

Support Messages Templates

A resource to help you to build engagement with your distance students

Introduction

The rationale for this resource is provided in the first few pages following this introduction. Briefly though, we know that sending distance students regular messages improves student satisfaction in a course and enhances retention, especially during the early weeks of a course. This is a particularly critical time for distance students who will have their initial experiences of the reality of mixing study, work and life in general.

Not just any message will do!

This resource outlines how to construct messages that work. It also tells you how to do this in a way that minimises the time involved. Most importantly, messages do not need to be sent individually to be effective. A 'class' message - the same to every student – will do.

Another way of saving time would be for the programme coordinator or administrator to send programme-oriented messages to all students in the programme, instead of lecturers writing messages for each course in a programme.

Any technology is okay for sending these messages. Use Blackboard, email, even Facebook to send the messages.

The resource is set out simply. After the first few pages providing background, each example given shows you:

- when to send messages
- the intent of the message
- key information to convey
- ideas for information and resources
- an example message (*written for students taking an imaginary Semester 1 course in distance education*)

Several programmes undertake this kind of activity already and report good feedback from students. If you aren't yet doing this – have a go now, using this resource as a starting point.

Sarah Stein
Director, Distance Learning

Engaging and supporting students: A low cost solution

A joint initiative by the Distance Learning Office & Student Learning Development

The support messages resource

Support messages improve levels of student satisfaction in a course and enhance the student's sense of connection with the course and lecturer. There is solid evidence in the distance education literature that providing email message support enhances retention of distance students, especially during the early weeks in a course, for relatively little cost in time or money. Below is a series of message outlines that can be customised by Departments and emailed to students by Course Coordinators or Administrators, or sent using the Blackboard/Moodle communication tools. To cater for the range of activities and practices within distance education courses at Otago we have developed the outlines for particular occasions during the semester.

What we know

An initiative by the UK Open University (UKOU) suggests a minimum of 7 key times for sending support messages. The messages have been found to be effective in signposting support resources and linking students to personal advice available from their tutor and other support staff.

Professor Ormond Simpson (UKOU) argues for the need to be proactive and to 'frontload' a message support programme using what he calls *PaMS* or *Proactive Motivational Support*. He advocates an approach that stresses personal motivational messages rather than purely informational ones and, once beyond the 'front loading' period of the initial few weeks of a course, suggests messages be "short, friendly, encouraging and sometimes just lighthearted". Simpson (2012), in his book *Student Retention in Online Open and Distance Learning*. 3rd Edition. Abingdon: Routledge, provides evidence to show the positive impact of the PaMS approach.

One feature of both parts of the PaMS approach is that good results are obtained even when the messages are written in a general sense and sent 'in bulk'. A weekly course newsletter or 'Update' would have the same effect, but may take more time. The impact of the messages is slightly improved should an email merge that generates individually named and addressed messages be possible.

In sum, for effective support, email messages (or any similar kind of support message) should be sent, proactively, at key times, and especially during the first few weeks of a course. They should be relatively short, motivational and should include information about the key time or activity they are based around, as well as relevant resources. They can be drafted and sent 'in bulk' like a newsletter.

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The messages

The message-outlines below include ideas for points to raise, and suggestions for resources to mention. It is important that they are written as positive, affirmative and, if you can, occasionally humorous messages. They are designed for the following times and topics:

- One week before the start of the course – *Welcome*
- First week of the course – *Setting yourself up*
- For the first video/web(Zoom)/audio conference – *Getting to know each other*
- Second week of the course – *Exploring the DE world*
- Third week of the course - *Effective studying*
- Before the first (or any) assignment is due – *Thinking about your assignments?*
- Mid-course (or a bit later) progress check – *When the going gets tough ...*
- Exam revision time (Week 12) – *101 tips for exam success*
- End of course review (Last teaching week) – *All good things ...*

These messages are qualitatively different from those you send students about the course material/concepts/ideas or about the administration of the course. Differentiate them somehow, for example, by using a catchy and ongoing subject line.

