Identification, implementation and evaluation of support strategies for distance students

Final report

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Introduction

The University of Otago College of Education, like an increasing number of tertiary institutions worldwide, offers a number of postgraduate papers by distance, using the Internet (Hillstock, 2005; Lai, Pratt & Grant, 2003; Reindl-Johnson, 2004). Currently students can complete seven postgraduate UOCE programmes online. Student support is critical to being a successful distance student (Simpson, 2002), and was the focus of this study. Part one of this research assessed the levels of support provided to and received by our students. In Part two it evaluated the effectiveness of support strategies that were implemented based on the results of part one.

Online learning imposes additional cognitive and social demands on the learner (e.g. Lai, 2002; Lai & Pratt, 2004; Kazmer, 2000; Sherry, 2000). Distance students also often have different characteristics than on-campus students, with the majority of our students working fulltime and studying part time. While often learner support is peripheral to the teaching, Mills (2003) argues that it should be an integral part of the teaching and learning programme. Currently UOCE distance students are supported through the university's central services (e.g., Remote Library Services, ITS Helpdesk) and are encouraged to use resources such as the online information literacy modules, developed within the university. They are also directed to a variety of external resources. While these resources provide students with the required generic learning skills material (Johnson & Barrett, 2003), Simpson (2002) identified a variety of other areas in which students need support. These include areas related to academic support (such as following up student's progress, and the provision of feedback) and non-academic support (including providing advice and practical help to promote study, such as providing information on topics such as stress management). This research project aims to identify our current levels of support for students, and then implementing and evaluating systems aimed at enhancing this.

Description

At the end of semester one, an evaluation of the support systems currently provided for UOCE distance students was conducted. All students who were enrolled in semester one and full year courses but not in second semester classes, and their lecturers, were invited to participate in phase one of the research. Students were asked to complete an online questionnaire that was based on Simpson's (2002) questions about student support. Questions were asked with regards their experience and beliefs about support activities, staffing, materials, and past experiences (see Appendix A for the questions). Lecturers were asked to complete a similar online survey, which also asked for their beliefs regarding the role they felt they should play in providing students with

various kinds of support. At the conclusion of the questionnaire, students and lecturers were asked to indicate whether or not they would be willing to participate in an interview to discuss student support further.

Seventeen students (out of 60, 28%) and five staff (out of 7; 71%) completed questionnaires. Interviews were conducted with eight students. Quantitative data from the online surveys was entered into SPSS. Only descriptive analyses were conducted due to the number of responses. The interviews were transcribed and then coded for themes.

Evaluation

Students had mixed perceptions with regards the enrolment process. Approximately one-third indicated this was easy (35%), one-third (35%) indicated they felt it was neutral, while one-third (29%) indicated this was a complex process. All students reported that the websites and coursebooks were neutral 24% and 29% respectively) or friendly and approachable (76% and 71%, respectively).

Students were asked if they felt part of their class, the College of Education, and the wider university. No student indicated they felt not at all a part of each of these, with the majority of students feeling at least somewhat part of each (see Table 1). However, nearly half (47%) felt part of the University to only a small degree, and 18% felt part of their class to only a small degree.

Table 1: The percentage of students indicating they felt part of the university, college and their class

	Small degree	**Somewhat**	**Moderate/ large degree**
University	47	29	23
College	41	29	30
Class	18	24	59

Students were also asked when, if ever, they felt part of the university, college or their class. As Table 2 shows, in most cases this occurred during the course.

Table 2: The percentage of students indicating when they felt part of the university, college and their class

	Never	**When enrolled**	**Start of course**	**During course**
University	6	18	29	47
College	0	6	47	47
Class	0	6	24	71

These results are not entirely surprising, given results from university-wide surveys that indicate that distance students have a lower sense of belonging than do on-campus students. However, it is a

concern, particularly as feeling connected to classmates can enhance the learning experience. One of the interviewed students commented on how a lack of connection was impacting on their participation in their online class.

> *I've got no connection to people in one of the papers, and even though my marks are good, I'm still intimidated, about putting forward my posting.*

Almost all students (88%) reported that they struggled with their course at some stage, and most did ask for at least some help (see Table 3).

Table 3: Percentage of students who needed and asked for help

	Not at all	**Some degree**	**Moderate degree**	**Large degree**
Did you struggle with your course?	12	65	12	12
If yes, did you ask for help?	13	47	20	20

Students were asked to indicate which of the available support systems they used. As Table 4 shows, up to one-third of students were unaware of some of the forms of support available to them. More students made use of course specific support (website, coursebook, and emails) than other forms, although over one-quarter (27%) used the remote library service frequently.

