students of a similar age did not report such problems.

7.2.8. Socioeconomic matters

Very little was reported in relation to socioeconomic limitations; and nor was this the focus of the research. However, a couple of participants reflected upon financial difficulties and how this distracted from study. For example, Olivia reported, *“I’ve had a lot of money problems this week. That has to be my biggest stress of the week. It really upsets me and distracts me completely. It makes studying really hard when you’re worrying about how to buy the groceries”*. While many campus-based learners are likely to face similar financial problems, this finding demonstrates another soft factor that affects the ability to engage with study by distance.

7.2.9. Study experience

More than one third of participants were returning to study for the first time since high school, which was an interval of more than a decade for all but one. During orientation week, the level of confidence among this group was mixed with some feeling more confident than others. As the semester progressed, a lack of prior tertiary-level experience presented challenges for some but not for others. Some struggled to find effective study techniques to meet the demand of university-level study. For example, Libby described, *“I’ve done a lot of research on how to do an assignment, but it doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense to me”*.

Among those with prior tertiary-level experience, three were certificate or diploma qualified, four had commenced undergraduate-level papers as an internal student, and five were already qualified with an undergraduate degree. Reflections among this group were mixed and suggested that prior tertiary-level experience was not necessarily an advantage when embarking on studying by distance. Many reported that their study skills had been heavily conditioned to an internal learning environment, and they were still coming to terms with the most effective way of engaging as a distance learner. Several participants commented on the benefits of personal interaction when studying on campus, but few exploited opportunities to talk with classmates using online discussion fora.

7.3. Making use of support

This theme examines the places and spaces that participants used to support their learning; and within those, the sources from which participants sought academic and emotional support. Sources range through lecturers, peers, family, friends, colleagues, university support staff and online self-help resources. The analysis begins with a distinction between ‘avid support seekers’ and ‘self-sufficient learners’.

7.3.1. Avid support seekers

Around a quarter of participants explored opportunities to interact with others and seek academic support. Principally, they were engaged in the online environment and contributed to Stream discussion forums on a regular basis. Maggie reported the extent of her interest saying, *“I turn all the alerts on to my phone, and I’ll be at work and then I’ll get a little thing pop up when someone sends a question”*. A few others engaged in discussion via Facebook groups and, in Olivia’s case, she initiated the Facebook group because Stream was not initially used to support her course. Beth had the innovative idea of generating discussion and debate through reflections on her personal blog. She reported, *“My blogs they’ve been really good, they’ve had some retaliation which has been nice so it’s been good to argue about what’s on my mind”*.

This group of avid support seekers were also interested in contact with lecturers for the purpose of discussion, reassurance and feedback. However, because they cared about these interactions, ‘seekers’ were disgruntled on the occasions that their lecturers were perceived not to reciprocate. Beth reported the details of her interactions:

‘One tutor was not very helpful; my question that I had was apparently irrelevant. With another tutor, he took nearly 2 months to get back to one of my emails. A third tutor was helpful, somewhat, but didn’t seem to elaborate or provide feedback that I could actually work with.’

Other seekers reported on their lecturer’s online presence. For some, they observed the importance of lecturers who were active contributors to discussion forums on Stream and who took that opportunity to shape the online culture. Negative perceptions arose from the way some lecturers communicated. For example, Hannah reported, *“My paper coordinator writes real mean in the forums ... and there’s been a couple of times I’ve wanted to write on there, but I’m a bit scared of her reaction so I figure it out myself”*. For Olivia, the problem was more related to her lecturer’s absence from the online environment altogether. She exasperated, *“Why the woman doesn’t use Stream is beyond me!”*.

However, Olivia, among others used her proximity to campus as an advantage. She was one of only a few participants who attended a contact course. In this face-to-face environment, Olivia and her lecturer were able to establish a better relationship. After the contact course, Olivia reported, *“She said she’s a bit of a technophobe, and I can understand that and I’m glad she addressed it and took full responsibility”*. The contact course was reported as the highlight of the distance learning experience by those who attended one. As a ‘seeker’ stuck in China, Nathan regretted that he had not been able to attend his contact course and suggested, *“If the contact course sessions could be videoed and put on line for overseas students, that would be a big improvement”*.

Maximising the campus environment was common among ‘seekers’. Their proximity made it easy for them to organise or join campus-based study groups. This was a particular advantage for Penny, who had a strong preference for face-to-face interaction. After several weeks struggling without peer interaction, she reported, *“Three of us turned up, and it was actually really nice; we just got to know each other, why we want to do psychology, and then we formulated what we wanted to do as a group”*. Living close to campus helped seekers generally integrate with other students in the environment, which was something that became particularly apparent to Susan when she moved house to the centre of a university town. From that point onwards, she enjoyed being part of the environment and reported, *“I’ve been to campus for four days in a row and spending up to six hours each day there in the library so that’s been a huge benefit for me”*.

Seekers also took advantage of other university support services. They engaged early with the distance library service and several reported being guided by the library’s, ‘how to’ podcasts. This group of seekers were not afraid to ask for help and reported that librarians were forthcoming with assistance. Hannah revealed, *“The library is so cool, and when I do get stuck all I do is ring and the lady is so helpful”*.

They also welcomed advice and feedback from the University’s Centre for Teaching and Learning. Most seekers used the assignment pre-reading service and some also attended one-to-one

meetings with a Learning Consultant. Those who attended meetings reported the consultants in high esteem and believed the meetings had been pivotal moments in their learning experiences. Penny was complementary about the grace with which a Learning Consultant had helped her cope with dyslexia in the context of distance learning. Meanwhile, Olivia exclaimed, “*old dogs can learn new tricks!*”. In Susan’s case, she valued the combination of academic and pastoral support that the University was able to provide:

‘I went to Massey yesterday, and I saw a counsellor there and she was just awesome. She put me in touch with the Teaching and Learning Centre and I’m going there tomorrow. So I came away from Massey this morning feeling so much more positive.’

7.3.2. Self-sufficient learners

Around three-quarters of participants were self-sufficient learners who adopted more of a ‘lone wolf’ approach to study. They tended to stay in their own safe havens where they seemed primarily to rely on their resources. In this respect, self-sufficient learners were identified by limited interactions with the University, lecturers, other students or academic support services. Chris epitomised the self-sufficient learner when he concluded, “*Actually, I have no idea how to find support; I wasn’t good at asking for help*”.

As mentioned above, many of the self-sufficient did not interact with their lecturers. For example, during a period of low motivation, Emma resolved to schedule a meeting with her lecturer. The following week, she reported, “*I haven’t met with my lecturer and I’ll put that off for a while because it’s a bit of an effort and I’m a bit lazy about it so I’ll put that off until I really need to*”. Among those who did interact with their lecturers, they mainly exchanged some email correspondence. From among this minority, some lecturers were reported to be kind and forthcoming. Kane reported, “*My lecturer was more than happy to have correspondence via email so finding support was easy enough*”.

Going beyond email correspondence was less common. The self-sufficient did not attend their contact courses. Reasons for not attending contact courses were complex. For some, family circumstances were difficult. Libby explained, “*I have a compulsory course coming up, but I can’t leave my mother-in-law at the moment because the cancer is getting the better of her*”. For others, the decision was more associated with cost and the level of priority attributed to study. Deborah described her decision making, saying, “*I think one of my papers had a contact course during semester break, but because of work and stuff like that I didn’t go ... I couldn’t make the time*”.

The self-sufficient initiated barely any interaction with fellow students. They had mixed views about the benefits of discussion forums on Stream and the role that these played in their learning experience. In Ursula’s opinion, “*I still take a deep breath before I read the forums because there is a lot of waffle and I feel I’m missing the point*”. Many of the self-sufficient preferred only to read and observe the Stream discussion fora. It emerged that, for some, good intentions to contribute did not manifest because they feared their contributions would leave them exposed. Nathan offered the explanation that social confidence was a major factor, saying: “*Stream is available, but people’s base fears of putting something out there and being wrong...*”.

In the absence of substantial interaction with lecturers or peers, some of the 'self-sufficient learners' did seek support from family and friends. A couple of participants had children who were also engaged in tertiary-level studies. These children extended support especially in terms of proof reading assignments and guidance with technology. For example, Ursula reported, *"I couldn't for the life of me find ERIC stuff, and I spent two days looking for it and then I asked my daughter, and she got it in two minutes"*.

However, it was nevertheless reported that academic support from family, friends and colleagues was never quite as effective as interacting with lecturers and other students in the physical classroom. Although his wife was supportive, Ian reflected, *"I've been trying to integrate my wife into talking about what I'm doing, but it's hard as it can be sometimes quite technical with writing essays and stuff"*. Interestingly, many of the self-sufficient learners reported that the main limitation of distance education was the absent classroom environment. Nathan poignantly concluded that Stream was, *"very different to leaning over to a peer and checking for immediate reinforcement"*.

7.4. Study approaches

This section draws on the concepts of deep, surface and strategic approaches to study (Anderson et al., 2011) on which 'fish-hooks' within the reflective-prompt protocol were also informed. It is important to note that previously proposed distinctions in the study approaches of distance learners such as Systematic Wading, Speedy-focusing and Global Dipping (Carnwell, 2000) did not fit the evidence. Rather, during the data analysis, two overarching themes emerged: active and passive approaches to learning.

7.4.1. Active, strategic approach

An active, strategic approach emerged as a theme around task-oriented time management. In other words, this approach was common among participants who reported they established a realistic study routine that accounted for predictable, as well as unpredictable, life events and was, therefore, sustainable for the duration of semester.

Some participants began the semester by creating a visual plan, which helped them organise their commitment to a realistic schedule. For example, Deborah began by reporting, *"I think time management is going to be a big thing, and in my room over there, it has a big wall planner for when stuff is supposed to be due"*. However, in the face of competing pressures, planning per se was not necessarily a reliable indicator of a sustainable strategic approach. Sustainability depended on adhering to plans by completing tasks systematically in the time allocated. Beth reported a good example of this approach saying:

'My method is tackling a chapter and do all the relevant questions in relation to that chapter in one go - and get all four papers done in one go -one paper each night.'

Having optimum study conditions was something that seemed to influence an active strategic approach. Some participants reflected on how their study environment was limited by distractions like children. For example, Penny reported her frustration saying, *"You get this mojo moment, and then you get someone at the door; I'm finding it challenging to keep the*

learning momentum high because of the interruptions". Other participants' conditions were perceived to be influenced positively by sunlight during the day and negatively by the cold at night. Participants who actively sought ways of creating an environment that was conducive to their study success demonstrated characteristics of a strategic approach as Ian described:

'I thought night would be better for essays, but I actually found I wrote most of my essay during the day during the 4-5 hours when kids are in kindy. And then in the night I have some time with my wife and catch up on the internet and email.'

