Eliciting and Analysing Expectations of Novice Distance Learners

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Students who undertake distance learning for the first time at the tertiary level will have had experience of formal learning in other settings, usually within conventional classroom settings. They may have certain expectations of learning through this new mode concerning, for example, what it will be like to be a distance learner, or what will be the pluses and minuses offered by distance learning. It is also likely that some of these initial expectations will not be met, or may be only partially met, and that new beliefs will emerge based on their experiences.

A number of researchers since the 1980s have highlighted the importance of studying the experiences of distance learners. Harris (1987, 135) argued that 'the individual student, especially in distance systems with relatively open admission, tends to be seen ... in rather abstract terms'. Ramsden (1984) emphasised that a student's perception of the learning context is an integral part of his or her experience. A few years earlier Marton and Svensson (1979) highlighted the potential of students' conceptions of learning to have a limiting influence on their approach to study. Researchers have also pointed to the need to develop an increased understanding among tutors, administrators and others of the position and viewpoints of the distance learner. For example, Brew and Wright (1990) interviewed eleven Open University tutor counsellors and found a lack of understanding of the processes involved in distance learning seen from a student's perspective. Jegede puts it well when he highlights the different viewpoints of distance education held by researchers, administrators, teachers and students and foregrounds 'the need for more information in the practice of distance education from different perspectives' (1992, 238). The common thread in such observations is that distance learners have expectations about learning and the learning context and that these expectations influence how they carry out their learning experiences; at the same time, because of the constraints of the distance learning context, the nature and impact of such expectations and beliefs may tend to be little understood and easily overlooked.

It would be a mistake to assume that it is possible to characterise a set of uniform expectations of novice distance learners or to establish a set of commonly-held beliefs among more experienced distance learners. To do this would be to assume that a 'typical' distance learner, whether novice or experienced, is readily identifiable. Rather, one would expect to encounter a range of expectations and beliefs, and to counter any assumption that distance learners form a homogeneous group. Holmberg's perspective that 'diversity, rather than uniformity, characterises distance education'(1989, 128) was borne in mind in developing the first part of a study of the expectations of novice distance learners.

Consider learners planning to undertake distance learning for the first time. What do they expect? Which aspects of distance learning do they have expectations about? What is foregrounded in their expectations?

Are there areas of experience in which their expectations conflict with the realities of distance study? Do their expectations shift over time as they develop more experience as distance learners? What are the emergent beliefs about distance learning which students develop on the basis of their experiences? To answer these questions a longitudinal study was undertaken of novice distance learners.

RESEARCH DESIGN The researcher who attempts to investigate the expectations of distance learners faces two constraints. First, there are obvious difficulties of access to distance learners, more especially in the use of group-based data-gathering instruments (for example, focus groups, group interviews). Second, researchers (for example, Pajares, 1992) have commented on the inherent difficulty of getting people to reflect on and articulate their beliefs about learning, particularly through a single snapshot data collection approach. For this study it was decided that the most appropriate means of access to distance learner expectations would be individual rather than group based. In addition, it would take place through several phases to permit more fine-grained exploration of expectations and to capture shifts in such expectations. Research carried out by Van Meter, Yokoi and Pressley (1994) into note-taking theories of college students was influential in establishing the general approach of the research design. They describe their approach as:

> ... consistent with contemporary qualitative methodologies that stress the gradual emergence of the operations of a study as data are collected and analysed. Thus, rather than a single, fixed set of questions being used through the investigation, the interview evolved as the study proceeded so that students' beliefs could be explored in more detail in later interviews involving other students (Van Meter, Yokoi and Pressley 1994, 324).

In this investigation of distance learners an iterative approach to data collection was adopted, involving several phases rather than the single questionnaire and/or single interview approach. Information on expectations was collected prior to enrolment, then through several phases during the course, of a single semester of fourteen weeks' duration. At each phase of the study the instruments were adapted according to the kinds of information which had emerged in earlier phases.

The starting point for the study was to identify a number of domains of expectations which would then set the parameters for subsequent, more detailed investigation. Phase one took place over a period of approximately fifteen months and involved naturalistic, opportunistic interviews with prospective distance learners who had not studied before at the tertiary level through distance education (N=18). They were asked about their expectations of extramural study (the term used by Massey University). More general questions such as previous study and experience with learning languages were included at times to make the interview more naturalistic. Care was taken to ask only general questions and not to cue their replies to focus on particular areas. The interviews attempted to identify the range of student expectations rather than the specific details of those expectations. However, follow-up questions were asked based on their initial responses. Thus students who talked about, for example, prior learning experiences, were asked:

> Do you think extramural study will be very different from other learning experiences?
> How do you think it might be different from classroom-based study?

