

Living the new normal: Reflections on the experiences of first-time distance learners

Mark Brown

Mike Keppell

Helen Hughes

Natasha Hard

Sandi Shillington

Liz Smith

Significant challenges face traditional distance education. The conventional 'pack and post' model of distance education is under serious threat along with the performance of distance education providers as governments and funding bodies increasingly scrutinize retention, progression and completion rates. The objective of the current study was to contribute to the enhancement of services and resources available for first-time distance learners in the future. The study was framed around Design-based Research involving a mixed method approach over three phases. The third phase was the major component of the study, which involved gathering the lived experiences of 20 first-time distance learners, in their own words, using weekly video diaries for data collection. The research proposed seven key takeaways, alongside seven guiding principles aimed at distance education providers wanting to enhance the success of distance learners in the future.

Keywords: Distance learners, retention, student success, digital learning, video diaries

Introduction

Historically, distance education is rooted in the goals of increasing educational access and promoting lifelong learning and development. Over the 20th Century, distance education has evolved to provide opportunities for study and life-long learning for mature and second chance learners, geographically isolated people and those from minority and lower socio-economic groups, along with students with disabilities (Daniel, 2011).

More recently, anecdotal evidence from distance providers in developed countries report a shifting profile from undergraduate to postgraduate study as the population ages and mid-career professionals strive to advance their careers. There is also evidence of increasing demand from younger students for the flexibility and convenience that distance education provides through the use of digital technologies (Krause et al., 2005). Since the advent of the World-Wide Web, a dazzling array of new possibilities has emerged and a new generation of digitally mediated distance education has fundamentally changed the tertiary education landscape (McKee, 2010). Arguably, new and emerging models of online, blended and distance education have become the 'new normal' in today's socially wired and globally connected world.

In contrast to the traditional first generation correspondence model of distance education (Taylor, 1995), or the 'lone wolf' approach to distance learning, Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski (2009) report that online learning is the fastest growing sector of tertiary education. This growth has been driven in part by conventional institutions increasingly adopting new online and blended models of distance education as a 'sunrise industry' with many having established subdivisions to develop it (Simpson, 2000, p. 1). In particular, the enterprise-wide adoption of Learning Management Systems (LMS) in the last decade has helped many institutions to expand into the foray of distance education. As Sir John Daniel (2011) observes, the digital revolution has the potential to transform the 'iron triangle' of distance education 'to achieve wider access, higher quality and lower cost all at the same time'.

Currently, around 26% of students at the tertiary level in New Zealand study by distance education (Ministry of Education, 2010). In 2010, Ministry of Education statistics show that universities account for 25% of total Equivalent Full-time Students (EFTS) studying by distance with 16% of undergraduate degrees being

undertaken by distance learners. Although Australia has been a pioneer in this field, over the last decade it is estimated that 15% of university students each year have studied by distance education (Nunan, 2005).

In comparison, in the United States the latest annual survey of online learning claims the number of students taking at least one online course has surpassed six million (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Based on these figures, Allen and Seaman (2011) estimate that 31% of higher education students in the United States now take at least one course online. This claim is further evidence of what is described as ‘convergence’—that is, the gradual blurring of the boundaries of the distinction between ‘campus-bound’ and ‘distance learning’ paradigms (OECD, 1996).

In the United Kingdom a recent Online Learning Task Force (2011) encourages universities to seize the opportunities that new forms of online learning provide to enhance student choice and meet learners’ expectations of greater flexibility and convenience. The Task Force concludes:

Online learning – however blended with on-or off-campus interactions, whether delivered in the UK or overseas – provides real opportunity for UK institutions to develop responsive, engaging and interactive provision which, if offered at scale, can deliver quality and cost-effectiveness and meet student demands for flexible learning. (Online Learning Task Force, 2011, p.3).

Methodology

The objective of the current study was to contribute to the enhancement of services and resources available for first-time distance learners in the future. The research adopted a mixed methodology across three phases. Phase One involved a stocktake of current institutional services and supports at two large-scale distance education providers in Australasia. The primary data collection technique was document analysis. Informal meetings with staff involved in leading the initiatives at both institutions also helped to clarify questions related to specific services and resources. Initiatives were mapped against the conceptual framework developed by MacKay, Shillington, Paewai, Brown, Suddaby and White (2010) to support different interventions across the study lifecycle.

Phase Two involved the recruitment of first-time distance learners, followed by a baseline survey leading up to and during Semester 2, 2011. The survey comprised two sections: a reflective section followed by a demographic section. The reflective section was structured to gather student perceptions of reasons for undertaking distance study and to explore their perceived approach to study drawing on the concept of deep, strategic and surface study orchestrations taken from the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) used by Anderson et al. (2011). It was also designed around the Equivalency of Interaction Theory of student interaction with other students, staff and content (Anderson, 2003).