Strategically oriented participants were also coded according to their interest in being thorough. Based on their reflections, they appeared to have engaged in the majority of recommended study activities. This often meant keeping up with everyone else, which was principally judged against the week-by-week suggestions in the study guide. Hannah often reflected on this, saying for example, *"I am up to date with all my readings and I've got to do a quiz to do tonight"*.

Participants described a mixture of learning activities proposed by their study guides. Most were interested in at least reading lecture slides alongside textbook chapters and sometimes recommended articles that were often provided as part of the study guide. A few participants were also conscientious about completing the optional questions available in the study guide.

Similarly, those identified with an active, strategic approach reported giving their best efforts to high-impact assignments worth as much as 20 per cent of the final grade. The most thorough among participants began giving careful consideration to assignment questions long in advance of the assignment deadline. With time on their side, this group of participants enabled themselves to take a steady and reflective approach to the reading and writing process, as Ian described:

'So my plan is to do a rough sketch for my anthropology essay and then put it aside and let it rest and focus on my psychology essay and have a run with it for a few days, do most of it. Then a few touches on my anthropology. Then spend the last couple of days finishing my psychology before submitting and then give one last push for anthropology.'

Several participants with a similar level of discipline planned for the final draft of their assignments to be prepared in sufficient time for their work to be reviewed by partners, friends, colleagues and even the Massey University assignment pre-reading service. The review phase was an important one for those with an active, strategic approach and who realised the potential benefits of obtaining academic support from others.

As exam time approached, participants who maintained a strategic approach over the semester had allowed enough time to revise the breadth and depth of course content. Many participants reflected on the limited time available between their final assessment deadline and their exam(s). However, strategically oriented participants typically began to plan and prepare for exams long before their final assignment was submitted. For some, they began to develop their revision strategy shortly after the mid-semester break. Thinking ahead, Olivia said: *"So there are four topics to be covered in the exam, and I've separated out all the questions and I'm thinking of writing a skeleton essay, or even a mind-map for each of the essays and then testing myself"*.

Another thing that adequate time management allowed strategic oriented participants to do was invest in continuous improvement because they knew it would, in turn, help them become more efficient. It has already been reported that Beth and Olivia regularly sought feedback from their lecturers because they believed it would help them move forwards more constructively. It has also been reported that Olivia enjoyed online resources as avenues of self-development, especially the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL). However, Olivia was among a small minority of participants who had the capacity to invest time and energy in self-development activities on a regular basis.

The overall result mattered to active, strategic oriented students. They expected not only to pass but to do so with good grades. Most had high levels of confidence and self-efficacy and believed that they were capable of achieving A-grades; although B-grades were considered entirely acceptable. Most, however, indicated that they would not be doing themselves justice if they settled for C-grades; even though 'C's pass degrees'.

7.4.2. Active, deep approach

An active, deep approach describes participants who truly embraced the learning experience, not so much as a task but for personal self-fulfilment. A deep approach seemed to be reported when there were high levels of interest in the topic being studied. Interest alone did not guarantee success, but it certainly arose as the starting point for moments of deep learning. For example, Ian reported, *"I did the interview for linguistics earlier today. It's really opens my eyes about a culture I thought I knew pretty well. So that was really good and I can't wait to write the essay"*.

Characteristic of those most interested was the ability to apply and relate new knowledge to their everyday lives. Nathan was a good example of someone whose new knowledge was relevant to his current employment, which consequently enhanced his everyday experience at work. For Hannah, her future career was undecided, but nevertheless, new knowledge and the applied nature of distance study enriched her appreciation of everyday contexts. She said, *"It was so exciting to learn more about reproduction; the other day I was talking to a lady who'd had IVF, and I knew exactly what she was talking about!"*.

Another characteristic of a deep approach was the participant's level of reflection even without real-life contexts within which they could relate new knowledge. Participants like Nathan, Ian and Olivia were forthcoming with subject-level musings, often quite enjoying the opportunity to hear their ideas evolve out loud. Andy also described reflection as a way to engage with his studies saying, *"I find it's better to read articles separately with a gap in between to reflect on them"*.

Despite high levels of interest in subject content, only a few participants reported sourcing evidence above and beyond course expectations. Postgraduate participants indicated that it was necessary for them to source journal articles using the library database, but this did not seem to be the case for undergraduate participants. Although engaging deeply with primary sources of evidence did not seem to be an essential precursor for undergraduate success, this activity was reported by some of the highest performing participants. For example, Olivia said, *"I guess I've been going deeper when I don't need to-I can't retain information if I don't understand it and connect it in a wider context"*.

Another sign of a deep approach was resilience. That is, the dynamic process of adaptation that enables students to continue study in the face of adversity and other life and work challenges. For clarification, all those participants who completed study including attending exams showed resilience. However, this sub-theme is characterised by resilience with conviction; a belief that their actions would make a difference in spite of the challenges they faced.

For example, when Nathan was unable to attend his contact course, he turned his attention to following the discussion generated by attendees on Stream. When Olivia discovered that her distance paper was not supported by an online environment, she initiated an alternative peer discussion forum using Facebook. Ian had a healthy confidence and remained resilient in spite of a disappointing assignment grade. He argued, *“Obviously, it wasn’t a masterpiece, so I learn from it for the future, but I’m not withdrawing my plan [to achieve A grades]; I still think it was good what I did”*.

7.4.3. Passive, surface approach

It is important to note that most participants revealed moments when they adopted more of a surface approach to their study. For some, those moments lasted only a matter of days, although others struggled with passive feelings for weeks at a time. The reasons for adopting passive, surface approaches were complex and are subject to conjecture; but it was noteworthy many of the influencing factors were often perceived by participants as beyond their own control.

In contrast to moments of deep learning in which participants embraced their learning experience, surface approaches sometimes arose from waning interest in their study and appeared to result in quite the opposite of self-fulfilment. For example, Emma described herself as a creative thinker and a tactile learner who had lost her natural passion upon realising that her distance paper was heavily theoretical. Equally, Tom reported enrolling almost begrudgingly in distance education and was particularly disinterested in one of his papers. He considered withdrawal saying, *“I’ve all but pulled out of one of my papers except the textbook is due to turn up on Saturday and with the purchase of the textbook, it seems ridiculous to now give up the paper”*.

Closely related was evidence of passive approaches, arguably arising from participant’s relatively traditional conceptions of study. In other words, these were students who were more ‘syllabus-bound’ (Anderson, et al, 2011). An example of this was given by Chris when he reported, *“For my distance paper, preparing for next week just means reading the textbook, so that I can understand the lecture slides”*. This approach tended to be revealed in the video diaries in moments of waning interest, but also when participants felt overwhelmed by other aspects of life. Those whose approach was not predominantly coded as active were less likely to remain resilient and think creatively and collaboratively about problem solving. Their default approach was to play things ‘by the book’—the book being the study guide.

Surface approaches were also linked to academic confusion arising from a sense of dependency (e.g., waiting for someone else to solve their problems). This was particularly common (although not universal) among participants with no prior tertiary experience and/or those returning to study following a prolonged absence. These participants invariably reflected on a genuine desire to engage strategically, if not deeply, with their studies, but appeared to be inhibited by a lack of understanding of the university academic environment, which includes how to source appropriate support. Libby revealed this lack of institutional knowledge when she reported, *“I*

did contact Massey via Stream for help, but I've not heard; it's been two weeks, but I don't want to push them".

However, participants most frequently revealed tendencies towards surface approaches through avoidance and procrastination. For example, Jack was limited by academic confusion and full-time employment but, upon taking annual leave, he confessed that he had 'become lazy' and that his 'study routine was terrible'. Kane was another participant with a family life often complicated by winter sickness, which he had cited when requesting an extension. However, he also confessed to procrastinating during the course of his weekly diary. Deborah was another who procrastinated from the outset.

'It's Sunday. I went to buy printer paper. I've been disorganised. I forgot semester started on Monday... I'd like to get more organised and set aside a set time every day rather than procrastinate ... This afternoon was good. I wrote a to-do list.'

A potential outcome of procrastination was that participants found themselves without enough time to invest more than just the minimum required by the syllabus to pass a paper. Several participants reflected on their ability to pass tests and assignments without investing considerable time or effort. These same participants also began to disengage with low-impact assignments worth one to five per cent of the final grade. This phenomenon was described by Fiona who reported, *"I stayed up [to finish the assignment] until 2 am on Saturday night, but I found about 10 pm that night that it was only worth six per cent so I wasn't enthused for it, which was a bad attitude, but that's what happened"*.

Complete resignation was rare among participants and was typically preceded by evidence of prolonged surface engagement. Academic confusion and/or a lack of interest were often associated with a loss of morale and subsequent procrastination which, for those participants who had not established a support network, could be a difficult situation to recover from.

Of course, the relationship between these factors is inherently complex as confirmed by the video diaries. That said, notably none of the participants who revealed more dominant passive, surface approaches at the start of the semester appeared to change their orientation towards active, deeper learning approaches as a consequence of their study. In other words, there was limited evidence from the video diaries that the process of studying by distance greatly affected their original orientation to study.

7.5. Retrospective thoughts

This theme arises from the data provided by participants during their final video diary entry as they reflected on their overall impression of the preceding weeks. At this point, most participants did not know their grades. Although retrospective recall or hindsight has methodological limitations, the lessons and thoughts about studying by distance education shared by participants were consistent with many of their earlier reflections throughout semester.

7.5.1. Overall, I excelled

In hindsight, around one quarter of participants summarised their semester as predominantly positive having enrolled in more-or-less the right number of papers to suit their lifestyle. This group, who also tended to report an active approach to learning, were rewarded with strong

grades from the outset and believed that they had sustained their level of performance until the end of semester. Importantly, they never reported considering withdrawal. Looking to the future, they unanimously agreed that distance education was right for them. As an example, Olivia concluded: *“I finished my paper and I was quite elated. I feel like I’ve got a 60 or possibly a 70 per cent. I actually feel a lot more confident taking distance papers now”*.

7.5.2. Overall, I survived

In hindsight, around one quarter of participants summarised their semester as a challenge during which they had struggled to keep their heads above water, especially two-thirds of the way through semester. Nevertheless, they had persevered, never doubting their long-term commitment to distance study. Although this group believed they had passed the majority of their papers, a few participants who were already disadvantaged by poor assignment grades feared that their exam performance would not earn them a pass mark. Most concluded that their first semester studying by distance was thus somewhat exploratory with several resolving to study fewer papers per semester. As an example, Jack reported: *“The problem is finding the time to study while my brain is fresh and not tired so I am looking to go back next year and just do one paper in the first semester”*.