Table 4: Percentages of students using support systems

	Have not heard of	**Never/ Occasionally**	**Sometimes**	**Frequently**
Remote library	12	35	29	24
ITS helpdesk	0	88	13	0
Student computing	24	71	6	0
Student learning	29	71	0	0
Online information modules	35	65	0	0
External resources	12	77	12	0
Website	0	41	12	47
Coursebook	0	29	18	53
Regular emails	0	47	12	41
Individual emails	0	41	35	24
Online support	12	59	18	12
Other students	6	71	24	0

In general, students indicated that the support systems they had used were effective (see Table 5), however, in many cases the majority of students had not used them. The only support systems seen as being ineffective were ITS helpdesk, individual emails and online support. In each case, one student indicated these were not effective. While it was encouraging to see that most students (94%) felt that the coursebook was effective, these figures show that there is room for improvement in

most of the support systems; both in terms of encouraging students to use them, and in ensuring that students who do use them find them effective.

Table 5: Percentages of students indicating effectiveness of support systems

	Have not used	**Ineffective**	**Neutral**	**Effective/Very effective**
Remote library	24	0	18	59
ITS helpdesk	24	6	12	59
Student computing	74	0	12	12
Student learning	82	0	12	6
Online information modules	65	0	24	12
External resources	41	0	29	29
Website	6	0	35	59
Coursebook	0	0	6	94
Regular emails	24	0	24	53
Individual emails	0	6	18	76
Online support	35	6	29	29
Other students	24	0	35	35

Support provided was not solely reactive, with students indicating it was either proactive (35%) or both proactive and reactive (65%). Most students believed that support was provided at appropriate times, with 24% saying this occurred to a large degree, 41% to a moderate degree, and 24% to some degree. Several of the students interviewed suggested, however, that additional support be provided either early in the course or approximately two-thirds through.

> *I think it's probably at the beginning, especially for someone like me, who has only been sorta dipping into things) over the last few years to to go back into something serious. . . that's when you need more.*

> *For me, personally it's the middle . . . It's kinda like you get halfway through and you're 'ah, god, what have I done', 'why the hell have I done this', and it's just that motivation . . . every year of my study I've done the same thing, . . . maybe they could do a check up, around April or something, would probably help if the lecturer's just wanted to, take the time to send out an email...and then, again the equivalent in the second semester*

One student commented that what they needed was confirmation that they were doing what they should be

> *Its' kind of a difficult one, because you're actually always feeling like, am I doing the right thing sometimes, because you don't get that nod of approval, that 'yeah, you're on the right track' sorta thing, [that you get] when you've got face to face, interaction.*

Students had different views on the amount of support that should be provided. A number commented on the difficulty when support was not provided proactively,

> *It's quite hard like, as the student you've got to initiate it all the time.*

Other students noted that as distance or postgraduate students the onus was on them.

> *When you're at 400 you shouldn't be getting too much support . . . we are adult students, there's not a huge amount of support, but we shouldn't be getting it . . . it never hurts if you're more caring, but we are independent 400 level students so it shouldn't really matter.*

> *I believe at post-graduate level you've got to be taking a lot of self-responsibility for things and, and I believe you set up right at the start to know that and undertake that.*

> *When you're doing distance learning you just need to, just, obviously we've got to be responsible at our end to keep regular contact with what's happening on the forum.*

Several students commented on the different approaches to support taken by different lecturers. Another student, who had taken a number of courses over several years, also noted that rather than the support being provided varying,

> *it could also be my perception and my confidence, as well.*

Overall, the findings from phase one were generally positive, with students mostly satisfied with the levels of support they were receiving. When asked to suggest ways in which support could be improved, a variety of responses were given

> *Course reserve used by all lecturers to make finding resources easy*

> *I went in and visited the university when I was in Dunedin for one of my papers this made the paper more personal and interesting and accessible. So maybe a conference with audio/video might be useful. It personalises the experience and makes you feel less alone",*

> *When enrolling very little description is provided about a given paper. I would like full paper descriptions loaded with less jargon and the names of those teaching the paper listed. We are spending considerable funds on each paper, full information should be provided,*

> *Not enough practical applications of theory in this course. A very dense text only and limited postings of case studies.*

While these are all valuable suggestions, the range of responses here, along with the mixed results identified previously meant that there did not seem to be one area which students strongly felt needed improved. This made identifying areas to change for semester two was more difficult than expected. There was room for improvement in most of the support systems; both in terms of encouraging students to use them, and in ensuring that students who do use them find them effective. Some of these changes were, however, greater than could be implemented in semester two. A point several students did agree on was the usefulness of proactive support. They also identified two key timepoints: early in the semester, and approximately two-thirds through. It was therefore decided that in semester two, contact would be made with the students at these times, with a form of proactive support.

