Rethinking support for the digital age:

support for online learners from a teaching staff perspective

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Masters of Education

at

The University of Waikato

by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2014

ABSTRACT

Although the internet has contributed to a rapid increase in online education provision and student numbers, the withdrawal rate in online settings is higher than that in face to face. Consequently, the need for adequate infrastructure and support systems for online education cannot be ignored. With a growing online student base, there is a need for tertiary organisations to be responsive and supportive to students who are completing their education outside of the traditional, face to face classroom scenario. However, within the tertiary organisation that this study takes place, support services are predominantly focused towards students who are studying face to face. The purpose of this research was to identify current thinking and practices of support for online students from a teaching staff perspective to contribute to the development of support for online students. As the main point of contact for students who are studying online with the organisation, tutors of online programmes were interviewed to identify how they currently support their students and in turn, enable them to progress with their education. Tutors were also interviewed to identify the organisational factors they believe should exist when supporting students who are studying online. This study identified that tutors believe that managerial staff who make decisions about offering online courses perceive these as an extension of face to face courses. As a result, the time and effort required to develop, teach and support online programmes and students is underestimated which causes challenges for teaching staff. Nevertheless, tutors in this study were committed to supporting their students and do this through providing timely feedback, encouraging online learning communities and self-directed learning. Tutors are driven to provide this level of support as they describe their students as having many commitments in addition to their studies. They also describe students as second-chance learners who may have had negative educational experiences in the past. This awareness of students' circumstances drives tutors to provide support when students are studying which can be after hours or during weekends. Tutors also believe that support services should be more flexible and operate during these times. To compensate, tutors

take on roles that they might not otherwise do in the face to face learning environment. However, such practices are challenging and may be unsustainable if the number of courses and student numbers are to increase. Tutors in this study would prefer a collaborative organisational approach to online education to ensure the services and resources required to develop, teach and support online programmes are provided in a seamless manner. This study does not suggest that support services are made available 24/7; rather, it recommends that the organisation first needs to clarify their position and staff roles in online education to ensure those who develop, teach and support online programmes have a shared understanding of the resources, time and effort required for these programmes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge my supervisor Kerry Earl and co-supervisor Simon Archard for their guidance and support. Thank you both for your insight into online teaching and learning and for your patience throughout this research journey.

I would like to thank the tutors who took part in this study. Through this study, I gained an appreciation of the challenges that you experience in your roles. Despite these challenges, you are dedicated and committed to supporting students and show this through your teaching practices. I commend you for the work that you do and hope that recommendations from this study can help to alleviate some of the challenges you experience.

To my friends and family who have supported me, thank you for the babysitting, the cooked meals and the shoulders to lean on. Your support has been invaluable, you know who you are. Special thanks to Logan for seeing my potential and encouraging me to embark on this journey in the first place. You have been an excellent advisor, mentor and friend and encouraged me to keep going when I wanted to give up.

To my mother Kumeroa, your love and support is invaluable. I would not be able to achieve what I have without the dedication and commitment you give to ensure your family are loved and supported. You are truly a selfless woman and I am forever grateful to have you as my mother. Thank you.

To my children Surf and Astyn, thank you for your patience throughout this journey. You inspire and motivate me to never give up in the hopes that I can provide a solid foundation for you. I love you both.

There are two pivotal women who I lost throughout my Masters study. Although their passing made this journey particularly difficult, I know they would expect me to persevere and strive towards achieving my goals. I dedicate this to my grandmothers, Harriette and Anna; I hope you are both proud of my achievements.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview of chapter

This chapter describes the purpose of this study and the contextual factors that led to the research inquiry. It begins with an overview of the significance of the study including the researcher's interest in the topic. Following this, the current context is presented which includes an overview of the organisation that this research takes place in and the range of learning support services available to students. The issues that this research seeks to address are then presented, followed by research objectives. To conclude, the structure of the study is presented.

Significance of the study

Although the internet and information and communication technologies (ICT) has contributed to a rapid increase in online education, the withdrawal rate in online education is higher than that in face to face education (Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Poellhuber, Chomienne & Karsenti, 2008). This results in the need for adequate infrastructure and support systems for online education which cannot be ignored. With a growing online student base, there is a need for educational institutions to be responsive and supportive to students who are completing their education outside of the traditional, face to face classroom scenario through online education (Hunte, 2010; Lee, 2010; Pullan, 2009-2010). While it may be challenging for organisations to identify how to best support online students, online education opens up opportunities for those who cannot attend physical classes to achieve their educational goals. From personal experience, online education did exactly that.

My own educational pathway was not linear. Although I come from a very supportive family, continuing on to tertiary education was not highly valued due to negative experiences that my parents and grandparents faced within

the educational system. Likewise, my experiences were mostly negative and I left school as a 15 year old without any qualifications. Almost 10 years later, I began my full-time university studies whilst working part time and raising my then 7 year old child. I decided to pursue tertiary study to increase my career prospects. With the arrival of my second child and a then incomplete degree, I completed online papers towards the end of my degree in order to fit studies around work and family commitments. If these online options were not available, it would have taken longer to complete my degree or alternatively, I may not have completed my degree at all. It is widely acknowledged that students in online education are challenged with trying to balance multiple commitments in addition to their studies, more so than students who attend face to face classes (Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris, & Lee, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Minaar, 2013). The flexibility of online learning allows students to study at any time in any place. This was certainly the case in my experience. While online education afforded me the opportunity to complete my studies, it was by no means an easy feat and required high levels of self-discipline. Nevertheless, the availability of online options allowed me to achieve my educational goals.

In my current role as Learner Facilitator within a tertiary organisation, I am in a position where I can support others to achieve their educational goals through the provision of learning support services. These services include planning for study, understanding assessment requirements and writing for academic purposes. The range of services available is discussed further in this chapter.

While learning support services are available to all students of the organisation, these services are predominantly focused towards those who are studying through traditional, face to face education. As I have identified in my experience as Learner Facilitator, there is limited consideration for services outside of the traditional, face to face classroom scenario. Findings from this research may contribute to developments of online support provision for the organisation's online students.

Research context and setting

The tertiary organisation that this research takes place in provides a range of vocational courses. Courses are provided predominantly through face to face delivery across two main campuses. However, the organisation does deliver several courses completely online to students based nationally and internationally. The organisation uses Moodle as its Learning Management System (LMS) and most courses have teaching resources available in Moodle. The organisation is split into four schools and the uptake of online education across the organisation is varied where courses that are practical-based, such as trades courses, are delivered predominantly face to face. However, the organisation's provision of online courses has steadily increased.

There are several factors driving this increase. These include increased competition from other tertiary organisations and the need to generate increased revenues. Within a capped funding environment, tertiary organisations are encouraged to do more with less and generate alternative revenue sources (Tertiary Education Commission, 2012). Up until 2012, a Business Development Unit existed who were responsible for developing new business and revenue sources for the organisation. This included identifying commercial opportunities that were not funded through EFTs funding and identifying opportunities for new course offerings. In 2012, the Business Development Unit was disbanded and business development responsibilities were decentralised amongst the organisation's four schools. As business development activities were now the responsibility of each school, school leadership teams were not only encouraged to create innovative learning experiences through information and communication technologies (ICT), but to also find opportunities to further develop the organisation. This contributed to the development and delivery of new online courses, and online delivery options for courses that are delivered face to face.

While the increase in online courses has allowed the organisation to reach a wider audience, there would appear to be limited consideration into how

these students are supported outside of the traditional, face to face classroom scenario. Although the organisation has several staff available who can support and advise teaching and support staff in the area of online education, the overall organisational ICT strategy, which will inform future developments in ICT, is still being developed.

With its first draft developed in February 2012, the development of an organisational ICT strategy has been a slow process. The strategy recognises the changing needs of learners and how they receive, interact with and respond to learning. As such, the strategy is driven by the need to prepare the organisation for the 21st century learning environment.

The strategy is based on three main objectives:

- to enhance pedagogy
- to ensure programmes are relevant to the industries they prepare students for
- to serve the purpose of creating equity

To achieve these objectives, the strategy emphasises:

- the need for leadership and governance to ensure the use of ICT is planned, coordinated and adequately resourced
- the need to develop capability and competence to empower staff to deliver dynamic technology enhanced experiences
- the need to develop quality learning content and tools
- the need to develop a robust and reliable ICT infrastructure

The strategy also emphasises the affordances of virtual classrooms and the ability to capitalise on Web 2.0 and 3.0 technologies. According to the strategy, virtual environments will also allow the organisation to serve students who cannot attend campus based courses. Furthermore, the strategy emphasises the need to monitor ICT initiatives that have gained traction to ensure that such innovations are maintained.