Course Coordinators should determine the timing of messages they will send to students PRIOR TO the course beginning and diary the date they will be sent. Because you will be making the messages personal, it is best for one person to write the personal aspects of each message.

The messages have a set structure – three sections that you can build on:

Section 1. News/motivation

The **first section** is the place to personalise the message. Be yourself to begin – talk about events (at work, at home, at play) in your life. Relate course material to current events – we all love our topic and can see its relevance in some way. Each new section of the material gives a new chance to do this. Be encouraging, make study sound enjoyable and possible.

Section 2. Course progress, announcements, feedback, information

The **mid section** is a place to comment on achievement, talk about what's coming next, provide interim targets, and note support resources. It'll help students pace their work and motivate them to continue. You might mention things that past students have found difficult, provide general feedback on assignments, but especially you can point students toward resources and sources of information that can help their study.

Section 3. The (fun) wrap-up

The **final section** should be informal once more. Leave your students with a final picture of you as a person. You might try a joke! It might even be funny!

Example of a mid-course message

Here's an example provided by the developer of the PaMS approach and adapted for Otago. I'm sure you can do better!

Hi everyone

My umbrella is inside out, the drains are clogged with leaves, and our family cat is spending more time indoors than outside... it's definitely autumn here in Dunedin. I love this time of year for the crisp mornings and beautiful days that follow but I hate the raking of leaves that I have to do! It's a pretty good indicator that we are on the downhill slide to the end of the course though. **KEEP GOING!**

You started your course in March so you're now over halfway through. And like 62.7% of students at this stage you're a bit behind with your course (actually I made that figure up – but I bet it's not too far wrong). So what you need is the world's shortest guide to how to catch up with your studies. Just remember the word **SPUD**:

S - stands for:

- **Skim** bits of the course - you don't have to read everything thoroughly. You can sometimes get a good idea of what's important by skimming through a unit.
- **Skip** – you can actually skip some bits if you need to – ask my advice!
- **Scrape** – you don't have to do well at everything – sometimes it's ok to aim to scrape through a bit of the course if you need to just to catch up.

P - stands for the slogan: 'Perfectionism is the Enemy of Progress' which is another way of saying it's ok to scrape. Although it's nice, you really don't have to get 99% on that assignment.

D - stands for various ways of finding the time:

- **Defer** – there may be things you think you have to do which you can put off for a while
- **Delegate** – there may be things you can get someone else to do, like help with proof reading assignments or abdication from household duties (yeah right!)
- **'Decommit'** – a fancy way of saying there may be things you don't have to do at all, such as social engagements.

U - ah; you noticed the absence of U. I couldn't find a U – suggestions welcome.

So for our next theme, starting next week, the key reading is Bergoli and Schwartz. Focus on that and use your skimming skills on the remaining readings before moving on to the practical activity in your Study Guide.

I'm on leave for two days at the start of next week – heading off to a place where they think the Internet is a fancy new fishing device. That means that I'll be out of touch for two days. Since next week is the first in our new theme and you will be focusing on reading and the activity, I don't imagine you'll want to be contacting me. But if you do, then try Wednesday morning.

Regards

Section
One

Section
Two

Section
Three

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Message structures

The following sections are the outlines for your messages. They all indicate:

- the timing
- the intent of the message
- key messages to convey
- ideas for information and resources to point to within the second section
- an example message (written for students taking an imaginary Semester 1 course in distance education)

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One week before the start of the course – Welcome

Intent	Offering immediate support
Key messages	<p>There's a real person to help</p> <p>Distance is no issue</p> <p>You will have company during the course</p>
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ID cards: How to get one and why you need it: http://www.otago.ac.nz/courses/distance_study/otago019645.html • <i>Distance Learning Information and Support Booklet</i>. This booklet is sent to all distance students • e-Vision: The University's online information service and a primary means of communicating with students. Students should use e-Vision to redirect their OU student email address to their preferred email address • Provide contact details for a real person – telephone, email, office hours (you don't need to encourage 24/7 access!) • Blackboard: Information can be found in the <i>Distance Learning Information and Support Booklet</i> • Moodle: Information can be found from the Course Administrator/Department

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Example:

Hi (*student name*)

Welcome to EDUB432 Principles of Distance Education. So far there are 12 of us involved in this course... so you shouldn't be lonely. I read this morning that the Minister for Tertiary Education is concerned about completion rates in distance courses. I guess we'll have to show him there's nothing to worry about! However, if you are like me, the first couple of weeks will be both exciting and possibly a strain, so here are a few reminders, and suggestions of places you can go to help you through that first couple of weeks.