The initial support provided was a checklist. This checklist was originally developed by the Student Learning Centre for on-campus students. The Distance Learning Office then adapted it for distance students. I adapted it further, to ensure it addressed the specific activities we wanted our students to be doing (see Appendix B for a copy of the checklist used). This was then emailed to students early in Semester 2. The second additional support provided was an email designed to build engagement. It was based on the email support resources developed by the Student Learning Centre and the Distance Learning Office. These email resources are based on work by Simpson (2003) that emphasises the importance of Proactive Motivational Support. The resource developed at the University of Otago identified seven key times for sending messages. One of these was a progress check mid-course or later, which fits in with the comments by students in semester one, identifying this point as a point of need. As a result, an email based on that recommended for this time was sent. This email aims to reassure and encourage students (see Appendix C).

These two strategies were implemented in two semester two papers, with students participating in these papers invited to take part in end of year online surveys and interviews, as occurred at the end of semester one. These surveys and interviews, however, also included questions that pertained specifically to the additional areas of support. Seven completed the end of year survey (of 12; 58%) with two of these agreeing to participate in interviews.

These students were asked the same questions as those in semester one, as well as additional questions asking specifically about the two interventions. The small numbers of students who responded to the survey in semester two limits the comparisons that can be made, but overall, semester two students reported very similar levels and experiences of support to those in semester one. Three of the five students[1] reported receiving the checklist, and all three subsequently completed it. All those who completed it found at least somewhat useful, with two of the three reporting it was helpful to a large degree. They were asked how it was helpful, with two students reporting it was motivating, encouraging, supporting and all students reporting it was reassuring. As

[1] As the checklist was sent to all students it is not clear why some reported not receiving it. It may have been that they were not checking their student email, or that they did receive it but did not remember it.

the lecturer in one of the papers, I received immediate feedback from two of the students to whom I had sent the checklist, commenting on how helpful and reassuring they found it.

> *What a great checklist! Thanks. I was pleased to see that mine were 'yes' ticks :-)*

In contrast, one of the interviewed students commented that although it was reassuring, it was not particularly necessary, as she already felt confident that she was on track.

> *I guess it sorta confirmed that I was doing the right thing, predominantly. I don't think that it was particularly necessary, but I guess it was kinda helpful, it was good to get the confirmation . . . I didn't think that it was necessary because I was on track anyway, and I was pretty sure I was well on track, everything seemed to be going on, nicely, so it wasn't necessary for me.*

Only two of the five students reported receiving the motivational email. Interestingly, these students reported that it was not motivating, however, they did feel it was encouraging and reassuring. One student commented on the reassurance she felt when she received it, and on the timing of the email.

> *There was an email sent around about that time, which was that SPUD email, which was actually really, like it was quite cool. Like I actually went 'Oh my god, I'm not that far behind, it's alright', so yeah. . . . . I think that probably, yea where the biggest contact needs to happen*

Conclusion

Although the disappointing numbers of students who participated in this research limit the conclusions that can be drawn, overall the results were promising. Students were generally positive about their courses, and were unable to provide many suggestions of how they could be better supported. While the interventions implemented in semester two did not appear to reach all the students, they did provide reassurance at what had previously been identified as critical times. The difficulties reaching students with these interventions also highlighted the need to remind students that they need to check their student email. This research also highlighted the variation in support provided by different lecturers and also needed by students.

A paper summarising phase one of this research was presented at the recent DEANZ (Distance Education Association of New Zealand) conference held in Wellington. I am currently arranging to present a departmental seminar where I will provide an overview of the research. I will then prepare a paper to submit to the Journal of Online, Flexible and Distance Learning, based on this research.

This research is part of an ongoing programme of research and evaluation conducted on our distance programmes, and we will continue to use these findings and that of previous research to improve our programmes this year and into the future.

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