



## Supporting Distance Learners: Making Practice More Effective

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### Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative evaluation of the postgraduate courses offered by distance in one university department. The types and amount of support provided to students was evaluated and compared with Simpson's (2008a) Proactive Motivational Support model (PaMS). While students were largely satisfied with the support they received during their studies, their perceptions of the levels and effectiveness of that support varied. They also perceived a variation in the levels of support between individual courses. A number of areas where support could be improved were identified, including those that met the characteristics of the PaMS model.

**Keywords:** distance learning; support; motivation; PaMS; expectations

### Introduction

The numbers of students involved in distance courses at the tertiary level is relatively small in New Zealand, but distance education is an important feature of our education system (Guiney, 2014). As is the case worldwide, distance education offers opportunities to people who would not otherwise be able to participate in tertiary education due to their location, or because of work or family responsibilities (Guiney, 2014; Newberry & DeLuca, 2014).

Distance learning is perceived to impose additional demands on the learner (Lai, 2002). These demands have been categorised in a number of ways. For example, Lai (2002) referred to cognitive and social demands, while Sherry (2000) divided the areas into learner, organisational, and technological factors. Kazmer (2000) separated the demands further, identifying seven areas associated with this form of study: planning, technology, workload, social issues, the integration of life and study, administrative adaptation, and effort and rewards. Despite these varying categorisations, recognition of a range of reasons why distance students might not succeed is common to all models. It is also notable that, in comparison with on-campus students, distance students tend to be older and are more likely to be studying part time, often due to family or work responsibilities (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Guiney, 2014). These responsibilities can exacerbate the difficulties associated with studying by distance. This is especially true for those who are new to online learning, and therefore have to negotiate not only the content, but also the entire learning experience (McQuaid, 2010; Reisetter, Lapointe, & Korcуска, 2007).

A key aspect of alleviating and overcoming the difficulties faced by distance students is the provision of appropriate and effective support (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010; Guiney,

2014; Heyman, 2010; Mills, 2003; Park & Choi, 2009). Support needs to cover all aspects of students' experiences (Heyman, 2010), and be provided when students need it (Newberry & DeLuca, 2014). Simpson (2002; 2013) divided the types of support students required into two categories: academic support (the knowledge relating to the specific course and general academic skills) and non-academic support (affective and organisational). These two types of support are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** Types of support required by students (adapted from Simpson, 2002, pp. 6-7)

Type of support	Areas of support
<b>Academic</b>	Defining
	Explaining
	Assessing
	Chasing progress
	Developing skills
	Exploring
	Enriching
<b>Non-academic</b>	Advising
	Assessing (in non-academic areas)
	Advocating
	Agitating
	Acting
	Administering

In a contrasting approach to considering non-academic support, Moisey and Hughes (2008) classified such support in terms of when it was needed. For example, before the course, learners need support to help prepare for and make decisions about their course, and during their course they need support with academic, administrative, and technical issues.

Simpson (2008b) recognised a need for theories that explore and explain the role of student support in distance learning, and developed his Proactive Motivational Support (PaMS) theoretical model based on motivation. It includes the Strengths Approach theory from Positive Psychology (e.g., Boniwell, 2005, and Dweck's 1999 Self Theory; both cited in Simpson, 2008b). Applying these theories with what is known about effective motivation, Simpson (2008b) described the PaMS stance as being proactive and motivational. It would be:

1. individual (focus on individual student needs rather than a top-down one-size-fits-all approach)
2. interactive (allow learners to interact with their support rather than a take-it-or-leave-it approach)
3. motivational (be informed by, and use, both Self Theory and the Strengths Approach (p. 168).

Contacting individual students allows support to be individualised, and making contact by phone or email allows for interaction during which staff can identify and help the student understand their strengths. During this contact, staff should remind students that, with effort, they can succeed at the course. Staff can also get to know students as individuals, identifying aspects of

their personalities and habits that can be strengths in distance learning (see Simpson, 2008a, for an example of how to apply PaMS with new students).

