Student Engagement in Distance-based Vocational Education

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Abstract

Students enrolled in distance education courses tend to have lower course completion rates than those who attend face-to-face classes (Simpson, 2013). This article reports on a collective case study undertaken at a vocational, distance education provider in New Zealand, whose course completion rates have risen over recent years to match those of similar face-to-face institutions. This research investigated institutional factors that have contributed towards this improvement, from the perspectives of the staff involved. Results show staff believe there are key enablers and barriers to student engagement and course completion, but the barriers are not insurmountable. The implication is that distance education providers can improve student engagement and completion rates through effective interventions.

Keywords: distance education; student engagement; student retention; polytechnic student retention; barriers and enablers in distance education; vocational education

Introduction

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (OPNZ) is the largest distance-based vocational education institution in New Zealand (Open Polytechnic, 2013). It typically caters for working people who are seeking to upskill and has large numbers of students who are older, female and/or second-chance learners. The polytechnic is a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) organisation and consequently is primarily concerned with "…the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the world of work" (Neal & Seelig, 2013). Technical and vocational education and training have become priorities as more people need further employment skills to adapt to rapid economic, social, and technological changes (UNESCO & ILO, [2001?]).

However, because TVET systems involve a wide range of target markets and different delivery models (Neal, 2011), they are more complex than either compulsory or higher education systems. For example, OPNZ offers courses from Level 1 (typically offered at high school) on the New Zealand Qualification Framework (NZQF) through to Level 7 (degree level). The diverse needs and abilities of the students therefore create challenges for student engagement and retention. Although the distance delivery model allows accessible education, students enrolled with OPNZ have traditionally had low course completion rates (Guiney, 2013b). However, in 2012 and 2013 OPNZ achieved marginally higher course completion rates than the polytechnic sector average

(Tertiary Education Commission, 2013). This research seeks to discover, from the point of view of the staff involved, the institutional factors that led to these higher completion rates.

Literature review

Student engagement

The literature has various definitions and descriptions of student engagement. Robinson and Hullinger (2008) define student engagement as students' efforts to study, analyse, practise, solve problems and receive feedback, while Suttle (2010) describes it as "the psychological investment of attention, interest, effort and emotional involvement expended in the work of learning" (p. 1). Klem and Connell (2004) identify two types of student engagement: ongoing engagement, which includes how students behave, think, and feel whilst studying; and reaction to challenge, which refers to how students cope when challenges arise.

Indicators of student engagement can be retention, progression, and attrition rates (Coates, 2005; Nichols, 2009; Ross, 2010). In New Zealand, Educational Performance Indicators (EPIs) (which include course completion rates, progression to higher study, completion of qualifications, and retention rates) are used to assess delivery in the polytechnic sector and as measures of student engagement (Anderson, 2011). Course completion therefore tends to be synonymous with student engagement, because students who are engaged in their studies are more likely to complete (Ross, 2010).

Measuring student engagement gives educational institutions valuable data about students' learning (Coates, 2005). Retention and course completion are important for both the student and the institution because there are considerable costs (both financial and emotional) involved in not completing (Simpson, 2013). As Nichols (2011) notes, some students who drop out experience a "shattering of confidence that hinders them from considering further study" (p. 5). Examining factors which lead to engagement and disengagement is therefore vital.

Enablers to student engagement in distance education

Studies such as Chen et al. (2008) and Robinson and Hullinger (2008) assert that students who are satisfied with their learning provider are more likely to be engaged with their studies. This satisfaction stems from feeling they belong, and that they are accepted and affirmed as part of a learning community (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010). Whilst contact may be more challenging in distance education, Robinson and Hullinger (2008) argued that contact, along with prompt and appropriate feedback, are particularly important to encourage engagement. They also claim that having contact with study peers, and sharing multiple perspectives and ideas, also leads to increased engagement.

Barriers to student engagement in distance education

Barriers to student engagement "can be particularly challenging in a distance learning environment" (Ross, 2010, p. 1). Distance learners typically spend more time in employment, looking after dependants, and dealing with financial stress, so study is just one of many priorities (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008). Employment demands create barriers (Ashby, 2004) and, as Guiney (2013a) claimed, while employers support employee absence to attend lectures, they are less supportive of employees completing online study in work time.