7.5.3. Overall, I struggled

In hindsight, as many as half the participants admitted feeling consistently overwhelmed as they struggled to balance study with lifestyle limitations. This group frequently contemplated withdrawal, particularly after the mid semester point and some did actually withdraw from a paper. Out of this group, many of those distance learners who participated until the end of semester reported doubts that they would pass all their paper(s), especially in the last few weeks leading up the end of semester. Most of this group cited that distance learning did not suit either their approach to learning or their lifestyle at that point in time. For example, Deborah reported, *“The fact is you try and do everything, but you just can’t fit it in so I think I might take the first half of next year to re-evaluate what I’m doing instead of just wasting more time”*. It follows that those participants who reported they struggled were also more likely to have revealed passive, surface approaches to their study from early in the semester.

7.6. Value of reflection

The final theme was the pivotal role of reflection via what became known as ‘the Bloggie project’. Eight participants withdrew from the research around the sixth week of semester, and most of these students seemed ambivalent about the value of reflection. For example, Tom said, *“doing the Bloggie never impacted on my study; it’s been of no consequence at all”*. In contrast, the 12 who participated until the final weeks of semester reported indications that the Bloggie project had influenced them positively.

The Bloggie project developed a sense of routine with the general expectation that reflections would be submitted weekly. Participants sometimes reported a sense of guilt on occasions when a week had passed without significant study activity; in part because they wanted to contribute meaningfully to the research and, in part because the act of reflection (at least through the Bloggie) made them feel acutely aware of their lapse. In Maggie’s words:

'I do wonder how well I would have done had it not been for this Bloggie project; having that constant niggle about having to record a thing it then urges you to make sure you've got something to talk about in terms of study.'

Some participants found themselves using the Bloggie to reflect upon and resolve the challenges that each week presented. Nathan, who was employed in education, was aware from the outset about the theoretical benefits of learner reflection. Upon conclusion of the project, he confirmed his preconceptions by saying, *"I have found the process of the reflections really useful in terms of my study and keeping me focused"*.

For several others, the benefits of reflection emerged over time and were appreciated more by surprise. In the case of Kane, he began his Bloggie reflections on the fifth week feeling extraordinarily despondent because the grade for his first assignment had not been as good as he had hoped. Through the course of his reflection, Kane even alluded to withdrawal intentions but eventually concluded on a positive note:

'As I'm talking on the Bloggie, I'm putting it in perspective that it's a bad start, but not horrific. I'm getting motivated to do better as I'm talking out loud.'

The Bloggie project also offered a sense of interaction with someone on the receiving end of the video diaries. Although participants appreciated that the Project Manager neither provided feedback nor entered in to significant dialogue, many seemed to appreciate the feeling that someone was listening to their reflections and responding with pertinent questions. For example, Ian concluded:

'Doing this Bloggie helped me feel like there is someone on the other side and I'm not completely on my own.'

Jack even reported that the Bloggie project was a primary source of support by saying, *"Besides my Pastor at Church, you were probably my next best supporter"*. Of course, such comments confirm our earlier assumptions that the intervention of the video diaries would have an influence on the lived experiences of first-time distance learners, and this point needs to be kept in mind when thinking about the major lessons that emerge from this type of research; although consistent with the goal of maximising catalytic validity, the impact was largely positive.

7.7. Summary

This chapter has described six themes that arose from 22 hours of video diaries gathered from 20 participants over the course of one semester. Motivating factors have been identified as career progression, hopes of a brighter future, and a sense of worthiness. Pulling in the other direction, nine inhibiting 'soft factors' were identified as employment, dependent children, partners, health, home environment, leisure, distance and digital technology, socioeconomic matters and study experience. The importance of support was another theme in which the difference between 'self-sufficient learners' and the 'avid support seekers' was reported. The theme relating to study approaches was aligned with existing literature about deep, strategic

and surface approaches, but went on to recognise deep and strategic approaches as equally active. The fifth theme that arose from retrospective thoughts indicates that distance learners are likely to perceive that they either excelled, survived or struggled. Finally, the value of reflection arose from the highly commended activity of video diaries.

Chapter 8 Discussion

This chapter identifies seven key takeaways from the study, which emerge after reflecting on the findings and relevant literature across the three main research phases. The takeaways underscore the importance of learner stories and the value of adopting a conceptual framework to map and better understand the diverse needs of distance learners. They identify that first-time distance learners have relatively little conception of the actual demands of studying by distance, and their approaches to learning are influenced by a number of factors. Importantly, more research is required into a second critical ‘at risk’ phase beyond the first few weeks, and there is a gap in participants’ knowledge of how to be effective online learners. Finally, the chapter discusses the value of institutions supporting opportunities for regular student interaction and reflection.

8.1. Takeaway 1

Learner stories add flesh to the ‘soft factors’ of what it means to be a distance learner. Reflections, recorded in a student’s own words, provide a unique insight into the complexity of studying from a distance.

The specific motivations and needs of distance learners require further exploration, especially in the digital age. The current research has contributed substantially to this gap in the literature through the stories of first-time distance learners—albeit a small sample. Richness of data comes from the learner’s voice as they express their experiences in their own words. In concurrence with JISC (2008), the current study confirms the value of listening to learners and hearing about more of their individual experiences as well as the general issues they face. Only by doing this have we begun to consider the full range of experiences and soft factors that, to date, have been largely overlooked in debates over retention in the context of distance education. By listening to the student voice, the findings suggest institutions may become better informed about how to help distance learners think about study, make appropriate choices, and grow and develop to achieve their full potential.

8.2. Takeaway 2

Adopting a conceptual framework that maps services and resources across different phases of the study lifecycle can help institutions to better design and coordinate supports which meet the diverse needs of distance learners.

The results of the first phase of the current study acknowledge the importance of a conceptual framework that organises interventions across different phases of the study lifecycle as well as according to the unique needs of different populations. The second and third phases of the study focused principally on the weeks between enrolment for the first-few weeks as a distance learner and completion of the first semester.

Results of the second phase concur with Poskitt et al. (2011) that the majority of distance learners are older than campus-based students. They are often professionals who are employed as many as 40+ hours per week and around half have responsibility for the care of dependent children. Despite demographic trends, distance learners are not a homogenous audience.

By triangulating the findings of the first, second and third phases of research, the current study has provided an insight into the value of support services—both those provided by the institution and the resources students use at their own disposal. Learner stories have reinforced the value of distance education providers targeting support services during the ‘path to enrolment’ phase (i.e., ‘thinking about study’ and ‘making choices’), especially in relation to the reality of studying by distance and helping students to make their goals more explicit. This point is evidenced by examples from the learner stories where students did not always make realistic study choices in light of their personal circumstances. However, there is a place for further research to investigate how prospective distance students perceive pre-enrolment tools because the current study did not commence data collection until after enrolment. The unanswered question is whether use of the ‘thinking about study’ tools provided by Massey University would have positively influenced decisions already made by the sample of first-time distance learners; and there is a wider issue of why many of these students did not take advantage of these resources in the first place.

Data collection commenced during the so-called ‘study readiness’ phase. Pre-semester survey results, in concurrence with learner stories, indicated that around one-third of distance learners can be expected to travel to attend an orientation event. That said, particular attention should be given to the timing of these events and implications if the semester starts during the school holidays. Moreover, learner stories reveal that some first-time distance learners will not necessarily be new to a dual-mode institution having already completed previous papers/subjects as internal, on-campus students. For these students, orientation activities may seem superfluous if they do not relate to the transition from internal to distance learning. This is an important group of students who have particular requirements in the early stages of the study lifecycle.

As the semester progressed, learner stories revealed a reasonably stark contrast between students termed ‘self-sufficient learners’ and ‘the avid support-seekers’. The latter group took advantage of the benefits of academic learning services such as the Massey University Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL) and the learning consultants who support a range of targeted and personalised services. In contrast, the primarily self-sufficient first-time distance learners tended to be syllabus-bound, which is a phenomenon of surface learners described by Anderson et al. (2011).

Further research is required to better understand how to identify and engage the primarily self-sufficient learners who, metaphorically speaking, adopted more of a ‘lone wolf’ approach to distance learning. Moreover, it is debatable whether these students actually wanted to engage more with the institution. Although the current research asked distance learners to reflect on their sources of support, they were not asked to explain their rationale for interacting (or not) with institutional services. However, drawing inference from learner stories, a complex web of soft factors appeared to influence this group of self-sufficient learners, including their original goals, the way they approached their study and a low awareness of the value that can be gained from working with others and engaging with institutional support services.

8.3. Takeaway 3

Distance learning was perceived to enable tertiary study to fit around other life, work and family commitments. However, first-time distance students have relatively little conception of the actual demands of studying by distance.

Learner stories, in combination with survey data, highlight a gap between the perceptions of students before and after their first semester as a distance learner. The first instalment of data collected from participants through the video diaries revealed that students perceive distance study will not only be flexibly scheduled around commitments, but also ‘condensable’ into the hours they have available. Few students appeared to be prepared for the actual demands of study, especially in terms of the interactions they could or were increasingly expected to take advantage of through the University’s online learning environment.

As early as the orientation period, the perceived flexibility and self-paced nature of distance education appeared to create a false sense of security, especially amongst those who revealed more passive, surface approaches to learning, which seems to invite students to ignore or delay non-essential tasks. In other words, activities that do not substantially add to student’s final grade were frequently de-prioritised, including de-prioritising minor assessments. The value of getting started as early as possible was not something many students appeared to appreciate.

The perceived flexibility of education from a distance often translates into making way for more pressing demands in student’s immediate environment. Learner stories highlight that students can quickly become anxious about study encroaching on their physical and emotional capacity to contribute meaningfully at home and in the workplace. When students experience pressure in their immediate environment, results of the current research suggest that study—in part because of its distance—will become the weakest link. Notably, quantitative results, albeit based on retrospective recall, indicate that the majority of first-time distance learners did not invest as much time in their papers as the institution recommends.

Although speculative, the lack of appreciation of the demands of studying through distance education make a strong case for the value of STUDY LINK type readiness courses that help to give a taste of the realities of distance learning, especially in an online and blended learning environment. Such preparation courses may help to assist and even filter students who have not established clear goals for study and could even be available as a suite of open courseware that serve to introduce students to some of the strategies required of being an effective distance learner. The opportunity to experience distance education before actually committing to or formally commencing university-level work may be a valuable tool in helping students think about study and make appropriate choices according to their personal circumstances.

8.4. Takeaway 4

Distance students who begin with study goals that are aligned with their wider aspirations and realistically balanced alongside life’s other commitments also typically report active study orientations.

