How Can We Help? Supporting Students in Distance Tertiary Education: An Evaluative Study

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INTRODUCTION Retention of students in adult distance learning is a complex, multi-dimensional matter, involving a wide range of variables. Of particular interest is the mature student, returning to study in mid-life after many years away from education, often with considerable anxiety about their own abilities. The voluntary nature of tertiary education differentiates it from compulsory secondary schooling. However, the lifestyle characteristics of mid-life students, busy with jobs and family commitments, together with the voluntary aspect, may affect a student's ability to persist and succeed with study.

Mature students bring life experiences and varied and often complicated backgrounds to study, which may (while also potentially being positive factors) increase the range of possible causes of withdrawal or failure. Many students are returning to study because of economic pressure and are being urged by employers to upskill while holding down a job. Thus it is likely that for a variety of reasons mature students will need significant support during their study.

While both motivation and persistence are relevant to all areas of education, nowhere are they more important than in the context of distance learning. Particular features of distance education are loneliness, isolation, lack of face-to-face contact and encouragement and, often, the part-time nature of distance study, which inevitably means a long, slow process for gaining a qualification. All these are factors that contribute to well-documented difficulties in retaining students on distance education programmes (Willen, 1988; Kortens, 1990; Powell, et al, 1990; Nash, 1991; Yuen et al, 1994) and may have little connection with the original motivating forces that led them to begin.

This study analysed one programme which was successful in retaining 85% of its students through to the completion of their qualification. It reveals some critical factors in the administration and management of distance education at tertiary level, particularly the importance of support systems for distance students within institutions. As with any programme of study, there were unique features which could be evaluated but not generalised. However, while immediate applicability elsewhere may be limited, this research does provide ideas and procedures which are capable of being tested in other contexts. In addition, the results complement the research literature about student support in distance and open learning.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT The programme that was the focus of this research was offered by The School of Library Studies, situated at the Wellington College of Education, New Zealand. The School provided a two-year part time programme of study leading to the New Zealand Library Studies Certificate. This programme was largely delivered by distance education, with two face-to-face teaching blocks of a fortnight each incorporated into its structure. It was the only distance programme offered by the

College of Education at the time.

Students who enrolled in the Certificate of Library Studies were typically female, in mid-life and frequently had dependent children and ageing relatives. All were in work, varying from a few hours per week to full time employment. Many had not studied for two decades or more and frequently had achieved only basic secondary school qualifications (McCahon, 1995). It was common, therefore, for people to come onto the programme with low levels of confidence as students, and with conflicts of responsibility between home, work and study. Many encountered difficulties as they progressed with the programme, both academic and personal, which are revealed in the responses to this survey. Some withdrew, some deferred their study for a time and picked it up again, but 85% continued and completed their Certificate.

THEORETICAL MODEL Powell, Conway and Ross (1990) proposed a model of student success and persistence in a study of students enrolled in a first year distance course offered by a Canadian university (see Figure 1). The authors examined those characteristics which students bring with them to study, which they called predisposing characteristics. Their research focused on only one course at first year level and did not examine persistence over time leading to completion of a qualification.

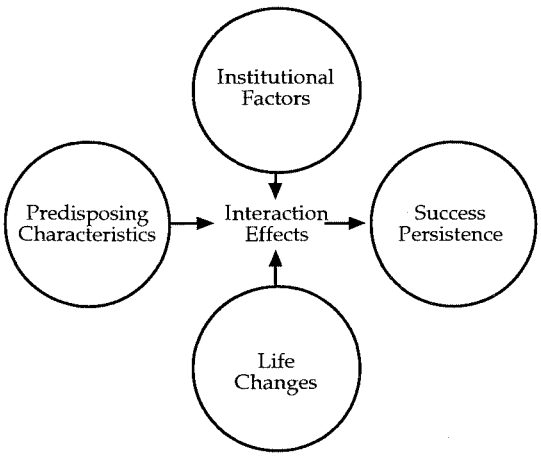


Figure 1: A multivariate framework for analysing success and persistence in distance education

They recognised in their model, however, that two other groups of factors affect a student's progress and may influence such predisposing characteristics as age and educational background. These two additional groups are institutional factors and life changes. As can be seen in Figure 1, it is suggested that it is the interaction of all three sets of factors which forms an individual student's experience and leads to either persistence or withdrawal.