- Be sure you've completed all the stages of the Course Enrolment process and paid those fees – I don't want to lose you! Look for information here: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/enrolment/>.
- Get your ID card now! Information about this is here: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/student-services/other-services/otago018288.html>
- You'll have a copy of the *Distance Learning Information & Support Booklet*. It's a treasure trove of helpful information. Keep it handy. You can find a pdf version here, under *Support for Current Students*: http://www.otago.ac.nz/courses/distance_study/
- The University will send emails to your student email address – be sure you forward that mail to whatever address you usually use. Information about student email can be found here: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/its/services/messaging/otago028846.html>

That's enough, surely. We start in earnest next week. For you that means lots of reading initially; for me it means another great chance to see the course through fresh eyes. I really do love the opportunity it brings to reconsider ideas and theories in the light of the new perspectives the course will create. Enjoy yourself!

Cheers

First week of the course – Setting yourself up

Intent	Creating a successful personal environment
Key messages	Good study planning is essential Know your sources of support
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating a study environment – HEDC Student Learning Development provides good resources that will help students establish a study environment and a set of study skills that will support study http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/index.html• From the Otago Distance Learning site – a page full of tips and hints about study, family support, the qualities of a good distance learner, University support services and much more http://www.otago.ac.nz/courses/distance_study/• From the Library, the page about the Distance Library Service is at: http://otago.libguides.com/distance

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Example:

Hi

Well, this is it! Week One!

Shouldn't admit it for week one, but I'm a bit tired. I spent Sunday running around the hills near Dunedin at an orienteering event and a few bits of me ache. I hope your start to the course is a bit better – maybe you'll open a bottle of bubbly, eat a chocolate fish or make an onion sandwich (it's strange what motivates people!) as you launch the ship of learning... or maybe you'll be saving it for safe arrival at the end of the course! Whatever your choice, stick to it!

Remember though, *start today!* Procrastination is the thief of time, or, as my parents used to ask me, "Would you put off procrastinating for a day or two?" For you, let's push that out to maybe three months. Start on the course readings now, plan how your work will continue, mark the wall planner with assignment dates... and don't let up!

As well as the reading there's a whole lot of other stuff that will come in handy – things that mean you will have created a little study environment for yourself...

- The library is central to your study. The Distance Library Service is worth knowing about since you will use it a lot. Find out about the Distance Library Service at <http://otago.libguides.com/distance>
- The University's HEDC Student Learning Development is a great source of advice and assistance. Their website has lots of resources ... try <http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/index.html>
- Have a browse through the Distance Learning Support pages at http://www.otago.ac.nz/courses/distance_study/

I hope you find it interesting living the *Principles of Distance Education* [Paper Title] as you learn about them ... and that you use this course as an opportunity to see how they are applied in practice. I'm ready for the bouquets and brickbats that you might want to throw my way!

Regards

Second week of the course – Exploring the DE world

Intent	<p>Orientation to the DE environment</p> <p>Connecting and creating belonging</p>
Key messages	<p>You are part of a wider community of scholars</p> <p>Helpful contacts and resources abound</p>
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind students of the Distance Library Service that can be found at: http://otago.libguides.com/distance ... and ... <p>Also from the Library, Learn How to ... do all sorts of useful things to help with study and assignment work, at http://otago.libguides.com/selfhelp</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting with other students: Be sure to attend the first video/web (Zoom)/audio conference if your course has them, or contribute to online discussions, or ask the lecturer if there is a class list of students and contact details • The Information Technology Services “Student IT” web page gives lots of ways students can get help with IT problems... They can even chat to a student IT advisor live online. They should look at this and other possibilities at https://blogs.otago.ac.nz/studentit/