The length of these interviews varied greatly, from a few minutes to around 15 minutes, depending on the response and interactional style of the student. A reflective approach was adopted where appropriate after the suggestion of Van Meter *et al* :'during each interview the interviewer continuously

reflected to a participant what she believed the participant had said ... thus providing opportunities to correct any interviewer misconceptions' (1994, 325). The interviews were not recorded but notes were taken immediately afterwards.

DOMAINS OF EXPECTATIONS Content
analysis of the notes from the phase one interviews revealed six domains of expectations. These are given below, with a paraphrase to indicate how each domain was defined.

- **Conceptions of distance learning**: 'what extramural study might be like'
- **Prior learning experiences**: 'how extramural study may be different from attending classes'
- **Learner role**: 'as an extramural student I'll have to ...'
- **Advantages and disadvantages**: 'what the good and not so good aspects of extramural study will be'
- **Success**: 'to succeed I'll have to ...'
- **Control**: 'I'll be able to ... I'll not be able to ...'

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the phase one interview was to identify domains, rather than to explore in detail the content of expectations. In-depth exploration of expectations was to take place in subsequent phases of the study.

The second phase of the study took place with an intact group of extramural students undertaking the study of Spanish and Japanese at the first year level. Students within these classes were invited to participate in the study, and ethical procedures were followed in approaching and interacting with them. The aim of the second phase was to gain more detailed information on each of the domains of expectations during their first two weeks of study. To do this, a questionnaire was constructed comprising open-ended questions, ranking exercises and tasks requiring students to evaluate certain statements in terms of their own experience. The questionnaire was mailed to students and

the response rate was 67 percent. These respondents formed the main sample for the remainder of the study: the 'novice' learners (N=23) and the 'experienced' learners (N=26). All students in this sample had had experience in learning other foreign languages. Responses obtained from students through the questionnaire were analysed, and results revealed that the most detailed responses at this phase were obtained in three domains: conceptions of distance learning, success and control. These are the subject of discussion of the remainder of the article.

CONCEPTIONS OF DISTANCE
LEARNING This domain concerns what is foregrounded in the student's mind about distance learning, in this case, extramural study. Responses from prospective learners related to what extramural study meant to them e.g. a flexible means of study, a way of working independently. In constructing the questionnaire items relating to conceptions of distance learning, the distance research literature was also surveyed. One conception of distance learning quoted in Kleist (1986) had not been encountered in the phase one interviews. This was the view that the distance course is the course you do when you cannot do the 'real', classroom-based course. A variation on this view is pointed to in the question posed by Holmberg (1989): Is distance education to be regarded as a mode of communication in its own right, or simply as a substitute for conventional face-to-face education? This interpretation was included to see whether it is a viewpoint held by students. Information from the initial interviews and from the research literature indicated seven conceptions of distance learning. These were included as alternatives in the following questionnaire item (see Table 1).

A summary of responses from the 23 novice learners are given in Table 2. The most frequent conceptions related to flexibility, to the ability to set your own pace and to work independently, and to the possibility of developing skills in independent learning.

First up, what do you expect ?
What does extramural study mean to you?

✔ alternatives which most closely match your expectations:

❏ In extramural study you can work independently.
❏ As an extramural student you can study at a pace that suits you.
❏ You have flexibility in the way you study as an extramural student.
❏ As an extramural student you can work at your own level.
❏ Extramural study is the course you do when you can't follow the classroom course.
❏ Through extramural study you can develop skills in independent learning.
❏ As an extramural student you are free of the constraints of the conventional classroom.

Which of the above statements most closely matches your expectations
of extramural study?

Underline one, <u>or</u> write your own statement below about what you expect of extramural study.