This model provided the framework for the study, but all three sets of factors were examined rather than the single set of predisposing characteristics to which Powell et al restricted their research.

There were several reasons for the selection of this model for the study:

- It is comparatively simple and is capable of adaptation to particular contexts, such as the one under discussion.
- The choice of factors included in each of the three categories can be varied yet stay within the intention of the model.
- It is consistent in its general approach and theoretical grounding with other models and discussion in the literature.

METHODOLOGY A mail survey was both practical and appropriate for this project, in order to gather data from as many of the student group involved as possible. Students were geographically spread throughout New Zealand in both rural and urban situations. Over 70% lived outside the greater Wellington area and the remaining 30% were not a representative group, particularly in terms of the rural/urban balance.

Because the central purpose of this study was to gain insights into human behaviour, experience and feeling, qualitative data was essential. The questionnaire design therefore provided as much opportunity as possible for

respondents to add qualitative comments.

Two focus group sessions were held, one involving staff and the other with a group of students who would later be invited to participate in the survey. The purpose of the focus group sessions was to tighten and finalise the draft questionnaire and to gather collective comment. Some questions were added and others rephrased in light of the focus groups' input.

The questionnaire had three sections, each one representing one of the three 'bubbles' of the model. Section 1 related to the background characteristics of students other than their experience of study. Section 2 investigated life changes such as illness, bereavement, change of job or home, marriage or divorce, and changes to levels of self-confidence and knowledge. The institutional factors in Section 3 included course delivery, block courses, regional collections of resources, the toll-free phone line, marking, course materials, and tutor attributes such as availability and approachability.

Two groups of respondents were invited to participate: those students who had at that time recently completed the Certificate programme (Questionnaire A) and those who had withdrawn from it during the previous two years (Questionnaire B). The questionnaire was posted soon after the class had graduated while students' experience was still recent and their interest level could be expected to be high. The response rate from completing students to Questionnaire A was 60%, which was acceptable given that the survey was a postal one and the instrument was lengthy.

Since Questionnaire B drew a response rate of only 33%, generalisation from it must be limited. There were only 15 potential respondents for this questionnaire and the relatively poor response rate probably reflected lack of interest in being involved with the project given their earlier decision to drop out of the programme.

Summary of Findings

BACKGROUND OR PREDISPOSING CHARACTERISTICS (SECTION 1) This student group was characterised by several predominant factors: they were female, in mid-life and European. Most were in the library profession at the time of participating in the survey, and more than 90% had two years' or more library work experience. Most led busy lives, although work commitments were more often heavier than personal ones. More than half the respondents rated career development and gaining a qualification as their prime motivators for doing this course. A quarter of respondents reported that they had low or very low confidence with study when they began the Certificate and this was closely related to education but not to age. Those who had already achieved at tertiary level, regardless of their age, expressed higher confidence, even when they had not studied for many years, than those who had not gone beyond secondary school.

Previous education as a predisposing factor probably has most impact at the start of study and should, if the course in which the student is enrolled is effective for their needs, diminish with time. Once a student has some success their lack of previous education and familiarity with study diminishes as an area of concern (Benson et al, 1991). This is borne out in the significant increase in confidence at the end of the programme that was reported by many of the respondents in this study. Early support for such students is, therefore, a crucial factor in their ability to move beyond this initial barrier.

Work experience in the library profession was the one factor in common for all respondents, although the extent of that experience and the nature of the jobs themselves were widely varying. However, this was probably influential for many students in that they began with some knowledge of the subject area and a surety based in practice that this was what they wanted to do. For eight students the support they received from their

workplace was a crucial factor in their eventual completion.

Although some of the background factors examined might be less relevant to other student groups and other studies, many of them, particularly issues of 'busyness' and self-confidence, are raised repeatedly in the literature as influential in the progress and success of adult learners (Moore, 1986; Benson et al, 1991; Candy, 1991; Leach, 1997).