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Example:

Dear

Had you ever noticed how little press distance education gets? My question is sparked by the comments of the Minister of Tertiary Ed, reported in the ODT this morning – he just assumed all students studied on campus. The lack of coverage is one of the mysteries of life! While there is considerable interest in education, DE is often subsumed within that wider picture even though it has its own quite distinct features. Why do you think that happens given the fact that in the US, 28% of all tertiary students studied at a distance in 2014? This marginalisation, some call it invisibility, of distance students is mainly a characteristic of dual mode institutions – which you have started to read about in your studies (I hope).

At Otago using information technology is one of the ways we try to bring you into contact with each other and with resources available through the University. Try these three:

- Did you know that the Information Technology Services “Student IT” web page gives lots of ways students can get help with IT problems... You can even chat to a student IT advisor live online through Facebook. Have a look at this and other possibilities at <https://blogs.otago.ac.nz/studentit/>
- I have a list of people in this paper who have agreed to their contact details being released. Get in touch with me (email) if you want a copy so that you can contact one-another.
- ... and finally, the Library again ... Learn how to do stuff useful for study at <http://otago.libguides.com/selfhelp>

Well, while you are busy reading about different types of distance education institution, I’m trying to write about them. Yep, I’m preparing a presentation for a conference ... trying to write about the varying approaches to strategic planning for distance education in single- and dual-mode distance ed institutions – and removing the cloak of invisibility is one of the issues I’m addressing!

Keep reading ... your first assignment is due in 2 weeks ☺

Cheers

The first video/web (ZOOM)/audio-conf: Getting to know each other

Intent	Building social presence and sense of community
Key messages	<p>You are part of a wide community of learners and scholars</p> <p>Your perspective and contribution are valued</p>
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video, web and audio conferences are an opportunity to get to know fellow students and the lecturer better. • Instructions for the linking into a video, web (Zoom) or audio conference are in the Course Administration Guide as well as on the ITS site - https://blogs.otago.ac.nz/zoom/ • A Student Profile form may be included in the Course Administration Guide. Ask students to fill that in and return it before the first video/web (ZOOM)/audio conference if possible, as it helps the lecturer shape and build discussion. • If Self-Review forms are also included in the Course Administration Guide, students could be asked to complete and return them. They will be a good guide to students' progress through the course.

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Example:

Dear

Our first web conference using Zoom is coming up shortly. I guess I'm used to them. I'm on the Executive of a national organisation that meets every month by web conference. Web conferences can produce odd moments at times – like the time one of us was so tired that he fell asleep after a while and then started to snore and we could all see him as his eyes slowly closed and eventually his head dropped gently onto his keyboard. We tried shouting but couldn't wake him. The snoring was quite melodious after a while, so we just continued and he woke up again after about 5 minutes – highly embarrassed. 😊

None of you will do that, but I guess that it is a warning that a web conference environment is a bit different from a normal environment - especially if you haven't had much experience of them. So, I thought I'd pop a couple of thoughts about preparing for and participating in an Zoom session into this email.

I'll start by telling you it would help me if you would complete and return the Student Profile page that is [in your Course Administration Guide/on the Blackboard/Moodle site]. It's nice to know a bit about you beforehand – if only what name you want me to call you by. The other way you can help me before the Zoom session is to return the Self-review for the module we've been working on over the last two weeks. Doing that will mean I get a sense of the emphases we need to have during the conference.

Other tips for a good Zoom session:

- Make sure you have followed the instructions about how to set yourself up - it is so important to have a set of headphones and microphone. All the very easy to follow instructions can be found here:
<https://blogs.otago.ac.nz/zoom/gettingstarted/>
- Encourage the engagement of others by posing questions
- Be ready to contribute to the discussion. There is a 'raise hand' feature you can use.
- Prepare for the session!

One of the side-benefits of a Zoom session is the chance it gives you to get a sense of who your fellow students are – you get to hear them and to see them too. Of course, we can turn our web cams off after we say hello to each other if you like - that way, you don't have to feel you are on show throughout the session 😊.