Furthermore, Stone (2012) argued positive relationships between teaching staff and students contribute significantly to students' academic success; however, forging relationships with distance students is challenging, due to little or no face-to-face contact. Distance learning provides students with opportunities for active individual study, but Chen et al. (2008) claimed

their ability to collaborate with others is limited and that distance students often experience feelings of isolation and little sense of belonging or connection with the education provider.

A number of studies (e.g., Nichols, 2009, 2011; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Ross, 2010) described the personal barriers distance students face, such as a lack of the necessary technology (or skills to use it); insufficient literacy, numeracy and time-management skills; little self-confidence, support, or outside encouragement; and being unprepared for the workload. Anderson (2011) also claimed that poor course and assessment design, poor instruction, and a lack of appropriate and timely feedback can impede student progress, as can unsupported assumptions by staff about students, in which students are blamed for poor outcomes.

These barriers can be particularly acute for TVET organisations, such as OPNZ, that deal with a wide range of students from diverse backgrounds and learning experiences (Neal & Seelig, 2013).

Current interventions

Since 2010, OPNZ has had an increased focus on student engagement and retention. Guiney (2013b) has documented these in detail; however, the key foci of these interventions have been distance learning support, support for Māori learners, teachers supporting distance students, and organisational interventions to improve support.

Distance learning support

The polytechnic has recognised that students require different levels of support and it has developed a variety of models to support various student groups (Guiney, 2013b). In particular, students who are studying at lower levels of the NZQF and those new to distance learning often require a higher level of support (Guiney, 2013b). Some strategies OPNZ has introduced to provide distance learning support include:

- developing student profiles to help determine the most effective learning approaches
- providing Programme and Student Advisors (PASAs) who assist students with pre- and post-enrolment processes and general course support
- introducing a peer-mentoring scheme for first-time students
- running online study skills and exam-skills workshops
- developing online study materials.

Support for Māori learners

Up to 90% of OPNZ students at Level 1 are Māori or Pasifika (Guiney, 2013b), so a number of strategies to help with engagement and retention of these students have been implemented. Examples are: attempts to include whānau (family) in all activities, including Māori and Pasifika concepts and pedagogies in programmes, and a peer mentoring service (Tuakana Ako) for Māori students (Guiney, 2013a).

The role of teaching staff

Teaching staff at OPNZ are closely involved in student engagement. Strategies include pre-entry tests to identify students who are best suited to foundation-level study, and using learning management system analytics to monitor and track student activity and progress. Teachers are also encouraged to contact students between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. when they are more likely to be available, and to use online forums and face-to-face study groups to provide support (Guiney, 2013b).

Organisational and structural interventions

A number of organisational and structural interventions have also been implemented. These include the ongoing use of student satisfaction and engagement surveys, an organisation-wide student engagement tool to support monitoring, ensuring high-quality learning materials that have a consistent 'look and feel', and moving to more blended delivery models.

While these interventions were reported in more detail by Guiney (2013b), the perceptions of the staff involved in their implementation have not been recorded. This research seeks to document these perceptions.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to identify staff perceptions of factors contributing to the improvement in course completion rates. It also aimed to discover their views on enablers and barriers to student engagement in TVET education.

Because the research investigated perceptions of factors that contribute to improved student course completions, an interpretivist paradigm was used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This paradigm is appropriate because it focuses on personal constructions of knowledge and shared meanings (O'Donoghue, 2007). Ethical considerations were ensured by gaining ethical approval from the Faculty of Education Human Ethics Committee of Victoria University of Wellington. Volunteers were sought through the OPNZ staff daily email newsletter, and ten staff members (five female and five male) agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews.

Interviews were conducted on site at OPNZ in January 2014 and, to assist with confidentiality and lessen bias in the responses, interviews were conducted by the research assistant who was from another institution. If a participant was easily identifiable because they were the only person in their role at OPNZ, a number of strategies were taken to ensure confidentiality. These strategies include allocating pseudonyms, changing the gender of some participants' pseudonyms, and generalising some details (see Table 1).