Table 1. Questionnaire items relating to conceptions of distance learning

None of the novice students viewed distance learning as a substitute for a conventional classroom-based course. Students were also asked to nominate a single item which was the closest to their conception of distance learning. Results from this more open-ended question were consistent with those in Table 2 in that the flexibility characteristic of extramural study was chosen by 20 of the 23 respondents. The elaborations they gave to the expectation of 'flexibility' revealed the interpretation of this term from the learner's perspective. Elaborations indicated that flexibility is primarily perceived in terms of their lifestyle rather than flexibility for themselves as learners in relation to the material. That is, flexibility is seen in relation to the external circumstances of their lives. This was expressed in terms of 'convenience', 'flexibility with other parts of my life', 'fits in with my other commitments', 'allows me to juggle study, work and family', 'does not

Conceptions	Number of responses
Learner Independence	17
Flexibility: pace of study	18
Flexibility: means of study	22
Flexibility: level of study	2
Substitute course	0
Development of independent learning skills	15
Freedom from classroom constraints	6

Table 2. Response frequencies for conceptions of distance learning

Table 3. Ranking exercise relating to success

interfere with my professional career'. A number of students also recognised the flexibility for the learner inherent in the nature of distance learning, but this comment was never foregrounded.

SUCCESS Success has been variously defined in the distance education context (for a discussion on this see Cull, 1993.). Among the learners in this study success was interpreted primarily as completing and passing their courses. A number of factors which students viewed as important for success featured in the initial interviews, including motivation, confidence and persistence. Within the distance research literature motivation (for example, Thompson, 1990), the quality and quantity of teacher-learner interaction (Beaverson, 1988), and the quality of course materials (Jegede, 1992) have been cited as critical to success. The extramural students in this study were asked to rank sources of success as given in Table 3.

The nine factors in the questionnaire item can be seen as relating to five underlying

Construct	Item
'Effort'	Amount of time studying Persistence
Learner characteristics	Confidence in self Motivation
Metacognition	Knowing how you learn best
Interaction	Quality of interaction with tutor Amount of interaction with tutor Campus course
Materials	Quality of course materials

Table 4. Constructs and items relating to success

Success Factors	Mean Ranking
Motivation	1.3
Confidence in self	3.9
Quality of course materials	4.8
Amount of time studying	5.5
Persistence	5.6
Quality of interaction with tutor	7.8
Amount of interaction with tutor	8.1
Knowing how you learn best	8.3
Campus course	8.9

Table 5. Mean ranking of success factors among novice learners (N=23)

constructs: 'effort', learner characteristics, metacognition, interaction, materials (Table 4). The first three constructs are more internal to the learner, the last two relate more to external factors and to the institution.

The mean ranking of results for novice learners are displayed in Table 5. The mean ranking of results for the experienced cohort are displayed in Table 6.

Analysis of the results reveals that novice distance learners placed confidence and the amount and quality of interaction higher than experienced distance learners. Experienced distance learners placed 'effort' (persistence) and metacognition (knowing how you learn best) more highly than novice learners. Several explanations can be given for the difference between the two groups. It could be that novice learners are attuned to building up their confidence at the early stages of their experience of extramural study. Experienced learners on the other hand may have already developed their sense of confidence and are able to recognise the importance of other factors. What the results show is that the experienced learners rated factors internal to the learner as more important for success and novice learners appeared to be oriented more to external factors (amount and quality of interaction) as well as self-confidence. The study will continue to trace any shifts relating to success factors among the novice learners, to see if more internality develops with their experience of distance learning.

Success Factors	Mean Ranking
Motivation	1.3
Persistence	3.7
Knowing how you learn best	3.8
Amount of time studying	4.0
Quality of course materials	4.2
Confidence in self	4.6
Quality of interaction with tutor	6.5
Campus course	8.1
Amount of interaction with tutor	8.1

Table 6 . Mean ranking of success factors among experienced learners (N=26)

An important point to note here is that responses to factors such as quality of materials and the campus course are likely to be related to the individual student's experience. If students are unable to attend the campus course then obviously it will not rate highly as a contributor to success. Similarly it could be that they have found the course materials to be quite uniform in standard, or expect the materials to be of a consistently high standard, and as such do not consider this factor to be of significance. Thus it was not possible to be entirely sure of the degree to which the student's individual circumstances and experiences shaped their interpretations of some of the items in this domain of expectation.

CONTROL One other domain which featured prominently in the responses of prospective students related to their expectations of choice in distance learning and personal control over their learning. Early indications were that this is a complex construct, comprising varying interpretations, with both positive and negative attitudinal factors attached. It was thus decided to elicit further information about this construct through open-ended questions. Learners were asked to provide written responses to the following questions:

> Do you think extramural students have control over their learning?
> What do you have control over?
> What do you not have control over?