From the Strengths Approach came a focus on the strengths students brought to their study, rather than their weaknesses. Applying this approach to distance learning involves distance teaching staff finding out about the personal lives of their students to identify their strengths (Boniwell, 2003, as cited in Simpson, 2008b). For example, a student who is juggling work and family life may have strengths at managing multiple tasks and needs, and in managing time. Helping them to realise this, and then applying it to their study, can be motivational.

Dweck's Self Theory (1999, as cited in Simpson 2008b) proposed that people view their intelligence as fixed or as having the potential to be enhanced through effort. Simpson (2008b) believed students and staff involved in distance learning need to be convinced of the latter approach, so students can be encouraged to persevere to succeed and overcome barriers. When applying this theory, staff need to praise effort over achievement.

Recognising the complexity of support systems, Simpson (2002) identified twenty-one questions that he recommended institutions providing distance education use to review student support. He clustered these questions in four groups: support activities; materials; support staffing; and supporting students in practice. One final additional question asked students whether they always had the support they needed when they needed it, and how this could be improved.

This research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the current support strategies implemented in programmes offered by one university department using the PaMS model.

## Context

The university department in which the study was based has offered distance courses in education, largely at the postgraduate level, since 1994, and online courses since 1997. At the time the research was conducted, seven postgraduate qualifications could be completed wholly online. Most of the students taking these courses are mature students who are working full time and studying part time. In most cases they are teachers who are undertaking the courses to upgrade their qualifications and/or enhance their understanding of a variety of educational issues.

The online programmes were delivered through the Moodle learning management system, with support provided by individual lecturers through their course website, and by the university's central support services. Students were sent the book, *Distance Learning Information and Support* at the start of that year's courses. They were directed to a variety of internal resources, and to external resources on topics such as referencing and searching. At the start of each course they received a course pack comprising a hard-copy version of the coursebook and a CD containing electronic copies of the coursebook, the assignment coverpage, a video of an Endnote tutorial, and readings that could be distributed without breaching copyright.

This research project aimed, firstly, to determine students' perceptions of the current levels and kinds of support; secondly, to consider the degree to which we were effectively providing all areas of support previously identified; and thirdly, whether the characteristics of PaMS were being met. It was part of a continuing research programme aimed at enhancing the distance programmes (e.g., Lai, 2002; Lai & Pratt, 2004; Lai & Pratt, 2006; Pratt, 2009). Data reported here is from the qualitative phase of a larger mixed-methods study.

## Method

Ethics approval was sought and granted from the university. At the start of Semester 1, all students taking Semester 1 and full-year courses were invited to participate in an interview

exploring student support. Eight students agreed to take part in an interview at this time. This was repeated in Semester 2 and included those students who were enrolled in Semester 2 and full-year courses who had not previously been invited to participate. Two more students participated in interviews at this time. A total of ten students were therefore involved in the project: eight in group one, and two in group two.

Because the researcher was involved in the delivery of the distance education programme, an independent research assistant conducted the interviews. Students were interviewed by phone or Skype, depending on their preference. Interviews took 20–30 minutes, and were audio recorded. The interviews were semi-structured and based on Simpson's (2002) questions. The questions covered three of Simpson's four topics. Additional questions were also used for the larger study (see Appendix A).

To protect the anonymity of those who participated, the research assistant replaced names of staff, students, and courses with codes, and removed other identifying information before passing the transcripts to the researcher. The recording failed in one interview; however, the interviewer took notes, which she passed on in lieu of the transcript. Transcripts were analysed thematically using both inductive and deductive codes. A priori themes were identified from the literature and used in conjunction with codes developed from the data.

## **Findings**

Simpson's (2002) themes are used to present the findings.

### **Support activities**

The questions in this category focused on how and when communication between students and staff occurred, and whether support was proactive or reactive. In general, students reported that most of their communication occurred through email or discussion on Moodle, although other options were available.

Only to, to email, to . . . clarify things, so that's all really. (Student C)

Email works very effectively for me. I . . . can't really think what else. I mean quite often on an email if it's something that they can't clarify by email, they'll give you a phone number and you can give them a call. (Student D)

Two students indicated they had also been to see at least one of their lecturers to clarify issues, but one indicated that even if it were physically possible, he would not have done it.