Results of the initial survey and video diaries caution institutions not to assume they know how students want to engage and what distance learners aim to achieve. In some cases, first-time distance learners were not seeking to be more actively engaged by the institution. Even though survey data reveals distance students may not invest as much time in their papers as institutions recommend, they also indicate that most students think they enrolled in about the right number of distance papers. This paradox of student engagement is further complicated by an aggregated analysis of AUSSE data, which reports that distance learners in New Zealand overall are more engaged than internal campus-based students (Poskitt, et al., 2011).

Results of the current study indicate that distance learners are highly likely to be motivated by career-oriented goals. This is consistent with what Poskitt et al. (2011) report, namely that in comparison to campus-based students, those studying by distance are more likely to be employed in a job that is related to their study. In these cases, distance students invariably require a university qualification to enhance their prospects of promotion and/or to broaden their chances of employability. When distance study is unrelated to employment, students seem to study with a specific career change in mind, including the change from full-time parent to income earning professional. However, despite apparent career-oriented study goals, the current study gathered limited evidence relating to the uptake of university career services by prospective students when making choices about their program of distance study. There is scope for further research, because learner stories indicated that passive, surface study orientations are common amongst students whose study goals are unaligned with their career goals.

In addition to career-oriented goals, the sample of first-time distance learners was frequently motivated by highly affective and deeply emotional goals. In other words, distance education was not only a means of developing a greater sense of individual self-worth, but also perceived as a way of betterment or enhancing their own life chances and those of dependant family. Results of the quantitative survey reveal that as many as 98 per cent of students do not enrol in distance mode by design; but rather because of circumstance. This finding, coupled with examples from the video diaries, suggests that the chance to have an education as an adult can be motivation itself. Therefore, the decision to embark on a university-level degree through distance education was not just about getting a better job, as the process of education itself was perceived to have particular value. There was a perception amongst many of the participants that getting an advanced university-level qualification will help them to become better people and better citizens.

However, learner stories reveal that a clear vision for the future or purpose for undertaking study is only one factor that contributes to student success. Students who revealed an active study orientation throughout semester also frequently reported goals that were realistic and well balanced alongside their other commitments in life. The challenge for institutions is that learner stories also reveal that helping students calculate what is personally realistic is highly contextualised by their own circumstances. In other words, stories tell us that two students who appear to have very similar commitments on paper lead very different lives in reality. This finding suggests caution is required over current initiatives to identify and respond to perceived 'at risk' students based on institutional academic and learning analytics

8.5. Takeaway 5

Although learner stories affirm the importance of the first few weeks of study, there are ebbs and flows in the life of a distance student over the semester and a second critical 'at risk' period was identified in later weeks.

The video diaries add more insight into the complex web of factors that contribute to student engagement across the study lifecycle. The first six weeks is typically considered a high risk transition period for first-time learners (Krause et al., 2005). Students who find themselves over committed or are vulnerable to disengagement may take the opportunity to withdraw from papers during the first few weeks. During the period of data collection, only one student completely withdrew and there were two paper withdrawals. The number of participants who discontinued their study was less than anticipated given the normal withdrawal rate amongst the wider population of first-time distance learners. Of course, the research selected participants from a pool of volunteers, which is likely to have biased the sample towards students with deep study orientations. Although somewhat speculative, indications are from the initial video diaries that students who withdraw during the first few weeks recognised that the demands of study would not fit around their existing commitments.

As semester progressed, learner stories revealed that the approaches adopted to study in the first few weeks were relatively stable. In other words, first-time distance learners whose prevalent study orientations were passive from the outset were unlikely to become progressively active, deeper learners over time. This finding raises questions about the most appropriate times and optimum moments for institutions to intervene and whether there are particular activities, strategies or triggers at specific points in the study lifecycle that may evoke and lead to more active engagement. It has already been discussed that institutions need to manage prospective students' expectations during the pre-enrolment phase and help students to develop realistic study goals. However, there is scope for further research to investigate the interplay between specific interventions, a student's willingness to engage in the first place and the development of different study approaches or learner orchestrations.

After the first few weeks, it is common for distance learners to receive their initial assignment grades. Some participants did not think their grades reflected the effort they invested; others felt frustrated or explained their performance because they did not invest enough effort; while many students were clearly affected by the nature and perceived quality of their teacher's feedback. On the basis of the evidence collected through the video diaries, students who revealed passive, surface study approaches were more likely to be negatively affected by this feedback, and they often allowed their progress to stagnate, which in turn resulted in them reporting they felt overwhelmed by other demands on their time. A notable finding is that during this period students often disengaged from their study to an extent that was hard to recover.

Importantly, there is evidence from the video diaries that a second and significant 'high-risk' period of disengagement exists for all first-time distance learners towards the latter part of semester. Although the sample is too small to comment with any confidence on discipline level and assessment type differences, this period tended to occur just before the major assignment

was due. The trigger did not appear to be linked to anxiety related to exams, but rather the realisation of the amount of work required in order to complete the paper before this period. Although this second 'at risk' period did not result in immediate withdrawal, it often meant that even highly motivated students began to question their ability to successfully complete their program of study. The key point is that, contrary to popular belief, the crucial period of ensuring the success of first-time distance learners extends well beyond the first few weeks of study.

8.6. Takeaway 6

Digital literacy is variable among first-time distance learners; age and gender are not strong indicators of digital literacy. Irrespective of the level of digital literacy, insights gained from learner stories reveal that few students know how to be effective online learners.

The research findings indicate that technology, when used appropriately, now presents distance learners with a transformative advantage to interact with teachers and peers to an extent that rivals or even betters traditional campus-based teaching and learning. Notably, Poskitt et al. (2011) report, based on aggregated AUSSE data, negligible differences between distance learners and campus-based learners in the frequency of their participation in active forms of learning such as contributing to discussions, asking questions or working with others. It has even been suggested that distance students are more proactive and possibly assertive in help-seeking behaviour (Poskitt et al., 2011). However, the findings suggest there is a need to provide greater support for how to use new digital technology to be an effective *online learner* from a distance.

In concurrence with Jones, Ramanau, Cross and Healing (2010), the research findings support the view that distance learners represent a 'complex picture of minorities' some of whom are truly engaged in a wide range of digital activity at frequent intervals; while others rarely utilise digital resources at their disposal. There is clear evidence from the video dairies that some students are adept at using new digital technology and routinely expect an online learning environment as part of their normal study. In exact agreement with Jelfs and Richardson (2012, p.1), who surveyed over 4000 distance learners at the Open University in the United Kingdom, noted that 'regardless of their ages, students who had more positive attitudes to technology were more likely to adopt deep and strategic approaches to studying and were less likely to adopt a surface approach to studying'.

Of course, this finding does not mean that attitudes to, and use of, technology are determining factors in influencing a particular study approach, or *visa versa*; however, when combined with evidence of the video dairies, it does help to confirm the overall portrait of an active learner in a modern distance education provider.

On the other hand, new models of online, blended and distance education appear to be posing challenges for a number of first-time distance learners. While the level of technical skills is important, a notable finding is that many students claim they aspire to interact through digital fora (e.g. Stream discussion forums or Facebook groups) and, despite having the digital literacy

to do so, appear to lack social confidence in formal online learning environments. Instead, in concurrence with Poskitt et al. (2011), the current research has also observed that mature-aged, first-time distance learners are highly likely to rely on traditional email correspondence with their teachers. The key point is that social confidence in a digital environment along with online engagement needs to be modelled and nurtured by empathic teachers who encourage risk taking, personal dialogue and friendly interaction between staff and fellow students. In this regard, the way teachers interact matters and a welcoming digital culture may go a long way to helping to build a stronger sense of belonging to a genuine community of online learners.

8.7. Takeaway 7

Video diaries, coupled with the researcher's role, influenced student engagement by providing different learning environments; metaphorically a new cave, campfire, watering hole and mountain-top for active learning and reflection. Learner stories highlighted the value of institutions supporting opportunities for first-time distance learners to engage in regular interaction and reflection over the initial stages of their study.

Learner stories highlighted that some first-time distance learners miss traditional face-to-face tuition and classroom interaction with peers. As revealed in the video diaries, some participants recall how face-to-face teaching provides immediate, often personalised feedback from which students can gain a sense of confidence and self-assurance that their own level of understanding or confusion sits vis-à-vis everyone else. Equally, the participants recall a heightened sense of clarity when teachers, in person, disseminate information and instructions. These comments should not come as a surprise, as the participants were first-time distance learners who are arguably preconditioned to more conventional forms of teaching and have limited experience of online learning.

In physical learning environments, it is generally accepted that 'active learning in groups, peer relationships and social skills are important in engaging learners' (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 171). Zhao and Kuh (2004) argue that students perform better and are more satisfied at institutions that cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups. Put another way, what works best is a culture that promotes a strong sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). As Krause (2006, as cited in Trowler, 2010, p. 4) observes:

For some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are the students for whom the culture of the university is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting.

With the benefit of hindsight the research could have explored, in more depth, the sense in which students felt connected or alienated from the University, especially the primarily self-sufficient learners or 'lone wolves' who rarely pursued opportunities for interaction with the institution, teachers or fellow classmates. However, this question leads to the 'chicken-or-egg' debate over what comes first: an inherently 'lone wolf' approach among learners who choose to study by distance; or failings among distance education providers to establish connectedness with their students. Stories told by largely self-sufficient distance learners certainly highlight that

institutions could do more to challenge the so-called 'lone wolf' conception of distance learning and that it is not enough to rely on chance that distance students will take opportunities to interact with teachers, peers and academic support staff, and find necessary levels of learning support from people in their immediate vicinity with whom they enjoy an established sense of relatedness.

To build a stronger sense of belonging or relatedness with students distributed at a distance, the learner stories reported in Chapter 7 reveal the importance of better understanding the different places and spaces for learning and knowledge generation. In this regard, Thornberg (1996) proposes four metaphors that resonate with the findings of the current study:

- Caves refer to spaces where distance learners can find time to reflect and come in to contact with themselves;
- Campfires are formal environments where students have the opportunity to listen to stories from which they construct knowledge from those with expertise and wisdom;
- Watering holes are informal environments where students gather at a central source to discuss information and create meaning with their peers;
- Mountain-tops are metaphorically where students share their findings and present their ideas to an audience; it is their peak experience.

The current research offers a glimpse of how the online learning environment, when well designed and supported by staff and students, can provide a valuable campfire and watering hole for gathering information and co-constructing knowledge. Potentially, it offers the chance to feel part of the place by interacting with the teacher as a real person and socialising and sharing understandings with other learners; although, as the video diaries reveal, it is possible to lead a person to water, but not possible to make them drink. In some cases there is evidence of students who sought to create their own watering holes using social media; this is something that institutions may be able to facilitate. In a similar vein, there is the potential to design online tools (e.g. emoticons) and virtual spaces (e.g. Facebook) where distance learners can celebrate and share their achievements from the mountain-top. Institutions could even recognise their successes through a range of targeted awards for first-time distance learners.