Content analysis of their responses revealed two broad categories of control: control in relation to the study context and control in relation to input and interaction. Students were strongly divided over whether they saw themselves as having control over the dimensions of the study context, and input and interaction. In addition many students expressed the ambiguities inherent in the notion of control. The responses are summarised in Table 7.

Results reveal that the possibilities for control inherent in the distance study context also mean the student is vulnerable to the intrusion of external commitments into the study process. One student put it well when she wrote:

Dimensions	I do have control over...	I do not have control over...
Study context	When I study (timing, frequency duration) Where I study How I study (pace and amount) Integrating study into my life	But whether I actually get the time... Time frames of the course (for example, assignment due dates, when I get feedback) External commitments often impinge
Input and interaction	I can repeat, reorder ... input Time is not wasted on materials and interactions irrelevant to my needs	Low levels of interaction - cannot learn from others Lack of immediate feedback Depth and extent of feedback

Table 7. Responses relating to the domain of control among novice learners.

As a distance learner I think I'll have the time to study - I couldn't fit travelling time, trying to find a park ... into my life. But at the same time because I'm studying at home I am concerned whether I'll actually get the time. I guess that's where you have to make the time.

The opportunities to integrate study into daily life are seen by many novice learners as highly attractive but are soon found to be something of a two-edged sword since other pressures can detract from focus and priorities.

Novice distance learners also interpreted control in relation to input and interaction; they felt they had control over input due to the packaged nature of the course:

Now I have received all the material - it's all here - sometimes in class if your attention wanes you miss out on a really important point and then you're lost. Here I have everything written down, or tapes I can play again and again.

Also two students referred positively to the control they had over their interactions:

For me I think I like having control over interactions. I know I won't be able to learn from others in the class - their questions can be helpful when you realise it's something you're also not sure about, but mostly I think you waste a lot of time. This way of study can be more concentrated, streamlined, because I won't have to waste time sitting through things that aren't relevant to me.

However these two comments were unusual. Most students felt the main thing they did not have control over was the lack of interaction and input, and they saw this as a detractor. One student wrote relating to input:

I'm quite apprehensive. I'm very new to all of this. When you attend classes you get the input - I have to make the input. I wonder how I'll go.

A typical comment concerning interaction was:

At this stage I feel the lack of interaction is something I have to accept - I have no control over that. But I think too that I'll have no control over the feedback I get from the tutor - how much they give me and whether it's what I really need to help me or not. I know I could always ring up the tutor - but I'm not sure I'll do that much.

Students were asked a final general question:

Is the freedom in extramural study an advantage or a disadvantage? Why?

Replies to this question were consistent with the kinds of ambiguities given in earlier responses relating to control. For the most part they felt the freedom was an advantage, but expressed concerns about motivation and focus in the relatively free environment. The novice learners in this group expressed their expectation that they would have to manage their feelings about the learning, especially when feeling unmotivated. Thus freedom was seen as an advantage, but also as requiring of the learner greater affective control and discipline than in the classroom setting. A concern with affective control of learning among distance students was one of the findings in a comparative study by White (1995, 1997) of classroom and distance learners.

CONCLUSION This paper has presented some preliminary insights into how distance learning is conceptualised by novice learners. Within this group, extramural study is seen as offering flexibility to the learner within the wider context of their lives. The notion of success is seen in the early stages of extramural study as dependent more on external factors (for example, quality of materials and interaction), and less on internal factors relating to the learner (for example persistence, self-knowledge). This domain is a promising avenue for investigation in later phases of the study to see if there is a shift from external to

internal locus of control as learners accrue experience in the new learning context. Early stages of the study have also pointed to the complexities surrounding the domain of control and choice in distance learning. The possibilities for control are seen by learners as pertaining to the study context (this is close to the earlier discussion of flexibility) and to input and interaction. Within these two areas, negative perspectives (for example, limitations on spontaneous input) were viewed as concomitant with the more positive aspects of freedom (for example, freedom from unwanted input). The need for affective control and discipline was highlighted in the freer learning environment of extramural study. Finally, it is important to emphasise the preliminary nature of this research and that what is reported here relates to the first two phases of a longitudinal study. Although exploration of the expectations and emergent beliefs of distance learners has barely begun, it is an important area of enquiry within distance education if we are to develop a deeper understanding of the distance learning process.

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