Table 1 Participants

Pseudonym	Role at OPNZ
Clara	Lecturer in Social Sciences
Craig	Adviser in the OPNZ Learning Centre
Foster	Senior manager at OPNZ
Jack	Lecturer in Commerce
Martha	Faculty management
Owen	Librarian and liaison librarian on courses
Rick	Engineering Trades lecturer
Rory	Senior manager responsible for many aspects of academic delivery, including research and student retention
Rose	Senior manager in Strategy and Analysis
Wilfred	Lecturer in Construction

Questions focused on participants' views of student engagement—they were specifically asked what they considered to be enablers and barriers. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to participants for checking to ensure accuracy and to give participants the opportunity

to alter or remove comments. The transcripts were analysed using content analysis to categorise the data according to similar themes and patterns. Following the inductive approach, two researchers independently identified themes from the data, and the themes were agreed after discussion. Further axial coding resulted in three major codes within the concepts of enablers and barriers. The two main themes encompassed the three sub-themes (codes) of staff, students, and systems. These three sub-themes created both enablers and barriers.

Findings

Staff: Enablers and barriers

All participants were aware of OPNZ's focus on improving student engagement and course completions and felt proud of the organisation's achievements in recent years. For example:

> By really focusing we've been able to do things we never dreamed of. (Rose)

> A few years ago our EPIs were awful, but over the last few years we've really turned that around. (Rory)

All participants were aware of the strategies and practices in place to improve student engagement. All spoke of the need for committed and knowledgeable staff, the need for staff to be competent in their roles, and the importance of continually striving for improvement. As Craig acknowledged:

> You don't want to sit still, we want to keep doing a better job. (Craig)

Enablers

Participants identified two key aspects of staff involvement that have been particularly significant in increasing student engagement at OPNZ. These were a student-focused approach and the effect of high-quality resource design.

A student-focused approach

All staff recognised the need to be student focused, and that their job was to help students work to the best of their ability, to improve their qualifications, and to reach life goals.

> We've moved from a problem-solving approach which was "what are you having trouble with and we'll help you to fix it" to a strengths-based approach where we focus on talking to the students about their goals and dreams and how they will use the skills they already have to help them study. (Craig)

Key aspects of a student-focused approach include being flexible and proactive, and developing a sense of belonging amongst the students.

Rick spoke of supporting students by negotiating individual work plans and submission dates to take account of work and family commitments, rather than making all students adhere to the same dates. His faculty ensured a tutor and/or lecturer was available until 8 p.m. each evening for student phone calls, and they also arranged face-to-face student drop-in study groups if the numbers of students warranted this approach. There were 15 such study groups around New Zealand at that time.

All participants spoke of the need for staff to be proactive in encouraging student engagement. As Craig said, "we don't wait for students to contact us—we ring them". Participants provided information on the procedures followed by their departments. (For example, the learning centre targets all newly enrolled students and uses a peer-to-peer mentoring system whereby experienced students phone new students to discuss goals and ascertain any assistance needed.)

Lecturers contacted all students within a set time of the course beginning, and then again at an agreed interval. The library contacted most degree-level students through library forums on the online course pages and were available to provide resources and assistance at the student's request. Multiple contact methods were mentioned, such as emails, phone calls, and text messages.

Several participants spoke of the need to make the students feel part of a learning community and to create a sense of belonging.

> The key thing is that students feel that they belong to the organisation. (Craig)

> Our engagement strategies are focused around trying to make the students feel they belong. (Rose)

> I try to be really welcoming and open … you really do need to be available and respond quickly to things like phone messages and email. (Clara)

High-quality course and resource design

There was also general agreement that course resources and course design are important enablers in student engagement. One participant described how he rewrote some mathematics materials because the original was too difficult, and the difference the changes made to students' ability to engage with the material and the learning.

Barriers

Participants identified three staff-related barriers to improving student engagement. These were: the impact of poor course and resource design, negative attitudes towards students, and the impact of change management.