The video diaries also gave particular insight to the way visiting a local campus library or attending a contact course could act as a campfire, a watering hole and, to some extent, a mountain top. Just being on campus appeared to help some students perceive a greater sense of belonging. The benefits of the contact or residential course are complex. First, contact course participants report they enjoyed the opportunity for blended or conventional education, which reinforces the importance of the metaphorical campfire as a place for learning. The contact course also represents an important watering hole at which social interaction allowed attendees to build small alliances with 'friends' from among people with whom they would not have previously related. This experience included relating with lecturers who had not necessarily been forthcoming in the online environment or via email. With newfound friends, distance learners began to discuss their interpretations of and concerns for the weeks ahead, which goes to underscore the point that institutions are not the only ones capable of supporting distance learners. Finally, there was a mountain-top element to the contact course in which

distance learners take the opportunity to ascertain their own proficiency relative to peers, which may help to enhance their level of academic confidence.

Learner stories—supported by survey data in Chapter 6—suggest that institution-led activities such as Orientation Events and Contact Courses may be poorly attended by students with ‘lone wolf’ dispositions to distance study. In contrast, their participation in video diary reflections was seen to be consistent and enthusiastic. Metaphorically speaking, video diaries provided a cave or sheltered space for personal reflection and a watering hole for learners to share their experiences with a real person. They also offered a place around the campfire for thinking about new knowledge and at times provided an audience for celebrating their achievement from mountain-tops. The challenge for institutions is to find ways of supporting and sustaining this type of personal reflection and academic scaffolding as a routine part of being a distance learner. Once again, this is where new digital technologies open up a number of new possibilities for cultivating a sense of belonging, including the chance to be mentored by more experienced distance learners.

8.8. Summary

This chapter described seven major takeaways from the research. Firstly, that learner stories provide a unique insight into the complexity of the soft factors that influence the experience as a distance learner. In light of these complexities, institutions are encouraged to adopt a conceptual framework to assist in the design and coordination of supports to meet the diverse needs of distance learners. As part of the process of helping students to think about the option of distance study, institutions should help them to align their study goals with their wider aspirations. It is noteworthy that students who balance study effectively alongside life’s other commitments also report an active approach to study. Although institutional support is important during the first few weeks, distance students experience substantial ebbs and flows throughout the course of semester, and more research is required into a second critical ‘at risk’ period that has been identified. Relating back to existing literature, the current study supports the argument that neither age nor gender are strong indicators of digital literacy and that, in actual fact, few distance learners in this study knew how to be effective online learners. Finally, results of the current study highlight the value of institutions supporting opportunities for new and different places and spaces of learning where distance learners can engage in reflection and regular interactions that may enhance their sense of belonging.

Chapter 9 Lessons Learned for Institutions

This chapter presents a number of lessons for institutions. Drawing on insights gained from first-time distance learners, and contemporary literature on retention, progression and completion, a set of guiding principles that recognise the complexity and multifaceted nature of student engagement is presented.

Mindful of ‘what makes a good principle’, the principles provide a foundation to the conceptual framework described in this study and endeavour to support the diverse needs of distance learners across the study lifecycle. While supported by a checklist of questions for distance providers, adapted from recent work in the United Kingdom by Thomas (2012), the principles need to be understood from a ‘dynamic and non-hierarchical’ perspective (Zepke, 2011). In this respect, they reflect a view that the sum adds up to more than the total of the individual parts. The intention is that the principles coupled with the supporting questions provide a metaphorical anchor and reflective toolkit in which to think about how to enhance distance learner success.

9.1. Principle 1: Shared goals

Institutions need to understand the goals, motivations and aspirations of distance students, their families and their employers. They should provide opportunities to apply learning to real problems that resonate with the goals of distance learners. From the early stages of the study lifecycle, it is important to help students shape realistic and achievable goals, aligned with their life and work commitments by giving them a strong sense of what it is like to be a distance learner; mindful that life happens.

Question 1:

To what extent does the institution assist students to define their goals and understand whether university-level distance education is the most appropriate study option for them?

9.2. Principle 2: Personal agency

Similarly, institutions have an important role in fostering the personal agency and self-belief of distance learners, especially when returning to study after a long break. This starts with treating the learner as a real person and providing opportunities for mentoring and peer-to-peer support. The aim is to develop ‘learning relationships’ (Zepke & Leach, 2010) where students can grow in confidence and increase their ability to self-regulate and achieve their own objectives.

Question 2:

To what extent does the institution develop the capacity-skills, understanding and opportunities-for distance learners to engage and purposively develop their own sense of belonging?

9.3. Principle 3: Adaptive empathy

It is important for institutions to facilitate a sense of empathy between students and those who are supporting the learning experience, including teachers and family. A welcoming culture in which all staff take a real interest in students will help distance learners feel more connected with the institution. Valuing the diverse backgrounds and experiences of distance learners and supporting friendly, personal interactions between teachers and students will foster a culture of adaptive empathy. Such a culture may also assist students to more quickly adjust to the ebb and flow of being a distance learner.

Question 3:

To what extent does the institution promote a welcoming culture which seeks to understand the individual and diverse needs of distance students?

9.4. Principle 4: Personalisation

Learning development services and resources should be personalised to respond to the individual needs of distance learners (or groups of similar students) at key points in the study lifecycle. A customised approach requires institutions to be aware of the diversity of students they serve and the different learning trajectories they may follow as they progress through the study lifecycle. It also recognises each learner is different and that a holistic and multifaceted range of services is required; there is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the diverse needs of distance learners.

Question 4:

To what extent does learner profiling and institutional data monitoring allow for customised teaching and learning services to respond to individual needs?

9.5. Principle 5: Transactional engagement

Institutions play a key role in supporting transactional engagement—that is, the way students and teachers engage (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Engagement is central to learning, the level of teacher presence and the sense of belonging or connectedness students have with peers and academic support staff. There is no doubt that engagement, when understood from a dynamic and non-hierarchical perspective, can enhance the success of distance learners. The concept of transactional engagement also extends to the interactions that distance students have with study resources and learning activities, which should encourage active participation and deep reflection.

Question 5:

To what extent do academic staff take responsibility for cultivating a sense of belonging through their curriculum design, learning activities and student interactions?

9.6. Principle 6: Networked learning

Institutions should be attentive to the wider social and academic networks through which formal and informal learning occurs. Knowledge and learner support exists in the network.

Online learning has the potential to extend these networks and teachers should encourage distance students to make strategic use of a wider range of study resources and support services that go beyond the capability of their own institution. However, do not assume that distance students have the right skills or dispositions to be effective online learners. New online delivery methods for distance education need to be supported by opportunities for students to develop digital literacy.

Question 6:

To what extent do online learning environments foster a sense of teacher and learner presence so distance learners feel they are part of a wider learning network?

9.7. Principle 7: Spaces for knowledge generation

Reflection is at the heart of learning. There are now different tools, places and spaces for learning, which go beyond the traditional ‘pack and post’ and ‘lone wolf’ models of distance education. Institutions can design for reflection and knowledge generation by better exploiting the affordances provided through new physical and online learning environments. Metaphorically speaking, technology offers new caves, campfires, watering holes and mountain-tops through which today’s distance learners can reflect, co-construct knowledge, develop learning relationships and share and celebrate their achievements.

Question 7:

To what extent does the institution intentionally design for reflection and knowledge generation within and across a range of distributed places and spaces?

9.9. Summary

This chapter has proposed seven principles as a toolkit for enhancing the engagement and success of distance learners. The principles build on existing literature on the complexity of engagement along with the key takeaways, and attempt to infuse a strong learner voice in the way institutions support distance learners. When combined with the conceptual framework described in this study for supporting the needs of distance learners across the study lifecycle, they offer a metaphorical anchor and language for talking, thinking and reconceptualising the way institutions understand what it means to be a distance learner. Finally, a checklist of seven questions is offered under each principle as a tool for reflecting on, nurturing and developing a stronger institutional culture of belonging and intentional learning amongst distance students.

Chapter 10 Insights for Distance Students

This chapter proposes ‘Seven Habits of Effective Distance Learners’¹ developed from the participants’ experiences and relevant literature. The habits are not intended as a comprehensive list of attributes and characteristics required for student success; instead they serve as beacons for promoting greater awareness of, and personal responsibility for, some of the factors thought to influence a student’s readiness and capability to undertake tertiary-level study by distance. In this respect, the purpose of the habits is to invite further reflection, discussion and consideration of the issues and challenges of being a first-time distance learner.

10.1. Habit 1: Be proactive

Are you ready to take responsibility for your study? Proactive learners recognise that they are responsible and believe that their efforts will make a difference. They focus their time and energy on their circle of influence; in other words, the things that they can control. When life happens, effective students are resilient and find ways of overcoming unexpected difficulties. In her own words, Maggie underscored the importance of being proactive:

I guess make sure it’s on your mind – even if you’re on top of things. It’s so easy for one week to turn into two; to turn into three. So just dipping in a little bit all the time is really useful; even for half-an-hour or an hour just to confirm in your mind, ‘yea, I do get this chapter, I don’t need to worry’. Having that permanent awareness that you are doing a course is useful.

10.2. Habit 2: Begin with the end in mind

What are you aiming for? Successful learners have a conscious vision of and plan for the future. They also have clarity that their study choices will help them achieve that vision. Without the end in mind, distance learners can easily lose sight of their goals amid other life circumstances. In some cases, students will also need to think about what their family and/or employers are aiming for. In his own words, Jack highlighted the importance of beginning with the end in mind:

The most important reason I am studying [business] is because there is a driver within me to succeed in life because when I was younger, I was a bit of a misfit and I wasn’t very well behaved ... Being an accountant or some sort of role in the finance sector is within grasp of myself and my capabilities having spent the last six years in the bank.

¹ Inspiration for this chapter comes from the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People® first published by Stephen Covey in 1989.

10.3. Habit 3: Put first things first

Have you thought about what is realistic? Distance learners need to identify their existing commitments and should be careful not to over extend themselves. Instead, they should aim for a sustainable study routine that accommodates the ebbs and flows of academic study. Many students will need to consider family and employers and think realistically about where study fits among competing priorities. In his own words, Ian explained the importance of putting first things first:

I'm going to go down to three papers next semester and then two over summer school, which will give me the same amount of papers per year but less stress and less pressure and it will be easier to live a more routine life with the kids now they're going to start school and study as well; it won't take over our lives.

