

Supporting Learners: The Tension Between Institutional Provision and Learners' Expectations

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INTRODUCTION The rapid growth of open and distance qualification programmes over the last decade has introduced a new set of challenges for tertiary education providers. Study from a distance increases the support and interaction needs of learners with a diverse range of academic skills and abilities. In New Zealand, tertiary study is provided through a variety of distance modes by universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, and private training establishments, with more courses and qualifications being offered by an increasing number of providers every year. This escalation has raised awareness of the challenge facing tertiary education providers to provide effective support for these learners to ensure they are not disadvantaged by choosing to study in this mode.

This paper focuses on issues and challenges in the provision of study support from the perspective of the tertiary institutions and of their learners. Although it is primarily a review of current literature, illustrative comment is drawn from data gathered from the participants of three recent investigations. Study 1, *The Challenge of Providing Effective Support to Distance Learners*, questioned a small group of adult learners enrolled in distance

courses on how effective they found the available support systems. Questionnaire responses were analysed, followed by interviews with a sample of those who had replied initially. Study 2 was a study of first-year learners, investigating what factors assisted them to remain committed to their study. This case study on retention of first-year students in tertiary institutions was part of a major research project, *Improving Tertiary Student Outcomes in Their First Year of Study*, conducted over two years in seven tertiary institutions. That project sought the views of students, lecturers, and administrators through questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. Online learners enrolled in the Diploma in ICT in Education were the focus of Study 3, conducted in 2003 by Kachelhoffer and Morrow.

PERCEPTIONS OF

LEARNER SUPPORT Learner support has been defined as "all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies" (Simpson, 2000, p. 6.). Theorists are divided on exactly which elements constitute support and their definitions change accordingly. Simpson divides support into two broad areas: academic support (cognitive, intellectual, and knowledge issues) and

non-academic support (affective and organisational aspects). Mills (2003) regards learning materials as part of academic teaching and therefore outside the framework of learner support. He argues that a change of approach is needed to place student support in a more important position alongside the production of teaching materials. Kenworthy (2003) discusses Rumble's analysis of several approaches, which makes the distinction between "compensatory services," which are designed to overcome students' learning difficulties, and "comprehensive services," those built into the programme being delivered.

It can be argued that the quality of course materials is a significant factor in the success or failure of distance learners and they should therefore be seen as part of the support structure. McLachlan-Smith (1998) discusses several methods of instructional design that can use study materials to create a supportive framework within the teaching-learning situation. Thorpe (2003) sees the boundaries of learner support and course design and development blurring because of the nature of collaborative learning that is generated through online interaction and group activities. A focus group in Study 2 said they appreciated study materials that were "sequenced clearly for us." Use of humour was also appreciated where appropriate.

There is at least one voice questioning the value of continuing to offer support services. Mason (2003) suggests that the development of online courses and virtual learning should be accompanied by a re-evaluation of learner support within the role of the educational provider. She asks if it is still the business of any university to ensure that learning

happens. Because a significant number of the learners enrolled in these courses belong to the lifelong learning generation, she argues they will "take charge of their own learning needs and choose courses which fit the requirements of their lifestyle" (Mason, 2003, p. 91).

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) for education has revolutionised delivery and support options. It has been characterised by rapid development, increasing sophistication, greater availability and affordability for those who continue to upgrade their qualifications in New Zealand. Many institutions are exploring the opportunities for creative online support systems, and a whole new competitive industry is developing based around the provision of online tertiary study. This is leading to a growing tension between learners, who demand increasingly sophisticated online support structures, and tertiary institutions, which may not be able to afford to provide them.

Twenty years ago the literature classified distance learners as disadvantaged compared with their on-campus peers. Learner isolation was seen as a major challenge for distance providers to surmount (Henderson, 2003). Today online communication is greatly reducing the loneliness of the distance learner. In a more recent development, learners studying on campus are demanding the same benefits that online support and communication are bringing to open and distance courses. Turoff, Discenza, and Howard (2004) argue that the increasing availability of ICT is blurring the boundaries between distance and face-to-face delivery:

A student in a face-to-face class that is not augmented by a collaborative learning approach and by asynchronous group communications technology is not getting as good an education as the distance student who has those benefits. (p. 4)

FROM THE LEARNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Traditionally tertiary education catered for students enrolling after graduating from secondary school. This trend has changed markedly over the last 25 years in New Zealand, aided by the adaptability allowed within distance programmes. The Ministry of Education recorded 154,129 students under 25 studying with tertiary providers in 1999, in comparison with 108,315 at or over the age of 25. By 2004 the balance had shifted, with 216,743 students under 25 recorded and 349,917 aged 25 or over (Ministry of Education, 2005). Interest may spark the adult learner's enrolment in one part-time course, although more commonly the goal is completion of a full qualification.

