

Exploring the disconnections: Student interaction with support services upon commencement of distance education

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Abstract

While provision of appropriate supports in the first year of study has been found to have a positive effect on student success, supports targeting online and distance learners are often applied in a “goulash approach.” Against this backdrop, the research investigated the experiences of first-time distance learners with a view to informing the future design of supports during the early stages of the study lifecycle. The study was framed around Design-Based Research involving a mixed method approach over three phases: a stocktake of services designed to support distance learning; a pre- and post-semester survey of first-time distance learners; and a video diary phase that gathered the lived experiences of 20 students upon commencement of their study. Triangulated results of the three phases highlight a disconnection between institutional support services and the majority of first-time distance learners who demonstrated a self-sufficient, lone wolf approach to learning.

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Introduction

Online learning is the fastest growing sector of tertiary education (Tennant, McMullen & Kaczynski, 2010). This is adversely juxtaposed with one fundamental drawback – lower retention and completion rates than conventional, face-to-face education (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010; Simpson, 2008). Bart (2012) reports that attrition rates can be as much as 20% higher in American online classes; while Bourke and Simpson (2011) report that, at lower qualification levels and in particular disciplines, it can be difficult for distance education programs to achieve 50% retention in New Zealand. In the UK, a report from the Open University reported that only 22% of distance learners commencing undergraduate degrees completed their study within eight years (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2009).

The decision to persist or drop out of an online program is complex (Willging & Johnson, 2009) and cannot be ascertained from campus-based student data. The experiences of campus and distance students are markedly different (Poskitt, Rees, Suddaby & Radloff, 2011). In the first place, the majority of distance learners are likely to be older than campus-based students. In New Zealand, almost 80% of all tertiary level distance students are over 25 years of age (Ministry of Education, 2010). Furthermore, distance learners are more likely to combine part-time study with employment and childcare commitments. In Australia, 79% of external students study part-time compared to 23% of internal students (Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2010). Meanwhile, data from New Zealand reveals that distance students commit an average of 17.6 hours per week to paid employment

compared to 12.9 hours by campus-based students; and 61% of distance learners spend at least one hour per week caring for dependents, compared to 37% of campus-based students (Poskitt et al.). According to Kember (1989), 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 drop out from their program of study.

In the battle to address online student retention, Heyman (2010) proposed three key themes, the first of which was labelled *Student Support and Student Connection with the Institution*. This theme emphasises adequate and ongoing institutional support in a range of areas such as academic skills, financial aid and counselling; to name a few. Many authors agree that students who do not feel adequately supported by their institution may be more likely to drop out; especially in their first year of study (Kift, 2009; Venstra, 2009). This type of support is described as cultivating a sense of belonging amongst first-time students (Thomas, 2012). Simpson (2008) has consistently argued in favour of support services that meet the specific needs of distance learners but cautions that they must not be simply applied in an ad hoc manner, which he describes as a “goulash approach.”

Heyman's (2010) second theme is labelled *Quality of Interaction between Faculty and Students*. One aspect of the teacher's role is to make the connection with support services. As Russo-Gleicher (2013) reports, teacher attitudes play an important role in online student retention in some part because teachers are in a central position to identify online students at risk and make decisions about whether to make referrals

to student support services. Furthermore, Jones (2010) found that academic caring is important for male and female online students, to an extent that matches classroom students. Overall, online and new digital forms of distance education can be an impersonal exercise and teachers have an important role in preventing students from feeling “eSolated” (Appana, 2008, p. 15).

Heyman’s (2010) final theme is *Student Self-Discipline*. A lack of self-discipline has been associated with a “dissonant” approach to learning (Anderson, Lee, Simpson, & Stein, 2011), which has been associated with poor student attainment (Entwistle, Tait & McCune, 2000). Intrinsic motivation and possession of an internal locus of control are critical to distance learner success (Simonson, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2011). Albeit based on a study among first-year campus students, Ashwin and Trigwell (2012) report that students who are most motivated in the context of learning and feel they can succeed in that context are those who have an evoked conception (based on past experiences) of learning that is more focused on developing new knowledge; which in turn is characteristic of a deep approach to learning (Anderson et al.).