Poor quality course materials

While there was general agreement that good course and resource design was important, participants in student support roles felt there were still some poor materials that were problematic for student engagement. Examples included unclear assessment instructions, ambiguous tasks, excessive numbers of readings (in one case over 800 pages), and in one case a task was incorrectly labelled an essay when it was, in fact, a report. It was frustrating for student support staff to deal with constant student inquiries, but have no authority to have materials altered. On the other hand, time pressures, rather than reluctance, were cited by lecturers for not changing or updating materials. They felt they lacked time to deal with all their responsibilities. As Jack shared:

> The difficulty is the time factor, getting time to support students, to mark assessments *and* do revisions. (Jack)

Negative attitudes towards students

Negative attitudes to the students were identified as a further barrier. Some participants spoke of colleagues with attitudes such as considering engagement to be solely a student responsibility, and therefore not improving course materials nor changing practice. Some deficit attitudes towards students were expressed during the interviews. For example, one participant stated that if students could not be bothered working, there was not much that could be done. One expressed surprise at the poor technological skills of 19–20 year olds; and another commented on the lack of academic skills of some students.

Managing change

While most staff were committed to improving their practice, participants in management roles spoke of the difficulty in effecting change. As Rose commented "We've had to *force* a lot of practices that are good for the students". She noted that "It's quite frustrating getting messages

down" and Martha agreed that "change is hard". However, the exact nature of the change and the resistance was not explicitly shared. Only one specific example of resistance was given, and this related to lecturing staff being reluctant to provide exemplars because they felt doing so gave the students too much assistance and was akin to cheating.

On the whole, resistance to change seemed limited and, as Craig commented:

> For the most part we have brilliant course material, we have fantastic lecturers. (Craig)

Students: Enablers and barriers

Students have a part to play in their own engagement in study, and participants identified a number of factors they considered either enabled or acted as a barrier to this engagement.

Enablers

The participants identified four student-related enablers that help course completion. These related to how the students engaged with OPNZ for their learning and how they sought help when required. Staff particularly identified the importance of correct course and programme choice, careful monitoring of progress, use of support services, and involvement in a learning community.

Correct course and programme choice

Participants emphasised the need for students to be guided into appropriate NZQF levels and amounts of study. For example, OPNZ strongly recommends students start with one course and, if successful, enrol for further study rather than taking on too much at the beginning. It was noted that students needed to be mentored into courses at an appropriate level. As Clara said:

> …it's not doing any favour to anyone to put a student into a course when they're going to fail. (Clara)

Participants also noted the importance of ensuring students were studying courses that helped them to achieve their life and work goals, because this ensures students are motivated to study.

Monitoring

Careful monitoring of student progress was mentioned by all participants as an important aspect of encouraging engagement. They felt systems were in place:

> There are a lot of safety nets here … there are enough interventions and enough different people that can intervene and help. (Owen)

Monitoring occurs at all levels of the organisation and participants noted that this was an important aspect of improving student engagement and course completion rates. Foster noted:

> We now really closely know who comes in, who's engaged, what their success rates are, and we know that at a management level and a tutor level and administrator level. (Foster)

One aspect of monitoring that all participants mentioned was OPNZ's policy to contact students within certain timeframes and then again at certain intervals but, as Wilfred mentioned, the monitoring has to be supportive (for example, asking the student how they are getting on and whether they enjoying the course, rather than immediately suggesting they are falling behind).

Use of support services

All participants noted the need for students to be supported academically, and a variety of services are available. All students were made aware of these support services, but first-time students and students with disabilities were specifically targeted. Examples were given of students being provided with individual support, such as reader–writers or additional

mathematical tuition. However, as one participant mentioned, learning needs vary from student to student and staff need to be aware of individual students:

> You may not think that people who are in their 40s need support but actually sometimes they need it more than an 18 year old. (Clara)

Involvement in a learning community

Most participants emphasised the importance of creating learning communities of staff and students. In their view, students were more likely to be engaged if they felt connected to the institution, and when multiple methods of contact (e.g., email, texts, phone calls) were used. Creating opportunities for students to connect with each other was regarded as important, and online classrooms were seen to be an effective way of doing this. However, Rick noted that his faculty preferred a face-to-face, study-group approach due to the practical nature of teaching a trade.