I've gone and talked to Lecturer L twice, and I think we've emailed a couple of times. (Student A)

The only real communication I had was on Moodle and one or two emails. I don't even think, that [meeting the lecturers in person] felt like an option . . . I wouldn't have felt that I could have just rocked up to the university. (Student H)

One student commented on the difference meeting their lecturers in person had made to their experience.

This is my fourth year, and this year I'm full time and . . . the first year I didn't contact the lecturers except through the Moodle stuff, and so kind got the bare minimum. And you know, maybe that was more up to me than them, I'm not sure. . . since then, I've made a point . . . of actually going up and meeting my lecturers and that's face to face. And that's really changed my interactions. (Student F)

Another felt meeting lecturers was of such value that we should consider making it a compulsory part of the course.

... I've met up with three of them ... probably personalities, more than anything I think it's good, yes. It's worthwhile doing, if it can happen ... I think a close to compulsory [face-to-face meeting] would be really good, I mean people can't always make it, but ... it would be excellent to have one. And I mean you'd want a meet and greet, not just a short, quick one but ... like an hour and a half, two hours, afternoon tea, something like that ... it's up to us out-of-towners to travel and, if it was on I would have gone down. (Student A)

Another student agreed, noting that in a previous class they had talked about the possibility of having face-to-face interaction, but identified issues with it.

We talked about face-to-face interaction, and face-to-face communities and then online communities. And, we all sorta came up with the idea ... that it would be a good idea to have a boot camp sorta thing. Where you meet for two or three days and actually meet each other, and have a quick chat and get a bit of face-to-face talk going, and then, then go away and get into the online stuff so that you've got that initial connection ... it's a great thought, but I don't know whether it's practical really, to do that. I mean you do distance learning because, you're distance, you're normally away from the place, where you can't get to the university to go lectures, don't you? (Student E)

Others agreed that meeting the lecturer and their classmates was a good idea in principle, but identified problems with it.

I think it's always a good idea, but the downside becomes if ... someone like me is doing the [course], and I can't get to the day, then you actually, I mean I teach [a course] online so ... if you can't get all your participants together, it's not worth doing it. Because they then establish a left-out feeling. (Student H)

Well, from my experience, it would have been completely impractical for me because I was in another country ... It's a nice idea, but it strikes me as impractical for quite a few of the students. (Student G)

Students were also asked about their lecturers' responsiveness. In general students reported that emails were answered quickly: "within six hours" (Student D), "within a couple of days, same day sometimes" (Student E). Responsiveness in other areas was more mixed.

It depends on the lecturer. I've had one [course] this year where it's been slow and a bit difficult cos the lecturer's been away. So the response time [has] been slower and getting stuff ... online ... hasn't been as prompt as I'd like it to be. (Student F)

One of my [courses], they were very good at getting the grades up, so I could follow grades over the course of the year, whereas another couple of my [courses] ... didn't keep up to date so effectively with that, so it would be interesting to be able to see that and to make sure that was kept up to date. (Student G)

Students had similar perspectives on whether support was provided proactively, reactively, or both.

They're very proactive, they anticipate problems and they get them sorted before they happen ... it was good, you just knew exactly where you stood. ... Lecturer G, she's just amazing, she emails on a Monday, she outlines her expectations for the week, and then always has the opportunity to contact her if needed. So, it's just been really proactive communication, 'is there anything I can do?', 'do you need me?', 'how can I help?' It's just been really good. (Student D)

Essentially it's reactive cos I start it. I contact them and say 'hey, this' and . . . when you get there they are really welcoming and when you ask them stuff they are really helpful, but it's . . . cos I'm a distance learner you kinda don't know how often to ask or you're a bit nervous about it. (Student F)

I think to start off with, to make sure everybody's up and running, it's proactive, and then it's just, like I s'pose it should be, it's up to the individual, if they want to find out more information . . . I'm the one that goes searching for it . . . If I'm struggling with something or I need something clarified, I have no problem in you know, ringing round or emailing round to find the person that can help me. (Student B)

In line with the varied perceptions of whether support was proactive or reactive, different students reported needing help at the beginning, the middle, or two-thirds of the way through the course. Students who were new to studying online, or who were coming back to study after some time away, felt that they needed support at the beginning of the course.