I look forward to hearing from you all!

Cheers

Third week of the course - Effective studying

Intent	Developing mastery of study skills
Key messages	Effective study skills can be learnt You can do it, one step at a time
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading is central to university study... it's a matter of doing so in a way that helps study. HEDC Student Learning Development provides information about reading effectively. Go to http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/index.html /• Planning, writing and editing assignments are important. HEDC Student Learning Development has online resources that will help students develop effective writing habits for university study. Go to: http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/writing/index.html

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Example:

Dear (*student name*)

Another week about to start and I think I can say you've nearly made it through the course. A bit of an exaggeration, true, but most people withdraw during the first few weeks of a course, so since you are still with us you are more than likely going to be here at the end! In distance education (as you'll find out in a later section of the course), retention rates are higher for students who are undertaking study based around their work and for students who are post graduates. Since your profiles tell me that most of you are working and teaching in tertiary institutions and this is a post grad course, we should have a very high retention rate.

I love it when we start out, knowing that there will be some great responses to assessment tasks that will teach me something, or find a resource that I don't know about. In some ways I'm sure you feel the same way. But about now, you are probably realising this study will take a lot of your time and really is quite a commitment.

Stick with it! Help is at hand!

To maximise the utility of your study time, you want to be sure that you are reading and writing effectively. Most of us have some ideas about how to do this, but it is always worth brushing up on those skills. To help you do this HEDC Student Learning Centre produces a couple of resources that will be of value – one on reading for study and one on writing effectively. You will find them here:

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/index.html>

... You should find the resources really useful.

So, we are getting near the time when the first assignment is due. Next week I'll be writing a bit about completing that assignment and the kind of support that you might consider during the assignment writing process.

The key thing is ... You can do it! One step at a time! 😊

Cheers

Before the first (or any) assignment is due – Thinking about your assignment

Intent	Supporting students through the assignment writing process Completing is the result of a process
Key messages	Highs and lows are normal Persistence is rewarded
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The resources and information, including online tutorials, from HEDC Student Learning Development about planning and writing university assignments can be found at http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/digital/index.html• Examples of referencing (citation) styles can be found at: http://www.otago.ac.nz/library/referencing/index.html• Peer review can be valuable – apart from the critical input, talking over the assignment with another person reduces the sense of isolation someone might have as a distance student

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Example:

Dear

My wife is an A. A. Milne fan ... she got the bug when she was a primary school teacher and she suffers occasional relapses. Sometimes it's useful ... like with your first assignment coming up. So I'll just remind you of what Christopher Robin said to Pooh Bear and tell you that it applies to you too...

Promise me you'll always remember: You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.

... especially that last bit. ☺

In case self-belief is not really your cup of tea, I have a few things that might help get that assignment started, written, and submitted.

Assignment Writing: Try looking at the information and online tutorials about planning and writing assignments at

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/digital/index.html>

They are a fantastic way to pick up hints that will help with your assignment.

Referencing (Citation): There are many different referencing (citation) styles. They all contain details of author, title, publisher details and date of publication. You can find examples of these at: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/library/referencing/index.html>. Just remember you are expected to use APA for your assignments in this paper.

Assignment Review: Since good things come in threes, the last piece of advice is to find someone to read your assignment. It might be someone who just reads it to see if it makes sense... it might be someone who actually knows something about the topic and can help. Partner, work colleague, neighbour, parent (in-law)...seriously, if at all possible get someone to read it through before you submit it.

Let's concentrate on getting those assignments written and submitted over the next two weeks. We finish off our current online discussion this week and then you have a week in which to read and think and write before the due date.

Perhaps I should finish this message with another Milne quote ... there are occasions when I feel it applies to me ... but until the end of the course don't let it apply to you...

Did you ever stop to think, and forget to start again?

