

## In their own words: Student stories of seeking learning support

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### Abstract

Many Open and Distance Learning (ODL) providers report that their students are prone to lower rates of retention and completion than campus-based students. Against this background, there is growing interest around distance-specific learning support. The current research investigated the experiences of students during their first semester as distance learners at Massey University in New Zealand. The overarching methodology was Design-Based Research, within which phenomenological data gathering methods were used to study the experiences of twenty participants from their own point of view. Using video cameras, over twenty-two hours of self-reflections were gathered between July and November 2011 using a technique adapted from previous studies. A grounded theory approach was applied to the process of thematic data analysis. Results revealed how participants varied in their engagement with learning supports, including orientation events, outreach activity, cultural services, learning consultants, library services, fellow students, lecturers, residential courses, and other people. The discussion reflects on clusters of participants who utilised learning supports effectively, moderately and barely. The paper concludes by summarizing how the current research has had an impact on the design of learning support services at one of the world's leading providers of distance education.

**Keywords:** distance learning; impact; phenomenology; study support

### Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has a key role in promoting the goals of access and equality of opportunity to education. It is noteworthy that higher education participation levels have increased considerably over the past 30 years, which is partly due to new ODL study options. On average across OECD countries, 38% of 25–34 year-olds have a tertiary attainment, compared with 23% of 55–64 year olds (OECD, 2012). However, the growth of participation in higher education is not even across regions and countries. For example, in Europe, many institutions are still struggling to democratize their traditionally elite educational systems (Deloitte, 2011). In the United Kingdom, young

people from the most advantaged areas are still three times more likely to enter higher education than those from the least advantaged areas (HEFCE, 2013). In the United States, graduation odds are especially low for students who are African American, Hispanic, older, or poor (Complete College America, 2011).

Universities and colleges are not always equipped to resolve these issues on their own; government assistance and regulation is a key component of making education more accessible (Deloitte, 2011). Nevertheless, governments around the world are being criticised for paying inadequate attention to the part-time student population, which includes larger numbers of non-traditional students. For example, in New Zealand most part-time distance students are ineligible to apply for interest free loans. In the United States, 4 of every 10 public college students are only able to attend part time yet the federal government do not track their success; as if they are invisible (Complete College America, 2011, p. 6). In the United Kingdom, recent government funding reforms appear to have catalysed a 40% drop in part-time undergraduate entrants since 2010–11; and this decrease is likely to have implications for equality and diversity (HEFCE, 2013).

In spite of government policy, digitally mediated ODL has enabled many institutions to explore ways of extending educational offerings to a broad base of students remote from campus (Deloitte, 2011). There is demand for further innovation in flexible and affordable education (HEFCE, 2013; Online Learning Task Force, 2011) in response to the exponential growth of students enrolled in online courses. It was estimated that online models of delivery had attracted 17 million students from around the world by 2010 (Guri-Rosenblit, 2010). In the United States, 32% of higher education students take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This figure compares with 26% in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2010) and 19% in Australia (DEEWR, 2010). Furthermore, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have quickly become one of the hottest topics in higher education with the largest, Coursera, registering 2.9 million users from 220 countries by March 2013 (Waldrop, 2013).

Digital technologies have overcome two traditional challenges of education by distance: the dynamic update of learning resources on an ongoing basis and the facilitation of new types of interaction between students and teachers (Guri-Rosenblit, 2012). Nevertheless, retention and completion have been problems for distance learning ever since the first correspondence courses in the nineteenth century (Dede cited in Waldrop, 2013). At the Open University in the United Kingdom, for example, it has been reported that only 22% of undergraduate distance students complete their study within eight academic years (HEFCE, 2009). This figure compares with 24% of part-time bachelor students in the United States (Complete College America, 2011). In the case of MOOC completion rates, figures are dismal and rarely rise above 7% (Waldrop, 2013).