Whatever their reason for enrolling in tertiary study, adults require learning designed to fit in with their already busy lives, as they struggle to cope with the time pressures that occur when juggling work, study, and family commitments. Distance study offers these learners more flexibility by eliminating the boundaries of time and space.

Learner isolation has been identified as an important challenge for distance educators in much of the literature. However the support and communication opportunities made available by developments in ICT could be reducing this problem. The vast majority of

distance learners are now computer literate and can enrol for courses with Web support, where they have the option of "chatting" to their tutors and other learners online. Socialisation is not such a priority for some mature learners, especially the more experienced—as illustrated by the comment of one learner, "I study by distance to avoid the chit chat." When face-to-face tutorials are offered, some learners choose not to attend, even though they live within a few kilometres of the venue and the course is scheduled for a convenient time. Self-sufficiency or lack of time were the main reasons given for this choice (Henderson, 2003).

The most influential support factor identified by our Study 1 learners was their own home environment. This factor remained consistently important no matter which delivery method they are using for their studies. Families can be a mixed blessing, endlessly supportive or a major stumbling block to continuing study (Leach, et al., 2005). One survey participant believed the questionnaire he filled in should also "encompass the support given at home, both financially and personally." Conversely, another woman commented she received little support for her study from her family, which placed her under extra pressure. One focus group member in Study 2 explained, "You get support at college but it's nothing like your personal life—family and friends. It's the personal side of things that drives you." The tertiary institution has a role to play in assisting partners, family, and friends to support learners' needs, even though these groups are outside its direct sphere of influence. Some institutions now develop resource kits for family members, explaining the tertiary system, the challenges the distance learner will

be facing throughout their study programme, and how to support them through these.

Learners today are becoming more discerning, demanding high-quality materials and services, and are prepared to challenge the tertiary institution when they are not satisfied with the service provided. O'Leary (2000) describes distance learners as usually "serious, disciplined, conscientious, and demanding." The tradition of pride in being an integrated member (and eventually a graduate) of a well-established tertiary institution is losing ground as mature learners see themselves more as a client or customer, shopping for the best educational products and services. They are critical of any problems placed in their path by the institution and may choose to go elsewhere to complete their qualification. This issue was raised on several occasions during our surveys. One learner had started her qualification at one institution, then switched to another after a year of what she described as "run around." Kenworthy explains:

The expectations of a more sophisticated, more demanding student body and the growing trend towards life-long learning have also contributed to the need for institutions to adapt and plan for this changing educational environment. One result of this has been a growing trend to perceive potential students as clients or customers, and higher education as a commodity which can be packaged, marketed and sold like any other product. (2003, p. 55)

It was noted that administrators interviewed for our case study often used

"the rhetoric of client service" (Prebble, et al., 2004). Lentell endorses this view:

The growing commercialism of distance education whereby education becomes another consumer good has focused providers' attention on students as customers of services (teaching and learning support) as well as the product (study and course materials). Indeed the quality of customer service is, in the highly competitive distance learning market, frequently the distinguishing feature between providers. (2003, p. 68)

FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In 2003, Mills advocated a change in institutional thinking about learner support in distance education. Academic teaching, which he categorized as the production of course materials and therefore considered to be outside the support framework, was still taking precedence over learning and student support in most educational institutions. He argued that learner support should be perceived as central to distance education provision alongside materials production. From a financial perspective, institutions saw the provision of support as a cost, whereas the production of materials was classed as income generating. Mills (2003) believed, "By planning learner support as an integral part of a teaching and learning programme, rather than an afterthought which can be excised when times get difficult, institutions can demonstrate a recognition of the link between income generation and learner support" (p. 104).

Financial considerations are becoming a major issue for New Zealand institutions

offering open and distance study options. This impacts greatly on the level of support that may be considered. From 2008, an increasing proportion of government institutional funding will be tagged to course retention and completion rates, however distance learners traditionally have a higher dropout rate than those studying on campus. Providing effective support structures could therefore be seen as cost effective by encouraging persistence with study, which would result in higher completion and retention rates. With learners adopting a more consumer-driven approach to the choice of institution, institutions are facing the problem of balancing learners' expressed needs against budgetary constraints. One example is the level of services to be provided after hours, an issue raised by three people among the Study 1 participants. A considerable number of distance learners study at nights or weekends, and they expect to have access to the library and computer helpdesk and to be able to make contact with their tutors when they are studying. Provision of this level of service may require major changes to employment contracts for academic, support, and technology staff, not to mention the additional costs of keeping the institutional facilities open for expanded periods.