LIFE CHANGES (SECTION 2) The student group as a whole had experienced a wide range of major life events during their two years of study. Only 11% of respondents to Questionnaire A reported none at all, while others suffered enormous burdens of illness, change and personal upheavals of all kinds. Yet all these students persisted. It is interesting that the respondents to Questionnaire B did not, as a group, experience any greater number of life changes than those who completed the programme.

The effects of major life changes on study were varied and by no means predictable, lending weight to Paul's assertion that 'there are strong personal variables which...are critical in determining whether or not someone will drop out of a course' (Paul, 1990, p.81).

A student's background characteristics will come into play here, but these are as likely to be personality attributes combined with an individual's response to life experiences, as they are to be more measurable factors such as education, ethnicity or age.

Self-identity will strongly influence an individual's ability to persist and succeed with study. In the responses to this section of the questionnaires it was evident that what becomes an almost insurmountable obstacle for one person, is a manageable challenge for another. Despite reporting a similar range and number of major life experiences to the rest of the group, more than 40% reported no negative effects on their study.

A growth in knowledge and an improvement in level of confidence with study were changes each recognised by 75% of respondents. These were important, if subtle, life changes, and were influential in students' ability to complete the qualification. Such growth enabled students to move along the continuum from emotionally dependent toward self-directed learner (see for example Robinson, 1981; Moore, 1986; Benson et al, 1991; Candy, 1991).

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS (SECTION 3) The School of Library Studies operated with a defined structure and a number of identifiable methods of student support. Structural features such as block courses were intended as support mechanisms as well as methods of delivery. Almost all of these features were valued highly by the student group (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Structure of the programme and effects on study
[Totals do not reflect the number of respondents in the study but the number of individual responses to questions]

Structural Feature	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Distance delivery	46	19	7
Block courses	51	12	11
Deadlines	52	15	5
Deferral option	9	50	4
Selected entry	24	37	3
Regional collections	36	21	17
Small staff	44	22	1

Individuals valued particular aspects differently. For example, distance delivery was not liked by all respondents, nor did they all find it easy. This, coupled with unfamiliarity with this method of learning, presented many students with considerable challenges. Although some respondents stated that it would not have been their preferred method of learning, they acknowledged that it was the only way that they could undertake the programme and were therefore motivated to make it work. For such students extra support

was needed right from the beginning, especially for those with lower confidence with study.

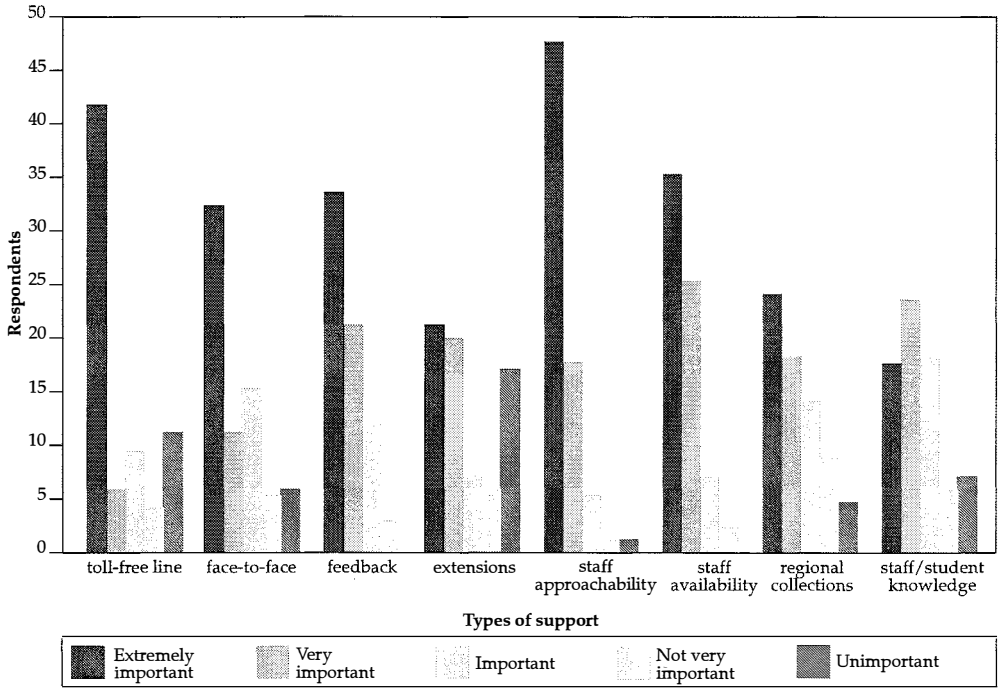
Regional collections of books and resources were regarded positively by just under half the respondents, reflecting the fact that access to these collections was not equitable and geographical proximity, in particular, affected students' use and therefore their response. This result is consistent with the view of the student focus group that the regional collections were problematic. Access to resources was a factor for three of the five respondents to Questionnaire B in their decision to withdraw from the programme. Simple geography was not always the problem, however. An unwillingness to make the effort to locate resources and a dislike of having to share them with other students were also factors.