The completions problem goes beyond the design of a particular course as only a small proportion of distance learners have the drive and perseverance to learn on their own—whereas most people need help (Dede; cited in Waldrop 2013). For example, Anderson, Lee, Simpson and Stein (2011) studied 176 distance students in New Zealand and observed a lack of self-regulatory skills in one fifth of their sample, which they labelled a dissonant orchestration. Dissonance has been associated with poor student attainment (Entwistle, Tait & McCune, 2000) and is the antithesis of intrinsic motivation and internal loci of control, which are critical to distance learner success (Simonson, Schlosser & Orellana, 2011).

While appreciating the importance of student self-discipline and the key role of academic faculty, Heyman (2010) promotes the importance of adequate and ongoing institutional support in an extensive range of areas. However, Simpson (2009) cautions against a “goulash” approach to institutional support services. In other words, if institutions try everything that might work, they fail to focus on the most important things and cannot ever discover what is working best. In the absence of an

effective support strategy, 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). New digital forms of ODL can be an impersonal exercise and online students are particularly at risk of feeling “eSolated” (Appana, 2008, p.15). It is therefore important to help online students cultivate a sense of connection or belonging with their institution (Heyman, 2010).

Teachers are in a central position to identify online students at risk and make decisions about whether to make referrals to study support services (Russo-Gleicher, 2013). Academic support and pastoral care is important for male and female online learners, to an extent that matches classroom students (Jones, 2010). In contrast to the traditional “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” model of correspondence, Dede (cited in Waldrop, 2013) advocates the importance of support networks within the online learning environment from professors and fellow students. In the case of MOOCs, Dede argues that peer-to-peer communication tools are inadequate and that MOOC companies are, “Just kind of hoping that people will figure out from the bottom up how to support each other” (p. 62). Liyanagunawardena, Adams and Williams (2013) agree that neither the facilitator perspective nor the technological aspects of MOOCs are being widely researched.

One problem with the *laissez-faire* approach is 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 (Jones, Ramanau, Cross & Healing, 2010). Baxter (2012) draws a stark contrast between students who are able to initiate and sustain very successful online interactions and relationships with fellow students, and those to whom digital confidence is not intuitive. Baxter argues that, in the absence of adequate support services, feelings of exclusion precipitated by lack of ability to successfully form online friendships may be equally, if not more, powerful reasons than academic issues in terms of why distance learning students fail to progress.

Amid rising numbers of online learners, there is increasing interest in ways to support students from a distance. Distance students and campus-based learners have a very different student experiences and engage with their study differently (Poskitt, Rees, Suddaby & Radloff, 2011), which means that bespoke interventions are called for. Against this background, the objective of the current research was to investigate the nature of the distance learner experience in their own words at Massey University, New Zealand and the interactions they have with learning supports during the first semester of university-level study.

## Methods

The overarching methodology was Design-Based Research, which was chosen to 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 seeking to develop best practice in complex learning environments through the incorporation of evaluation and empirical analyses, from which multiple entry points for various scholarly endeavours arise (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012).

Within the overarching methodology, the research drew on phenomenological data gathering methods to study the experiences of first-time distance learners from their own point of view. With permission from Massey University’s Human Ethics Committee, enrolment data was obtained for 750 students studying via distance for the first time in Semester 2, 2011. The method of recruitment was by email 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.

One hundred and forty students volunteered to participate from which 20 were purposefully selected. 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, and entry qualification.

Using video 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 expectation was for five minutes of video footage per week, although the key factor was not one of length but forthcomingness and insightfulness of the reflections provided. 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.

Consistent with a phenomenological approach to understanding experiences in participants' own words, a grounded theory approach was applied to the process of thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis 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, 2006). By following a realist approach, the student voice was retained at the forefront of the analysis. In other words, participants' experiences were described as fully as possible to retain a sense of context. Within the limitations of grounded theory, an inductive approach (bottom-up) was applied, which meant that the major themes arose from the data.

## Results

Twenty first-time distance learners participated: Andy, Beth, Chris, Deborah, Emma, Fiona, Geraldine, Hannah, Ian, Jack, Kane, Libby, Maggie, Nathan, Olivia, Penny, Rachel, Susan, Tom and Ursula. All names are pseudonyms, which are arranged in alphabetical order to correspond with age. In other words, Andy was the youngest and Ursula was the oldest. Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics.