10.4. Habit 4: Think win-win

Are you an effective online learner? Effective distance learners explore ways they can achieve their academic goals by using a mix of conventional study methods with the possibilities that new digital technologies provide. Thinking digitally will help to enhance opportunities for productive online interactions with other people and open up a new world of rich and engaging content. In his own words, Nathan understood the importance of developing new skills as a 21st century learner:

The online environment is very useful. I've managed to work my way around Stream; as well as the library website and the online tutorial s... It's all new to me, but I can see it's a fantastic resource and I'll obviously be making a lot more use of it.

10.5. Habit 5: Seek first to understand

Do you welcome guidance? Effective distance learners understand that seeking help is not a weakness. There are lots of people who can offer valuable academic support. Students who willingly accept guidance and constructive feedback stand to benefit from a greater understanding of what is required to succeed. In her own words, Olivia acknowledged the benefit of seeking understanding from others:

Because I've done two degrees, I think I'm so proficient; why would I need to learn any other techniques? Thinking like that has stopped me reaching out to the learning centre. So, I'm glad I've conquered that one. Tomorrow I'm going to talk to them about my essay-I've written hundreds of essays, but old dogs can learn new tricks.

10.6. Habit 6: Collaborate

Are you good at building networks? When students use alternative viewpoints as a source of critical reflection, they begin to gain new insight, because 'two brains are better than one'. Contact courses and online learning environments provide spaces for distance learners to collaborate with others. Knowledge generation might be with other learners, or equally with colleagues, friends or family. In her own words, Beth highlighted the benefit of collaboration:

My blogs, they've been really good. They've generated some retaliation which has been nice. I got in to an argument about something in a hypothetical sense with a colleague who is doing the same paper and I came away from that with some new views, which allowed me to reevaluate my own opinion of the situation.

10.7. Habit 7: Sharpen the saw

What do you do to stay sharp? Distance learners are often under pressure as they try to juggle study, family and employment responsibilities; frequently meaning that they de-prioritise their own physical and mental wellbeing. However, students who invest time into staying fresh and energetic increase their resilience to handle the challenges they face. In her own words, Susan emphasised the benefits of staying sharp:

I'm in a different head space after seeing the counsellor today. I don't know why, I just feel more relaxed ... And the difference in moving house has been amazing. I mean, I went out and just walking down the quayside made me feel so much better... I'm happy and the whole atmosphere is conducive to study.

10.8. Summary

In summary, this chapter has proposed seven habits for highly effective first-time distance learners. It recommends that, first and foremost, first time distance students remain proactive and take responsibility for their learning throughout semester. The habits set out to ask students to consider whether they have begun with the end in mind and are, therefore, able to prioritise effectively by putting first things first. By thinking win-win, distance students are encouraged to explore the possibilities that new technologies can provide. When it comes to interaction with other people, the habits highlight the benefits that can come from seeking: first, to understand, which means welcoming academic support-especially from the institution; second, to collaborate with peers by building networks and adopting the philosophy that two or more brains are better than one; and, third, distance learners are encouraged not to forget the importance of self-care and taking measures to remain sharp so they are fresh and energetic to face the challenges ahead.

Chapter 11 Conclusions

This chapter reflects on the success of the research in achieving its original objective and considers a number of methodological issues associated with the study. It describes the dissemination of the findings and discusses linkages with several other important lines of research. Lastly, the chapter reports on the formative and summative evaluation of the research and offers some final thoughts.

11.1. Reflecting on the objective

This research set out with the objective of contributing to the enhancement of services and resources available for first-time distance learners. More specifically, the intention of the research was:

- to develop a conceptual framework for identifying the most effective use of various intervention tools, supports and resources at early stages of the study lifecycle;
- to investigate the experiences of being a first-time distance learner from a student's perspective 'in their own words'; and
- to develop a set of overarching principles that will help institutions to enhance distance learner engagement and success.

In reflecting on whether the research has achieved these objectives, the study has successfully shown the value of adopting an overarching conceptual framework to identify, scaffold and discuss different services and resources to ensure the success of first-time distance learners.

It has also demonstrated the value of investigating the lived experiences of distance learners 'in their own words' by reporting 20 learner stories over the initial stages of the study lifecycle. These stories, which go beyond the original project deliverable, provide unique insights into the diverse backgrounds, different motivations and particular challenges of being a first-time distance learner.

Drawing on the stories and relevant literature, the research proposes a set of principles to support institutions to enhance distance learner engagement and success. In addition, the study provides a brief checklist for distance education providers as a metaphorical anchor and reflective toolkit in which to think about how to better support the needs of distance learners. The value of the toolkit will largely depend on the extent that institutions find the principles and questions useful in their planning, development and evaluation of services and resources designed to support the provision of distance education.

The final phase of the research would not have been possible without the willingness and insightful contributions provided by the participants; and, for this reason, the study offers back to prospective distance students a number of habits to promote greater awareness and reflection of factors thought to influence the readiness and capability of people to successfully complete tertiary-level study by distance.

Lastly, the findings of the three research phases, when taken collectively, make a valuable contribution to the field and go some way to addressing an important gap in the literature, especially in terms of providing unique insights into the first year experiences of distance learners from a student's perspective. In so doing, the study also paves the way for further research that explores some of the issues raised by this work, including the need to better inform prospective students about the actual demands of studying by distance; the importance of support beyond the first few weeks; the challenge of learning how to be an online learner; and the value of supporting opportunities for regular interaction and reflection over the initial stages of the study lifecycle to develop a stronger sense of belonging, to name a few.

11.2. Methodological reflections

The research posed a number of challenges and methodological dilemmas. This section briefly discusses some of these in the interests of interpreting the trustworthiness of the current findings and to support future researchers.

The first issue relates to the recruitment of the sample, as students who volunteered to participate are likely to be atypical of the wider population of first-time distance learners. The relatively low number of participants who withdrew from study over the semester supports this point. Another issue related to sample recruitment is the challenge of relying on participants' retrospective recall when gathering data on what they think about study and making choices because selecting students before they formally enrol is problematic. In this respect, the participants' reflection over the initial stages of the study lifecycle needs to be treated with caution.

Another challenge that arose during Phase Three is that participants' stories can often end up being retold through the researchers' own stories based on their pre-existing theories and experiences. Although a number of strategies were adopted to ensure the learner's voice was retained, the individual nature of the relationship established between participants and the Research Manager in recording video diaries was not originally anticipated. It was clear by the end of the second week that a more customised response was required in framing weekly 'fish hooks' as some participants were talking through the Bloggie™ camera to the Research Manager.

The problem this created is that participation in the reflective diary protocol had an important influence on the experience of being a first-time distance learner. In some cases, the intervention may have been significant in helping to maintain the participant's resilience towards study. There is no easy solution to this problem. It also led the research team to continue the study beyond mid semester as ceasing the research at this point would have been unethical. On the other hand, this relationship enhanced the ability to probe individual responses and seek insightful follow-up data in a manner that would not otherwise have been possible. Thus, the weekly reflective 'fish hooks' must be seen as both a weakness and major strength of the study in helping to reveal what it is like to be a first-time distance learner from a unique insider's perspective.

The overarching methodology was framed around Design-based Research, but the multi-phase and multi-method nature of the study does not strictly follow all the principles of this approach. For example, it was problematic to engage all the stakeholders in reflective inquiry to test and refine plausible explanations and solutions to some of the issues identified through the

findings. More to the point, if time had been available, participants would have had been given an opportunity to validate and provide feedback on the proposed habits of highly effective distance learners. Similarly, the principles and reflective toolkit for institutions proposed in Chapter 9 would have been shared more widely in its development.

While the challenges of doing Design-based Research warrant further consideration by the research community, on the whole, the study remains true to its original intentions. Importantly, it investigates a real-world problem and generates a set of guiding principles as a toolkit for institutional development and presents a range of questions and suggestions for enhancing the engagement and success of first-time distance learners.

11.3. Dissemination

The research team are committed to widely disseminating the key takeaways, and lessons and insights for institutions and distance learners as evidenced by the scholarly outputs already associated with the project. To date, one journal manuscript has been accepted and four conference papers have been presented based on the research findings. In addition, a special Distance Learner Colloquium was hosted on the day before the International Higher Education First Year Experience Conference. Notably, 50 participants attended the Colloquium from 23 different universities.

As already mentioned above, a Student Guide has also been produced to promote greater awareness and reflection amongst prospective students of factors thought to influence distance learner success. The research team expect to make further enhancements to the Guide based on future efforts to validate the proposed habits with relevant students. The Student Guide will be freely available under a Creative Commons Licence for other distance providers to adapt and redevelop as appropriate to suit their own requirements.

Finally, additional initiatives are planned to disseminate the research findings through relevant conferences and scholarly publications. Also, the research team will maintain the current WikiResearcher site to keep the academic and professional community informed of future developments.

11.4. Linkages

The findings of the present study have important linkages to the distance education literature and more particularly current national and international concerns over retention, progression and completion rates. More generally, the study has relevance to the growing body of work calling for a wider understanding of the ‘soft factors’ that influence student engagement from multiple perspectives. Another important link is to the burgeoning first year experience community in which there appears to be increasing interest in the ‘new normal’ of online, blended and distance education. There is, also, a potential link to the research community in terms of lessons for Design-based Research and the use of video diaries as a technique for recording learners’ stories. Lastly, the research is central to work underway in the two participating institutions to enhance the services and resources for distance learners. It adds to the evidence base and rich tradition of institutional research at both Charles Sturt University and Massey University on the evolving nature of distance education.

11.5. Evaluation

The evaluation strategy was both formative and summative and included members of the research team, the External Advisory Group and the External Evaluator. The research was conducted as part of a partnership between Charles Sturt University and Massey University. This partnership was based around a set of agreed principles for constructively working together on two parallel projects. Members of both research projects regularly met to discuss key decisions related to the study and informal collegial conversations were also invaluable in helping to critically reflect on progress. Feedback provided on scholarly outputs based on preliminary findings was also another touch point for evaluation.

The External Advisory Group also played a key role in formative evaluation by providing a valuable forum for discussion and advice at critical stages of the project. Although the one group served both research projects, which created some challenges, this strategy helped to ensure discussion was focused on key milestones and deliverables. The Group met on five occasions and, at each meeting, their input was invaluable in confirming key decisions and feedback received in the process of writing the final report was absolutely crucial in enhancing the value and quality of the research.

The role of the External Evaluator was twofold. First, the Evaluator was a critical friend to the project over the three research phases, which further enabled informed decision making at crucial points. Dr Weir has considerable experience overseeing major research projects in her role as Research Manager for Ako Aotearoa, and her toolkit of questions combined with knowledge of the tertiary sector helped to enhance the conceptual and methodological trustworthiness of the study.