Probably, before and at the beginning. I mean I hadn't studied for some years so just the whole process of getting myself enrolled and then getting back into a daily routine of studying and doing essays and that kind of thing. (Student G)

For me probably at the start, because I needed to understand what the expectations were, when they were expected by and what level they were to be expected at. And I definitely received that at the start. Now it's just a matter of doing the stuff really. (Student D)

Other students needed support further through the course.

Maybe they could do a bit of a check-up, around I don't know, maybe in April or something, would probably help, if the lecturers just wanted to, take the time just to send out an email would be a good idea . . . and then again, the equivalent the second semester. (Student A)

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. (Student B)

Probably between the middle and the end . . . I think it was just, you know that two-thirds and you were like . . . typical stress. (Student H)

One student commented that they needed help in choosing the appropriate courses.

Someone who runs the department . . . should contact you and say 'hey, where are you heading with this, what are your plans? Have you this or this?' Like I said maybe I should have got off my bum and done that myself. But it's kind [of], you know, that real catch, who should do it. But I think it would be nice if the uni . . . sent you a message and said 'hey, do you want to catch up about this?', and then at least you have the option to turn it down. (Student F)

## **Materials**

The second area of questioning asked about the materials that were provided to students. We asked about the coursebook, the resources in Moodle, and resources provided by the wider university.

Students were generally happy with the coursebooks, although one confessed they had not really read it (Student A) and another preferred the online version to the hard-copy version, commenting that the coursebook was "too wordy" (Student B). Most, however, felt the coursebook included the appropriate material.

The handbooks at the start of the year are very clear, good guidelines about expectations . . . They were clear and they were concise and they completely told me . . . (a) what the course involved, (b) what I needed to and how to do it and when it was all due. (Student D)

One student noted that while the coursebook was good, more information was needed during the course itself.

You need to know not just what they are, but how . . . to get there and more importantly what to do when things go astray. Cos you've got so many things . . . in your life and with your distance, you know it's not like you can regularly turn up once a week and go 'ah, actually I'm two weeks behind'. (Student J)

Students also felt the Moodle website was easy to use. Despite this, very few reported having used the links to resources that were available on Moodle, although one student reported "the resources they put up are fabulous" (Student D). This pattern of not using resources continued when students were asked about their use of the support provided by the wider university. One student used the Information Technology Services service desk for help with Endnote, and four students reported using the remote library services, but the others said they had not needed them. One student explained that this may have been, in part, because "I didn't actually know what they were" (Student H). The students who did use the remote library service reported it was excellent, and that the librarians were excellent, "really prompt and terribly efficient" (Student F) and "incredibly helpful" (Student D).

Students identified three key areas where they felt additional support would have been useful. Three wanted more information on referencing and avoiding plagiarism, and access to a plagiarism checking tool. Two students referred to themselves as "older students" and wanted more technical support, while one wanted help in using the library databases more effectively. Appropriately, given that much of the information students wanted was already available, one noted that rather than emailing the lecturer for information:

If we actually knew a wee bit about the services . . . [we] could go direct to the thing that [we] needed. (Student H)

## **Supporting students in practice**

Supporting students in practice covers the support for and experience of students from their initial enrolment to the end of their study.

Students generally found enrolling in a university programme to be complex. If it was their first year, they had to apply for the programme, register with the university, and then go through a course approval process. Returning students also sometimes had difficulty, particularly as each stage had a deadline and late fees applied if the deadlines were missed.

Most students commented on not really knowing the people in their class, and needing an understanding of the personalities of those commenting in order to put comments in context. They suggested either meeting face to face or at least having some synchronous contact to aid with this.

