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Engaging Distance Students in Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract

The engagement, retention and success of tertiary students in New Zealand is of strategic importance and improving success remains a focus of government and tertiary education organisation policy and practice (Ministry of Education, n.d.). How to achieve success, as measured by student retention, has been the centre of attention of much research over past decades. More recently researchers have examined student engagement because students who are fully engaged in their studies are more likely to persist and successfully complete them (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). However, engaging and retaining students can be particularly challenging in a distance learning environment where students are separated from teaching and support staff and other learners. In such an environment, students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging and difficulty maintaining engagement in and motivation for learning (Ross, 2008a). This paper reports results from a case study on first-year student engagement at a distance learning institution in Aotearoa New Zealand. The case study institution is medium-sized (approximately 22,000 students) delivering a variety of subdegree programmes and some degree programmes via distance learning to mostly part-time learners in the workforce. The study examined a number of aspects of student engagement: transactions within the institutional setting, including teachers' work and institutional culture; student motivation; non-institutional influences; and demographics.

Findings revealed that the institution and the teachers played a significant role in whether or not students engaged in learning at optimum levels. Students' own motivation also played a vital role. Students said they needed study advice and guidance that was readily available and that they must have access to relevant and sufficient study resources. Students also said it was critical that they knew how to contact the right people for help when they needed it. Teacher actions and attributes were equally important. Students wanted teachers who cared, who challenged them, provided prompt and useful feedback and were readily available to discuss their learning. Furthermore, students needed teachers to be enthusiastic, make subjects interesting and to teach in ways that enabled them to learn. Feeling competent in their learning was important to students and they were strongly motivated by that. Students reported that they worked hard to understand difficult subject matter and were able to seek additional resources themselves to aid their understanding; they were motivated by these factors and they acted on them. In addition, they actively sought help when they needed it. Students also reported that a variety of non-institutional factors affected their engagement and success. These factors were mitigated to a greater or lesser extent by the support structures that students had around them.

These findings can support some suggestions for practice for the case study institution to foster engagement with learning in first-year students. Suggestions include providing helpful guidance and advice to students about their study, providing access to the resources they need, ensuring that students know who to contact for help, and providing learning support services at times students need them. In addition, teachers can challenge students in helpful ways, make sure they give prompt feedback that improves learning and be available to discuss students' learning with them. Furthermore, the institution and teachers can provide subject material that challenges students and enables them to use that subject knowledge in practice. In considering student motivation for engagement, the institution and teachers could foster students' belief in their own competence. Finally, the institution could explore ways to assist students' families, friends and employers to understand the demands of study and how best to support their student family member/employee.

Introduction

The engagement, retention and success of tertiary students in New Zealand is of strategic importance and improving success remains a focus of government and tertiary education organisation policy and practice (Ministry of Education, n.d.). How to achieve success, as measured by student retention, has been the centre of attention of much research over past decades. More recently researchers have examined student engagement because students who are fully engaged in their studies are more likely to persist and successfully complete them (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

The literature offers a number of definitions to explain engagement. Chapman (2003) suggests that engagement is students' active participation and cognitive investment in their learning in addition to an emotional commitment to it. Kuh (2004) declares it is the effort students dedicate to learning activities. However, it is the Australian Council for Educational Research's (2008, p. vi) definition of engagement where students are positioned as being "involved with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning" which reveals that engagement is more than simply the outcome of student effort. Indeed, certain conditions and activities are needed in order for students to be successfully engaged in learning. Those activities and conditions sit within institutional structures and cultures (Kuh et al., 2005), relationships between students and teachers, and students and students (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005), students' motivation for learning (Schuetz, 2008) and items external to the learning environment (McInnis, 2003).

However, engaging and retaining students can be particularly challenging in a distance learning environment where students are separated from teaching and support staff and other learners. In such an environment students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging and difficulty maintaining engagement in and motivation for learning (Ross, 2008a). Unfortunately, the student engagement literature is largely international. There is little arising

from the New Zealand context and even less which reports outcomes for students in open and distance learning in that context. So while the existing literature might help to shed some light on student engagement in open and distance learning in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is more likely that investigation of that particular environment will yield more useful findings.

This paper reports results from a case study on first-year student engagement at an open and distance learning institution in New Zealand. The case study institution is medium-sized (approximately 22,000 students) delivering a variety of subdegree programmes and some degree programmes via distance learning to mostly part-time learners in the workforce. The study examined a number of aspects of student engagement: transactions within the institutional setting, including teachers' work and institutional culture; student motivation; non-institutional influences; and demographics. In addition to reporting the case study findings, this paper outlines some ways in which the institution in the study and its teachers might foster students' engagement in learning.

Literature review

Institutions have a significant role to play in engaging students successfully. Successful institutions establish cultures that focus on student success, emphasise student learning in their mission, hold high academic expectations of students, aim for continuous improvement, invest money in student support services, value diversity and effectively prepare students for learning (Kuh et al., 2005). In short, institutional learning environments matter.

Engagement with learning is enhanced in environments where institutions provide a comprehensive programme of academic and other support, particularly in the first year (Reason, Terezini, & Domingo, 2006), along with an inspiring curriculum in which skill development is embedded (Kift, 2004). Similarly, preparing students for learning can have a long-lasting and positive effect on engagement and success. Successful preparatory programmes include first-year seminars, transition and bridging programmes and orientation processes (Kuh et al., 2006; Pittaway & Moss, 2006; Youl, Read, & Schmid, 2006). Study skills development programmes such as essay planning can be effective especially when such planning comprises a component of the final course assessment (Kiernan, Lawrence, & Sankey, 2006). Equally effective are learning-to-learn programmes, particularly when those programmes are embedded in discipline-specific content. Zeegers and Martin (2001) found that students who participated in a learning-to-learn programme in an introductory chemistry class were less likely to engage in surface learning only. In addition, these students achieved better assessment results and more of them persisted with their studies than the previous year's cohort.

In addition to preparatory programmes and academic support, peer mentoring schemes are reported to contribute to increased levels of student engagement and achievement. Dewart, Drees, Hixenbaugh, and Thorn (2006) describe a mentoring programme for first-year students which resulted in increased self-esteem and academic confidence in those students who participated

compared with those who did not. Likewise, Glaser, Hall, and Halperin (2005) report that students who took part in peer mentoring attributed their successful transition to university, feeling of belonging and the development of academic skills to the mentoring programme.

Just as influential as mentoring and other support programmes in achieving optimal levels of student engagement is the extent to which diversity is positively reflected within institutional environments (Te Tari Matauranga Māori, 2007). Johnson et al. (2007) found that the racial climate in an institution had a significant effect on whether or not students felt comfortable and included. Feeling comfortable and included leads to a sense of belonging which is positively implicated in students' levels of engagement; when students feel accepted and that they belong their engagement with learning is strengthened (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003).