Second, the External Evaluator was able to provide summative evaluation at three key weigh stations during the research process. These milestone reports ensured the research remained on track in meeting the major deliverables. Based on an agreed evaluation framework, the Evaluator was also able to provide expert comments on the success and value of the completed project to DEHub and DISSRTE. Specifically, this framework focused on the following areas:

- Clarity of purpose and process of project;
- Relevance and appropriateness of the methodology;
- Effectiveness of data collection;
- Appropriateness of resources;
- Depth and accuracy of analysis;
- Timeliness;
- Efficiency of organisation and operation;
- Value gained for money expended;
- Validity of conclusions and outcomes; and
- Quality of report and outputs.

The external summative evaluation report prepared by Dr Kirsty Weir is provided in Appendix C.


11.6. Final thoughts


Although new models of tertiary learning are emerging, supported by the growth of new digital technologies, it is important not to lose sight of whom the ‘new normal’ of online, blended and distance education serves. Many of the students in this research would not have been able to better themselves or develop capacity to enhance their workplace and potential to transform their local communities without the option of studying by distance. In this regard, the learner stories reported in this study offer a glimpse of the wider societal benefits of supporting different pathways to tertiary education. In a similar vein to previous generations of distance education—teaching and learning without student and teacher meeting face-to-face—the new fusion of digital and distance continues to play a key role in providing life-long learning opportunities to a demographically, culturally and geographically diverse population at different stages of the learning pathway. However, effective distance education does not happen by chance and depends on a complex mix of factors, including institutional culture, teacher responsiveness, support services, learner characteristics and so on, which all contribute to student success. With this point in mind, the last word is given to Kane:

The primary benefit via distance is the fact I can do it in my own time. It's the selling point of distance learning ... I'd definitely recommend starting with just one paper [subject] first and get online and talk to someone about enrolment and what that could mean for them. Study regularly and if you're not sure, ask questions because I've asked questions via email to my tutor and I've also gone online and looked on Stream [LMS] at the discussion boards. And even though I've never made a contribution, I've still benefited from reading other people's contributions ... I think the online environment is supportive ... I think Massey has a great reputation for its distance learning infrastructure. I'd basically like to say thank you for having the medium of distance study. I've heard great things about Massey and everything is true.

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Appendix A – Pre-Semester Survey

1. What is your main reason for studying?
 - Constructive use of time between family commitments
 - Constructive use of time while seeking employment
 - I want to change career direction
 - I want to gain skills & knowledge for personal interest
 - I want to improve my current career
 - I want to re-enter the workforce
 - Other (please specify)
 - *Would you like to add anything*

2. What is your main reason for studying distance paper(s)?
 - I have day-time work commitments
 - I have day-time childcare commitments
 - My paper(s) are not offered on-campus
 - Distance education better suits my lifestyle
 - I live too far from campus
 - Distance education better suits my learning style
 - Other (please specify)
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

3. When did you start thinking about studying distance paper(s)?
 - Since Easter 2011
 - Between Christmas and Easter
 - The second-half of 2010
 - Over 12 months ago
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

Questions 4 to 11 used a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree)

4. Who supported your decision to study distance paper(s)?
 - My partner
 - My family/whānau
 - My friends
 - My work colleagues
 - My employer
 - A student studying via distance
 - A student studying on-campus
 - Massey University staff
 - Other (please specify)
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

5. How are you feeling about your distance paper(s)?
 - Confident about studying via distance-mode
 - Confident about coping with the workload
 - Confident about my study skills
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

6. How do you expect your lecturer(s) to add value to your learning?
 - Provide me with feedback to go forward
 - Provide the information I need
 - Challenge my thinking
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

7. How do you expect fellow students to add value to your learning?
 - Nothing necessarily
 - Debate and discussion
 - Tips and strategies
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

8. Where do you expect to find the most valuable content?
 - From material that I source myself
 - From the core study materials
 - From readings suggested by my lecturer
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

9. How do you expect the Stream online learning environment to add value?
 - Help me interact with other students
 - Help me to interact with lecturers
 - Provide content that will enhance my learning
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

10. How would you best describe your goal for Semester 2?
 - I want to gain deeper knowledge
 - I'll be pleased if I pass
 - I expect my effort to be rewarded
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

11. How do you see yourself studying in Semester 2?
 - I tend to do what I need to
 - I tend to organize my commitments
 - I tend to immerse myself in tasks
 - *Would you like to add anything?*

12. Is there anything else you would like to share are you prepare for studying your distance paper(s) in Semester 2?

13. Are you male or female?
 - Male
 - Female

14. What is your age?
 - < 20
 - 20 - 24
 - 25 - 29
 - 30 - 39
 - 40 - 49
 - 50 - 59
 - 60+

15. With which ethnic group(s) do you identify?
 - Pakeha/European
 - Pakeha/European/Mix
 - Maori
 - Pasifika
 - Asian
 - Other

16. Is English your first language?
 - Yes
 - No

17. Massey University hosts Orientation Events at each of the following locations; which is closest to you?
 - Albany campus
 - Manawatu campus
 - Wellington campus
 - Christchurch
 - Other Urban
 - I live overseas

18. How long would it take you to travel to the location you selected in Question 18?
 - Less than 15 minutes
 - 15 - 60 minutes
 - 1 - 2 hours
 - More than 2 hours
 - I live overseas

19. Have you / do you plan to attend an Orientation Event before the start of Semester 2?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe

20. In Semester 2 2011, how many papers are you studying ON-CAMPUS?
- 0
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
21. In Semester 2 2011, how many papers are you studying via DISTANCE?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
22. Is this the first time that you have ever studied a paper via DISTANCE?
- Yes
 - No
23. In which College(s) are your DISTANCE paper(s)?
- College of Business
 - College of Creative Arts
 - College of Education
 - College of Humanities & Social Sciences
 - College of Sciences
24. Which level(s) are your DISTANCE paper(s)?
- 100
 - 100 + 200 / 300
 - 200 / 300
 - 400 / 500 / 600
 - 700 / 800 / 900
25. How did you qualify for your DISTANCE paper(s)?
- Adult admission
 - NCEA
 - Other
26. Are you the first person in your family to have studied at a university?
- Yes
 - No
27. Are you the first person in your family to have studied via DISTANCE?
- Yes
 - No

28. What is your commitment to paid employment during Semester 2 2011?

- None
- 1 - 8 hrs pw
- 9 - 16 hrs pw
- 17 - 24 hrs pw
- 25 - 32 hrs pw
- 33 - 40 hrs pw
- 40+ hours

29. Do you live with a partner?

- No, I don't have a partner
- No, I don't live with my partner
- Yes, I live with my partner

30. How many dependent children do you have?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

31. How would you describe your dependent childcare responsibilities?

- None
- Evenings and/or weekends
- Outside school hours
- Part-time with pre-schoolers
- All day, every day

Appendix B – Post-Semester Survey

1. I understand that completing and submitting this survey implies that I consent to participate in the Massey University study, “In your own words: Experiences of first-time distance learners”, as per the Participant Information Sheet, which was attached to your email.
 - I consent
 - I do not consent [exit]

2. Were you a FIRST-TIME DISTANCE LEARNER in Semester 2 2011?
 - Yes
 - No [exit]

3. On how many internal papers were you enrolled at the start of Semester 2?
 - None
 - 1 internal paper
 - 2 internal papers
 - 3 internal papers
 - 4 internal papers

4. Did you withdraw from any of these internal papers during Semester 2?
 - I withdrew from no internal papers [Go to Question 12]
 - I withdrew from one/some, completed 1/some internal papers
 - I withdrew from all internal papers

5. On how many distance papers were you enrolled at the start of Semester 2?
 - None [exit]
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4

6. Did you drop any of these distance papers?
 - I withdrew from no distance papers [Go to Question 12]
 - I withdrew from one/some, completed 1/some distance papers
 - I withdrew from all distance papers

7. In which College(s) were the distance paper(s) from which you withdrew?
 - College of Business
 - College of Creative Arts
 - College of Education
 - College of Humanities & Social Sciences
 - College of Sciences

8. Which level(s) were the DISTANCE paper(s) from which you withdrew?
 - 100
 - 200
 - 300
 - 400 / 500 / 600
 - 700 / 800 / 900

9. At which point(s) in Semester 2 did you withdraw from these distance papers?
 - Before the start of semester
 - The 1st half of semester
 - The 2nd half of semester
 - After the end of teaching

10. When you withdrew from your distance paper(s), did anybody from Massey contact you?
 - Yes
 - No

11. What was your primary and secondary reason for withdrawing from the distance paper(s)?
 - I just didn't have enough time to study
 - The paper(s) didn't meet my expectations
 - The paper(s) didn't interest me
 - I didn't feel that I was succeeding
 - I didn't have enough support to succeed
 - A different reason

12. In which College(s) were the distance paper(s) that you completed?
 - College of Business
 - College of Creative Arts
 - College of Education
 - College of Humanities & Social Sciences
 - College of Sciences

13. Which level(s) were the distance paper(s) that you completed?
 - 100
 - 200
 - 300
 - 400 / 500 / 600
 - 700 / 800 / 900

14. During the course of your distance studies (excluding group communications) were you contacted by anyone from Massey?
 - Yes, by my lecturer(s) only
 - Yes, by my lecturer(s) and by other person(s)
 - Yes, by other person(s) only
 - No, nobody contacted me

15. What was your commitment to paid employment during Semester 2?
- None
 - 01 - 08 hours per week
 - 09 - 16 hours per week
 - 17 - 24 hours per week
 - 25 - 32 hours per week
 - 33 - 40 hours per week
 - 40+ hours per week
16. Which statement best describes your dependent childcare responsibilities?
- None
 - Evenings and/or weekends
 - Outside school hours
 - Part-time with pre-schoolers
 - All day, every day
 - Other
17. How many dependent children do you have?
- None
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4+
18. Did you live with your partner during Semester 2?
- No, I didn't have a partner
 - No, I didn't live with my partner
 - Yes, I lived with my partner
 - Yes, for some of the time
19. Each week, approximately how many hours did you study per distance paper?
- More than 12 hours per distance paper, per week
 - 10-12 hours per distance paper, per week
 - 8-10 hours per distance paper, per week
 - 6-8 hours per distance paper, per week
 - 4-6 hours per distance paper, per week
 - 2-4 hours per distance paper, per week
 - 0-2 hours per distance paper, per week
20. How satisfied do you feel with the hours you studied per distance paper?
- Satisfied
 - Reasonably satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Reasonably unsatisfied
 - Unsatisfied