One theme that Heyman (2010) does not cover in depth is the issue of digital fluency. Jones, Ramanau, Cross and Healing (2010) caution that institutions should not assume distance students have the right skills or dispositions to be effective online learners because, while many are truly engaged in a wide range of digital activity at frequent intervals, others rarely utilise the digital resources at their disposal. Baxter (2012) examined digital confidence among distance students at the Open University and concluded that some students are able to initiate and sustain

very successful online interactions and relationships with their colleagues. Among the remaining students to whom digital confidence is not intuitive, this can be a motivating factor providing they receive adequate institutional support. However, in the absence of support services, the feeling of exclusion precipitated by lack of ability to successfully form online friendships may be equally, if not more, powerful a reason than academic issues in terms of why distance learning students fail to progress.

Against a background of pertinent yet limited distance-specific research into the issues regarding retention and completion, the current study set out to address an important gap in the literature. The objective was to investigate the experiences of first-time distance learners with a view to informing the future design of strategies to support students upon commencement of distance study.

Methodology

The study involved a mixed method approach over three phases. Design-Based Research was chosen as a framework that can guide the development of enhanced educational outcomes. Design-based research has increasingly received attention from researchers in education for its interactive and integrative qualities (Reeves, 2006). It aims to make a grounded connection between research and real-world contexts. This methodology can be thought of as “best practice” in complex learning environments thanks to the incorporation of evaluation and empirical analyses, from which multiple entry points for various scholarly endeavours arise (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit & McCloskey, 2009).

Phase One involved a stocktake of current institutional services and supports at two large-scale distance education providers in Australasia. The primary data collection technique was document analysis. To clarify questions related to specific services and resources, informal meetings were hosted with pivotal staff from both institutions. A catalogue of initiatives were mapped against a conceptual framework that was developed by Shillington et al. (2012) to support the design of different interventions across the study lifecycle. The framework proposes six stages: thinking about study; making choices; enrolment; first few weeks; progression, and completion.

The later phases of research involved the participation of students from one university with permission from the relevant Human Ethics Committee. Enrolment data was obtained for 750 students studying via distance for the first time in Semester 2, 2011. 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 invitation included a *Participant Information Sheet* which explained why students might consider recording video diaries for the purpose of research. The greatest benefit 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 *Participant Information Sheet* explained that a token of our appreciation would be provided upon receipt of participants' final diary episodes.

From among the 750 potential participants, 140 volunteered to participate. Because more students volunteered than anticipated, for both ethical and methodological reasons, all 140 volunteers were invited to complete an anonymous online survey before and after Semester 2. This research activity became Phase Two. Both surveys comprised two sections: a reflective section followed by a demographic section. The *Pre-Semester Survey* 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 *Post-Semester Survey* adopted the same structure and sought to explore respondents' perceptions of their actual approach to study throughout the preceding semester. The overall objective of Phase Two was to enable the research team to compare and contrast the pre-semester and post-semester perceptions of respondents.

Phase Three involved the purposeful selection of 20 students from among the 140 volunteers. The intention was to broadly represent the demographic and geographic diversity of first-time distance learners. The profile of diversity was informed by a demographic analysis of the University's distance students during the 2010 academic year. Selection criteria included: age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, subject of study, level of study, entry qualification, along with prior or current experience of tertiary study on-campus.

Using Sony bloggie™ cameras, video reflections were gathered using a 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 8am and 10pm on three separate days. In 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.

The present study adopted an approach that struck a balance between a structured and free-form approach. The initial expectation was for five minutes-worth of video footage per week; although this expectation waned given that the greater issue was not one of duration but of “forthcomingness” and “insightfulness” of information. A “reflective prompt” protocol was designed to encourage “free-flow” reflections whilst providing “fish-hooks” to elicit targeted categories of information in a lightly structured manner. Within 48 hours of receiving a participant’s video file, the Project Manager would respond via email with a fresh set of reflective prompts for the following week.

Twenty-two hours of rich video data was collected from all participants over the first half of the Semester. During semester-break, eight participants voluntarily chose to conclude, while twelve chose to continue until the end of semester. Although continuation of the video diaries beyond the initial six weeks 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.