Equally critical for student engagement is the learning relationship between teacher and student. Mearns, Meyer, and Bharadwaj (2007) assert that students work harder and express their opinions more readily when teachers are approachable, organised, well-prepared, and sensitive to students' needs. Bryson and Hand (2007) agree. Enthusiastic teachers who spend time developing relationships and trust with students are more likely to engage them in learning then those who do not. Reason et al. (2006) also maintain that teachers play a significant role in student success. Their study revealed that students who thought their teachers had given them academic support achieved more highly than those who did not. In the same vein, Kuh et al. (2005) declare that when teachers establish high academic standards and support students to achieve these standards, students do so. Kuh et al. also claim that assigning students challenging assessment tasks strengthens engagement but only when prompt and detailed feedback is given. There is other literature too which positions teachers at the centre of student engagement (Kuh et al., 2006) and argues that teachers' attitudes and behaviours have a direct and significant effect on students' engagement with learning (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

While interactions between teachers and students are influential in whether or not students engage successfully, so are those between and among students themselves. Moran and Gonyea (2003) found that students attributed their study success to the academic interactions they had with their peers rather than those with teachers or their own efforts. Others (Lambert, Terenzini, & Lattuca, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005) discovered that engagement and success was strengthened particularly when students worked with their peers in groups and on collaborative learning tasks. Krause (2005) agrees that working together in groups has a positive effect on student achievement and claims that the same is accomplished when students work together in learning communities. Furthermore, that students' sense of belonging is strengthened through their participation in such communities. In a similar vein, Zhao and Kuh (2004) argue that students apply more effort to their learning and are more deeply engaged in it when they take part in learning communities.

While on the one hand relationships with peers and positive interactions with teachers lead to increased engagement with learning, on the other hand students still must be motivated and willing to engage. Indeed, motivation is seen as a primary driver in engagement for learning

(Yorke & Knight, 2004) and in student success (Simpson, 2008). Being motivated and willing to act are strongly implicated in whether or not learners engage (Ainley, 2006; Schuetz, 2008). There are a number of theories of learning motivation (Simpson, 2008) and some suggest learners are motivated by an intrinsic interest in the subject (Venturini, 2007) or by particular personality traits (Caspi, Chajut, Saporta, & Beyth-Marom, 2006). Others propose that learners' self-belief (Yorke & Knight, 2004), self-efficacy (Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2007) and confidence in their own abilities (Fazey & Fazey, 2001) are key motivational drivers for engagement. However, Schuetz (2008) declares Deci and Ryan's theory of motivation—self-determination theory—to be the one which best explains learner motivation for engagement. Self-determination theory positions learners as agentic individuals, with clear goals for their learning, positive self-theories and who are active within their social environments.

Despite students being strongly motivated to engage with their learning and teachers and institutions providing optimal learning environments, influences external to those environments can work to undermine student engagement. These influences include family and employment commitments and personal, social and cultural items. The pressures that arise from these external items play a significant role in determining whether or not students persist with their studies. Burtenshaw, Ross, Hoy-Mack, Bathurst, and Zajkowski (2006) found that distance students who considered withdrawing from study did so because of such pressures. Dealing with personal problems and the demands of family can be stressful too, and force students to reconsider their commitment to study and whether or not to continue (Ross, 2008b). Studying part time is also associated with lowered levels of engagement and success (Earle, 2008; McInnis, 2003; Scott, 2009). Part-time study is increasing as students take on paid employment in order to support themselves. Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis (2005) found that full-time students in paid work reported that work interfered with their studies and their levels of academic achievement.

Project overview and research method

The research employed case study design to investigate the question "How do institutional and non-institutional learning environments influence student engagement?" The study used a survey and semi-structured interviews to seek the views of students enrolled for a first time in the case study institution. The survey, comprising a forced-choice questionnaire, contained four scales that gauged motivation; transactions within the institutional setting, included teachers' work and institutional culture; non-institutional influences; and demographics. Semi-structured interview questions were based on findings from the student survey and aimed at exploring in more depth the issues and themes which had emerged.

The project was approved by the institution's ethics committee. The paper-based survey was sent to a sample (900) of first-time enrolled students representative of gender, age and ethnicity of the institution's student population. A total of 82 responses were received. The response rate was a disappointing nine percent. Of the students who returned questionnaires, 52 percent were female.

Ten percent of the students were Māori and six percent were Pasifika; only six percent were aged 20 and under. Part-time students made up 73 percent of the sample and 52 percent were studying at certificate level. Ten students, six female and four male, who had returned completed questionnaires were interviewed. Every third student from the list of those who had returned interview consent forms was selected until 25 students had been chosen. Each student on the list was contacted by telephone to arrange an interview time. If a student was unavailable, the next student on the list was contacted until interviews had been arranged with 10 students.

Analysis

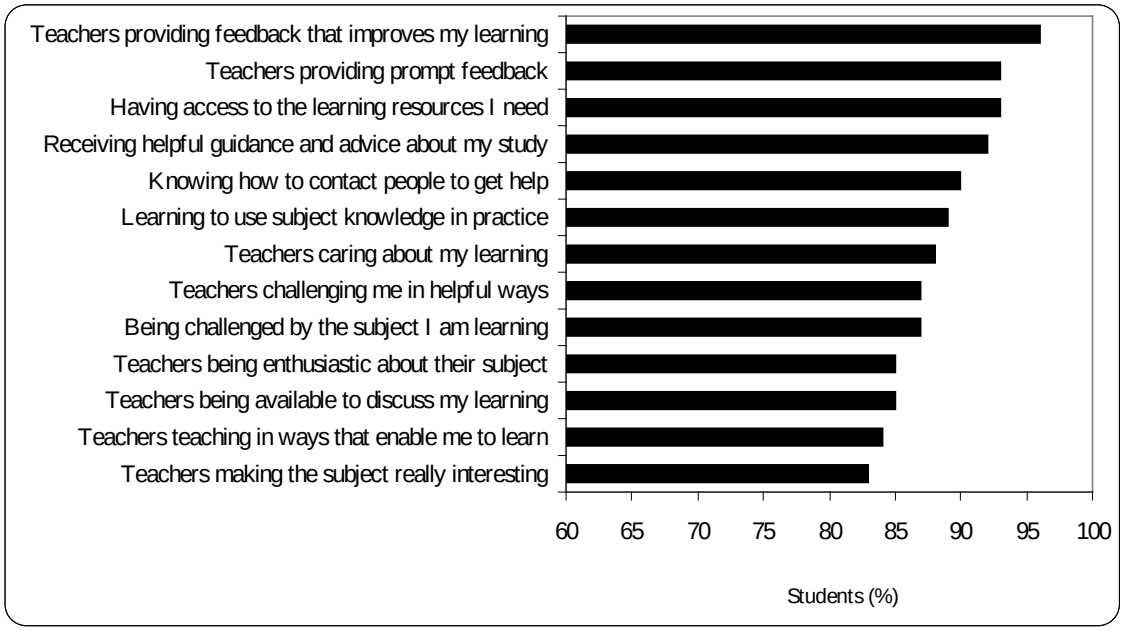
Survey data were analysed by a statistician using SPSS software to produce a simple percentage frequency distribution table. The "very important" and "important" scores were combined and results summarised in bar graphs. High importance items were classified as those which 80 percent or more of students thought important; medium importance items were those which 50 to 79 percent of students thought important; and low importance factor were those which less than 50 percent of students thought important. The interviews were transcribed and data analysed to identify themes and statements that related to the key findings from the survey.