Cheers

Mid-course (or a bit later) progress check – When the going gets tough

Intent	Maintaining persistence
Key messages	<p>Recall your initial motivation</p> <p>There are strategies for catching up</p> <p>Help can be found</p>
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember SPUD: see the letter below • Students might need reminding that they can access HEDC Student Learning Development at any time by email or telephone <p>Web: http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/contact/index.html Phone: 64 3 479 8801 Email: hedc.studentlearning@otago.ac.nz</p> <p>Or: Tel 0800 80 80 98 or Tel 64 3 479 7000 (from outside New Zealand) and ask for HEDC Student Learning Development</p>

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D - stands for various ways of finding the time:

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- **'Decommit'** – a fancy way of saying there may be things you don't have to do at all, such as social engagements.

U - ah; you noticed the absence of U. I couldn't find a U – suggestions welcome.

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Regards

Exam revision time (sometime Weeks 10 to 12) - 101 tips for exam success

Intent	Support revision for exams
Key messages	<p>Knowing about your examinations is important</p> <p>Good exam results seldom result from last minute cramming Exam techniques can be learnt</p> <p>Don't procrastinate</p>
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exam information is available from the University website at http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/exams/• Students will find HEDC Student Learning Development resources about exam preparation at: http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/digital/index.html• Past examination papers are available from the University Library website http://www.otago.ac.nz/library/exams/• Your students might like to try the Monash University "Exam Strategies Quiz" (but be sure to check the URL before sending it out to your class) http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lonline/study/exam/2.1.xml

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Example:

Dear

I remember telling you before that my wife was an A.A. Milne fan. I get to know a lot more about imaginary animals than I think is necessary. It comes in handy sometimes, though. So, just as you are thinking, “Oh no, exams time! Could things get much worse?” I’ve got the perfect quote to brighten you up...

“It’s snowing still,” said Eeyore gloomily.

“So it is.” “And freezing.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” said Eeyore. “However,” he said, brightening up a little, “we haven’t had an earthquake lately.”

Earthquakes are a bit like exams really – we know they are going to happen sometime, wonder about how rough they are going to be, and we dread going through them. But just as you can prepare for earthquakes, you can prepare for exams. Here are three key messages:

1. Don’t procrastinate.
2. Exam techniques can be learnt.
3. Good exam results seldom result from last minute cramming.

Rather than attempt to give you good exam preparation advice in this message, I’ll simply say that you should go to

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/digital/index.html>

which is a link to all the information you might want about studying for exams. You could also try going to:

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/study/exam/2.1.xml>

to check on your knowledge of examination strategies.

Start your examination preparation today!

Study well. I’ll hope for rain across the country for the next two weeks in the hope that you will stay indoors and study – assuming none of you are kayakers. Use the time well, and enjoy discovering just how much you already know!

Cheers

End of course review (last teaching week) – All good things ...

Intent	To end the course positively and maintain the connection between students and University
Key messages	It's an achievement to have got this far We want you to remain part of the Otago community
Ideas for general information to pass on	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If students are likely to be completing a qualification, point them in the direction of the Alumni Association http://www.otago.ac.nz/alumni/index.html• Ideas for subsequent courses – departmental website or University information at http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/planning/

Distance Learning Office

PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand
Tel +64 3 479 4138 • Email distance@otago.ac.nz
Web http://www.otago.ac.nz/courses/distance_study/

Example:

Dear

Another semester over – for me and you!

To be honest I always feel a little, well, reluctant to let go at the end of a semester. We've thought our way through the intricacies of distance education theory and practice, and put them into play. In the process we've learnt from each other and I feel that we've got to know each other a bit too.

While it's great to have got this far, there's always more to learn. Some of that learning may happen through Otago – and the distance learning pages of our web site will help you find out about other distance courses that might be of interest (http://www.otago.ac.nz/courses/distance_study/)

You might want to keep in touch with each other. The easiest way to do that is to swap contact details. The Alumni Association also provides a way to stay in touch with each other and the University. You can find out all about it at <http://www.otago.ac.nz/alumni/index.html>

And I'm always keen to hear how you are going, so if you feel like dropping me a line from time to time to tell me about your latest distance education mission, go right ahead. If you are Dunedin-bound let me know – I always like to have a coffee with other distance educators.

Good luck for the future 😊

Cheers

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