Even when individuals were less enthusiastic about a particular feature, they often acknowledged that this was because of personal circumstances and that others could feel differently. For example, several students felt that block courses had a negative effect on their ability to complete the Certificate because of personal circumstances but that they were valuable despite this. This finding is also discussed in the literature by Thorpe (1988), Kember (1995), Robinson (1995), and Mills and Tait (1996). The option of deferring study for a specified period gains a largely neutral response because the majority of students did not need to take advantage of it.

Support strategies such as the toll-free line, feedback on assignments, and staff attributes such as approachability and availability were valued highly by most respondents (see Figure 3).

The toll-free line, now a standard means of providing support to distance students, was extremely important for two-thirds of respondents and unimportant for only 15%. These students lived locally and therefore had no need of it. Immediate contact was greatly

Figure 3: Importance of institutional support



valued and the toll-free line also encouraged the development of 'conversation and community' described by Tait (1996). However, it would not have been successful if staff had not met student needs when they did make contact.

Personal attributes of staff – in particular approachability and availability – were rated particularly highly as forms of support. Feedback on the calibre of the staff was extensive and very positive and these elements were also emphasised by the student focus group. As Hall (1998) notes, the rapport between teacher and student is an essential component of successful teaching (by both distance and face-to-face contact) and availability and approachability are fundamental in establishing that rapport.

Nearly 85% of respondents said that they found it easy to ask for assistance, particularly after the first contact, which confirms the approachability and empathy of the staff. A strong theme here was that students felt anxious that their questions would be seen as trivial or that they would not be treated as equals. The attitude and approachability of staff is of paramount importance in this context. As Tait (1996, p. 63) expresses it, the need is for 'interaction amongst equals, irrespective of roles such as student and tutor'. This study showed that the attitudes of staff, and the initial face-to-face contact, established an environment in which such interaction was easy, although some individual students found that their own shyness or reticence created barriers.

General Student Support Issues As outlined earlier, support for students comes from many different sources, the institution being only one. In this study it was clear that home was a strong source of encouragement and practical help for many students. Workplaces, other students, friends and personal characteristics of determination and faith were also crucial to different individuals.

The contribution of home, work and family in providing support is likely to have a profound effect on the social integration of students – their ability to manage the many roles of their adult lives with the demands of study. The attitudes of employers and colleagues can affect motivation and achievement levels as well as perseverance toward completion. Where family members encourage students to enrol and consistently recognise both their struggles and achievements, then there is likely to be a greater degree of integration between study and the demands of family and social life (Kember, 1995).

The institution can be influential in providing appropriate support, assistance with the development of coping strategies, and a culture of safety and trust where a student can feel able to acknowledge that they are having trouble and ask for help. For a third of the students in this study the School provided the most crucial form of support, outweighing home, work, and friends. Such a high percentage confirms the need for the 'planned, student-centred support' which is emphasised in Hall's (1998) notion of the rapport between student and tutor which arises from clear communication, enthusiasm, feedback, intellectual challenge and approachability.