Findings

Transactions within the institutional setting

The questionnaire transaction scale comprised 26 items divided into three clusters: relational transactions between teachers and students; learning transactions within the wider institution; and the effects of teaching and environment. Each item had two subscales: how important that item was for learning and how well it was done. Figure 1 shows those items from the importance subscale which were of high importance to students.

Figure 1 **Items of high importance to students' learning**



Of the 13 items that were of high importance to students, the majority (eight) were about the relational interactions between teachers and students. Three items were about the learning interactions within the wider institution. Students also said it was important to them that they were challenged by their subjects and could put what they learned into practice.

In their interactions with teachers students appreciated those who were responsive and supportive:

> She rang me to see how everything was going. It wasn't important, but it was awesome that she took the time. It was really quite personal instead of just being another person's work to check. (S5, p. 3)

When teachers were unresponsive students noticed and it affected their learning:

> It really drummed home that you are on your own and it's not that I needed support it was just that with extramural learning you can sort of leave it and I think if he had dropped in at six months to see how I was going it might have buoyed me up a little more. (S4, p. 3)

It was important to students that teachers were available and approachable:

> She is very approachable. … I have already rung her once about something I knew I had done wrong but she said don't worry about it because it's the first year and you are allowed to make mistakes and she was very helpful. (S2, p. 2)

Students also said it was important that their teachers cared:

> I found that the tutors were just really there for you; there was communication all the time, not in your face, but you felt they were there for support. They rang personally three or four times without me asking to find out how I was going and it really boosted me because it was the first time I had studied in a long time and to hear that from a tutor was just fantastic. (S8, p. 1)

Some students wanted a close relationship with their teacher:

> Yes, definitely a big factor. You need someone to talk to when you are doing correspondence work. (S7, p. 3)

However, others did not:

> I'm not really worried about having a close student/teacher relationship. I guess as a learner I can work things out for myself. (S3, p. 4)

Receiving prompt feedback that improved their learning was particularly important to students. In fact these items were the most important of all items (see Figure 1):

> The marking comments I get back are really helpful. (S2, p. 8)

When feedback on assignments was not forthcoming, students' learning suffered:

> I've been a bit disappointed over how long it has been taking to get them back. You put all this work in and you are thinking how you have done and it kind of impacts on the next assignment. If I've made some huge mistakes I want to know now so I can think about the next assignment. (S8, p. 2)

Working with other students was least important for students' learning. While less than 30 percent of the students said that they wanted to learn alongside others, some really enjoyed it:

> The tutors encouraged a lot of student interaction online which I really enjoyed. I got a lot of encouragement and support from the other students and a lot of good ideas—we could bounce ideas off each other and I learnt a lot. (S8, p. 1)

Other students thought that interacting online with fellow students could be beneficial:

> Forums, chat areas or some sort of collaborative environment where students can catch up and exchange ideas would be a useful adjunct to the course. (S9, p. 5)

In addition to showing the importance to students of relationships with their teachers and other students Figure 1 reveals the wider institutional interactions and activities that were also very important. In this latter case it was access to resources, advice and guidance and the right people that were critical for students.

Students said it was important they received the right information and that people were helpful:

> I think it's important. I was worried about doing it wrong so you need people to deal with who are helpful and pleasant on the phone—didn't want some old battleaxe. No one wants to feel they can't ring up and get information if they need to. (S6, p. 3)

They also needed services that were responsive. Many students used the institution's library and appreciated the responsiveness of that service:

> They are very helpful and will always go out of their way to make sure the books are sent to you straight away. Like one lady photocopied the whole of the Te Whariki for me and posted to me and said I could keep it so that would have been a lot of time for her to do that and I really appreciated that. (S2, p. 3)

While students were quite high users of the library, it was the internet that they most frequently used to access relevant information to support their study. A number of students not only used the internet to access information but also to increase their understanding of a particular subject or concept:

> I will read it a few times just to make sure my brain is working and then I will carry on reading past it and come back with fresh eyes and then if I'm thinking I can't get this I will go on the internet and Google it. (S4, p. 5)

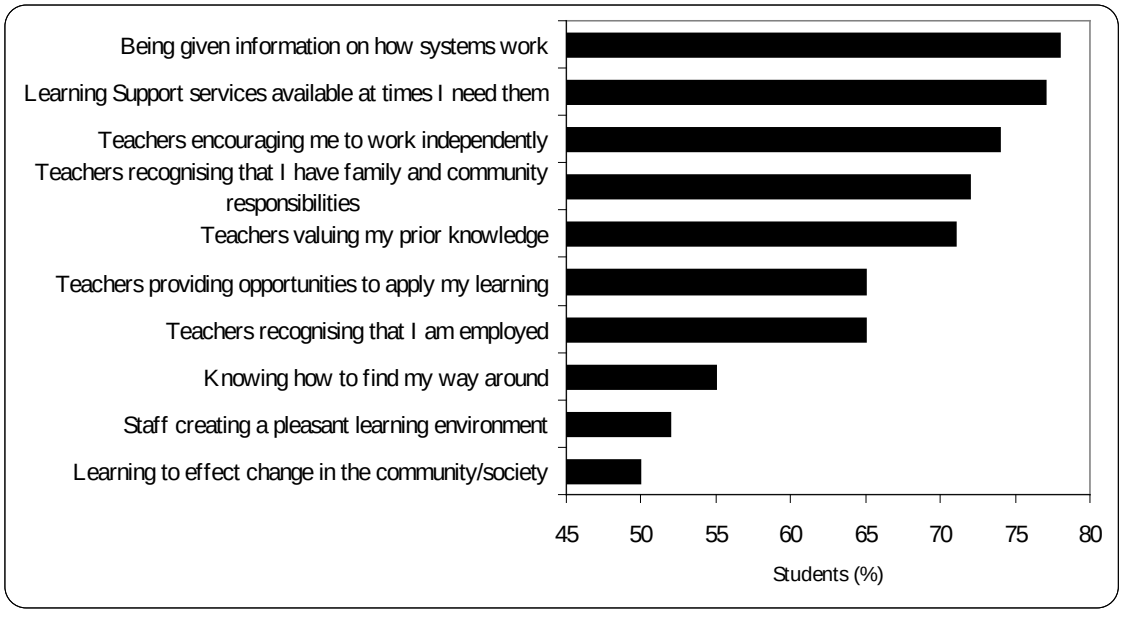
Accessing the internet was for some students the means through which they could be completely independent in their learning and not have to rely on teachers or other staff for help:

> It would take longer because I know exactly what I need … if you have someone on the phone or use e-mail it takes so much longer. It's easier to skim a few articles or websites and get the information and so on. (S1, p. 2)

Additionally some students said they had found that the resources provided on the institution's online learning management system were very useful.