An ongoing challenge for tertiary institutions is the provision, maintenance, and continual upgrading of efficient systems, which enable learners to complete the initial and ongoing administrative requirements quickly and effectively. Acheson (2004) comments that it can be exasperating to observe how often the needs of learners are created by factors within the institution. She believes that the role of the institution is to support learners by

enhancing their learning without imposing any additional hurdles in their way. Zepke, et al., (2005) found that two groups of staff with major influence on whether learners stayed or left were the front-line administrative staff and staff working in student support services such as libraries, study skills centres, counselling, health services, and hospitality areas. The first contact a prospective learner has with the institution is often with liaison or administrative staff. Institutional recognition of their importance in the support structure should ensure that they receive appropriate training. Provision of individualised advice and guidance, resulting in the selection of the most appropriate study programme at enrolment time, is a crucial part of the support structure.

Effective tutoring is another important part of the support structure that can result in better outcomes for the both the institution and their learners. One focus group member needed "good tutors who want you to learn and are really committed to their own teaching." Lentell (2003) believes the importance of tutors in distance education has gained recognition in recent years and has encouraged institutions to appoint suitably qualified educational professionals in this role. As recently as 1998, McLachlan-Smith indicated that although some academic staff were academically well qualified, they were poorly prepared for distance teaching. They knew too little about the needs of distance learners or how to promote learning. Howd (2000) encouraged educational institutions to employ seasoned practitioners. In the last five years, the role of the tutor has become even more crucial with the sharp increase in distance enrolments and the

growing variety of forms of delivery. Appointment of suitable people to fill this role should be of paramount importance for the institution.

The skills required from a tutor are many and varied. Merisotis & Phipps (1999) say, "Faculty involved in distance education find themselves acting as a combination of content experts, learning process design experts, process implementation managers, motivators, mentors, and interpreters" (p. 16). Often the tutor is the only person from the institution who gets to know the learner as an individual, so the relationship developed during a course will make a lasting impression and may even be the deciding factor in whether the learner continues to study at that institution, because of the multiple roles they play.

As most of the contact with distance learners is conducted either online or by telephone, tutors require proficient oral and written communication skills and the facility to respond promptly to queries. They must be able to understand the diversity of the learners in their tutor group, which may include members of minority groups and other cultures. As one learner said, "They have to relate and know what situation you are in." Perhaps the greatest skill required is the ability to switch from teacher to facilitator of learning, adopting a student-centred approach to their work.

When we asked distance learners for feedback on their experiences with tutors, their responses indicated a very strong desire for human contact and an appreciation of the ongoing contact with their tutors, especially when the response was received promptly and was easy to understand and implement. They classed warmth and humour as highly desirable

characteristics, and their comments included such words as "accessible," "encouraging," "sympathetic," and "supportive." Learners found their tutors' enthusiasm for the topic motivating and appreciated their personal interest in each member of their tutor group. One learner described her interactions with an "abrasive tutor" (her words) and how this coloured her whole experience of study that year. Another described her excellent rapport with one tutor, who shared her own resources with the learner when they discovered a common interest. The increasing number of institutions that provide support and ongoing professional development for tutorial staff is evidence the significance of this role is now being acknowledged.

The constant escalation in enrolments for distance study raises the dilemma of whether to maintain services at the same level as in previous years when numbers were smaller. Most institutions offer a suite of support services for their distance learners in addition to library services and tutorial support, including academic skills assistance, counsellors, and ICT helpdesk. All of these are reliant on the goodwill and expertise of the staff to provide an efficient, quick service that will be both welcoming and inclusive to those contacting them from a distance. Study 1 participants indicated that although they accessed only library and helpdesk services regularly, they expected the other support structures to be available should they be needed. For example, the chaplaincy service was one form of support that featured prominently in interviews with learners studying on campus, but which is not usually available to distance learners. This is a gap that could be filled by developing a

chaplain's Web site, allowing distance learners access to confidential advice.

ICT—AN AGENT FOR CHANGE

The rapid growth of information and communication technology (ICT) has been the most important development in distance education in recent years, enabling new methods of course support and delivery. Support services, originally available only for on-campus learners, are now accessible to those studying from a distance, thereby removing location as an issue. The World Wide Web has enhanced communication with staff from the teaching institution, as well as opening up more possibilities for interaction between learners. By encouraging the development of active online communities, staff can significantly reduce any feelings of isolation for those learners participating. Alongside the significant advantages, however, come yet more challenges for tertiary providers of distance education. As Tait and Mills state, the first challenge in the provision of learner support in open and distance learning is "the impact of ICT on what is wanted by learners today, what can be provided by institutions, and what restructuring of organisations has to follow" (2003, p. 1). For learners, on the other hand, the growth in ICT has enhanced their opportunities while also increasing inequity, as not all potential learners are able to access the required technology.