You can't replace human interaction, you know. Whereas over the internet, even when you're, emailing in the group sessions and things like that, it's isolated, you know . . . You always find that you need a bit more, I think, we're at distance, you always feel a bit more isolated when you are in need of more information or clarification, it's that kind, it's more intense kind of confusion. (Student J)

You build up that trust, because . . . some of the things that you want to say online, because you don't have that background knowledge of a person, you can interpret it so differently.

But just by having that, like a real time contact, sometimes just helps to break down those barriers and stuff like that . . . to be kinda online for an hour together and have kinda like a discussion like that, you know build up the class, . . . the kinda the whanau feeling really when you're in a programme of learning. (Student H)

A number of students also commented on the effect the lecturer and their participation had on their experience of studying.

The [courses] I've enjoyed more, have been when the lecturers have participated regularly. I've got one lecturer this year who sets up the questions at the start of the fortnight, comments at the middle and then sums up at the end . . . it's probably extremely helpful but they're a bit far apart. The lecturers who have been a bit more engaged online, and participated a bit more often . . . I've probably got a bit more out of. (Student F)

The other awkward thing is when you've got a lecturer away and then [they come] back half way through a semester or something . . . and it changes the whole flow of the pattern. You're used to working with one lecturer, and then a second one arrives back from holiday and starts going off on different tangents. It doesn't help in the least. (Student A)

It was just that . . . kinda that willingness to help us succeed and to . . . see us in every day contexts. And also . . . he made sure that he commented on everyone's posts as well. So you didn't feel . . . I'm doing all this work and everyone else is, but you're just . . . choosing one or two. Even if it was just 'well, done. What do others think?' That at least, let me know that he was looking at it. (Student B)

There was similar variation in students' experiences of assessment. Some students found the assessments and criteria to be appropriate, while others wanted more detail. One student reported that not all coursebooks included marking criteria for the assignments, and they were not satisfied with this.

The marking criteria is quite broad, but [so are] the assignment types. So yes, the marking criteria meets the assessment objectives and it's definitely linked to learning outcomes. But I think it's the nature of the study and because [it is] very personalised, I can relate everything back to nursing education which is what I work in, and they've had to create a course that meets such a vast range of education across the sectors. . . . [B]y default their assignments and marking criteria have to be quite broad to encompass that, and I think they've done that really well. (Student D)

Students had similar experiences in terms of the speed of return of assessments. One student commented it had improved since the previous year when they had to submit a third assessment before the first two were returned. Mostly, though, students reported both the timeliness and quality of feedback as being "really good" (Student E) or "really awesome" (Student H). One student commented that it was:

Not too bad really, I mean they've got a heap, if they're going to do a good job . . . I wouldn't expect them to rush, rush through it. (Student A)

## **Overall support**

The last of Simpson's (2002) questions was an overarching one. Encouragingly, most students had positive things to say about their overall experience, noting it was "good overall", "excellent", "brilliant", "quite successful", and they had "really enjoyed it". One student described the overall experience as being:

Outstanding. Excellent tutors, excellent contact, like they're always available . . . just phenomenal, it's been excellent. The handbooks at the start of the year are very clear, good

guidelines about expectations and constant contact, if I've got any questions, it's just been great. (Student D)

One student noted that "you get what you give" (Student F), while another said that as an adult student, they did not expect "a huge amount of support". Another student went on to explain that this was a hard issue to comment on, as:

If I think about it all the information is there pretty much . . . the reality is, if you miss some information and you're not actually using the technology properly, you don't think that you're getting that support, but it actually is there. (Student E)

In thinking about their courses and how they were supported, most students also commented on their experience as a distance student. In general, they reported finding it "demanding" and "challenging", both due to their learning preferences and having to balance the multiple demands of work, home, and study. Students also varied in their expectations of the courses and each other, and this affected both their experience and their perceptions of support.

A number of students reported on their expectations of themselves and their classmates as postgraduate distance students. At times difficulties arose when their expectations differed from those of their lecturers, but in general most students reported that they needed to be fairly independent as learners.