While the very important interactions and activities between students and their teachers and the wider institution are revealed in Figure 1, Figure 2 details those which students deemed moderately important to them. The finding worthy of note here is students' use of the institution's learning support services.

Figure 2 **Items of medium importance to students' learning**



While the students who completed the survey said it was quite important that learning support services be available, very few of those interviewed said they had used these services. A number of students said that they had not needed to because they could manage on their own:

> I don't need academic assistance and there isn't a lot of external research required in my course and what there is I manage to do. (S9, p. 2)

One student said she had not bothered using learning support services because she perceived it as a bit of a hassle. Most students reported that they used non-institutional support: employers, friends, and family. Many students were part-time students who were working full time and said:

> I talk to my employer because he is qualified and he is really helpful … pretty much all my questions he has been able to answer. (S3, p. 2)

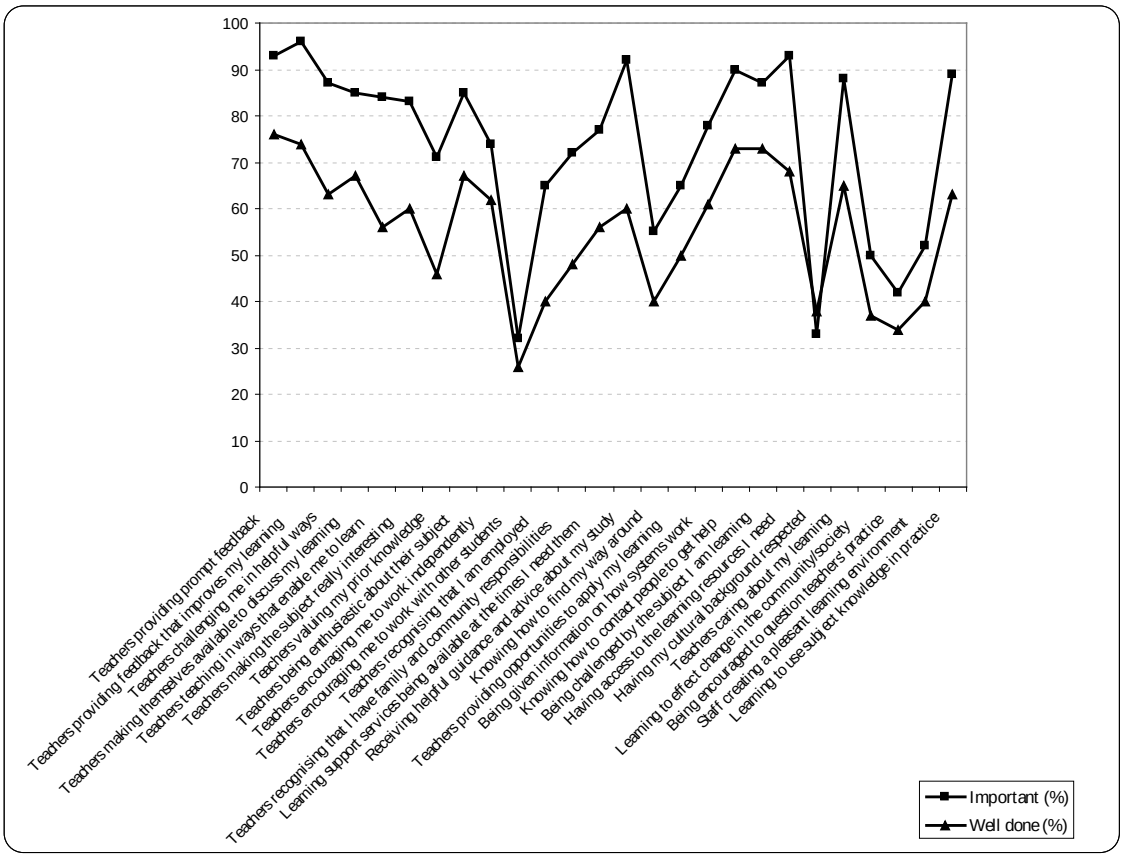
Other students relied on family and friends for support:

> I have a good support network around me: a great flat mate who's been to University, she's been there and done that and she's given me tips about time management and my mum has been pretty good. (S5, p. 2)

Finally, of the 26 questionnaire items, only three items were given a low importance score by the students. Students did not consider that being encouraged to work with other students, questioning teachers' practice or having their cultural background respected were important for their learning.

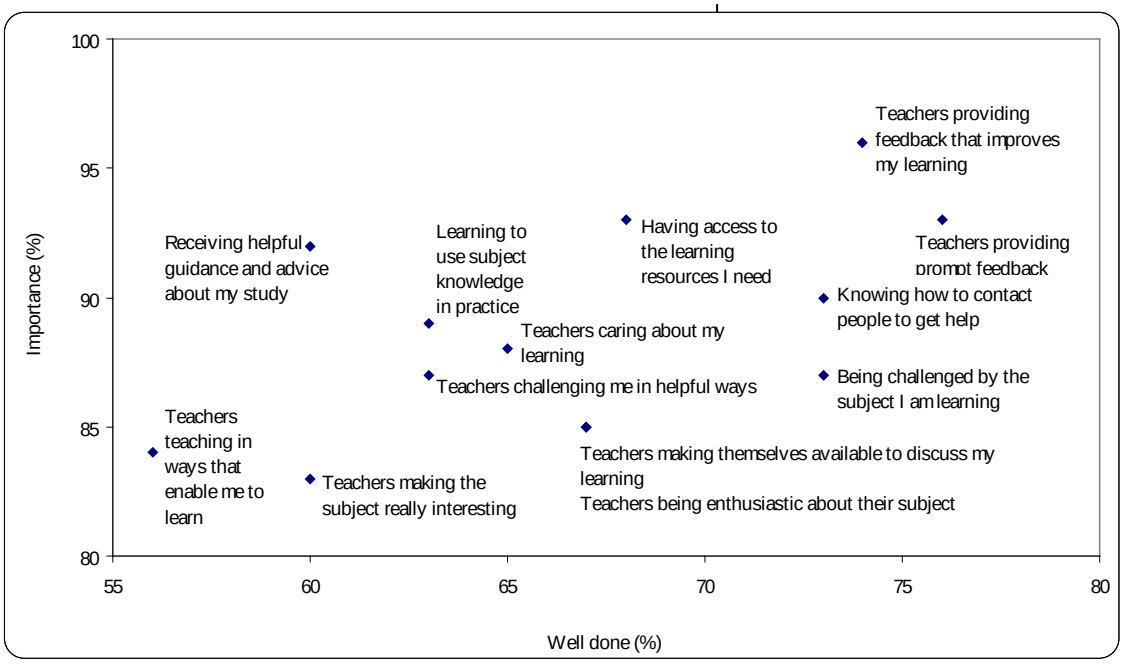
In the second subscale of the questionnaire transaction scale, students were asked to score how well the items were performed by the institution. Results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 **Items important to students' learning and how well they were done**



On every item except one (having my cultural background accepted), the importance score exceeded the performance score. Figure 4 shows the significance of these results. It contains those items that students thought were very important to them. The right-hand section shows those items which were very important to students and which were quite well done. The left section shows those which were important and which were not all that well done. It could therefore be said that student expectations were not met on all of those items.