Although online courses are delivered, the delay in finalising an overall ICT strategy for the organisation, along with major upgrades to the organisation's student management and finance management systems, has meant that online courses are delivered without adequate consideration of support systems and infrastructure required to support the growing number of online students. To ensure quality when it comes to the development of online courses, consideration for organisation wide services is recommended – from recruitment, admission, learning support and completion (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Minaar, 2013; Nichols, 2010). This research focuses predominantly on learning support services and how these services can contribute to student persistence in online education. In the context of this study, Poellhuber, Choienne and Karsenti's (2008) definition of persistence is used which suggests that persistence is the completion of all compulsory assignments and exams regardless of a pass or fail result. This definition is used in the study because it implies that the support initiatives that tertiary organisations implement to enable persistence may not necessarily result in students successfully passing their course.

As highlighted in their draft ICT strategy, the organisation will continue to move into blended and online delivery. However, given funding constraints, it is highly likely that the provision of online courses will increase without adequate consideration of infrastructure and support systems required to assist the growing online student base. As tertiary organisations are encouraged to generate alternative revenue sources, it is important that online courses are of high quality and adequately supported. Furthermore, as government funding is increasingly linked to student completions (Tertiary Education Commission, 2012), the need for learning support services within online education cannot be ignored.

Learning support services

Earlier models of retention in higher education are based on organisation fit, where students are more likely to persist with their educational goals if they assimilate into the organisation (Tinto, 1987). While these models

suggest that tertiary organisations can create services to support this integration, earlier models do not take into consideration external factors that affect student ability to persist with their educational goals. More recent models acknowledge external factors that affect persistence, such as finances, family and work responsibilities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003). Although tertiary organisations cannot control external factors, internal support processes and systems may be able to minimise the effects of these factors and therefore, allow the organisation to be more responsive to student needs. In their synthesis of literature on student retention, New Zealand based researchers Zepke and Leach (2005) assert that student outcomes are impacted by the extent and quality of student services, where services of high quality result in positive student outcomes such as student satisfaction and course completions. While services offered will vary across tertiary organisations, core services may include childcare, pastoral care services, ESOL support, counselling and health services, library services, career services and learning support services.

Within the organisation that this research focuses on, learning support services are available to all students to assist them with their studies. These services aim to minimise challenges that students may be experiencing to enable the best possible chance of persistence. The range of services available to students includes:

- study skills such as time management, planning for study and note taking
- writing for academic purposes
- understanding assessment requirements
- preparing for exams and tests
- APA referencing
- career planning

In addition to this, learning support staff may have to provide some level of pastoral care to students and refer them on to other staff members or external agencies for health and counselling services.

While there is a limited range of self-help resources available on the student portal to assist students with academic assignments, learning support services are provided predominantly through face to face appointments with Learner Facilitators or through workshops delivered in class at the request of tutors. Students may self-refer or may be referred by tutors who believe students might benefit from the services available. In the latter example, tutors will inform students that they have been referred before any intervention from Learner Facilitators takes place.

Although these services are available to all students, services are accessed predominantly by students who are completing their studies through face to face delivery. According to a recent internal survey which identified the areas of support that Learner Facilitators provide, only one of eight Learner Facilitators spent 13 percent of available contact time providing support to online students.

Anecdotal evidence and personal experience would suggest that Learner Facilitators are open to providing support to all students; however, it is difficult to provide support to online students when there is limited consideration for providing support outside of traditional, face to face classroom hours. Furthermore, it may be difficult to identify the best mode of delivery given these students are not based on campus.

Research focus and questions

As the organisation will continue to move into blended and online delivery modes, it is important that students of these courses are provided with a similar level of support as students who are studying through face to face courses.

As the learning support department currently provides minimal support to students who are studying online, the purpose of this research is to identify how these students are supported to enable the best possible chance of persistence in online education. As tutors are the main point of contact for students who are studying online, tutors who deliver online courses within the tertiary organisation were interviewed to investigate current thinking and

practices in the field of support for online students. This research was guided by four questions:

- What is the current thinking and practices around support for tertiary students who are studying online?
- What types of support already exists for tertiary students who are studying online?
- What organisational features need to exist to provide effective online student support?
- What recommendations can be made to the organisation around supporting their online students?

In addition to this research which provides better understanding and knowledge of the challenges to supporting online education delivery, it is hoped that these findings will also serve to inform the organisation itself in its development of online teaching and learning.

Organisation of the thesis

This thesis is organised into five chapters. The following chapter, chapter two, is a review of the literature on the topic of student support in online education and how such support can enable persistence in the online learning environment.

Chapter three describes the theoretical assumptions that guide this research and the methods used to carry out this research project. This chapter reiterates the research questions and focus of this study.

Chapter four presents the findings from the qualitative interviews held with tutorial staff members who deliver online programmes.

In chapter five, the empirical findings from this study are discussed.

In chapter six, limitations of this study are acknowledged. This chapter concludes with suggestions for further research and recommendations to the tertiary organisation to contribute to the development of support for students who are studying online.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview of chapter

This chapter presents a review of the literature surrounding the topic of support for online students and how such support may enable student persistence in learning. This literature review is presented in four sections.

Section one begins with an overview of online learning in tertiary education, the context of this study, and how online learning has evolved. This section also identifies the issues of student retention in online education.

Section two identifies characteristics of the online student and the skills and knowledge that students require to increase the likelihood of persistence.

Section three identifies the key role that tutors have in online education and how they may facilitate academic and social integration, which, according to literature has a significant influence on persistence. It identifies that tutors may facilitate integration through course design and teaching practices.

Finally, section four identifies how online students are supported by tertiary organisations. In the context of this study, support is defined as strategies that enable students to persist with their studies regardless of a pass or fail result. In this section, strategies that may be used to support students are explored which includes the provision of self-help resources, orientation and targeted support interventions.

Although this literature review provides general themes about how students are supported in online education, not all online courses operate the same way and tertiary organisations will provide services based on their specific needs and characteristics.

Online learning in tertiary education

As the focus of this study is based on online education, the following section identifies how online education has evolved and the factors that have contributed to the increased provision of online courses. Retention in online education is also discussed to identify how tertiary organisations may enable student persistence in online education.

Evolution of online education

In the context of this study, online learning and online education are defined as courses delivered completely online. Literature suggests that online education has evolved as a form of distance education where instruction and interaction between teacher and student is mediated through the internet (Casey, 2008; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2003; Westera & Sloep, 2001). With increased access to the internet and information and communication technologies (ICT), tertiary organisations have extended their range of programmes to include ones that are delivered completely online (Erickson & Noonan, 2010; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Through online delivery, tertiary organisations are able to reach students based locally, nationally and internationally. Consequently, some literature suggests that online education has increased competition between tertiary organisations (Casey, 2008; Simonson et al., 2001). While an increase in online offerings opens up educational opportunities for students who may not be able to attend campus based courses, Rovai and Downey (2010) emphasise that it is imperative that tertiary organisations do not dismiss the political, cultural and academic factors that underpin the development of quality online programmes. With these factors in mind, online courses are developed and delivered in a way that is more responsive to student needs as political, cultural and academic factors are considered (Rovai & Downey, 2010; Simpson, 2004). Researchers' emphasise that online courses should not be treated as an add-on or presented as an equivalent to existing face to face courses, rather, the design and delivery of online courses and the infrastructure required to support these courses must be given equal consideration (Lee & Choi, 2011; Shimoni, Barrington, Wilde & Henwood, 2013).

There are generations who have grown up with technology and the internet (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001) and the growth of online student numbers is expected to increase due to the convenience that online learning affords (Erickson & Noonan, 2010; Lee & Choi, 2011). Online education is a popular choice for working professionals, students with parental responsibilities and second-chance learners as it allows them to balance their studies around other commitments (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011). Students may also take a combination of online and face to face courses as the range of online course offerings increases (Rovai, 2003; Simonson et al., 2001). Although online education is a convenient option for students who cannot attend campus based courses, some literature indicates that retention rates are lower than that of face to face courses (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Reasons why students choose to withdraw from their online programmes are complex and varied, however, some literature suggests that students often underestimate the time and effort required to study online and subsequently do not complete their studies (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Researchers in the area of online education emphasise the importance for tertiary organisations to not only understand why students choose to persist with their studies, but also how tertiary organisations may support students and enable persistence (Lee & Choi, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Models of retention in tertiary education can help to identify factors that may influence student decisions to persist in face to face and online education.

Retention in online education

Models of retention have evolved over time. Earlier models for example emphasise the need for students to adapt and integrate into the tertiary organisation (e.g, Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987). More recent models emphasise the need for tertiary organisations to adapt to the needs of students based on their culture, background and experiences they bring to the tertiary organisation (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003). Models proposed by prominent retention theorist Tinto (1975; 1987) are based on the needs of students deemed traditional – those who have likely followed a continuous,

linear pathway into higher education. More recent models extend on Tinto's model to encompass students who are studying at a distance (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and students studying online (Rovai, 2003).