I believe at postgraduate 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. (Student D)

When you're doing distance learning obviously we've got to be responsible at our end to keep regular contact with what's happening on the forum, and, you know, Lecturer H's putting stuff up there and we can see there's a new post that we haven't read, and we need to read them. (Student E)

## Discussion

The results clearly show that students' experiences were individual; they appeared to vary in terms of their own needs and expectations, and those of their lecturer(s). Students differed in their perceptions of whether support was proactive or reactive, when they needed help, and the degree to which they believed their lecturers were responsive. Despite the differing perceptions, and the areas in which they felt improvements could be made, students were generally very positive about the course and the support provided. One student acknowledged that while they wanted more help, it was available if they chose to access it.

Based on the findings, three key issues appeared to be common. Firstly, overall, students did not seem to feel that they were part of a community. Students' sense of community was not the focus of this project, but given previous research indicating that distance students who feel part of a community of learners tend to be more satisfied and learn more effectively (e.g., see Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Moore, 2014; Sadra, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009) it is certainly an issue that needs further exploration. The fact that one student did not feel he could visit the lecturers was also a concern; although these are distance courses, students are encouraged to meet with lecturers if they are in the area.

The second issue that arose for a number of students was that many were either not aware of the resources that were available for them, or how they could use them to enhance their experience. In general, though, it appeared that resources were provided to cover a wide range of needs and experiences, and that students could pick and choose what was appropriate for them.

Thirdly, it appeared that staff and students had differing expectations about being a postgraduate student and a distance student, and what was involved in completing a distance course. For example, in some cases lecturers would work with individual students to provide them with the support they needed to be successful, within the parameters of the course requirements, while others did not. As one student noted, it was particularly difficult when lecturers, and hence expectations, changed within one course.

Ensuring that staff and students had similar expectations would reduce the opportunities for misunderstanding. It was clear, though, that students had preferences for the kinds and amounts of support provided, so it would seem likely that they would prefer to have at least some staff provide those levels of support rather than having consistent but lower levels of support. While recognising the need for staff to run their course as they wish, it would seem appropriate for a department to have an agreed set of standards. These standards should be implemented throughout all courses, and staff and students should be aware of them before a course starts.

It was not clear where staff's varying expectations regarding the level and kind of support that they should provide to students arose; they may have been a function of staff beliefs about intelligence, as described in Self Theory. Alternatively, these expectations may have varied as a function of Johnston and Simpson's (2006, as cited in Simpson, 2013) characterisation of staff types. These types are:

- the Darwinista, who believes students' lack of success is due to some fault of their own, such as not working hard enough, or not having the necessary intelligence
- the Fatalista, who believes students do not succeed due to factors external to the course
- the Retentioneer, who believes students do not succeed because they were not supported proactively.

If staff are either of the first two types, they might believe that they cannot do anything that will make a difference to students' performance, and so providing additional support would not be effective. A further possibility is that staff have expectations that, as postgraduate students and adults, students will identify and provide for their own support needs. Exactly why there are variations in terms of provided support is not clear. However, it is clear that the levels of support, and variations in these, can have a negative effect on students' distance learning experiences.

While the questions asked in the interview did not specifically ask whether the support provided aligned with PaMS characteristics, it was expected that these characteristics would be apparent through students' responses. In general, though, this was not the case, with only one student mentioning motivation specifically. Perhaps students did not consider motivation to be the role of the department, or perhaps they did not think to mention it when asked more generally about support.

Detailed exploration of students' comments showed that, while the support provided met some of the characteristics of PaMS, it did not meet them all. The first characteristic of PaMS is that it focuses on the needs of individual students. In general, the support available appeared to be generic, available to all students, rather than based on consideration of individual students' needs. Further investigation would be needed to determine the extent to which staff drew individual students' attention to support that was particularly relevant for them, or whether they individualised the support they provided. It may be that the support students are reporting as being available for all students was, in fact, available only for them, in recognition of an individual need; but individual students did not know this.

The second characteristic of PaMS is that it be interactive. In most cases it appeared that the support provided in these courses was not interactive, but was simply provided for students to

use or ignore. Similarly, while some students mentioned meeting or talking with their lecturers, such suggestions appeared to occur at the student's behest; so, while it may have been interactive, it was not proactive. However, there did appear to be some exceptions, with mention made of regular emails to students — these may have provided an interactive opportunity. The content of the email, however, would need to be analysed to determine the extent to which it encouraged interactivity, rather than simply being an information-dispersing mechanism.