Figure 4 **Relationship between items of high importance to students' learning and how well they were done**



Student motivation

Twenty-four items were used to determine students' motivational needs as identified by Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory: competency, agency and relatedness. Students were asked how important each item was in motivating them to be engaged and they identified various motivations. Figure 5 shows that students placed a high value on agency and on feeling competent in their study. Agency and competency were equally important. Relatedness as a motivating factor was not important for the majority of the students

Figure 5 **Items of high importance to students' learning**

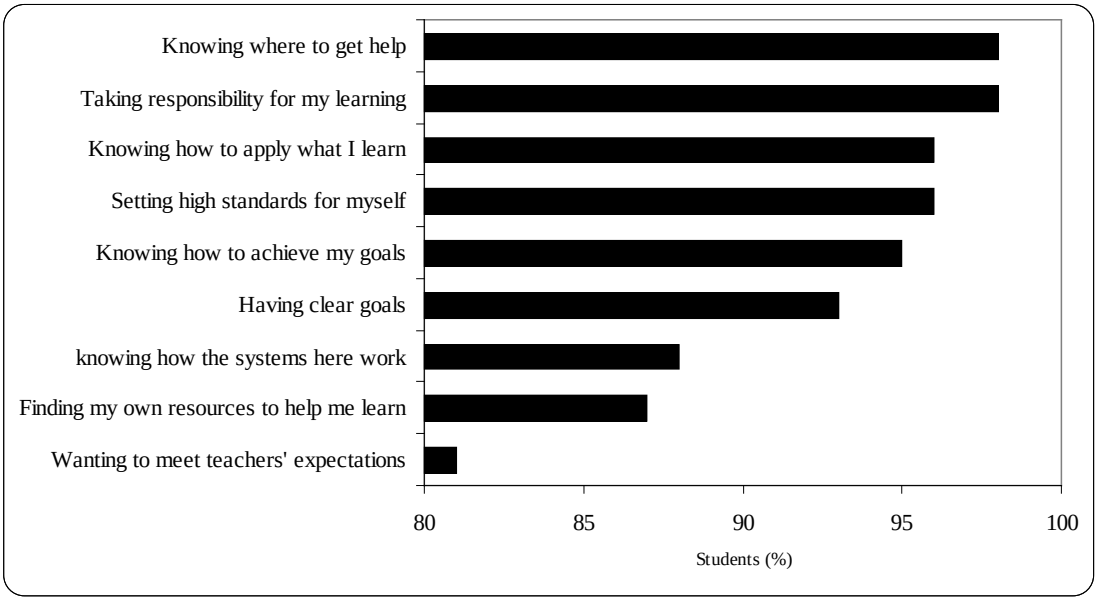
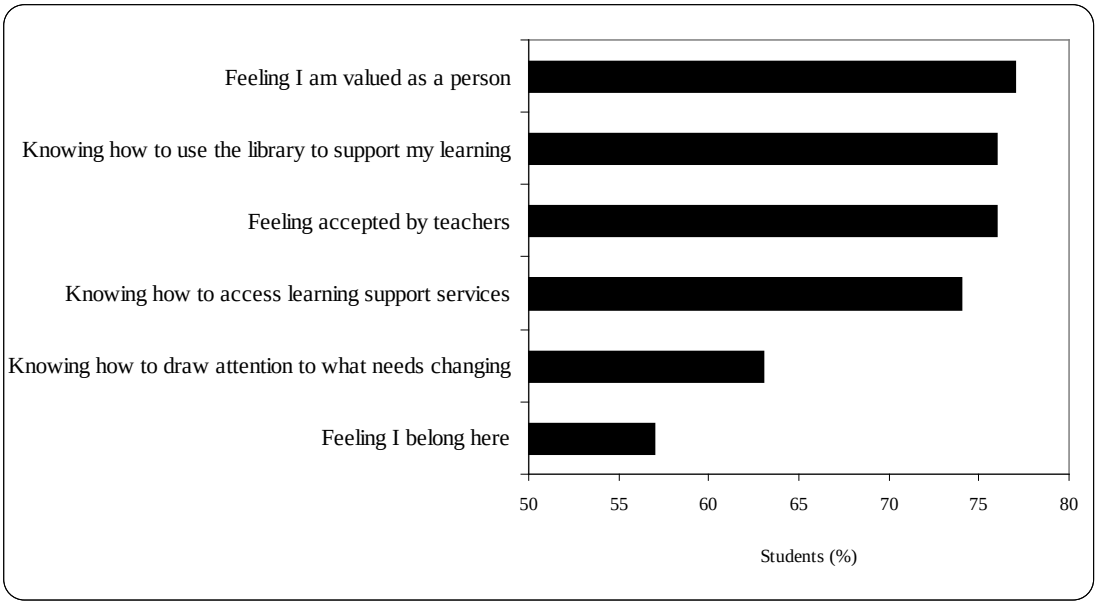


Figure 6 shows that when items of medium importance are taken into consideration, students were most strongly motivated by competency items overall. Some relatedness items were important though. Students wanted to feel valued, be accepted by their teachers and to meet teachers' expectations. Some also needed to feel that they belonged:

> Emails from the tutors and support from the other students, just having a chat online has been good, it makes you feel like you belong. (S8, p. 4)

Figure 6 **Items of medium importance to students' learning**



Interview data revealed that students were keen to take responsibility for their own learning. They liked working on their own and finding their own resources. They knew where to get help and would access support services only if needed:

> Maybe it's a bit arrogant of me to think I don't need support but part of me thinks if I needed it I would be quite confident asking for it. (S4, p. 2)

Students also set high standards for themselves.

> I like to achieve and I want to do well so I put in more than most and I enjoy learning the peripheral information as well. (S10, p. 5)

Although not everyone did:

> I try not to get too hung up on my assignments being perfect. I just let it go. (S1, p. 2)

Students' motivation was also strongly related to their goals for learning. As seen in Figure 5, having clear goals and knowing how to achieve them were important motivators for engagement. Unsurprisingly most goals were related to jobs and careers.