Barriers

Staff identified three barriers that particularly affected student engagement, course completion, and retention. These were: students lacking the necessary skills, time conflicts, and lack of face-to-face contact.

Students lacking necessary skills

Participants noted that the nature of OPNZ as a distance TVET provider meant that they had a significant number of students who were unprepared for the independent learning required for distance study. Staff commented particularly that some of the students they dealt with did not have the computer, literacy and/or writing skills required for their study. As Rick commented:

> I've had students over the years who I've spent huge amounts of time with to get them through their calculations … because they were no good at maths at school, they didn't really learn anything from primary school onwards. (Rick)

In another example, he said:

> I've got one guy at the moment who can read but his actual comprehension of what he's reading is quite poor, and also his ability to write—he can tell me the answer to something but for him to actually put that down in writing is almost impossible, so he has to have something to copy from. (Rick)

Wilfred also commented that students coming into trades education have often left school with minimal education and some have to be taught very basic skills such as how to draw a straight line. Clara spoke of students enrolling in social science courses who were unaware of the high level of statistical, research, and referencing skills required by the discipline.

Time conflicts

Due to the nature of students enrolled at OPNZ (older, female and/or second-chance learners) participants felt there were many demands on their time. For example, when staff contacted non-engaged students, reasons given for the lack of engagement included dealing with sick family members, work pressure, and the general busy-ness of an adult life. As Clara noted:

> I think that one problem is incorrect expectations and unrealistic evaluations of how much time they have and I think a second reason for non-engagement is students who may actually realise how much work it is but haven't thought about all the other aspects of their life. (Clara)

Rick spoke of working with employers of apprentices to remove time conflicts, by managing assignment completion when work was quiet. He would also contact employers of non-engaged students to enlist their support.

Lack of face-to-face contact

All participants talked about the importance of building relationships with students to encourage engagement and connection with the institution, but cited the lack of face-to-face contact as a particular barrier to establishing these relationships with distance education students.

> The challenge to distance education is to build those communities of learning without necessarily ever seeing people. (Rose)

Two participants from trades education also commented that the kinaesthetic nature of trades was not always compatible with written, distance study, and that they adopted a blended approach by providing study centres.

Systems: Enablers and barriers

The polytechnic has made a number of system-wide changes to improve course completion and student engagement rates. Some of these relate to the organisation of courses and programmes, and others have been systemic changes at a higher level. As with the other sub-themes, participants identified both enablers and barriers.

Enablers

The enablers that were identified related to changes to both course structure and systems. Participants particularly noted the effect of more structured courses; the increased focus on strategy, analysis and monitoring; creating an online presence; and the effect of forced student withdrawals.

More structured courses

Participants recognised that certain types of courses had been problematic for student engagement and completion. These were courses that were open for enrolment every month, and students had 52 weeks to complete. The number of times such courses were offered was reduced, assessment due dates were introduced, and timeframes to complete were reduced to 35 weeks.

> As we've seen—if we change the way we offer courses, if we provide them in more solid chunks, if we have the right structure, the results will follow. (Rory)

> The assessment due dates have made a difference, it structured things for people. (Martha)

Focus on strategy, analysis and monitoring

In 2009, OPNZ established a directorate named 'Strategy and Analysis'. The mandate of this unit is to execute the strategy of OPNZ and direct the organisation in achieving organisational goals and objectives. Five participants discussed the relevance of this unit and believed it made a major contribution to improvements in student engagement because it ensures OPNZ is constantly monitoring progress and planning future progress. Although not all of the participants specifically mentioned Strategy and Analysis, they all noted the effect of the engagement tool, which was instigated by the unit, in closely monitoring enrolments and completions and alerting staff to non-engaged students. Systems that allow close monitoring of student engagement were considered beneficial to improving engagement. As one participant said:

> We measure it [engagement] and that in itself is a huge change agent in that we now really closely monitor who comes in, who's engaged, and what their success rates are. (Foster)