A grounded strategy was applied to the process of thematic analysis, which 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). By following a “realist” approach, the student voice was retained at the forefront of the analysis. In other words, the experiences, meanings and lived reality of participants were described as fully as possible to retain a sense of context. Within the limitations of a grounded theory, an inductive approach (“bottom-up”) was applied, which meant that the major themes arose from the data. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2003) six-step process: (1) Familiarisation; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining and naming themes; (6) Reporting the content of themes.

Results

This section summarises findings from each of the three research phases. For the purpose of this paper, the findings focus on data that relates to the interaction of students with learning support services.

Phase One

In Phase One, document analysis took place under the umbrella of the six stage framework proposed by Shillington et al. (2012): thinking about study; making choices; enrolment; first few weeks; progression, and completion. Findings showed that a comprehensive suite of institutional services were available to support the diverse needs of distance learners across all six stages. However, for reporting purposes, audited services were

collated under three headings, which will be addressed in turn:

- *The path to enrolment* encompassed a range of online support tools that were designed to help students make wise study choices in light of their existing academic skills and life circumstances, including: *How distance learning works; Is distance learning for me?; Finding time for study; University IT and academic skills.*
- *Study readiness* was a stage that existed during the variable period between enrolment and the official start of semester; and was essentially an orientation phase. One institution provided a comprehensive distance-focussed online orientation experience, which included access to an award winning suite of short, preparatory online courses. The other institution provided online orientation support in combination with a national road show of regional orientation events for distance students.
- During *the first few weeks and beyond*, the online learning environment was the portal for most support services at both institutions. From here, students were able to access distance library services, as well as learning development services that were available both online and in person with learning consultants. For niche groups of students, distance-specific services were provided by advocacy, athlete and cultural support teams. Many courses at both institutions also provided residential schools that their students were encouraged to attend. Finally, distance student success was monitored throughout the semester by centralised university campaigns that responded to warning signs.

Phase Two

The *Pre-semester Survey* generated a 39% response rate (n=62). The majority of respondents were female (78%, n=48), over 25 years old (70%, n=43) and identified themselves as Pakeha/European decent (92%, n=57). They were mainly distance-only students (81%, n=50) as opposed to a mix of study modes. Over half of respondents studied only one distance paper¹ (57%, n=35) while 26% (n=16) studied two distance papers and 15% (n=9) three or four distance papers. In terms of other commitments on their time, 75% (n=47) of respondents were employed, with 45% (n=28) employed more than 33 hours per week. The majority of participants (62%, n=38) had a partner, while fewer (43%, n=27) had dependent childcare responsibilities. The *Post-semester Survey* generated a 37% response rate (n=57) from an almost identical group of respondents, demographically speaking.

From before the start of semester, respondents were divided in the way they perceived the value of University support services. The majority of respondents (83%, n=51) lived less than a 60 minute drive from a scheduled orientation event but only 36% (n=22) planned to attend, while 23% (n=14) were not sure. The majority (41%, n=25) did not plan to attend an orientation event.

After semester, on the basis of self-report and retrospective recall, the sources of most useful study-related information were perceived to be the Moodle online learning environment, online library services and the Internet. Notably, 70% (n=40) of respondents perceived that the

¹ The New Zealand term for a semester-long teaching activity. It is synonymous with *unit*, *course* and *subject* used in other jurisdictions.

major advantage of Moodle was access to content as opposed to interactive opportunities with staff (17%, n=10) or other students (13%, n=7). As many as 61% (n=35) of respondents reported that the value of their lecturer(s) was related to “providing information” as opposed to “offering feedback to go forwards” (30%, n=17) or “challenging their thinking” (9%, n=5). In terms of the value that other students added to the learning experience, 44% (n=25) of respondents perceived that there was none, which suggests a highly individualised approach to their learning.

In terms of the time committed to study, only 35% (n=20) of respondents report they matched or exceeded the recommended 10 to 12 hours of study per week, per distance unit. Another 25% (n=14) reported they studied between eight and 10 hours; while 40% (n=23) claimed they studied less than eight hours. Notably, only 24% (n=14) felt unsatisfied with the hours they had studied per distance unit; although only 17% (n=10) wish they had studied fewer papers. When asked whether, during the course of their studies, they were contacted by anyone from the University, the majority (52%, n=30) reported to have been contacted by both their lecturer(s) and another person; 20% (n=11) by another person only; 17% (n=10) by their lecturer only; and 11% (n=6) by nobody whatsoever.