Although earlier models were based on traditional students, retention theorists emphasise the importance of academic and social integration into the organisation. Through this integration, persistence is likely to occur (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975; 1987). Academic integration occurs when students assimilate into the intellectual life of the tertiary organisation and social integration occurs when students develop interpersonal relationships with faculty, peers and staff (Rovai, 2003). According to Tinto (1987) academic and social integration are distinct, however they do interact and enhance one another. Furthermore, formal and informal systems (such as informal peer support networks) within tertiary organisations can facilitate integration and increase the likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1987). Literature on retention in online education suggests that academic and social integration in tertiary education (both face to face and online) is necessary as it is positively related to student satisfaction and persistence. In her study with an online undergraduate psychology course in the United States, Drouin (2008) reported a positive relationship between student to student interactions and perceived sense of community and satisfaction. Lapointe and Reisetter (2008) report similar findings in their study on learning communities in an online graduate course in the United States, however, students valued student to tutor interactions more than student to student interactions.

Models of retention and their links to persistence

Earlier models of retention, such as the Student Integration Model proposed by prominent United States (US) retention theorist Tinto (e.g, Tinto, 1975; 1987), suggests that students are more likely to persist if they adapt and integrate academically and socially into the tertiary organisation. According to Tinto (1987), tertiary organisations may not be able to influence factors that students bring before they enter the organisation, such as previous academic performance, skills and knowledge. However, once enrolled,

tertiary organisations may implement practices and systems to assist students with academic and social integration. Measures of academic integration include assignment and test grades and intellectual development. Social integration can be measured by involvement in campus activities and interactions with peers and faculty, where positive and regular interactions are more likely to result in positive student outcomes.

Underpinning the Student Integration Model is the assumption that tertiary organisations need to be proactive in facilitating integration into the tertiary organisation (Tinto, 2006-2007). While this assumption has been validated in several studies in the United Kingdom, United States and New Zealand (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Nichols, 2010), there are those who argue that the Student Integration Model is based on students deemed 'traditional' – those who have likely followed a continuous, linear educational pathway and are from majority ethnic backgrounds (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Non-traditional students however, include those who are from ethnic minorities and students who may not have followed a linear, continuous educational pathway (Bean & Metzner, 1985). As such, critics suggest that the model fails to consider cultural differences and external factors that may affect non-traditional students. Furthermore, as the Student Integration Model emphasises involvement in campus based activities, critics also suggest that the model does not adequately address the needs of students based off-campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003).

Retention theorists Bean and Metzner (1985), extended on the work of Tinto to explain attrition of non-traditional students who they define as students over 24 years of age, based off-campus or studying part time. In their studies, non-traditional students may have some, or a combination of these factors. While Tinto's Student Integration Model does acknowledge background and defining factors of students, Bean and Metzner (1985) extend this further through the inclusion of academic and environmental factors. Academic factors include study habits, course availability and programme fit. Environmental factors include finances, hours of

employment, family responsibilities and external support networks. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), students are more likely to persist if academic and environmental factors are favourable or have a positive effect and therefore, integration into the tertiary organisation is likely to occur. Although models proposed by Bean and Metzner (1985) take into consideration factors of non-traditional students, more recent models of retention are refined further to encompass distance and online students.

Rovai (2003) extends on the work of Tinto (1987) and Bean and Metzner (1985) by synthesizing their models with skills that students require to persist in the online environment. Rovai (2003) suggests that online students require skills in computer based interaction, information literacy and time management. He also suggests that students have an appropriate level of literacy skills according to the level of study. With the inclusion of skills required for online learning, tertiary organisations may be able to identify students who may require additional support to develop these skills (Rovai, 2003). Literature suggests that tertiary organisations may identify students who require support based on student characteristics such as previous academic history (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Nichols, 2010). Although models proposed by Tinto (1987), Bean and Metzner (1985) and Rovai (2003) may provide a framework for tertiary organisations to plan retention support and activities, there is no guarantee of any individual's retention given the different factors that may affect student decisions to persist with their education.

According to Rovai (2003), there are several factors that influence persistence in online education, both pre and post enrolment. Pre-enrolment factors include student characteristics and student skills. Post-enrolment factors include internal factors that the tertiary organisation may influence and external factors that the tertiary organisation has limited control over such as work and family commitments. These factors are presented in table 1 below:

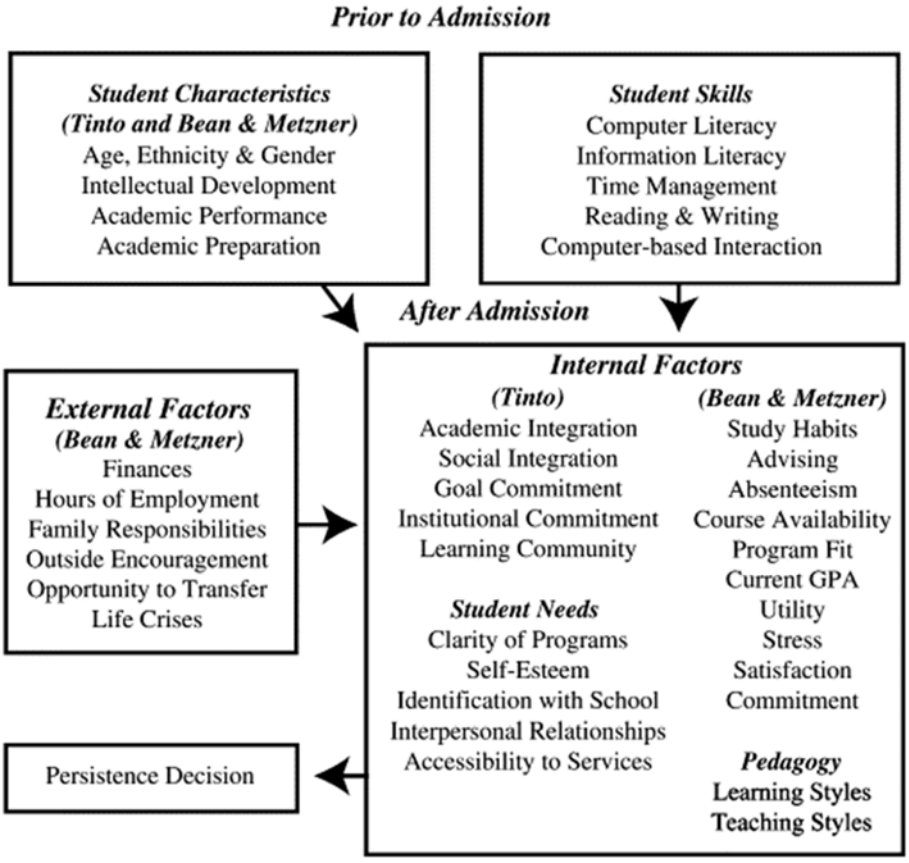

Table 1: Composite Persistence Model (Rovai, 2003)

While Rovai (2003) has categorised factors, they are interrelated and may influence each other and decisions to persist are influenced by a combination of factors. Rovai (2003) recommends that tertiary organisations consider all factors when developing systems that may support students and enable persistence in online education. Discussion of all factors is beyond the scope of this research, particularly external factors that tertiary organisations have limited control over. In the context of this study, factors that relate to student skills and knowledge, teaching practices and resources, and support systems are discussed.

The following section identifies skills, knowledge and experience that literature suggests students need to possess in order to cope with the demands of online education. Tertiary organisations may focus on the development of these skills and knowledge and in turn, increase the likelihood of persistence.

Skills, knowledge and experience students need to enable student persistence in online education

Literature on online education suggests that there are particular skills, knowledge and experience that students should possess to be successful in the online learning environment. The following section identifies characteristics, skills and knowledge that students should possess in the online learning environment which may increase the likelihood of persistence.

Student characteristics

With the increased use and accessibility of the internet, education has become more accessible through online delivery allowing students to study at any time and any place (Pratt & Palloff, 2001; Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Consequently, this has opened up opportunities for students who may not be able to attend face to face classes and are therefore likely to possess characteristics of non-traditional students (Rovai & Downey, 2010).

Student demographics

Although age, ethnicity and gender are included as factors that may influence persistence, the relationship between demographic characteristics and persistence is varied. In their synthesis of empirical research on student withdrawals from post-secondary online education, Lee and Choi (2011) found no significant relationship between demographic characteristics and persistence. However, mature students and women were more likely to be affected by external factors, which may include work and family commitments (Lee and Choi, 2011). These findings are consistent with Finnegan, Morris and Lee (2008-2009) who examined why students drop out of online education in United States colleges.

Previous academic performance and preparation

Several researchers note that students who have attained higher grades in previous tertiary programmes are more likely to successfully complete future programmes (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Gaytan, 2013;

Hung, Chou, Chao-Hsiu, & Zang-Yuan, 2010; Lee & Choi, 2011;Rovai, 2003). Lee and Choi (2011) identified a positive relationship between previous grades and successful completion. Finnegan, Morris and Lee (2008-2009) uncovered similar findings. Research findings are similar across both face to face and online delivery, where students who successfully completed previous courses were more likely to succeed in future courses (Bozarth et al., 2004; Gaytan, 2013; Hung et al., 2010; Muilenberg & Berge, 2005). Given the positive relationship between previous academic performance and successful completion, tertiary organisations may use information on previous academic performance and history to identify students who may require additional support to successfully complete their courses. Students may have to meet certain entry requirements, such as pre-requisite qualifications, however, entry requirements are varied and special consideration may be made for students who do not have pre-requisite qualifications.