No clear patterns emerged from the data to suggest that students with particular attributes relate consistently to particular types of support. There was no obvious relationship between age, education, ethnicity or personal commitments and any one support mechanism. Such connections are probably as much a feature of personality and experience as they are of measurable background characteristics and therefore cannot easily be isolated and linked. This is consistent with the attributes of adult learning identified by McLachlan-Smith (1998), where the differentiation of one adult from another by their accumulated and unique life experiences leads to quite individual and sometimes unpredictable responses to study. Students' differing abilities to cope and the strategies they used are indicated in the varying

responses to questions that relate to the structural features and support mechanisms set up by the School. Each person's success was an individual response to these factors. For example, while one student recorded 'myself' and another 'my own determination' as the only form of support needed or used, most others needed a mix of work, home, the School of Library Studies, friends and fellow students.

Many of the students in this study exhibited, initially at least, what Moore (1986) refers to as an emotional need for dependence. This dependency is evident in the high number of students who expressed very significant needs for support and great appreciation when it was forthcoming. The importance of assignments as a motivator and as a mechanism to ensure that the work was done, also suggests dependency, whereas in the truly self-directed learner, according to Knowles (1990), 'intrinsic motivation has primacy over extrinsic'. The anxiety expressed about asking for assistance, and the relief that students felt at not being judged or made to feel foolish, further suggest a profound need for appropriate support.

The emotional need for dependence may never disappear for particular students, while others may develop into fully self-directed learners. Some may find that their need for dependence will vary in relation to their familiarity with the subject matter and immediate personal concerns. Over time, and with a positive early experience, learners are likely to progress along the continuum from dependence toward independence. But because there are so many complex factors at work in adult lives, individuals may do this at different speeds and unevenly, often retaining some need for approval, help and support.

Early support is crucial and this was provided to a significant extent in this programme by the initial two-week block course which included sessions on study skills and a deliberate effort from staff to be approachable, informal and friendly. It gave the opportunity to 'launch' the students, so that those who were more vulnerable because of the combination of their age, lack of education and minimal confidence, did not have to kick start their study on their own faced only with a package of printed material. Once launched, accumulated life experiences, maturity, and the ability to manage their own lives all provided these adult learners with resources on which to draw. When combined with the range of support systems described earlier, most were able to persist and eventually to succeed.

Gender and Student Support

An additional and relevant feature in this context and of earlier Certificate classes, was that they were overwhelmingly female. More than 90% of this group were women, a feature that may well have influenced the outcome of the survey. It is interesting to note some variations from the overall findings.

Because there were only six responses from males it would be unwise to make any generalisations and in many respects there were no measurable differences. However, it is interesting to note that all six male respondents gave career development as a highly important reason for their undertaking the qualification and for all but one it was the most important. This is significantly different from the group as a whole. The men saw the block courses and distance education more positively than the whole group, while staff availability and approachability for male respondents were consistent with the main findings. They received support from home, work and the School, but none cited home as the most important source. Four indicated that the School gave them their main support and two did not single one out. Again, this differs from the group as a whole, where home was identified by nearly 40% as their most vital support system.

The dominance of women in the Certificate programme raises some interesting questions about the appropriate nature of student

support for these students. If Tait (1995) is correct, and notions of conversation and community are particularly important to women, then the style of both teaching and support offered by the School was highly appropriate to a majority of the class. Because women place greater emphasis on inter-dependence rather than independence, and on relationships between people (Belenky, quoted in Leach, 1997, p.6), the small scale of the School's operation and approachability of the staff were probably highly valued. The staff of the School was predominantly female too, with, at the time that these students completed their qualification, an academic staff of four women and one man and an administrative staff of two women. One student commented on the 'overall friendliness of the staff members – is it a woman thing or just personality? – it was important anyhow.' A second found that the greatest support for her was 'a personal interest in my situation and a willingness to help'. There was a culture of openness among the staff and a level of personal involvement between tutors and students that was not merely accepted but actively anticipated.

Conclusions and Implications

It is apparent from this study that students' background characteristics and life changes can be highly influential on their progress through a course, particularly in the early stages. Effective systems of support, both institutional and personal, can, however, significantly increase the chances of retention and success.

This is hardly unexpected, nor is it new, although the emphasis on staff availability and approachability is unusually pronounced in this study. However, the notably high retention rate of 85% that was the catalyst for this project is not fully explained by these results alone. It is when the results of the survey are evaluated as a whole that an answer begins to emerge.