One student said:

> I am doing an advanced marketing course to enhance my career. I have done some marketing, but very little and it is basically to further my career. (S10, p. 1)

Another was passionate about her field of study:

> I'm really keen to know more about environmental issues. I'm very passionate and I'm hoping to find some employment in that field. (S7, p. 1)

One student explained how she used her study goals to stay motivated and manage her workload:

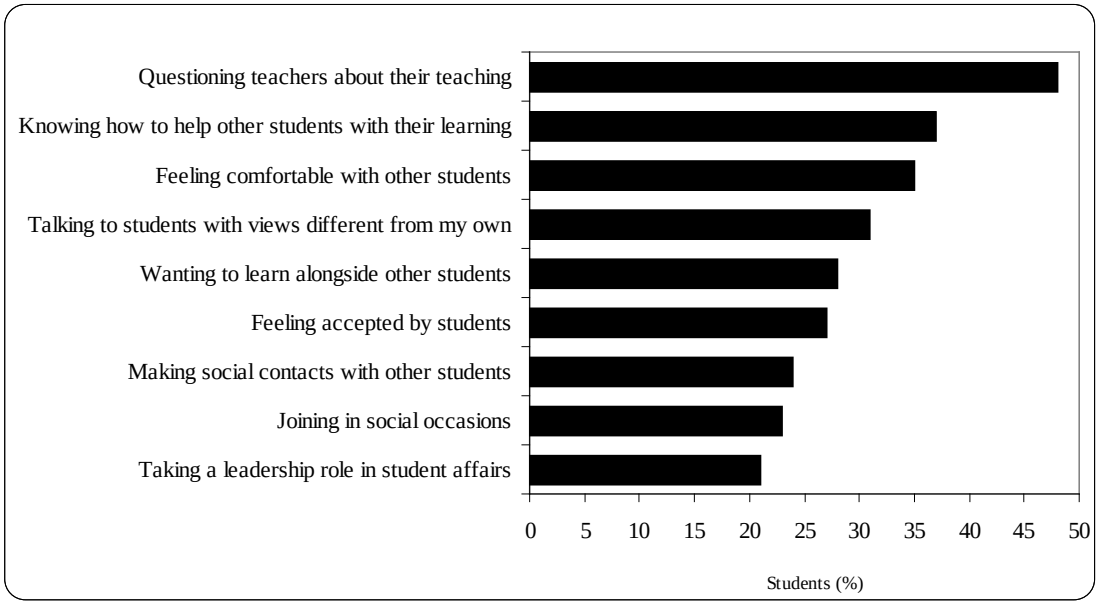
> Keeping an eye on my ultimate goal … taking things one step at a time rather than getting overwhelmed by the course as a whole. (S6, p. 1)

Figure 5 also shows that knowing how to apply what is learned was important to many students. Being able to apply their learning to the real world was highly motivational:

> If the assignment relates to a real world scenario then I really enjoy that … the theoretical side and the real world and linking the two together I find very interesting. (S8, p. 1)

Conversely, as can be seen in Figure 7, students were motivated by relatedness items in a minimal way only.

Figure 7 **Items of low importance to students' learning**



Very few students needed to establish relationships with other students; it was not very important to them. Students did not feel the need to be comfortable with or accepted by other students in order to be engaged in their learning. Nor did they need to learn alongside others.

One student said:

> I've never enjoyed a classroom environment anyway which I find stressful, so working from home is fabulous. (S8, p. 3)

Another student disliked working with other students, particularly on shared tasks:

> It depends on who's in your group. Some people are not highly motivated and you think 'oh no, I'm stuck with this person and I wanted a high mark.' I'm high mark orientated and I know straight away I will have to hold back in case they think I'm a know-it-all and that's why I prefer to work by myself. (S2, p. 4)

Some students thought working with others could be useful though:

> It would be quite helpful. Like if you knew that once a month there was going to be an open forum and you could log on and bounce ideas off other students. (S4, p. 3)

Others too found that interacting online with fellow classmates was a positive experience that helped them feel connected to the institution and to their peers:

> I did worry about being separated from other students and not feeling like a part of it. I had no idea that there was going to be this online element but when I found out about it I thought it was a good idea because it made you feel connected. (S7, p. 3)

Meeting teacher expectations and being accepted by their teachers in addition to feeling valued were the only relatedness motivating items of any significance to emerge from this study. When students did not feel connected or valued they disengaged:

> Feeling terribly disconnected to be honest. Everyone likes to feel valued. I'm just a number. I don't feel particularly well engaged. (S9, p. 4)

Staff knowing students' names made a difference:

> She used my first name, so you feel like I'm not just a number or just another person, she used my name. (S5, p. 4)

Students felt valued, too, when staff was flexible about assignment and course requirements:

> They were very helpful with changing my programme. I've been an awkward student and they worked it out really well. (S7, p. 4)

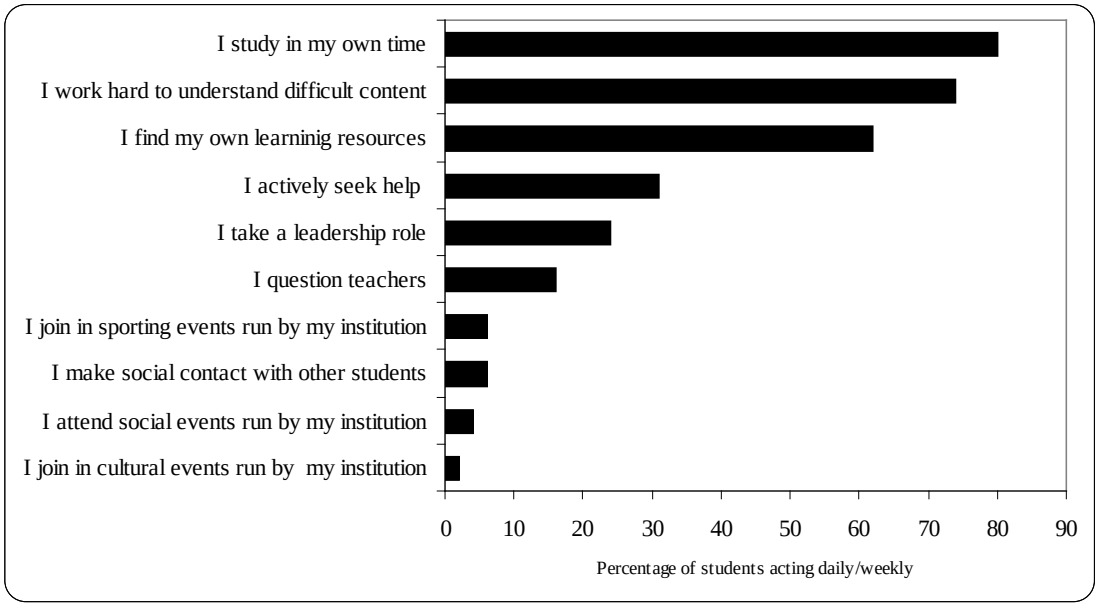
However, when flexibility was not forthcoming, students suffered:

> Twice now when I've asked them to be a bit flexible the answer was no. The whole idea of doing a distance learning course for me was so that I could manage and organise my own time, not for them to say right you will do this when we want you to do it … they should be making it a bit easier because life is stressful as it is. (S2, p. 6)

In addition to the items that identified what motivated students to learn, the questionnaire also included a separate scale (10 items) to determine how often (monthly, weekly, daily) students acted on their motivations. Students were asked to indicate the frequency with which they acted on competency, agency and relatedness items. Figure 8 shows that frequency.[1]