In addition to academic performance, student skill levels may also assist tertiary organisations when planning support systems. Skill levels may be identified through pre-enrolment and pre-course surveys and tests (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Hunte, 2012; Nichols, 2010).

Skills and knowledge

Computing skills

As online education is delivered through the internet, it is recommended that students have adequate computing skills to navigate the online learning environment. In their study on the effects of computer self-efficacy and motivation within an online undergraduate IT course at a United States university, Simmering, Posey and Piccoli (2009) found that students who had previous experience in computing successfully completed their online courses. Johnson and Gray (2013) reported similar findings in their study on the use of e-learning tools in an online undergraduate business course at a United States University. Although there is variation in skill levels required, recommended computing skills include basic computing (Hung et al., 2010), sourcing information from the internet (Hung et al., 2010;

Simmering, Posey & Piccoli, 2009) and communicating with asynchronous and synchronous technologies (Johnson & Gray, 2013). It is important to note that the level of skill required is difficult to define as required skill levels will vary depending on the course.

It cannot be assumed that students will have adequate computing skills given the increase of mature and second-chance learners in online programmes. Such students may lack computing skills and may therefore require additional support to successfully complete their course (Johnson & Gray, 2013; Simmering et al., 2009). In addition to computing skills, it is recommended that students have adequate literacy skills to be able to read and understand online instruction (Rovai, 2003). As with computing skills, the level of literacy skills required will vary depending on the requirements of the course.

Time management skills

Along with computing and literacy skills, a level of time management and organisational skills are highly recommended for students in online education (Bozarth et al., 2004; Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Müller, 2008). Although online education allows students to conveniently complete their studies, there is a misperception that online education is easier than campus based learning. Consequently, students often underestimate the workload and time required to complete learning tasks (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Minaar, 2013; Nichols, 2010). According to their large scale study of 1,056 students, Muilenberg and Berge (2005) found that students reported lack of time as a significant factor in their decisions to withdraw from their online courses. In their study, over 52 percent of respondents were graduate students, 28 percent were undergraduate students and remaining students were from community colleges and business / non-profit organisations. As online students are likely to have significant work and family commitments in addition to their studies (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Rovai, 2003) and are predominantly required to self-direct their

learning particularly in asynchronous learning environments (Simmering et al., 2009; Poellhuber et al., 2008; Puzziferro, 2008), literature suggests that time management and organisational skills are essential for planning and managing multiple commitments.

Self-discipline and self-motivation

Literature suggests that students require high levels of discipline and self-motivation skills to successfully complete their online education (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Gaytan, 2013; Shroff & Vogel, 2009). Researchers commonly draw on concepts of self-determination theory to identify relationships between self-directed learning behaviours and course completion (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008). According to Deci and Ryan (2000), self-determination theory focuses "on the social-contextual conditions that facilitate versus forestall the natural processes of self-motivation" (p.68). They go on further to suggest that self-motivation is achieved when needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Inherent in online education is the need for students to be autonomous learners as learning is significantly self-directed (Chen & Jang, 2010; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Puzziferro, 2008). Autonomous learners are able to create their own learning goals and undertake self-directed actions to complete these goals (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008). While tutors will provide varying levels of direction, students have increased control over when and how this learning will take place, particularly in asynchronous learning environments (Barnard, Lan, Crooks & Paton, 2008; Naughton, Roder & Smeed, 2010; Simmering et al., 2009; Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008). Some literature suggests that quality course design is required to allow students to intuitively navigate through the course to complete learning activities (Falloon, 2011; Galy, Downey, & Johnson, 2011; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Naughton et al., 2010). Furthermore, timely feedback from tutors will also help students direct their learning decisions (Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Geddes, 2009; Naughton et al., 2010). From the literature, it is apparent that course

designers, instructional designers and teachers have a role to play in supporting learner engagement and motivation.

Although tertiary organisations may encourage self-directed learning through quality course design and timely feedback from tutors, students should feel competent in their ability to complete learning activities, commonly referred to as self-efficacy (Geddes, 2009; Muilenberg & Berge, 2005; Pullan, 2009-2010; Puzziferro, 2008). Several researchers have reported positive relationships between self-efficacy and performance, where students with high levels of self-efficacy achieved higher levels of satisfaction and performance (Muilenberg & Berge, 2005; Puzziferro, 2008; Sun et al., 2008). In their study on the use of technology and independent learning at a US university, Galy et al., (2011) found that students who perceived technology as easy to use, and showed confidence in their ability to work independently, performed better than those who held opposite views. Sun et al. (2008) identified similar findings in a Taiwan university where self-efficacy was positively related to learner satisfaction and task completion. Several researchers note that as experience with technology or a particular task increases, so too does self-efficacy (Hung et al., 2010; Simmering et al., 2009; Sun et al., 2008).

Although tertiary organisations may have limited influence on characteristics and skills that students possess before they are enrolled, being cognisant of characteristics and skills that students require to be successful in the online learning environment may assist the tertiary organisation with the development of support systems (Rovai, 2003; Nichols, 2010; Tung, 2013). Such systems may focus on the development of skills and in turn, may enable persistence in online education.

The following section identifies how tertiary organisations may enable persistence in online education. As tutors are the main point of contact for students in online education, the following section explores the key role that tutors have and how their course design and teaching practices may enable persistence.

The role of the tutor in online education and their influence on student persistence

This section identifies the key role that tutors have in online education and how they may enable persistence. Literature suggests that tutors have a significant influence on academic and social integration which contributes to persistence in online education. This section identifies the many responsibilities that tutors take on in the online environment and how tutors can facilitate academic and social integration. Literature suggests that tutors may do this through course design and teaching practices.

The online tutor

As students significantly self-direct their learning in online education, literature suggests that the role of the tutor in online education has evolved into a more facilitating role (McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Salmon, 2005; Salmon, 2012). In traditional face to face education, the tutor predominantly directs learning, however, in online education students have greater control over when and how they will learn, particularly in asynchronous learning environments (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Naidu, 2006; Prensky, 2001). Although learning is more self-directed in the online environment, the tutor plays a pivotal role in providing subject matter expertise, guidance and facilitation (McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Salmon, 2005; Salmon, 2012).

Literature suggests that online tutors take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment (Berge, 1995; McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Salmon, 2005; Salmon, 2012). In his review of literature on the role of tutors in tertiary education, Berge (1995) categorises the role of the online tutor into four main categories and identifies the tasks that the online tutor might perform in these roles:

- Pedagogical or Intellectual – tasks within this role may focus on the learning and intellectual development of students. This may be done through facilitating and summarising discussions for students.
- Social – tasks within this role may focus on the development of friendly and comfortable learning environments. This may be done by creating opportunities for students to introduce themselves; guiding discussions

to ensure that students have equal opportunity to participate; and ensuring that students communicate in a polite and appropriate manner.

- Managerial or Organisational – tasks within this role are focused on setting learning objectives; timetabling of learning activities and setting ground rules for the online learning environment.
- Technical – tasks within this role are focused on developing student skill levels with the technologies that are being used in the online learning environment. Tutors may do this by providing technical guidance to students as required. In order to do this, tutors themselves should be familiar and competent with the technologies that are used (McPherson & Nunes, 2004).

Similar roles are proposed by Goodyear et al., (2001) in their report on competencies for online teaching. These competencies were developed by several online teaching practitioners from the United States, United Kingdom and Europe and propose eight roles that tutors might fulfil in the online learning environment:

- The Process Facilitator – facilitates activities to promote learning
- The Adviser-Counsellor – provides advice to students on an individual basis
- The Assessor – grades and provides feedback on completed activities
- The Researcher – encourages students to produce new knowledge in the course content area
- The Content Facilitator – facilitates understanding of course content
- The Technologist – makes technological choices that improve the online learning environment and assists students with developing their skills to use chosen technologies
- The Designer – designs online learning tasks that promote learning. Tasks with this role occur before the course is delivered
- The Manager-Administrator – oversees administrative requirements of the course such as record keeping for course content

Salmon (2005), who was involved with the development of the competencies described, suggests that these responsibilities are not

entirely exclusive to online teaching. She suggests that tutors of face to face courses might also fulfil these roles in their teaching. However, she goes on further to suggest that tutors and students of face to face courses might make use of campus based services that can provide advice in particular areas (such as counselling, technical support). Therefore, demands in these areas may not be as prevalent for tutors of face to face courses.