The School of Library Studies – A Whole Greater Than the Sum of its Parts? The nature of the School of Library Studies was such that it had a distinctive culture and atmosphere. It was a case of the whole being much greater than the sum of its parts; a notion which was evident from the student focus group. Participants in that session were noticeably reluctant to isolate one element as being more important than another and preferred to discuss the structure of the programme and its support systems collectively.

The School provided many individual features of successful distance education programmes, each of which contributed to the whole. But because of the small size and autonomy of its operation and the intimate nature of the School, these were able to be implemented in an unusually direct way and to be woven together with a resulting coherence unusual in larger organisations.

In most tertiary institutions, usually because of the size and diversity of the operation, it is difficult to meld the various elements discussed in this paper into a coherent entity that will meet individual students' needs. Ensuring that students' background characteristics are taken into account, that they are appropriately handled when life crises interfere with their progress, and that the institution's systems are effective for the majority, are challenges which become even more pronounced in a distance learning environment.

The School of Library Studies was in an unusual and privileged situation since it remained a separate entity as the only distance programme in its parent institution and was permitted to operate autonomously in almost every respect. This allowed students and staff alike to have a deep sense of identification with the programme, and helped to develop Kember's (1995) notion of academic integration. That this is unusual is highlighted by current trends in tertiary education towards

larger institutions, courses and programmes with increasingly high student numbers (Sewart, 1995; Paul, 1990; Tait, 1995), and the demise of niche or specialist departments.

In many large distance education environments, it is a continual challenge to develop a sense of collective affiliation – the sense of belonging in a course, being part of an institution and valued within it. Many distance learning students go through a course without ever making direct contact with tutors, administrative staff or other students (Kember, 1995). They therefore may not have any sense of belonging to the institution or even to the class of students of which they are a part. Where a truly open system exists, in which students may enrol at any time during the year, identification with a peer group may never be established.

The School of Library Studies, by virtue of its small size and autonomous operation, was able to provide the conditions for sound academic integration. This intimate scale was emphasised early in the programme by the inclusion of the contact fortnight. It provided the foundations for a sense of belonging to a class and established relationships with staff. It also gave students the opportunity to see and experience the College itself, thereby establishing an institutional identity as part of their academic integration.

In more subtle ways, the initial fortnight of contact laid the foundations for later study; study skills were discussed in tutorial settings, staff expectations could be made clear, and the culture and norms of the School became apparent. Kember sees the need for

> ... moral or value integration between the academic conventions and norms of the institution and the perceptions and performance of the student (Kember, 1995, p.99).

This is much more easily achieved where some face-to-face contact has been made. The gaining of knowledge about students' which is fundamental to the development of a rapport with them (Hall, 1998; Marland, 1997), has a speedier and often firmer beginning in this way. It is important, however, that tutors do not then relax and assume that no further support or development of a relationship with students is needed.

A consistent theme in the qualitative responses to the last section of the questionnaire was the lack of judgement or sense of being 'put down' by the staff. This was a very real concern, as evidenced by so many comments which referred to empathy, receptiveness, personal knowledge of students, dedication and commitment.

This sense of identifying with the whole School and the staff being 'on their side' adds an important dimension to student support, implying that the whole being greater than the sum of its parts is a valid and relevant concept in delivering distance education.

MULTIPLE STRATEGIES It is abundantly clear from this study that no one form of support can be effective for all students, but that a package of suitable structural elements and support systems are essential, one of which is dedicated, friendly and approachable staff. The recipe for success in this case was the unique package which was the School of Library Studies, coupled with the comparative uniformity of the student group, particularly in terms of age, gender and work backgrounds. A pivotal ingredient in this was the compulsory block courses, which achieved several important objectives. They

- enabled personal knowledge between staff and students to be developed, and initiated a culture of interactivity between them
- provided a means of assisting students with study skills and strategies
- acted as a 'launching pad' for distance study
- established embryonic friendships and study groups
- gave students the chance to identify with the institution and the School
- provided a sense of belonging to a class of peers

- helped to break down the barriers of position and authority which exist between tutor and student, even when both are adult.

In these ways a base is established on which individual relationships between tutor and student and between student and student could be built.