[1] Daily and weekly scores were combined to give the frequency of student action

Figure 8 **Frequency of student action**

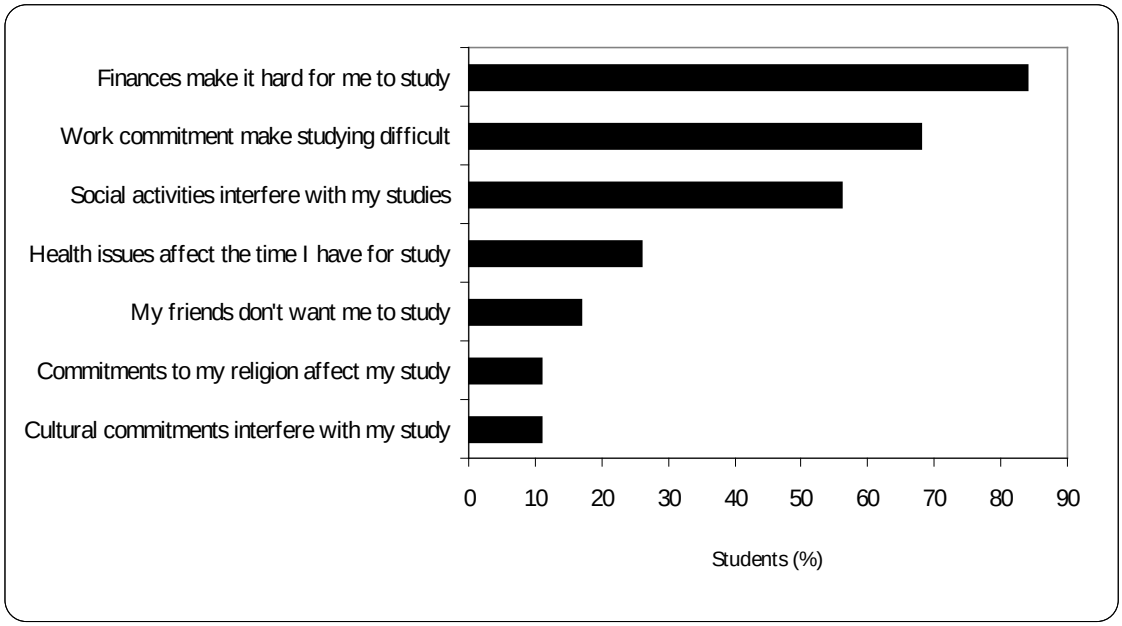


Unfortunately these findings reveal little. That students study in their own time and have little involvement in institutional non-academic activities is largely a given in an open and distance learning environment. Students are required to study in their own time and open and distance learning institutions by and large do not offer social, cultural or sporting events so students do not have the opportunity to participate in these activities. The findings worthy of note, however, are that students will work hard to understand difficult subject matter and are willing and able to seek additional resources to aid understanding; they are motivated by these items and they act on them. In addition, they will actively seek help when needed.

Non-institutional influences

Students reported dealing with a variety of challenges in their daily lives that affected their study. These challenges are detailed in Figure 9.

Figure 9 **Items negatively affecting student success**



As can be seen in Figure 9, financial constraints and work commitments were the two items that had the most effect on success:

> Probably the number one thing that turns me off learning is that I finish my day at work then I feel I have more work to do. (S3, p. 1)

Many students worked full time and had family and other commitments in addition to their study:

> I am a mother, wife and homemaker and I work and am a student as well. (S2, p. 1)

Constantly dealing with a variety of commitments meant students were often too tired to study. One made the comment:

> It's all the social commitments, family commitments, just being busy at work and coming home feeling really tired and not feeling like it. (S4, p. 2)

Others faced challenging personal situations which made study difficult:

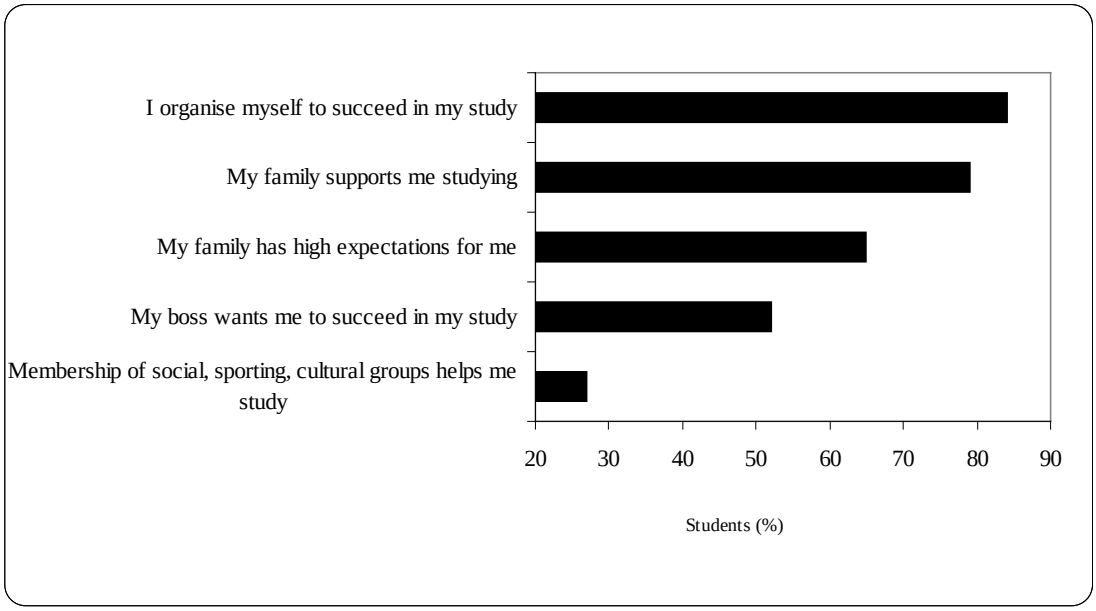
> Because I am a solo mum now and finding time to study and juggle work and it's very hard. I broke up with my partner three months ago and study has hit a brick wall. (S1, p. 1)

Some students found they simply had no choice but to put their study on hold when faced with changed personal circumstances:

> I've actually had to put it on hold at the moment because my youngest is disabled and she uses up a lot of my time. (S7, p. 1)

Despite facing all these different challenges students were proactive in organising themselves to succeed and were well supported in their studies by family, friends and employers (Figure 10).