21. Taking in to consideration your distance paper(s) and your internal papers, how do you feel about the number of papers you studied in Semester 2?
 - I studied just the right number of papers
 - I wish I'd studied more papers
 - I wish I'd studied less papers

22. Thinking about your distance paper(s), how did your lecturer(s) add most value to your learning?
 - By providing me with feedback to go forward
 - By providing information
 - By challenging my thinking

23. Thinking about your distance paper(s), how did other students add most value to your learning?
 - Via debate and discussion
 - Via tips and strategies
 - They didn't add value

24. Thinking about your distance paper(s), how Stream add most value to your learning?
 - By helping me to interact with other students
 - By helping me to interact with lecturers
 - By proving access to content

25. Thinking about your distance paper(s), where did you find the most valuable subject content?
 - From material that I sourced myself
 - From the core study materials
 - From readings suggested by my lecturer

26. Thinking about your distance paper(s), how did you mostly study in Semester 2?
 - I tended to do what I needed to
 - I tended to organize my commitments
 - I tended to immerse myself in tasks

27. Thinking about your distance paper(s), what has been your main achievement?
 - I think I've gained deeper knowledge
 - I think I've passed
 - I think my efforts have been rewarded

28. Thinking of your distance paper(s), please rank the 3 people who supported you most (in order of importance where #1 was the most important):
 - Children
 - Church community
 - Counsellor
 - Employer
 - Family/whānau
 - Friends

- Lecturer(s)
- Other Massey staff member(s)
- Parents
- Partner
- Student(s)
- Union representative
- Other

29. Thinking of your distance paper(s), please rank the 3 sources of most useful study related information (in order of importance where #1 was the most important):

- 0800 MASSEY
- EXMSS
- Lecturer(s)
- Massey academy of sport
- Massey assignment pre-reading service
- Massey distance learning website
- Massey learning centre
- Massey library
- Massey Maori student's association
- Massey MathsFirst website
- Massey Online Writing & Learning Link (OWLL)
- Massey orientation event
- Massey Stream
- MUSA
- Other student(s)
- The internet
- Other

30. Thinking of your distance paper(s), is there anything else that you would like to tell us?

31. Before Semester 2, what was your most recent study?

- High School studies
- Certificate level studies
- Bachelor level studies
- Postgraduate level studies
- Other

32. Are you the first person in your family to have studied at a university?

- Yes
- No

33. Are you the first person in your family to have studied via distance?

- Yes
- No

34. Are you male or female?

- Male
- Female

35. What is your age?

- < 20
- 20 - 24
- 25 - 29
- 30 - 39
- 40 - 49
- 50 - 59
- 60+

36. With which ethnic group(s) do you identify?

- Pakeha/European
- Maori
- Pasifika
- Asian
- Other

Appendix C – Independent evaluation report

Scope of Evaluation

The evaluation sought to achieve two objectives, to provide:

- Formative feedback for the project team as they undertook their work
- Comment on the success and value of the completed project to DEHub and DEEWR.

This evaluation only considers the New Zealand component of this work, and does not extend to the Australian arm of the project. To conduct the evaluation, I have met formally with the New Zealand based project team on five occasions between June 2011 and June 2012. Informally, I have had numerous additional communications with the team. I have enjoyed being involved in this project by way of a ‘critical friend’, which has involved reviewing and providing comment on project documentation and the final draft report (at various stages of completion), discussing ideas and results, and of course conducting this evaluation.

At the time this evaluation report was written, the project report was in its final draft stage, and the project team were immersed in the final presentation of the implications for tertiary organisations and the insights for learners.

An evaluation framework was developed by the broader project team, and was applied to both the New Zealand and Australian projects. Specifically, this framework focused on the following areas: Clarity of purpose and process of project; relevance and appropriateness of the methodology; effectiveness of data collection; appropriateness of resources; depth and accuracy of analysis; timeliness; efficiency of organisation and operation; value gained for money expended; validity of conclusions and outcomes; and quality of report and outputs. The below considers this project in light of these evaluation areas.

Clarity of purpose and process of project

The purpose of the project was very clear; it sought to improve the support services provided to distance learners by considering the learner experience of distance education as it occurred. The process of undertaking the project was very effective - the New Zealand component was led by Professor Mark Brown; Helen Hughes was the Project Manager (PM). The Project Leader (PL) and PM appeared to work well together. Over the course of the project, the PL was appointed to a new position within Massey University which limited the time that could be committed at certain stages of the study. The PM was able to increase her time on the project and undertake most of the day-to-day tasks. Throughout this time, clear and effective lines of communication were evident, and there was little impact on the overall progress of the project. I would like to stress however, that both the PL and PM were fully engaged with the writing process and worked in a highly collegial manner on presenting the final results in a clear and coherent way.

Relevance and appropriateness of the methodology

The original (and funded) method involved two components, a) a stocktake of current support initiatives in place for distance learners at Massey University and Charles Stuart University, and b) the collection of video diaries with a minimum of 10 learners across 6 weeks. This approach was innovative in that it allowed for the practices of an organisation (stocktake) to be considered against the actual experience of the learner (video-diaries). The video diaries in particular were a relevant and exciting element to the methodology as it allowed for an in-depth and personalised perspective from learners to be obtained. I am unaware of any other studies in the international literature on distance education that explores the perspectives of learners through video diaries, and compares this 'lived experience' with the support initiatives provided by the organisation. The project team should be commended for employing this innovative approach to hearing the learner voice.

Effectiveness of data collection

The data generated from this project was time consuming and extensive. The PL and PM demonstrated considerable commitment (in both time and thought) to ensuring that the process of collecting the data was respectful of the learners' personal circumstances, and robust with regards to methodology. These activities included the introduction of a student survey to respond to the high level of interest from learners wanting to participate in the study, and extending the data collection timeframe to enable learners to continue their self-reflections through the video-diaries.

Appropriateness of resources

The resources were adequate to complete data collection, analysis and reporting. Additional time has been spent by the project team developing journal articles, planning dissemination activities, and finalising the project report. As described below, the team are also committed to developing a guide to support distance learners and continuing to act on the findings of the project.

Depth and accuracy of analysis

The stocktake that was undertaken was comprehensive - this involved careful consideration of the full breadth of activities undertaken at each organisation. The survey data was adequately reported in the draft report, and could be subjected to further analysis as time and interest allows. Most attention was appropriately paid to the analysis of the video diaries, given it was the primary focus of the study. Very careful attention was paid to the analysis and the stories that were created. The authors have triangulated the findings in the report to present the collective key findings ('takeaways') across the three data sources.

Timeliness

Across the course of this project, the project team have set and met timelines. It is of note that the timeframes around feedback for the final report were carefully considered to enable the evaluator and reference group sufficient time to provide feedback on the document. It is expected that the completion of the student guide will extend beyond the final project date. This is intentional to enable feedback on the draft guide to be obtained at the project

colloquium. I would encourage the authors to consider also sharing this draft guide with the participants of this project to provide feedback (particularly the video diary participants). This would enable the learners to a) provide comment on the utility of the resource and b) be included in the outcomes of the work, further enhancing the learner voice and their sense of belonging.

Efficiency of organisation and operation

As with the timeliness of the project, the team appear to have worked efficiently together on the management of the project. The project team was particularly efficient in light of the PL being appointed in a new position and having less time for day-to-day tasks. The PM appears to have been particularly efficient in this regard.

Value gained for money expended

The expectations relating to data collection were exceeded in that an additional survey was conducted with 62 learners, and the minimum acceptable response rate for the video diaries at 10, was doubled to a sample of 20. Furthermore, the length of data collection was extended from the initial 6 weeks to continue across the duration of the semester, resulting in 120,000 words contributing to the diary transcripts collectively. These additional data were collected within the original budget allocation. Five other outputs are currently being developed from this work, including a colloquium presentation, a guide for learners, and three journal articles (in preparation). Therefore, the project represents good value for the money expended. Please see below comments about the value of outcomes.

Validity of conclusions and outcomes

At the time this evaluation report was written, the final conclusions, principles and insights were in final draft, thus my comments should be considered in this context. The authors have presented a series of key findings ('takeaways') on which a series of principles for organisations and insights for learners have been developed. Of course, the existing literature is also drawn upon. Broadly speaking, the principles call for organisations to contribute to and promote a greater sense of belonging amongst distance learners, and encourage learners to develop strategic skills to enhance their resourcefulness and resilience. These principles have the potential to provide a basis on which organisations can think about their practices that support distance learners, and for learners, the insights can be the basis for increased engagement with their studies.

The conceptual framework is useful here, particularly if the authors develop this in future publications to include reference to the principles and insights. Showing how the principles and insights interrelate with organisational interventions across key points in the study life cycle could support learners and organisations/staff to become more proactive in their engagement with student learning. The conclusions, as I read them, call for both learners and organisations to engage in on-going reflection regarding what they are doing to support learning and how effective these interventions are.

In terms of outcomes, a number of positive impacts are emerging. The stocktake conducted at Massey University for example has helped to consider what initiatives should be available for

distance learners across the study life-cycle. Additional internal projects are being planned to support learners, which have been influenced by the findings of this work.

Sustainable partnerships have also developed between the PLs at Charles Stuart University and Massey University. This work has enabled their existing relationship to further develop, and it is hoped that on-going collaborative activities will continue.

Benefits are also evident for the learners who participated in this project. It is clear from the video diary data that learners felt a connection with the project team and organisation as a result of being involved in the study. In addition, the video diaries increased reflection among learners. In this sense, the project could be considered an intervention in and of itself, to support distance learners.

The challenge for the project team, then, is to build upon these initial outcomes to achieve sustainable change for distance learners both within the participating organisations and beyond. I encourage the project team to think carefully about implementation of change internally, as well as their dissemination approach so that the work has maximum impact across the sector. Ako Aotearoa would be more than happy to assist in the dissemination of this work as opportunities arise.

Quality of report and outputs.

As noted above, there are a number of outputs being produced from this project. The overall quality of the outputs reviewed to date has been high. I would be happy to provide further comment on the final outputs, if necessary, once available.

Summary

In their own words: Experience of first-time distance learners is a timely piece of research that reminds educators and organisations that distance learners do not enrol in distance education because of their technological preferences, but almost exclusively because of their circumstances. It calls for organisations to maintain support for distance learners beyond the first six weeks of the study life-cycle by providing a perspective of distance education that is infrequently seen - through the eyes of the learner. I'd like to extend my congratulations to the project team, not only on the high quality design, data collection and outputs produced, but also for the commitment shown to support the learners throughout the course of this project and beyond.

Dr Kirsty Weir, Ako Aotearoa Research Manager
29 June 2012