The roles and competencies proposed by Berge (1995) and Goodyear et al. (2001) identify the multiple responsibilities that tutors of online courses might fulfil in their teaching. To adequately fulfil these roles, some literature suggests that development of tutor capability and skills for online teaching is imperative (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Several studies report positive relationships between tutor skill levels and student satisfaction in online learning (Cheng & Jang, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Galy et al., 2011). As Lee (2010) identified in his study with two undergraduate online courses at United States and Korean universities, perceived service quality was positively influenced by tutor skill level.

Discussion on the various roles that tutors of online education may fulfil is beyond the scope of this research, however, the roles and competencies proposed by Berge (1995) and Goodyear et al. (2001) demonstrate the pivotal role that tutors have in facilitating academic and social integration, which as some literature suggest is positively related to student satisfaction and persistence (Drouin, 2008; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1987).

How can tutors facilitate academic and social integration in online education?

According to Rovai (2003) and Tinto (2006-2007), students are more likely to persist with their education if there is a sense of connection with the tertiary organisation. This sense of connection occurs through academic and social integration which can be achieved when students develop interpersonal relationships with peers, tutors and other staff (Rovai, 2003). According to Rovai (2003), as students achieve social integration, academic

demands may become more manageable; therefore, academic and social integration may influence each other. Literature suggests that tutors of online courses may facilitate academic and social integration through their teaching and course design practices.

Online learning communities

As tutors are the main point of contact for students within the online learning environment, literature suggests that tutors play a key role in facilitating academic and social integration by creating opportunities for students to interact with faculty and their peers (Drouin, 2008; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; 2001; Rovai, 2003). To facilitate interaction in the online environment, the use of online learning communities is recommended (Drouin, 2008; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; 2001). Literature suggests that online learning can be an isolated form of learning for some students (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Westera & Sloep, 2001). Online learning communities are recommended to minimise feelings of isolation and to enhance social interaction between students and faculty (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Furthermore, online learning communities can also create opportunities for students to learn from each other which can minimise reliance on the tutor. Although online learning communities are recommended to facilitate social interaction, they are not suited for all students, particularly those who are more independent than others in the online learning environment (Drouin, 2008; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008). Literature suggests that online learning communities are more effective when interactions are informal and not forced upon students. For example, Palloff and Pratt (2007) recommend that tutors set expectations that students should meet and allow flexibility for students to complete this at a time that is convenient for them. This could be a set number of posts that students need to submit to discussion boards for example. Literature suggests that asynchronous forms of communication may be more suitable with online learning communities to allow more flexibility for students to participate at a time that is convenient for them (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007). When setting expectations for the online learning community, literature

suggests that tutors model expected behaviours as this can help set the scene for the community (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007).

Creating social presence

To facilitate social integration further, literature suggests that tutors create and maintain social presence in the online learning environment. According to Richardson and Swan, (2003) social presence is the degree to which a person is perceived as 'real' in mediated communication. In their study with students from an online undergraduate course in the United States, Richardson and Swan (2003) found that perceived social presence was positively related to perceived learning and satisfaction. Croxton (2014) presents similar findings in her review of empirical studies in the area of interactivity and student satisfaction and persistence in online education.

Social presence can be created in the online environment by acknowledging student contributions and providing timely feedback (Brinthaupt, Gardner, Raffo & Woodward., 2011; Gaytan, 2013). Several studies report positive relationships between timely feedback and student satisfaction and persistence (Barnard et al., 2008; Chen & Jang, 2010; Naughton et al., 2010; Shroff & Vogel, 2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Shimoni et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2008). In their study on how students can be supported in online courses at a Canadian College, Shimoni et al. (2013) found that students reported feelings of frustration when feedback was not received in a timely manner. Sun et al. (2008) report similar findings in their study with an online undergraduate course at a Taiwan University. Although these studies do not recommend an ideal timeframe in which to provide feedback, they do emphasise the importance of providing feedback in a timely manner to allow students to gauge their progress. Furthermore, several studies suggest that expectations for the course must be communicated clearly so students are aware of what is expected of them (Brinthaupt et al., 2011; Gaytan, 2013; Scribner-MacLean & Miller, 2011; Shimoni et al., 2013; Stanford-Bowers, 2008). As identified earlier in this chapter, literature suggests that students can learn from each other through online learning communities. Moreover,

students can also provide feedback to each other which can minimise reliance on feedback from the tutor (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

As social presence is the degree to which someone is perceived as 'real' in mediated communication, synchronous communication technologies – such as Skype, Adobe Connect – may be used to facilitate real time discussion. Through this technology, participants can see visual cues that are not apparent with other forms of communication in the online environment (email, text-based discussion) and can receive feedback in real time (Salmon, 2005). However, literature does suggest that the use of synchronous communication technologies in online education can be ineffective and counterproductive to creating social presence. For example, Ng (2007) found that interaction was limited in synchronous online tutorials in an undergraduate IT course at the Open University of Hong Kong. Although tutorials were designed to facilitate real time discussion, tutorials were lecture style which limited the time available for interaction. Tutors in this study also found it challenging to facilitate online tutorials as the technology used (Interwise) allowed students to communicate over video as well as through text-based chat which made it difficult to manage the two mediums. Tutors also found that it took them more time to prepare for online tutorials to ensure they would run with minimal disruptions. Literature suggests that technical disruptions can interfere with teaching and learning in the online environment (Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011). When using synchronous technologies, tutors should be skilled in using these technologies for facilitating online discussions (Croxton, 2014; Martin & Parker, 2014; Ng, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007).

Online course design

Literature suggests that effective online course design is based on three general themes. Firstly, courses must be easy to use (Galy et al., 2011; Lee & Choi, 2011; Sun et al., 2008), course content must be clear, and relevant to learning (Chen & Jang, 2010; Fan & Le, 2011; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009, Lee & Choi, 2011; Rawlings & Wilson, 2013; Shimoni et al., 2013) and learning tasks should develop students' skills and knowledge

(Barnard et al., 2008; Falloon, 2011; Geddes, 2009; Naughton et al., 2010; Shroff & Vogel, 2009).

To facilitate ease of use in the online learning environment, literature suggests that courses should be easy to navigate (Barnard et al., 2008; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Naughton et al. 2010). Palloff and Pratt (2003) recommend the use of course outlines which specify the objectives of the course and where students can find information and access help. Simple and consistent design layouts are also recommended to minimise the amount of information that is presented on screen and to ensure consistency in where to access information. Structuring course content by teaching week or topic for example can also assist students when navigating the online course (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Several studies recommend orientation sessions so students may familiarise themselves with the course (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010; Pullan 2009-2010). When designing online courses, it is highly recommended that courses are designed with a focus on learning objectives rather than the technology itself (Martin & Parker, 2014; Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Although tutors may develop courses themselves, they may have limited input into the type of learning management system (LMS) – an online platform that facilitates course delivery – that will be used. Furthermore, course design may be the responsibility of instructional designers with limited input from tutors. To ensure that courses are designed effectively, Palloff and Pratt (2003; 2007) emphasise collaboration between management, faculty and instructional design staff.

Ease of use may be achieved further through the provision of quality course content. Literature suggests that course content must be clear, concise and relevant to learning objectives (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000; Naughton et al., 2010; Shroff & Vogel, 2009). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, designing courses with learning objectives as the focus can ensure that course content is relevant to learning. Once learning objectives are established, expectations should be communicated clearly to students to

assist task completion (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007). Although interactive formats may be used in online education, such as video and audio files, Palloff and Pratt (2003) suggest that these are only used if they add value to learning activities. Therefore, developing tutor capability to teach online is highly emphasised in literature (Marshall, 2012; McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

As students signficantly self-direct their learning in online education, effective course design also entails learning activities and resources that encourage self-directed learning behaviours. As described earlier in this chapter, providing timely feedback to students can help them gauge their progress and direct their learning. Furthermore, the development of independent study strategies can also help students to complete learning activities. Several studies recommend orientation sessions to prepare students for online learning. Such sessions may cover topics such as goal setting and time management and have been shown to positively influence student satisfaciton and motivation (Hunte, 2012; Lee, 2010; Kuboni, 2009). The use of asynchronous communication is also recommended by some researchers as it allows students to access and review content mulitple times to increase their understanding of the topic (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Simmering & Posey, 2009). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, online learning communities can also be useful for students to learn from each other which can encourage self-directed learning as this reduces reliance on the tutor (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

To further encourage self-directed learning, literature suggests that students should feel competent in their ability to complete learning activities (Geddes, 2009; Muilenberg & Berge, 2005; Pullan, 2009-2010; Puzziferro, 2008). Palloff and Pratt (2007) suggest that learning and understanding is more likely to occur when meaningful tasks are incorporated into online courses. They recommend that tutors draw on student knowledge and experience as a foundation for developing new knowledge. For example, students might draw on real-life experiences to demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, when teaching students

from diverse backgrounds, some researchers recommend the use of culturally relevant course delivery and content (Rawlings & Wilson, 2013; Shimoni et al., 2013). In their study on supporting Māori students in an online undergraduate course at a New Zealand Polytechnic, Rawlings and Wilson (2013) found that students valued the inclusion of Māori cultural principles, such as mentoring between graduate and current students (Tuakana Teina) and using Māori language and symbols in the course itself. In their study, students suggested that the use of culturally relevant content helped create a sense of belonging which can in turn, enable persistence in the online learning environment (Rovai, 2003).