Over the course of semester, participants submitted a total twenty-two hours of video diaries. From the thematic analysis of data arose an overarching theme labelled, "Interaction with Learning Supports." Under this umbrella, the following sources of support were identified and are discussed in turn: orientation events, outreach activity, cultural services, learning consultants, library services, fellow students, lecturers, residential courses, and other people.

Orientation events typically took place before the commencement of data collection and therefore the research was mindful of retrospective recall. Orientation events were available to distance students both on-campus at three locations and off-campus at 15 geographically dispersed locations. Notably, three participants (Andy, Maggie, Olivia) were not new to the university having already studied during earlier semesters as campus-based students. Three participants (Tom, Susan, Penny) reflected on attending and enjoying an orientation event at one of three campus locations.

*Susan: Last weekend I went to campus for an Orientation course. I learned to write an essay properly and do referencing properly. This will be excellent because one paper [course] has three essays.*

**Table 1: Summary of the participant demographics**

Gender	Male (7), Female (13)
Age	Under 25 (4), 25–29 (4), 30–39 (6), 40–49 (4), 50–59 (2)
Ethnicity	Pakeha / European (12), Māori and/or Pasifika (8)
Location	A Campus town (11), Remote from campus (9)
Mode	Distance only (17), Mixed mode (3)
Total courses	Undergraduate (16), Postgraduate (4)
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 (4), None (3), Full time mother (2)
Dependents	None (11), One (1), Two or three (5), Four or more (3)

Centralised university support services reached out to some distance students in the first weeks. Phone calls from the university were mentioned by five participants (Beth, Geraldine, Hannah, Ian, Susan). All five remarked on the friendly nature of the phone call and appreciated knowing that support was available. However, Ian and Hannah noted that contact was too premature at a point in semester before anything had unfolded. Beth, despite working full-time and studying full-time, believed in her ability to research and resolve future problems independent from any centralised support system. Having just withdrawn from a paper [course] under the pressure of a full-time career, Geraldine reported that the phone call had not changed anything.

*Geraldine: The guy, while he was nice and everything (it was nice to know there are people looking out for you) the stuff he was telling me I already knew because the online content provided is really good.*

Centralized support services for Māori and Pasifika distance students contacted Emma and Penny. Emma admitted to ignoring Pasifika community emails amid the many other emails she received during a working day. Meanwhile, Penny thought about making better use of the service to connect her with other Māori students with whom she described a sense of comradeship. Notably, culture-specific support services were not mentioned by the five other participants of Māori and Pasifika descent (Chris, Jack, Libby, Olivia, Tom); four of whom either withdrew from or failed one or more courses.

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

Learning consultants were proactively contacted by five participants (Hannah, Ian, Olivia, Penny, Susan) to use their Assignment Pre-Reading Service. All five were very pleased with the constructive feedback that they received. In addition, Olivia, Penny and Susan attended campus-based meetings with Learning Consultants. Penny was dyslexic and relied heavily on her consultant for special needs support. Susan, following a period of thirty years since high school education, wanted all the help she could get. Olivia, an experienced student, was impressed by some learning strategies suggested by her consultant.

*Olivia: I met with my consultant and she showed me this technique for reading. I've just been thinking 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 going to learning centre, so I'm glad I've conquered that one. Old dogs can learn new tricks.*

Library services were used by five undergraduates (Hannah, Maggie, Penny, Susan, Ursula) and all postgraduates (Emma, Nathan, Rachel, Olivia). It's worth noting that Deborah and Fiona also mentioned the need to investigate what library services were available but never got around to doing so. In contrast, others reflected on their experience with distance-specific library services from the outset of semester. Nathan reported that the library "how to" online podcasts enhanced his experience from China. Olivia was amazed by the fantastic online learning resources, including the APA Referencing tool. Rachel and Susan were amazed by their ability to order books for overnight delivery at no cost. Ursula's books were sent to the wrong address but she was impressed with how efficiently the problem was resolved via email. Hannah was struggling to access journals but was grateful to find helpful librarians on the other end of a phone line. Most reflections on library services were complimentary although criticism was not unheard of.