Figure 10 **Items positively affecting student success**



Families held high expectations of students and provided good support. They dealt with household tasks to free up time for study:

> I'm lucky I've got quite a lot of support from my husband and my family and they give me the time that I need. (S6, p. 1)

Families were also encouraging and motivational and students depended on them:

> I depend on my partner to help me a bit because he is studying as well so it's good if we can support each other. I'm pretty hopeless when it comes to self-control. (S4, p. 2)

Equally important for student success was support from employers. Those students who had supportive employers reported that such support had a positive effect on their study and levels of achievement:

> I've got lots of support from my employer … he is giving me four hours study time a week (paid) at work. I have to do at least four hours study at home too. But the support my employer has given me has definitely encouraged me to put in the effort myself and also made it easier to get started. (S3, p. 2)

Discussion

There are limitations to this study. The research was a small case study involving only 82 first-time students and results must be interpreted with caution. However, it is clear from the study that the institution and the teachers played a significant role in whether or not students engaged in learning at optimum levels. It is also clear that students' own motivation played a part. Additionally, students reported that a variety of non-institutional items affected their engagement

and success. These items were mitigated to a greater or lesser extent by the support structures that students had around them.

The data show that the actions and attributes of teachers and the effects of teaching featured prominently (10 of 13) in those items that students indicated were highly important to them and their learning. Eight of those 10 items were about teacher behaviours and attributes. Students wanted teachers who cared, who challenged them, who provided prompt and useful feedback and who were readily available to discuss the students' learning. Furthermore, students needed teachers to be enthusiastic, make subjects interesting and to teach in ways that enabled the students to learn. That teachers and teaching are fundamental to student engagement is well reflected in the literature. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) maintain that teachers' behaviours and attitudes have a profound effect on students: teachers "play the single-most important role" (p. 176). Similarly, Kuh et al. (2006) confirm that teachers are at the heart of engagement. In particular, enthusiastic teachers who establish high academic standards, assign challenging assessment tasks and develop trusting relationships with students are more likely to engage them in learning than those teachers who do not (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kuh et al., 2005).

While students in this study specified that relationships and interactions with their teachers were very important, they reported that a number of those interactions were not done as well as expected. Overall, results revealed that students' expectations were largely unmet. The data in Figure 4 which illustrate those interactions important to students that were well done and those that were not very well done provide some direction for action on ways the case study institution could optimise teaching and learning interactions with students in order to engage them more effectively.

In the same way that teachers and teaching were important to students' learning and engagement, so too were a variety of institutional items. Most notably students said they needed study advice and guidance that was readily available to them and they must have access to relevant and sufficient study resources. Students emphasised too that it was critical they knew how to contact the right people when they needed help. Indeed, in an open and distance learning environment, where students largely work through learning materials on their own it is not surprising these items feature highly on students' important-to-have lists. They are critical to learning and success.

Besides it being very important that students knew how and where to get help, it was equally important for 77 percent of them that learning support services were available at times that students needed them. It is useful to note here that students' expectations on this were not met as well as they could have been (see Figure 3). Perhaps there is a mismatch between the times the students in the case study institution are studying—at night after work and family commitments are completed—and the times that learning support services are available. Learning support availability tends to be more in line with those tertiary institutions which have students on campus during the day. The provision of a variety of support services is important to student engagement and success. Such services assist students to become efficient learners (Hu & Kuh, 2003) and institutional investment in support services yields positive results for student engagement (Kuh et

al., 2005; Pike, Smart, Kuh, & Hayek, 2006). What is more, when those services are delivered within a student-centred institutional culture, specifically one where support of learning is emphasised and student success is the central focus, student engagement and achievement is maximised (Kuh et al., 2006; Porter, 2006).

In addition to institutional and teacher interactions student motivation was also strongly implicated in whether or not the students in this study engaged with their learning. Feeling competent in their learning was important to students and they were strongly motivated by that. This finding is supported in the literature. Fazey and Fazey (2001) also found that feeling competent to meet the demands of study were strong motivators for student engagement and action. Likewise Llorens et al. (2007) discovered that self-belief was a key motivator for engagement. Yorke and Knight (2004) concur; when students feel competent they set themselves goals and persist in overcoming obstacles. This finding is supported by other research from the case study institution which found that students who persisted were "determined to succeed" and this determination was intimately connected to strong motivation for learning driven by very clear goals for that learning (Burtenshaw et al., 2006). Students in the case study also liked being autonomous and working on their own. That many students preferred to manage on their own is not surprising in an open and distance learning context. In such a context, students need to be autonomous to be successful so discovering that students were motivated by that, while unsurprising, is nevertheless a positive finding.

Conversely the students in this study did not want or seek relationships with other students. Relationships were not important motivators for engagement. Despite the fact that relatedness was not valued as much as agency and competency items by students, relationships, relatedness, connection and belonging are important to many other students. Māori and Pasifika students in particular in the case study institution have reported that they want and need to feel connected; that a sense of connection and belonging encourages and motivates them to engage with their learning and to persist (Ross, 2008b). Other research supports this contention; when students feel accepted and that they belong their engagement with learning is strengthened (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Read et al., 2003). That students in this study were not motivated by relatedness items perhaps reflects the fact they are not well connected to the institution as they work to balance the often competing commitments of family, employment and study. In addition, being geographically distant from the institution, the lack of a physical campus and part-time study largely works against students developing close learning and social relationships with other students.

It is evident from the data that competing commitments affected students' engagement with learning but only moderately so. Students overcame challenges by being well organised for study and having good family support. These two items exerted the strongest influence on student engagement of all the external items. Being well organised and having strong family and other support has a positive effect on student persistence and success too. Burtenshaw et al. (2006) established that students who persisted in their studies manipulated their social environments to

advantage. Specifically, students made full use of the people, places and facilities around them to ensure that they were successful.

Suggestions for practice

The data from this case study reveal that teachers and teaching, the institutional environment, and students' motivation were more strongly implicated in whether or not students engaged with their learning than the non-institutional items of family, employment and social influences. It therefore makes sense to identify those aspects of teaching, the institutional environment and motivation that can be translated into suggestions for practice for the case study institution. In doing so, it would be most useful to focus on improving those institutional transactions that were very important to students but were not yet performed to students' expectations.

For teachers this means:

- providing prompt feedback to students that improves their learning
- caring about students and being available to discuss their learning with them
- challenging students in helpful ways and teaching in ways that help them learn
- being enthusiastic about their subject and making it interesting for students

For the institution this means:

- providing access to the resources students need for their study
- providing helpful guidance and advice to students about their study
- ensuring that students know who to contact for help
- providing learning support services at times students need them.

Additionally, the institution and teachers must provide subject material that challenges students and enables them to use that subject knowledge in practice. Furthermore, in considering student motivation for engagement, the institution and teachers could foster students' belief in their own competence and provide more opportunities for some students to develop learning and social relationships with other students.

Finally, the institution could explore ways to assist students' families, friends and employers to understand the demands of study and how best to support their student family member/employee.

Conclusion

This research was a small case study involving only 82 first-year students, and results must be interpreted with caution. Findings cannot be generalised across open and distance learning or other tertiary education environments or even across all first-year students at the institution in this study. However, a number of the findings are supported by the literature and previous research

from the case study institution, and can support the suggestions for practice outlined. The practice suggestions fit neatly with many of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education and in conjunction with the findings described in this paper, offer the case study institution the opportunity for reflection and action so that first-year open and distance learning student engagement for learning might be fostered.

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