The final characteristic of PaMS is that it be motivational, in line with the Strengths Approach and Self Theory. As such, support needed to:

- focus on students' strengths
- acknowledge what they, as individuals, brought to their study
- identify students' view of intelligence, and encourage them to recognise that they can do better by working harder
- focus on praising effort over achievement.

Again, these issues were not addressed directly in the questions but it would appear that, in general, much more work could be done in this area. Without initial individual and interactive contact with the student, it is difficult to see how individual strengths could be acknowledged as helping with their study. Having said this, one student did note that in contrast to her experience in the previous year, her "previous different point of view and my different experiences have been celebrated, and encouraged" (Student B), suggesting that the lecturer in the course had identified the strengths she brought based on her experience, and encouraged her and her peers to recognise them.

Similarly, there appeared to be room for improvement in terms of the remaining characteristics of PaMS. No students mentioned receiving information about differing views of intelligence, or encouragement to focus on working harder over a focus on intelligence. In general, too, no students mentioned their efforts being praised, and one student noted that in assignment feedback there was "more on the wrong than what you do right", which is contrary to the PaMS model.

## Limitations

Before drawing conclusions based on the findings of this research, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. This is a small-scale study, conducted with a small number of students from one university department. As such, it is not clear to what extent the findings were peculiar to this group of students. In addition, the questions asked were based on the identified areas in which support was needed, rather than relating specifically to PaMS. This reduces the certainty regarding the degree to which the support provided to these students is in line with the PaMS approach. Future research needs to address these issues (including looking at the content of the support being provided) to identify the extent to which the provided support addresses the key PaMS characteristics. Research also needs to be conducted with the staff involved in distance learning to determine their understanding and expectations regarding both the needs of distance students, and best practice when providing support.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the research, a clear finding of this study is the value of implementing a set of expectations for staff and students, based on research. Expectations would cover a wide range of issues, including:

- the importance of creating a sense of community
- ensuring that students feel welcome to contact staff

- clearly identifying the support (physical resources and support from the lecturer) that is available
- ensuring staff understand the importance of proactive motivational support as described in the PaMS model, including the characteristics and how these should be applied.

Overall, then, it appears that while students in these programmes were largely satisfied with the support they received, there are many areas in which it could be improved, and attention to the PaMS characteristics is particularly recommended. However, PaMS alone is not sufficient: other forms of support are also valued, both in terms of timing and focus. Additionally, when developing support strategies and materials it is best to include all staff who are involved in teaching and supporting students to ensure they understand the theory behind the support being provided. As a result, students are more likely to have a consistent and more positive experience across all courses. As one student explained:

Going by this year's experience, I love it. I just thought it was brilliant and I know that was down to the course coordinator, the lecturer, and the way he handled it and the way he delivered the course. (Student B)

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## Appendix A: Student interview schedule

Overall, how have you found studying by distance through the College of Education?

What support have you had, and how did you find it?

How would you rate the level and kind of support you have received? What improvements could be made?

What communication types (e.g., email, phone, in person, skype, IM etc) have you used to contact people from the College?

Did they work?

Were there any issues?

Are there other types you would like to use?

Have you had accurate and fast responses to any queries?

Have you felt that there is proactive support?

Can you explain this?

What kind of support, for what, how effective was it?

How could this be improved?

When did you feel you need support, and what kind?

Pre-enrolment/Starting courses/Finishing courses

How do your needs change throughout the course?

Out of all the support services available to you, were there any that you thought were unnecessary?

What other support services do you feel are required?

What did you think of the support materials?

Did you read the coursebook?

Did you follow up any of the sources of support identified in it?

How much did you explore the moodle site?

Did you explore the links/information in this to support activities?

Have you used any of the university support providers (e.g., Student learning development/centre; Student computing services/ITS; distance/remote librarian)?

How was that experience?

What else could we be doing to help ensure your study is successful?

Any other comments?



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