*Penny: I've spent a FULL three days trying to figure out how to use my library on the Internet. I even went in to the library and got the librarians to show me but even they weren't really sure how it was working themselves.*

Fellow students were engaged in online discussion via Moodle by four participants (Beth, Maggie, Olivia, Susan). Maggie displayed a particularly strategic approach, 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 used a Blog to generate discussion. Notably, as well as online interaction, these four participants also recognised the value of face-to-face interaction with fellow students via campus based study groups, residential courses and other social events.

In contrast, three participants (Fiona, Penny, Ursula) explicitly rejected the online forums. Fiona felt disadvantaged by living in a different time zone, which she believed would negatively affect the relevance of her contribution. Penny found herself frustrated around computers and described a preference for face-to-face interaction. Ursula was overwhelmed by technology as well as the culture of online discussion, the significance of which she could not understand. Meanwhile, five participants (Hannah, Ian, Jack, Kane, Nathan) were only interested in reading the discussion forums rather than participating. Nathan hypothesised that this trend was due to a lack of social confidence online.

*Nathan: The online forums are available but peoples base fears of putting something out there and being wrong; I'm sure that is in the back of people's thinking. It's very different to leaning over to a peer and checking for immediate reinforcement.*

Lecturer participation in online discussion was observed by four participants (Hannah, Maggie, Nathan, Susan). Maggie was reprimanded by her lecturer for a comment that she contributed to a discussion forum. That said, Maggie valued the online presence of her lecturer, which she appreciated wasn't universal among teaching staff. This message was supported by Susan, who enjoyed the online contribution of one lecturer but was deeply frustrated by the absence of another. The tone adopted by Hannah's lecturer in an online forum deterred her from contacting her lecturer altogether.

*Hannah: My paper [course] 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 around half of participants, email remained the most common method of communication with lecturers. The other half (Andy, Chris, Deborah, Fiona, Geraldine, Hannah, Jack, Rachel, Tom, Ursula) made no mention of contact with their lecturer other than for rare administrative purposes. Libby did not initiate contact but did receive an email from her lecturer that accused her of not taking study seriously enough. Emma admitted to being lazy about making contact with her lecturer but eventually did so to seek advice on some "struggles." Kane, Ian, Nathan and Susan were content

with directing questions to their lecturers via email and were motivated by the responses they received. In contrast, Beth was disgruntled about the length of time it took lecturers to respond to emails as well as the quality of feedback that they provided.

*Beth: My tutor was not very helpful. My question was apparently irrelevant. . . I was always brought up that no question is a dumb question and to be quite honest, that does nothing for anybody being told that your question is irrelevant.*

Penny, despite being enrolled as a distance student, attended several campus-based lectures and sought out her lecturer for meetings. Four other participants (Beth, Maggie, Olivia, Susan) met lecturers and fellow students on their campus-based residential courses during mid-semester break. It is worth noting that Nathan was unable to attend his residential due to a work commitment in China but, overcome with disappointment, booked tickets for the subsequent semester. Fiona was also frustrated at being overseas at the time of the residential and suggested that future sessions could be videoed and streamed online. Libby was aware that her residential was compulsory but was unable to attend due to caring for seven children and a terminally ill mother-in-law. Jack dismissed his residential because it was not compulsory and he simply did not have time amid full-time work alongside full-time distance study. Deborah, who had chosen distance education because previous campus-based undergraduate papers [courses] had not stimulated her sufficiently, was a self-confessed procrastinator.

*Deborah: 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.*

Colleagues, family and friends provided external sources of support. Academic discussion with and feedback from colleagues was particularly important to Nathan whose postgraduate study was highly relevant to his career. Emma, Ursula and Susan had family members who were also engaged in tertiary-level studies. These family extended support especially in terms of proof reading assignments and guidance with technology. Five other participants (Deborah, Fiona, Hannah, Ian, Kane) described their partners as their main source of support. However, while many partners were compassionate, learning support was not necessarily their forte.