Phase Three had a strong phenomenological dimension where the experiences of first-time distance learners at one of the universities were recorded from their own point of view using video diaries for data collection. Approval to conduct the second phase of the project was granted by lead university’s Human Ethics Committee. From a population of 750 potential participants enrolled for the first time at the beginning of Semester Two, 2011, 140 first-time distance learners volunteered to participate in Phase Three. Of these volunteers, 20 students were selected to participate in the video diary phase using Sony bloggie™ cameras. The sample was purposively selected to broadly represent the demographic and geographic diversity of first-time distance learners. The profile of diversity was informed by a demographic analysis of the University’s distance students during the 2010 academic year. Selection criteria included: age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, subject of study, level of study, entry qualification, along with prior or current experience of tertiary study on-campus.

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

An exceptional amount of rich data was collected over the first half of the Semester. During semester-break, participants were given the opportunity to continue or conclude their involvement in the project as they had managed their way through the crucial first few weeks of study. Eight participants chose to conclude, while twelve chose to continue until the end of semester. Although continuation of the video diaries beyond the initial six weeks was not part of the original plan, the research team was mindful of any sense in which the students felt abandoned on conclusion of the study.

Consistent with the intention of drawing on the principles of a phenomenological approach, a grounded strategy was adopted to data analysis. The purpose was to ensure that the student voice was retained at the forefront of the analysis. That said, the researchers' implicit and explicit theories meant that student responses and subsequent data analysis were clearly influenced by pre-existing knowledge. To address this issue as much as possible, the Project Manager was responsible for most of the data analysis and the interpretation of findings was the subject of considerable discussion throughout the data analysis phase among the Project Team; as well as with an Advisory Group of subject matter experts.

The analytic approach was thematic analysis, which is a technique for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2003). In this study, thematic analysis followed a 'realist' approach in which the experiences, meanings and lived reality of participants 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. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2003) six-step process.

Results

Grounded in the results of Phases One, Two and Three, seven key takeaways emerged from the study. These draw attention to some of the challenges ahead for distance education as it evolves to potentially become the 'new normal' mode of tertiary education delivery:

1. Learner stories add flesh to the 'soft factors' of what it means to be a distance learner. Reflections, recorded in student's own words, provide unique insight into the complexity of studying from a distance.
2. Adopting a conceptual framework that maps services and resources across different phases of the study lifecycle can help institutions to better design and coordinate supports which meet the diverse needs of distance learners.
3. Distance learning was perceived to enable tertiary study to fit around other life, work and family commitments. However, first-time distance students have relatively little conception of the actual demands of studying by distance.
4. Distance students who begin with study goals that are aligned with their wider aspirations and realistically balanced alongside life's other commitments also typically report active study orientations.
5. Although learner stories affirm the importance of the first few weeks of study, there are ebbs and flows in the life of a distance student over the semester; while a second 'at risk' period was identified in later weeks.
6. Digital literacy is variable among first-time distance learners; age and gender are not strong indicators of digital literacy. Irrespective of the level of digital literacy, insights gained from learner stories reveal that few students know how to be effective online learners.
7. Video diaries coupled with the researcher's role influenced student engagement by metaphorically providing a new cave, campfire, watering hole and mountain top for active learning and reflection (Thornberg, 1996). Learner stories highlighted the value of institutions supporting opportunities for first-time distance learners to engage in regular interaction and reflection over the initial stages of their study.

Discussion

Drawing on insights gained from first-time distance learners, alongside contemporary literature on retention, progression and completion, the guiding principles provide a basis for discussion among institutions wanting to deliver quality distance education to meet the needs of students in the future:

- Principle 1: Shared goals
To what extent does the institution assist students to define their goals and understand whether university-level distance education is the most appropriate study option for them?
- Principle 2: Personal agency

To what extent does the institution develop the capacity (skills, understanding and opportunities) for distance learners to engage and purposively develop their own sense of belonging?

- Principle 3: Adaptive empathy
To what extent does the institution promote a welcoming culture which seeks to understand the individual and diverse needs of distance students?
- Principle 4: Personalisation
To what extent does learner profiling and institutional data monitoring allow for customized teaching and learning services to respond to individual needs?
- Principle 5: Transactional engagement
To what extent do academic staff take responsibility for cultivating a sense of belonging through their curriculum design, learning activities and student interactions?
- Principle 6: Networked learning
To what extent do online learning environments foster a sense of teacher and learner presence so distance learners feel they are part of a wider learning network?
- Principle 7: Spaces for knowledge generation
To what extent does the institution intentionally design for reflection and knowledge generation within and across a range of distributed places and spaces?

Conclusion

In the rapidly changing landscape of higher education, the growth of new digital technologies has created significant opportunities for new institutions to enter the distance education community and is transforming the nature of distance education among existing providers. However, in this dynamic environment, it is important not to lose sight of whom the 'new normal' of online, blended and distance education serves. Many of the students in this research would not have been able to better themselves or develop capacity to enhance their workplace and potential to transform their local communities without the option of studying by distance. The new fusion of digital and distance continues to play a key role in providing life-long learning opportunities to a demographically, culturally and geographically diverse population at different stages of the learning pathway. In this regard, the learner stories reported in this study offer a glimpse of the benefits of supporting and enhancing different pathways to tertiary education in the future.

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Author contact details:

Mark Brown, m.e.brown@massey.ac.nz

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