Although the previous sections identify how tutors may facilitate social and academic intergration through teaching and course design practices, it is important to note that not all online courses operate the same and will vary depending on the needs and available resources of the organisation. Nevertheless, this section has idenitifed the pivotal role of the online tutor and the numerous responsibilities they might fulfill in the online learning environment. While there are recommended teaching and course design practices in online educaiton literature, development of tutor capability to teach and support students in the online learning environment is highly recommended (McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Salmon, 2012). Although tutors play a key role in supporting students in the online learning environment, staff from other services within the organisation, such as learning support staff, can also support students and in turn enable persistence. The following section identifies how other organisational support services can enable persistence in the online learning environment.

The role of organisational support services in online education and their influence on student persistence

Literature suggests that organisational support services can influence student decisions to persist with their online education. These services may focus on minimising barriers to learning and can also facilitate social and academic integration. This section begins with a brief overview of organisational wide approaches to online education and is followed by an overview of non-academic services that may support students in their studies. Learning support services are then presented which identifies how such services can support students and in turn, enable persistence.

Organisation wide approach to online education

As students are learning at any time and any place in online education, researchers emphasise an organisational wide approach to online education to ensure students are adequately supported (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). As described earlier in this chapter, tutors are the main point of contact for students in online education and may take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment. To minimise the reliance on tutors and potential workload issues, Palloff and Pratt (2003) recommend a strategic and planned approach to online education. They recommend that policies and plans for online education are developed by teams or committees to ensure that services required to support students are considered and provided in a seamless manner. Such teams may include faculty, instructional designers, learning and technical support staff and management. Literature suggests that an organisational wide commitment to supporting online students can contribute to student satisfaction (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Lee, 2010; Pullan 2009-2010).

Non-academic support services

According to Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004), support services are non-academic services that students or prospective students may access. The range of services may include recruitment, enrolment, financial planning, career services and technical support (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). Discussion of all services is beyond the scope of this study, however,

literature suggests that the provision (or absence) of such services can influence student decisions to persist with their studies (Lee & Choi, 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Simpson 2004).

Literature suggests that tertiary organisations may need to be more flexible with service provision in the online learning environment, this may be particularly apparent for students who are based in different time zones. This is not to suggest that services need to be available 24/7, rather, tertiary organisations may need to provide information that is easy to access and use through websites and learning management systems (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Shimoni et al., 2013; Simpson, 2004). Several researchers recommend the use of self-help resources so students may access help independently (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Simpson, 2004). They also recommend timely responses to student enquiries. Recommended timeframes in which to respond will depend on the organisation, however, it is recommended that students are given clear information about when they can expect a response to their enquiry (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003). Furthermore, the provision of timely services is recommended in literature. Pullan (2009) suggests that services are provided just in time if demand for services is expected to increase – for example students may require career services leading up to graduation. As described earlier in this chapter, a collaborative approach to planning and developing online programmes can ensure that services are provided in a seamless manner.

Learning support services

Traditionally, learning support services are provided as a complementary service that usually occurs after course development and teaching (Thorpe, 2002). In her definition, Thorpe (2002), who is a professor on Educational Technology at a United Kingdom University, describes the function of learning support as "enabling learners to study successfully and to develop their own understandings of the material" (p.106). Similarly, Tait (2000) defines learning support as a range of services that complement course materials or resources that are uniform for all learners. Underpinning these definitions is the assumption that learning support occurs *after* courses are

developed. To ensure students are well supported, literature suggests that learning support should be considered as an integral part of the overall design and delivery of online courses (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002).

Literature suggests that learning support services can better prepare students to meet learning demands of their course (Lee & Choi, 2011; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Simpson, 2004). Such services can facilitate academic and social integration which can in turn, enable persistence. The range of learning support services will vary according to individual organisations, however, common services include preparing students for online study (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010), providing academic advice (Simpson, 2004; Thompson & Hills, 2005) and referring students on to other services such as counselling (Shimoni et al., 2013; Simpson, 2004).

In his synthesis of empirical student support research in the UK, Simpson (2004) suggests that students who seek out learning support in online education are often those that are most likely to complete without learning support intervention. He further suggests that those who may require support the most may not seek out support that is available to them. In their study on support for undergraduate students at a Canadian College, Shimoni et al. (2013) report similar findings, where students reported feelings of being too ashamed to admit that they needed support. Furthermore, students did not know about the range of learning support services that were available to them. To increase promotion and accessibility of services, self-help resources, proactive support strategies and targeted support interventions are recommended (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Lee & Choi, 2011; Simpson, 2004).

Self-help resources

As learning is significantly self-directed in online education, the provision of self-help resources is highly recommended (Shimoni et al., 2013; Simpson, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003). To encourage self-directed learning, literature suggests that students need to feel competent to complete

learning activities (Geddes, 2009; Muilenberg & Berge, 2005; Pullan, 2009-2010; Puzziferro, 2008). Although tutors provide guidance and assistance to complete tasks, this may be enhanced further through the provision of self-help resources that can help prepare students to meet the learning demands of their course. Self-help resources may include study guides and videos, online workshops and links to other services that may assist students such as library services (Simpson, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003). Printed study guides and information booklets have been used in some studies where foundation level courses were offered (Hunte, 2012; Kuboni, 2011), however, such measures may not be cost-effective if materials are printed. Nevertheless, the way in which resources are provided will depend on the needs and resource availability of the tertiary organisation.

Pre-entry and pre-course needs analysis

Pre-entry and pre-course needs analysis can be effective as they can form an early identification system to highlight students who may require learning support. Through this analysis, tertiary organisations may identify students who may be at risk of withdrawing (Nichols, 2010; Simpson, 2004) and those who may lack skills required for online learning (Hung et al., 2007; Hunte, 2012; Shimoni et al., 2013). Although students may have to meet course entry requirements, it is important to note that some tertiary organisations may have open-entry policies which do not require students to have pre-requisite qualifications. The Open University of Malaysia for example has open-entry policies although students are screened to identify their readiness for online learning (Tung, 2012). Online courses also tend to attract second-chance learners who may not have achieved pre-requisite qualifications (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011). Through pre-entry and pre-course needs analysis, literature suggests that tertiary organisations may implement individualised support plans to encourage persistence and ideally, successful completion (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Hunte, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011; Nichols, 2010).

To identify students who may require learning support, tertiary organisations may draw on educational and academic history (Lee & Choi, 2011; Nichols, 2010; Simmering et al., 2009), online surveys to identify learner readiness (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Nichols, 2010; Simpson, 2004) diagnostic assessment results (Hunte, 2012; Nichols, 2010) and information from pre-entry interviews (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Shimoni et al., 2013). Pre-entry interviews may uncover deep information about student support needs; however, these may need to be supplemented with surveys or tests to capture those who may not feel comfortable to fully disclose their support needs (Shimoni et al., 2013). Whichever methods are used, Lee and Choi (2011) suggest that these are implemented from a supportive approach to ensure students do not view these as barriers. This is particularly important for second-chance learners who may have had negative educational experiences (Lee & Choi, 2011; Shimoni et al., 2013). Nevertheless, such initiatives can inform targeted support plans that can be individualised to student needs (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Hunte, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011; Nichols, 2010).

Several researchers have reported successful outcomes through the use of pre-entry and pre-course analysis (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010; Hunte, 2012; Simmering et al., 2009). In Nichols (2010) for example, a targeted retention strategy was implemented at a New Zealand Private Training Establishment. As part of this strategy, students were required to complete a survey with their enrolment forms to identify their ability to study online. Survey results and academic history were checked by learning support staff and students who would benefit from learning support services were identified. Students were then personally contacted by learning support staff who promoted the services available to them and their progress was monitored throughout the course. Those who significantly lacked essential skills for online learning were counselled into lower level courses and those who were new to the online environment were made to attend a compulsory preparatory course. This initiative contributed to an increase of successful completions, which ranged from 9.4 percent to 24.7 percent across three cohort programmes (Nichols, 2010). Similar

strategies were used in a Barbados college where students who were enrolled in online undergraduate courses had to complete a readiness for online learning self-assessment before the course began (Hunte, 2012). Those who had minimal skills were phoned by learning support consultants before the course began and detailed information books about the services on offer were sent to all students. Hunte (2012) found that this strategy positively impacted student performance.