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

## Discussion

The current research has provided a deep insight into the engagement of distance students with learning supports. Albeit based on a small sample, findings highlight clusters of participants who utilised learning supports effectively, moderately and barely.

The most effective support seekers were identified as Maggie, Olivia and Susan who welcomed interaction with the majority of learning supports at their disposal. They typically fitted the description of Jones *et al.* (2010) as those who were truly engaged in a wide range of digital activity at frequent intervals. They appreciated the value of ideas exchange and co-construction of knowledge. To this end, as Baxter (2012) suggested, initiating online interaction with fellow students was a central feature of their weekly study activity. Furthermore, they valued the online presence of lecturers for the purposes of discussion; rather more than for instruction.

Beth, Hannah, Nathan and Penny were identified as moderate support seekers who reflected at length on learning supports. Their depth of unprompted recall is interpreted as a sign of their desire in principle to interact with the services and resources at their disposal. However, in common, this cluster reported inhibitors that narrowed their study and support options. This finding highlights some fertile ground for further investigation.

In complete contrast, more than half of participants barely reflected on seeking support and, in concurrence with Jones *et al.* (2010), rarely utilised the digital resources at their disposal. Instead, their stories pointed towards ambivalence and even ignorance towards the existence of university support services. Thus, despite the dynamic progress that digital technology has afforded ODL (Guri-Rosenblit, 2012), the majority of participants told a story that echoed back to the static learning model of correspondence. In other words, those who barely sought support tended to solely rely on their study guide and, in this sense, were syllabus-bound as described by Anderson *et al.* (2011) in their definition of surface learners.

It is worth noting that digital literacy *per se* was not a limiting factor even among those who barely sought support. Instead, social confidence in a digital learning environment is worthy of further research. This finding echoes Baxter's (2012) conclusion that some students need support to develop successful online interactions and relationships with fellow students. The idea that teachers have a role in shaping the social culture of a digital classroom is aligned with Jones (2010) who argues that academic caring is important for online students to an extent that matches classroom students. Furthermore, the current study also supports Russo-Gleicher's (2013) argument that teachers could do more in their central position to refer at-risk students to learning supports. In other words, participant stories indicate that a teacher, even from a distance, can influence how students seek support.

Finally, the objective of the current study was not to correlate support seeking with grades as a measure of distance learner success. However, the current study observes that the most effective support seekers, despite the pressures of everyday life, told the most positive stories about distance learning. In stark contrast, those who barely sought support were those whose stories were most commonly littered with frustration and admissions of waning self-regulation (Anderson *et al.*, 2011). That said, it is worth noting that anomalies always exist. Ian barely reflected on learning supports yet his story was unequivocally as positive as his most interactive peers. This example highlights the danger of over generalising from the findings and underscores the importance of retaining a highly personalised dimension to ODL in new digitalised experiences.

## Conclusion

The impact of this research should not be underestimated as it sheds new light on a significant gap in the literature. The public and private cost (direct and indirect) of the failure to complete ODL courses has worldwide significance. More locally the study reported in this paper has influenced and helped to substantially redesign many of the existing student support services at Massey University. Massey is New Zealand's leading distance education provider, with over 50 years experience in supporting diverse and geographically remote distance learners. A new Student Success Framework has recently been launched by Massey University (Shillington *et al.*, 2012) and implemented university-wide to support both campus-based and distance learners. Notably, in terms of the participants, the video diary intervention played an important role in fostering reflection and scaffolding individual student success; in this regard the study has helped to change participant's lives. Furthermore, the current study employed a novel method of phenomenological data collection that has yielded high-impact results, which in turn has attracted international attention from other ODL providers. As a next step, Massey University is collaborating with a UK Russell Group university to undertake doctoral research that will adopt and extend the same video diary method. Without doubt, the study has helped to open a whole new line of enquiry and the student voice turns heads; nothing creates greater impact than their own words.

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