Creating an online presence

Creating an online presence was also considered by most participants to encourage student engagement. Lecturers said the online environment allowed the creation of learning communities through discussion boards and shared activities. Owen, from the library, described how e-books are used far more extensively than in the past. He cites the convenience of these books in terms

of accessibility for students and less staff time needed to post materials. The student learning centre has also created online support materials. As Martha commented:

> I see it [the online campus] as a useful way for students to not feel the distance as much. To see discussion forums where they can join in with other students and/or hear what the tutor is saying. (Martha)

Online learning (rather than paper-based distance learning) had further advantages. Rick spoke of the ability to share screens with students to demonstrate Computer Assisted Design (CAD) and to monitor students' use of CAD in the same way.

Using email to answer student queries was also seen as supportive to students as answers were guaranteed, whereas phone calls were often missed.

Withdrawing students

A further administrative procedure, after all support mechanisms were exhausted, was withdrawing non-engaged students from programmes. All agreed this was effective in improving course completion statistics, and allowed staff to focus their time on those students who were engaged. However, one participant did comment that merely withdrawing students did not address engagement and could, in fact, mask issues that should be dealt with.

Barriers

As with the other sub-themes, many of the barriers that related to systems at OPNZ were the converse of the enablers. Participants particularly identified issues relating to managing open courses and addressing the diverse and complex needs of OPNZ learners.

Managing open courses

Although some of the open courses had been restructured, others still caused engagement issues. Martha explains systemic difficulties:

> In open courses, you get 30 students now, then at the beginning of the next month you get another 30 students, so now you've got those 30 students plus the new 30 students, so you've got 60 students. And then the next month you've got another 30, so it builds up. So you can actually have over a hundred that are at various stages of the blocks so it is quite intensive, overlapping. (Martha)

The amount of time staff needed to spend in dealing with such courses was seen as a barrier.

Diverse and complex needs

A further barrier offered was the diverse and complex nature of OPNZ as a distance TVET provider, meaning a single system cannot work for all. As Rory explains:

> You'd like to think that distance education comes in one shape or flavour but it doesn't. There's no such thing as a typical programme here at the Open Polytechnic because they tend to run in very different ways. We also offer education from Level 1 right through to Level 7, and so we have different student needs. So it's not easy to get a silver bullet in terms of how student engagement might look or a single system that will work for everyone. What works in one programme area for business may not be appropriate at all for early childhood education, and it may not be appropriate for engineering. (Rory)

All participants spoke of the range of needs such as mathematical skills for apprentices, referencing skills for degree-level courses, and the specific needs of Māori and Pasifika and first-time students. The student base of a TVET provider is diverse and has many needs.

Discussion

Interventions and changes implemented by OPNZ over recent years have been part of a programme of continuous improvement, but are also a response to policy changes. Until 2010, tertiary institutions in New Zealand were funded by the total number of students enrolled; they therefore focused on attracting student enrolments. Subsequently, funding became related to the percentage of students completing courses (Ministry of Education, 2010). As a TVET distance education provider, OPNZ faced a number of challenges in raising course completion levels. In the initial period of change OPNZ fared badly in this measure and risked losing funding—improving course completion rates therefore became crucial for the institution's continuing existence.

Participants in this study came from a variety of roles within OPNZ, but all were well aware of the institution's efforts over recent years to improve student engagement and, ultimately, course completion. They were positive towards the interventions and changes, took pride in the organisation's achievements, and were unhappy with staff who were reluctant to change. Participants articulated familiarity with interventions recommended by the literature to improve student engagement. These included early identification of students who might need help (Gibbs, Regan, & Simpson, 2007), pre-counselling (such as guiding students to appropriate courses [Nichols, 2009]), and a proactive approach to all students (Barefoot, 2004). The institution-wide focus, and ensuring that staff are knowledgeable about effective interventions, have contributed to improved student engagement.