Clay, Rowland and Packard (2008-2009) also used similar initiatives in two undergraduate English Composition and Algebra courses at a US university. As part of their needs analysis process, students were required to undergo an interview with an eCore Advisor – who provided learning support advice for online study – to assess their ability to study in the online environment. Those who had not taken an online course previously were required to attend a 10 minute online orientation which included tips on how to study online and where students may go for help. After this orientation, students were required to complete a short survey and results were then sent to the eCore Advisor to analyse who would then recommend whether students can proceed to the enrolment stage. While such initiatives may be perceived as a barrier, this process allowed tutorial and advisory staff to implement support plans for students who required additional support. This initiative contributed to an increase in retention from 75 to 82 percent from the previous year. Clay, Rowland and Packard (2008-2009) note that this was the first time the organisation achieved a retention rate of over 80 percent for these two programmes. Similar initiatives were used in a Malaysian Open University where students were required to complete an open entry admission survey (Tung, 2012). Those who lacked skills required for online learning were required to complete a 20 week face to face Headstart Programme which focused on developing independent learning and technical skills. Although this initiative required face to face interaction, students who completed this course were then able to enrol in online courses.

When learning support staff are involved, Palloff and Pratt (2001; 2003) emphasise the importance of tutorial and support staff working closely

together. Interaction between students and learning support staff during pre-entry and pre-course analysis can create a platform for ongoing communication throughout the course which, according to literature, can assist with targeted support interventions (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010; Hunte, 2012; Tung, 2012).

Orientation

As described earlier in this chapter, academic and social integration can enable persistence in online education (Rovai, 2003). Literature suggests that integration is likely to occur when students are familiar with the online learning environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rovai 2003; Rovai & Downey, 2012). As identified earlier, tutors play a key role in familiarising students with course content and how they may access support during their studies. Some literature suggests that this may be enhanced further when support staff are involved in orientation initiatives (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010).

Common topics that are covered in orientation include tips for online study, time management, where to find information and how to access services. Several researchers recommend that orientation sessions are delivered before the course starts and that students should be given an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the course (Pullan 2009-2010; Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010). Topics that are covered and the way in which orientation sessions are delivered will vary depending on the needs and resource availability of the organisation.

Orientation sessions are predominantly delivered online and can include webinars, videos and online presentations (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003; Simmering & Posey, 2009). Some researchers recommend the option of face to face orientations if students are based locally (Hunte, 2010; Nichols, 2010). As Nichols (2010) reports in his study on targeted support interventions at a New Zealand Private Training Establishment, students who had not completed online courses before valued the face to face orientation that was held over a week and suggested that these helped them

prepare for their studies. These sessions also helped to develop relationships between learning support staff and students which in turn made it easier for staff to implement targeted support interventions throughout the course. Although face to face orientation sessions can be beneficial, they may not always be possible particularly when students are geographically widespread. Literature suggests that webinars and orientation videos can be just as effective and students can review content multiple times if needed (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003; Simmering & Posey, 2009).

Ongoing targeted support

As described earlier in this chapter, Simpson (2004) suggests that students who seek out learning support are often those that are likely to successfully complete their course without learning support intervention. To ensure support is provided to those students who might benefit most, several studies recommend targeted support strategies (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010).

Clay, Rowland and Packard (2008-2009) report significant increases in retention rates (from 20 to 30 percent) across three programmes after implementing support interventions that were targeted towards upcoming assignments. In their study, learning support staff would promote services that would specifically assist students with particular assignments. Support was also targeted towards students that tutorial staff deemed as at risk of failing their course. Literature suggests that there are signals that tutorial staff could look for to identify students at risk of failing. Common signals include missed assignments, lack of participation in online discussions and lack of activity in the online course itself (Lee & Choi, 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003; Simpson, 2004). This can be monitored through usage statistics that are available in most learning management systems. Learning support staff may not have access to this information, therefore, targeted support interventions would require tutorial and learning support staff to work closely together when providing such support.

Pre-course and pre-entry needs analysis and orientation activities can also assist learning support staff with targeted support initiatives. In Nichols (2010) for example, students who were identified as requiring additional support at the beginning of the course were monitored by learning support staff. Staff would personally contact students by phone to remind them of the services available, particularly in the lead up to assignments and tests. However, such initiatives may not be possible or efficient with large student cohorts. The uptake of support offers was high as students were familiar with learning support staff as students had been contacted earlier in the course. This initiative, along with pre-course and pre-entry needs analysis, and orientation activities, contributed to increased retention rates. Literature suggests that one-off support initiatives are not as effective as ongoing support initiatives such as those implemented in Nichols (2010). Support needs will change throughout the course therefore, ongoing targeted support is recommended (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010; Tung, 2012).

In addition to services described above, learning support staff may need to provide a level of pastoral care support to students. As online programmes are a popular choice for working professionals, work and family commitments are often cited as reasons not to persist with online education (Müller, 2008). In Tung's (2012) study on the effects of retention strategies implemented at a Malaysian university, students reported work and family commitments as reasons for withdrawing from their online courses. Although tertiary organisations have limited influence on work and family commitments, learning support staff may need to provide pastoral care support, particularly when life crises occur (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Müller, 2008). The way in which pastoral care support is provided varies. For example, learning support staff may be trained to provide counselling services (Shimoni et al., 2013) or students may be referred on to counsellors (Lee & Choi, 2011). Discussion of pastoral care services is beyond the scope of this research; however, it is important to note that learning support staff or

tutors themselves may need to provide a level of pastoral care support to students.

Literature suggests that services are required to ensure that students are supported to meet learning demands. The provision of support services can facilitate academic and social integration and, in turn, enable persistence. Literature shows that support is more effective when tertiary organisations implement a collaborative approach to online education to ensure services are provided in a seamless manner.

Summary of chapter

Through the literature on the subject, this chapter identified how students in the online learning environment are supported in their studies which in turn can enable the best possible chance of persistence. This chapter described the issues of retention in online education and drew on models of retention in tertiary education to identify factors that influence persistence. These models assert that academic and social integration has a significant influence on persistence in online education. The skills, knowledge and experience that students should possess to be successful in the online learning environment were identified as tertiary organisations may focus on the development of these to enable persistence. As the main point of contact for students in the online learning environment, the role of the online tutor was described and how they can facilitate academic and social integration through their teaching and course design practices. The roles of other organisational support services were described and how the provision of such services may influence persistence in the online learning environment.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overview of chapter

This chapter describes the research perspective and methods that were used in this study. It begins by exploring the theoretical perspectives of research and the paradigms that frame research inquiry. The theoretical framework that guides this study and the methods that were used are explained. This chapter also includes the ethical considerations and practices that were used, including explanations regarding the validity and reliability of this study and how the study complied with guidelines and processes of the University of Waikato's Ethics Committee.

Research in educational contexts

It is commonly acknowledged that traditional research methods such as those from the positivist paradigm, are based on objective scientific rigour which fails to address social, political, cultural and humanistic factors of research participants (Dillard, 2006; Lather, 1992; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011). In positivist research, the social world is conceptualised as a system of variables that are independently analysed to identify causality. Positivist ontology suggests that there is only one reality and therefore, an objective epistemology is emphasised. In positivism, quantitative methods are predominantly used through rigorous hypothesis testing to uncover the one true reality (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011). Research is often conducted in closed or controlled settings, within laboratories for example, which may skew data as participants are removed from their natural settings. Such approaches may produce quantifiable data and may also minimise researcher bias, however, they fail to consider social and humanistic factors that underpin the experiences of research participants and are therefore less suitable in social research. It is suggested that qualitative research methods are far more

considerate of social, political, cultural and humanistic factors that underpin the experiences of research participants in education and social sciences (Dillard, 2006; Lather, 1992; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011).

Due to the influence that educational practitioners have on student behaviour, educational research is predominantly social (Martinovic, Wiebe, Ratkovic, Willard-Holt, Spencer, Cantalini-Williams, 2012; Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007; Ravitch & Wirth, 2007). However, as education is subject to public policy, governments may call for quantitative research outputs, particularly where funding is concerned (Denzin, Lincoln & Giardina, 2006).

Educational research appears to be improvement based, where research outputs are expected to provide a solution to improve or enhance curriculum and teaching (Martinovic et al., 2012; Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007; Ravitch & Wirth, 2007). Although academics and practitioners may research solutions, they often follow different research approaches which can leave academics and practitioners divided. Academics may attempt to theorise a solution to a problem with minimal exposure to these problems (Martinovic et al., 2012). Alternatively, practitioners call for more practical research outputs that address problems as *they* experience them (Martinovic et al., 2012; Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007; Ravitch & Wirth, 2007). While this division may not be apparent in all situations, collaborative research approaches may be more suitable in educational research, which would allow academics and practitioners to work together towards a solution. This might be evident in an action research where the researcher is involved in the research study. Research relationships will vary where the lead researcher may be an 'insider' or 'outsider' and others may be variously involved or positioned as co-researchers.

Although there is merit in using both quantitative and quantitative research methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), there is debate amongst scholars as to which methods are more valid and reliable which can make research inquiries complex (Donmoyer, 2006; Ercikan & Roth, 2006). This debate amongst the research community may open up opportunities for

researchers to consider different viewpoints in their inquiries, however, arguments about method superiority can affect how research is accepted and validated as new knowledge (Donmoyer, 2006; Ercikan & Roth, 2006). Markula and Silk (2011) suggest that the merits of research be based not on what methods are used, but how methods fit within the paradigm that the researcher uses to frame their research.