Linking learners with technology is not always straightforward. Those who enrol in online learning programmes for the first time need to learn how to use technology effectively, as well as developing the traditional academic skills required for successful tertiary study. Tertiary institutions must therefore provide an accessible technology support

structure on top of their present academic support systems. Discenza, Howard, and Schenk (2002) suggest that learners can become distracted by technology, while the institutions face the challenge of maintaining the infrastructure required. Even online enrolment requires the development of an easily understood information package to ensure the learner is guided towards enrolling for the most appropriate courses. No matter how effective the online support services provided, there is no assurance that learners, especially those who need them most, will use them.

For academic staff the introduction of ICT into education has required new styles of teaching. Gone is the traditional classroom with the lecturer at the front of the room controlling the learning process. Online learning requires the educator to master the new technology and to become a supportive facilitator of learning. Kenworthy (2003) explains this change in focus from teaching to learning as the point where transmission models of teaching are replaced by learner control of navigation, resource use, and interaction. Ensuring that learners participate fully in the programme of study, encouraging deep learning, and creating new methods of ongoing evaluation and assessment are issues to address. Support structures must be in place to ensure that the learner is getting the most out of their study experience. Thorpe (2003) perceives the boundaries of learner support and course design and development blurring for online courses. Course design and learner support start to merge, in Thorpe's view, because the nature of collaborative learning that occurs is generated through online interaction and group activities.

The time factor involved in teaching online is a serious resourcing issue for institutions. Thorpe (2003) explains that, although some course materials will be prepared in advance, the structure will adapt as the online interaction develops, integrating the experiences of the learners with resources provided. The tutor therefore requires highly developed skills of learning facilitation. Our Study 2 survey feedback from tutors indicates that it took them twice as long to facilitate a class online in comparison to a traditional distance or face-to-face course, because of the individual nature of the interactions. Learners also expect instant feedback to their questions, which puts added pressure on the educator. One adult learner in Study 2 commented on her growing sense of frustration when she did not receive a reply to an email for several days. Lentell (2003) believes that technology still poses challenges, including a lack of skills in its use for teaching and learning. Some academic staff are resisting the change to technology-based education and refuse to adapt their courses to e-teaching. If the institution wants computer-based learning programmes to be a success, it would be advised to have effective support structures in place for staff, to develop skills in the new technology and encourage participation.

The communication opportunities introduced through delivery of study and support programmes online can virtually eliminate the feeling of remoteness reported by learners in traditional distance courses. Educators in online classes foster the development of a sense of community through interactive projects and bulletin boards. Working cooperatively in groups is an important part of academic learning and online learners can assist others to understand

new concepts through participating in chat room discussions. As one Study 1 participant said, "That group support and e-mails from others keep me motivated." Computer-mediated communication has heralded a change in communication patterns to a position where people develop working relationships online with colleagues they will never meet face-to-face. Learners adapt to this change with structured encouragement and support from the online educator, forming virtual tutor groups to learn cooperatively. A minority of learners still need encouragement to work cooperatively, however.

Research by Kachelhoffer and Morrow (2003) conducted with a group of online learners indicated that, while close interaction with their tutor was important to all respondents, there was some variation in opinion about interaction with peers. However the majority of online learners recognised the importance of interacting with others, sharing work, and receiving feedback from their peers. They indicated that they felt part of a community and were confident about sharing opinions in this safe environment. For example, incidental online chat between learners allowed one woman to realise, to her relief, that she was not the only person struggling to complete a particular assignment on time. She said, "It was reassuring to discover that others needed answers to exactly the same questions." Another respondent commented, "The online discussion forums have increased my network of professional colleagues."

Over the last ten years, a new competitive industry has developed around the provision of online learning, with many new tertiary providers competing with experienced providers

for enrolments. Kenworthy (2003) questions whether the “commercial imperative” of these new providers will recognise the need for learner support and be in a position to provide this. Within the last two years in New Zealand, several providers have gone out of business or been shut down because their standard of courses and services did not meet required quality standards, and other institutions are presently under review. This commercial imperative will become increasingly important when government funding for courses shifts further towards funding retention and outcomes, rather than course enrolments.

CONCLUSION This paper has discussed the issues and challenges faced by tertiary institutions in the development and maintenance of effective support systems for learners studying open, distance, online, and flexible study programmes, supported by data from three research projects. Distance education has been revolutionised by the development of e-learning, which has almost eliminated the isolation factor and introduced new possibilities for supporting learners. The learner’s perspective was also examined, highlighting their support needs. Study from a distance increases the support and interaction needs of learners, and their expectations are forcing institutions to adapt to the rapidly changing educational environment.

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