Phase Three

Twenty first-time distance learners participated in this phase of the study: Andy, Beth, Chris, Deborah, Emma, Fiona, Geraldine, Hannah, Ian, Jack, Kane, Libby, Maggie, Nathan, Olivia, Penny, Rachel, Susan, Tom. All names are pseudonyms and are presented alphabetically in ascending chronological order. These participants submitted a total of twenty-

two hours of video diaries. Arising from the thematic analysis of video data was a theme labelled, *Making use of support*. The theme examined the sources from which students drew to support their academic learning; as well as their life as a distance student. After initial analysis and drawing on the literature, the interpretation of these data began with a distinction between Support Seekers and Lone Wolves.

Support Seekers

Only around a quarter of participants were characterised by their interest in sourcing support. Although the research was mindful of the validity of retrospective recall, several Support Seekers mentioned orientation events that had taken place before the commencement of data collection. They also engaged early with the online learning environment via Moodle, which directed them to the website provided by the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning; the Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL) and the distance library website complete with *how to* podcasts. Nathan was identified as a deep learner and a Support Seeker from the outset:

Moodle is very useful – I've managed to work my way around it; as well as the library website and the online tutorials.

Once semester began, Support Seekers regularly contributed to online discussion fora with fellow students via Moodle. Maggie was a high performing undergraduate student with previous campus-based experience and displayed a particularly strategic approach to her distance paper, which included setting mobile phone alerts whenever someone posted a comment on a discussion forum.

In Olivia's case, Moodle was not initially used to support her course so she initiated a discussion group via Facebook; while Beth generated discussion in her private Blog.

Support Seekers were particularly interested in contact with lecturers for the purpose of discussion, reassurance and feedback. Beth was employed full-time whilst diligently studying four undergraduate units by distance. Because she cared about her interaction with lecturers, she was disgruntled when she sent an email to one tutor who responded that her question was, "irrelevant"; while a second tutor took almost two months to respond to Beth's email. A similar level of disappointment was described by Support Seekers whose lecturers' contributions to Moodle discussion forums were perceived to be terse. Hannah was a Support Seeker with an active approach to learning but was nevertheless intimidated by her lecturer:

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.

Against this background, Support Seekers appeared to enjoy the opportunity to make a personal connection with lecturers at contact courses. For example, Olivia was an experienced postgraduate student with an exceptionally deep approach to learning and true appreciation for the value of her contact course. Nathan was unable to attend his contact course due to prior engagements but suggested that future sessions could be videoed and streamed online.

Maximising the campus environment was common among Support Seekers for reasons in addition to contact courses.

Olivia and Susan participated in campus-based study groups and attended meetings at the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning. Olivia was impressed by some learning strategies suggested by her Learning Consultant and exclaimed, "old dogs can learn new tricks!" In contrast, Susan was a newbie in her late forties and, following a period of thirty years since high school education, wanted all the help she could get. She particularly valued the combination of academic and pastoral support that the University was able to provide:

I went to Uni and I saw a counsellor and she was just awesome. She also put me in touch with the Teaching & Learning Centre. I came away from Uni this morning feeling so much more positive.

Lone Wolves

As many as three-quarters of participants adopted a self-sufficient, Lone Wolf approach to study. They were identified by limited interactions with university support services, lecturers and other students. Only a handful of so called Lone Wolves mentioned phone calls from university support services during the course of semester; but without evidence that these interventions had been received with anything more than ambivalence. Chris was never contacted by the university. He already had failed papers on his academic record, withdrew from his internal paper and anticipated failure in his distance unit. He displayed a surface approach to study and concluded,

I have no idea how to find support; I wasn't good at asking for help.

Lone Wolves, regardless of their proximity, did not frequent campus; not even for their contact courses. Libby was one participant

with extenuating family circumstances. Caring for seven children and a terminally ill mother-in-law, she had to put her travel plans on hold — not to mention the four undergraduate units that she was studying by distance. For others, the decision was more associated with the level of priority attributed to study. Deborah, who had chosen distance education because previous campus-based undergraduate units had not stimulated her sufficiently, was a self-confessed procrastinator and reported:

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.