Early contact is essential and, although this can be achieved by other means, it is difficult to find a better method than face-to-face. There is a great deal of discussion currently about the use of technology to support and to establish lines of communication for distance students. While there is much to be gained from email and electronic mailing lists, we need to be careful that the personal knowledge of students and interactivity between tutor and students is not diminished. As Mills says, we must be careful that the tools of new technology '...complements rather than replaces the face-to-face contact which tutors and students consistently find so valuable' (Mills and Tait, 1996, p.85).

When this study was conducted in early 1998, email and electronic mailing lists were not widely used as methods of contact and support on this course. However, given that librarians are, as a profession, highly technologically aware, it is perhaps surprising that only one respondent mentioned email as an additional method of support that the School could have offered.

Computer technology will increasingly replace face-to-face contact in many institutions, as suggested by Nixon and Salmon (1996), Mills and Tait (1996) and Tait (1996), and may be a means of achieving and maintaining open learning. However, the responses here confirm that students both desire and need close personal contact with tutors and that they are often willing to attend face-to-face sessions despite financial or personal difficulty in order to realise this. Computer technology is not yet universally available nor will it be comparable for every student with the experience and value of face-to-face contact. The balanced approach advocated by Mills and Tait (1996) which includes computer-based support in conjunction with face-to-face, is consistent with the findings in this study.

In today's economic and political environment, most distance education institutions cannot sustain the small and intimate type of operation that the School of Library Studies enjoyed. However, they run a very real risk of losing students because of it. In the literature about student support, and in this study, the same messages are to be found: student support is vital, it needs to be multi-faceted, and it needs to be founded in staff excellence. It is important that sufficient numbers of staff are employed and that they are strongly student-focused with excellent interpersonal skills. Tait (1995) notes the trend towards large numbers of part time and contract staff as well as high staff/student ratios. While this may be attractive financially and from a business perspective, there may be a cost in terms of student retention and completion.

Staff attributes are built on intrinsic attitudes and knowledge of students and enhanced by having sufficient time for in-depth interaction (Thorpe, 1988; Lentell, 1995). Strategies for making contact early and setting up relationships between tutors and students are shown in this study to be crucial for retention and completion. Background characteristics such as level of education, experience with distance learning, recency of previous education, and confidence can be major influences on students' ability and willingness to persevere. These do not, however, need to result in withdrawal if suitable support is provided at an early stage.

All of the strategies discussed are time-consuming if they are to be done well, and electronic support systems are no less so. Replies to individual emails often take much time and forethought, without the benefit of the two-way discussion that occurs during a

phone call. The tutor has only the printed words to use, and cannot clarify or check understanding immediately. Therefore the reply needs to be carefully considered, in a similar way to assessing student work. Many students will continue to need and request individual assistance even if electronic discussion groups are available. Many such discussion groups require tutor monitoring and input to be both safe and effective which, again, can frequently absorb a great deal of time. There is evidence in recent studies that on-line interaction can enrich the learning experience for students, but that it is demanding of lecturers' time and requires the acquisition of new skills (Anderson, 1998).

Student support is central to the success of many distance education students, although a proportion will no doubt always be able to complete courses and qualifications with minimal help. Just what support any student will need is dependent on many things, but what emerges consistently from this research, and is reinforced in a wide range of literature, is that the attitudes and approachability of the academic staff and their respect for students are crucial for the majority of the students.

Strong identification with the institution, or at least a particular section of it, is also a significant motivator. Finding strategies to allow a degree of intimacy between students and the institution, both socially and academically, will enhance the integration of the individual into an educational environment.

The challenge for distance and open learning providers is to find successful and consistent strategies for achieving the loyalty and trust which existed between tutors and students at the School of Library Studies and the academic and social integration which led to a strong commitment to complete the programme. Methods of reducing the scale of large tertiary providers to a more intimate level must be an ongoing goal, while issues of staff numbers and workload are crucial factors if students are to be given adequate time and excellent support. Despite the new technologies that enable us to communicate with students in new and exciting ways, this study reinforces the importance of face-to-face contact and the value which extends far beyond the brief period that tutors and students spend together.

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