A notable feature articulated by all participants was the desire to be student-centred; they all spoke of the need to create effective relationships with students in order to support learning (Ross, 2010). This is a challenging feature of distance education and particularly of vocational training, because students have work demands that compete for their study time, and they are most likely to be available in the evenings. The addition of an online learning platform has improved student communication and connection with OPNZ and, consequently, has improved relationships. This improved communication among students and between students and lecturers is in keeping with social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1986), which purports that learning takes place within a social structure and that interaction assists this process. Moving paper-based distance education to online platforms is recommended by Robinson and Hullinger (2008), who claimed online environments allow distance students to discuss course work and stressful issues, and to share ideas. However, merely adding an online platform is not a solution, as the high dropout rate (around 93 percent) from Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) shows (*Times Higher Education*, 2013, as cited in Simpson, 2013). As Anderson and Simpson (2012) claim, teaching and learning must still focus on people, and we must tend to the mix of the human and the technological. Participants seemed to be aware of this challenge.

The student-centred approach included the recognition that unless courses and assessments meet student needs, they cause difficulties. However, there did seem to be some internal conflict over how to achieve this goal. Some participants claimed not enough time was allocated to this task and that the logistics of achieving change quickly were therefore insurmountable. Resistance by some staff to change materials was also reported, suggesting this is an outstanding issue. It also raises the question of who is responsible for materials and suggests that perhaps not only lecturers should have input. Participants from learning support and the library made important contributions to students' learning and had clear ideas about what was effective. As more institutions move to making materials available online, consideration of who is responsible, who has ownership and authority, and who has input, is needed. The diverse abilities of students enrolling in vocational education mean careful consideration needs to be given to the literacy levels of written materials. Subject-specialist lecturers may need to take advice from literacy experts.

In one department a student-centred approach also included working with employers. As the literature (e.g., Ashby, 2004; Guiney, 2013a) has suggested that employers are not always supportive of distance learning, this is a useful approach. Because students enrol in TVET institutions to improve their employment prospects, employers may, in fact, welcome inclusion.

Administrative procedures that can improve conditions likely to support student engagement are rarely reported in the literature. However, in this study, the importance of measuring and monitoring student engagement and having an institutional focus on student engagement was emphasised.

Interestingly, creating more structure (such as shortening completion timeframes and instituting submission deadlines) has improved course completion. One could speculate that complete openness does not create a sense of urgency for students and, consequently, procrastination increases. In particular, institutions that provide vocational training for part-time distance students, who have many competing demands on their time, may find that a more structured programme allows students to plan more effectively. Creating structure also allows the institution to measure non-engagement and initiate action that will encourage engagement.

Withdrawing non-engaged students was seen as a mechanism for providing staff with more time to work with those who want to succeed. Paloff and Pratt (2003) could be seen to support this stance as they argued successful distance (online) students need technical skills, self-motivation, and self-discipline. If students do not have these qualities then perhaps withdrawal is necessary. However, when students enrol in courses with the intention of succeeding but then do not engage, withdrawal could be masking an issue rather than dealing with reasons for not engaging. However, because research into what happens to those who do not complete is rare (Simpson, 2013), further investigation on this issue is warranted.

Participants described multiple interventions that suggest attention to a range of actions is needed. Distance education scholarship emphasises the need for effective materials and resources (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995); interaction with teachers and each other (Paloff & Pratt, 2003); and a student-centred, empathetic approach (Holmberg, 2005). Participants in this study recognised the need for all of these but, due to the wide range of vocational programmes offered by OPNZ, a simple, one-size-fits-all solution is not possible.

These differing perspectives created a picture that resonates with Paloff and Pratt's (2003) model of distance education courses whereby the institution, the staff and the students all work to create effective learning. As Paloff and Pratt claimed, the institution must create systems that are conducive to learning, teachers need to offer both academic and non-academic support, and students must be active learners who are willing to contribute. The participants in this study identified factors related to staff, students, and systems which they believed contributed to increased student engagement.

Conclusion

While acknowledging the small scale of this study, the findings do support and add to the literature on student engagement in distance vocational education. The student perspective is widely documented in the literature, but there is far less on staff perspectives. This study has painted a picture of a group of knowledgeable, dedicated TVET staff who firmly believe student engagement will improve with appropriate interventions. The implications are that distance education institutions can match face-to-face organisations in terms of student engagement and course completion, but they must enable staff to be student-centred.

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