Kane was a diligent student but relied solely on contact with his lecturer via email. Others, however, preferred to make no contact with their lecturers whatsoever. During a period of significant angst, Emma resolved to schedule a meeting with her postgraduate tutor. She later admitted that she had felt lazy and had put off making the arrangement. By the time of Emma's final reflection, she felt sure that her current study path was the wrong one and felt uncertain about her future.

Lone Wolves barely initiated contact with fellow students. They had mixed views about the benefits of discussion forums on Moodle and the role that these played in their learning experience. Many therefore preferred only to observe Moodle discussion fora and can be described as Lurkers. Lurking came more naturally to some than others and Ursula described how she always had to take a deep breath before reading the forums because she perceived them to be full of “waffle” and often felt that she was “missing the point.” Ursula was the oldest participant and attributed her lack of digital literacy to her

generation. However, Ursula was not the only Lurker whose good intentions to become involved in Moodle forums did not manifest. Nathan, who was typically a Support Seeker, was mid-thirties and digitally fluent but nevertheless explained that social confidence was a major factor:

Moodle is available but people's base fears of putting something out there and being wrong... it's very different to leaning over to a peer and checking for immediate reinforcement.

In the absence of substantial interaction with university support services, lecturers or other students, some Lone Wolves did report seeking 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. However, it was nevertheless reported that nothing was quite as effective as interacting with lecturers and other students in the physical classroom. Among the Lone Wolves, Ian was a rare high performer who displayed a deep and strategic approach to study but he was quick to admit the reality of his isolation:

I've been trying to integrate my wife in to talking about what I'm doing but it's hard as it can be sometimes quite technical with writing essays and stuff.

Reflecting on the findings

In Phase One, the audit of interventions at two large-scale distance education providers reinforced the importance of a conceptual framework as a starting point. In concurrence with Shillington et al. (2012), a framework can help institutions to organise interventions across different phases of the study lifecycle. However, the

problem still remains that patterns of learner needs are still not adequately understood in the distance environment.

Contrary to the “goulash approach” depicted by Simpson (2008), the audit of interventions highlighted a relatively comprehensive suite of carefully designed and targeted supports at both institutions. However, Phases Two and Three revealed that the uptake of these supports was poor. Regarding the *path to enrolment* and *orientation* stages, Phase Three of the research was limited because data collection began at the start of semester. That said, participants were given ample opportunity to reflect on all aspects of their learning journey and either they had not used these institutional supports or they were no longer at the forefront of their minds.

As the semester progressed, thematic analysis of video data revealed a reasonably stark contrast relating to the utilisation of support services between students termed Support Seekers and Lone Wolves. Lone Wolves were more likely than Support Seekers to be syllabus-bound and lack self-discipline, characteristics which are associated with a surface approach to learning (Anderson et al., 2011). To some extent, findings of the current study support Baxter (2012) in that the isolation of Lone Wolves was often precipitated by lack of ability to successfully form online relationships with peers, teachers and support services. However, more typically, Lone Wolves simply had a low awareness of the value that can be gained from sourcing support amid, as Kember (1989) described, the pressures of everyday life.

Albeit based on a small sample, evidence from the current study strongly suggests that students who reported the most deep

and strategic approaches to learning were most likely to be Support Seekers. In other words, it is thought that students who demonstrated a strong inner locus of control and who were motivated to focus their attention on what they could control—as opposed to what they could not—found an abundance of supports at the centre of their circle of influence. This finding aligns with Ashwin and Trigwell’s (2012) conclusion that students who have an evoked conception of learning that is more focused on developing new knowledge report adopting deeper approaches to learning and perceive that the learning environment is more supportive of their learning. However, it does not follow that Support Seekers knew how to be the most effective online learners, which supports the observations of Jones et al. (2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study suggests that the success of many first-time distance learners is seriously at risk due to disconnections between students and the services provided by the institution. Despite the sophisticated design of institutional supports available, upon the commencement of distance education, three quarters of students in this study were adopting a self-sufficient, lone wolf approach to study. Arguably, the key to improving engagement, retention and success among first-time distance learners can be found at the interface between student perceptions of what it means to be a distance learner and relevant support services across all three of Heyman’s (2010) key themes. There is scope for further research at this key interface to understand how to more effectively entwine current disconnections.

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