Paradigms in educational research

As discussed earlier in this chapter, positivist approaches may produce quantifiable data and may also minimise researcher bias, however, such approaches may fail to consider social and humanistic factors that underpin the experiences of research participants and are therefore less suitable in social research (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011). In contrast, critical and interpretivist approaches recognise the multiple factors that underpin the experiences of the researcher and participants and therefore, a subjective epistemology is emphasised (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011). The focus of this research was to identify current thinking and practices in the field of support for online students from a tutorial staff perspective; therefore, research was guided by an interpretivist approach. Such approaches are based on the experiences, views, opinions and interpretations of the research participants.

Research design – interpretivist approach

Interpretivist approaches are used to gain understanding by interpreting the perceptions of participants. Interpretivist ontology acknowledges the multiple constructions and lived experiences that individuals have that in turn shape their realities (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011). Like critical approaches, a subjective epistemology is emphasised and therefore, findings are due to the interactions between the researcher and participant in which both parties construct shared meanings (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011).

As literature suggests, tutors play a key role in supporting students to enable them to persist in the online learning environment. The purpose of this study was to investigate current provision of support to online students which can

in turn, enable persistence. The purpose of this study was to also inform any future development in the area of support for online students. As the student's main point of contact, tutors were invited to share their insight into the provision of support to online students. Through their experiences as online tutors, their voices can uncover rich detail about how students are, and could be, supported in the online learning environment. It is important to note that the inclusion of the student voice may have uncovered further details in this study; however, as learning support staff, including myself, provide minimal support to online students, the tutor's perspective was considered as pivotal to identify how the organisation might support their growing online student base.

Silverman (2011) notes that researchers bring to their inquiries notions and ideas about the research topic which may influence the way in which data is collected and reported. It is important to note that my own experience as an online student contributed to my interest in this area of research. As I am now in a position where I can provide learning support to online students, it was the intention of this study to find out how this could best be done.

Method of inquiry

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of inquiry for this study. According to literature, interviews are used to increase understanding of social actions and processes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Menter et al., 2011). Interviews can follow a structured or semi-structured format. However, structured interviews are based on a standard set of questions which minimises the interviewer's ability to ask probing questions and therefore limits the amount of information that can be elicited from interviewees (Menter et al., 2011).

Alternatively, semi-structured interviews are guided by pre-determined topics which serve as a general framework. The researcher may ask probing questions to uncover rich data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Menter et al., 2011). As the purpose of this study was to identify current thinking and practices around support for online students, semi-structured

interviews were used to allow participants to expand on their experiences and views on the topic of support for students who are studying online.

Participants

Sampling and selection of participants

To ensure that the range of courses that are offered online were represented in the study, representative sampling was used to obtain a cross-section of participants who taught across the range of programmes offered online. As the tertiary organisation is split into four schools, it was intended to interview at least one tutor involved with the delivery of online courses from each of the schools (4), with a maximum of two participants from each school (8).

A list of programmes offered by the tertiary organisation was requested from the organisation's academic registry to identify programmes that are delivered completely online. It was identified that only two of the schools offered full-time programmes. One of these schools offers several programmes fully online which extends the range of levels offered online (certificate to graduate certificate) and the other offered one certificate level programme. One school was in the process of developing their first online programme and one school did not offer any programmes that were delivered fully online. All tutors of online programmes were invited by email to be interviewed for this study (refer to appendix 1). The tutor who will be teaching on the online course that was under development was also invited to be interviewed. This tutor was invited to participate as it was expected that support for online students was considered as part of the course development. Of the 10 tutors invited to participate, 6 agreed to participate in this study.

School	Number of Participants	Level of Programme
School A	4	Undergraduate Graduate
School B	1	Pre-undergraduate
School C	1	Pre-undergraduate

Table 2: Participant Summary

Procedures

Data collection

Participants took part in a 30 minute semi-structured interview which was audio recorded at a location of their choosing. All interviews were held in their workplace. Participants were informed before the interview and through the information sheet that the interview would be recorded (refer to appendix 2). Participants were asked questions related to the research topic (refer to appendix 3).

With qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, the interviewer is a participant themselves in the interview process and therefore, there is potential for the researcher to influence responses (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Menter et al., 2011). Furthermore, as Lather (1992) suggests, it is important that the 'voice' represents those of the research participants, not the researcher. However, the participants' voice ultimately becomes the researcher's words when findings are reported (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Markula & Silk, 2011). To ensure that interview data reflected the voices of the research participants, interviews were transcribed and transcripts were emailed to research participants for approval before data was used in this study.

Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research involves the search for patterns and themes in the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Tolich and Davidson (1999) describe data analysis as a process of data reduction, data organisation and data interpretation. Thematic analysis was used in this

study to identify themes that relate to the overall research statement: Rethinking support for the digital age: support for online learners from a teaching staff perspective. Four research questions guided this study and these were kept at the forefront during analysis to ensure themes and subsequent findings could provide answers to these questions:

- What is the current thinking and practices around support for tertiary students who are studying online?
- What types of support already exists for tertiary students who are studying online?
- What organisational features need to exist to provide effective online student support?
- What recommendations can be made to the organisation around supporting their online students?

To analyse data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) analysis methods were followed. To begin, each transcript was read through multiple times to ascertain a general picture of individual perspectives of the research topic. Subsequent readings focused on coding data into 22 categories. These categories were based on general themes that emerged from the data. Codes were then grouped into concepts which allowed data to be compared and contrasted. Four themes emerged from the data which are presented in chapter four.

Ethical considerations and practices

Ethical research is important when dealing with human subjects. Ethical research practices are focused on protecting research participants to ensure they are not harmed or distressed through their involvement in the research inquiry (Creswell, 2008; Tolich & Davidson, 2011). In this study, ethical practices were considered and identified. This was done undertaking the University of Waikato ethical guidelines and committee procedures. To ensure the protection of participants through their involvement in this study, ethical practices were followed throughout the research inquiry.

Informed consent

Ethical research practices emphasise that participants must give their informed consent by knowing what they are taking part in before they give consent to participate (Creswell, 2008; Tolich & Davidson, 2011). In this study, participants were invited to participate by email and an information sheet and consent form were attached (refer to appendices 2 and 4). Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research before the consent form (appendix 4) was completed.

It is important to note the relationship that I have with participants as a fellow staff member. As a member of the learning support team, I have a service/support relationship with participants in their role as tutors. This relationship does not require me to be involved with managerial and assessment matters, therefore, I am not in a position of authority. Participation in the research was voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw up until the point that they approved their transcripts.

Confidentiality and privacy

All steps should be taken to maintain confidentiality and privacy when dealing with human subjects (Creswell, 2008; Tolich & Davidson, 2011). Anonymity cannot be guaranteed, however all steps to safeguard the identity of participants were taken in this study. Participants cannot be easily identified as the collection of demographic information (such as gender and tenure with the organisation) was not included in this study. Alphabetic coding was used to remove identifying features from data during data preparation and data entry. Furthermore, no participant is identified in the study or in the reporting of the study. The hard copies of the qualitative data are held in secure, locked storage in my workspace at the organisation that this research takes place in. This data will be retained for a period of five years. Audio files of the semi-structured interview recordings, along with data collected for data entry are stored in electronic data files which are password protected. These will be kept for a period of five years, after which they will be destroyed.

Credibility and trustworthiness

To ensure authenticity and trustworthiness of data in qualitative research, triangulation and data checking are typically used in qualitative research inquiries (Creswell, 2008; Tolich & Davidson, 2011).

Triangulation is the process of using different data sources or methods to understand or explain more fully the topic that is being researched. It allows the researcher to investigate the topic from different standpoints as they draw on multiple sources of information, individuals or processes (Creswell, 2008; Tolich & Davidson, 2011). Although this research was undertaken through one method (semi-structured interviews), interviews were held with a cross-section of participants who teach across the range of online programmes that are offered by the tertiary organisation. Through this cross-section, multiple perspectives about how support for online students was gained based on the experiences that participants have with their particular programmes. To triangulate data further, research could be done from the student's perspective. As this research was based on the tutor's perspective, interviews with students were beyond the scope of this study.

To ensure the accuracy of the data collected, participants in this study were sent transcripts of their interview to confirm that these were accurate and represented their views before data was analysed. Such practices are recommended in qualitiative research inquiries, particularly interpretivisit approaches to ensure that data reflects participant views and not that of the researcher (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011).

Summary of chapter

As the aim of this study is to explore current thinking and practices surrounding the topic of support for online students from a tutorial staff perspective, this study is guided by an interpretivist framework. Semi-structured interviews were used as they open up opportunities to explore participant views about support for online students. The following chapter presents findings from these interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Overview of chapter

This chapter presents findings from the qualitative interviews with participants, who are now referred to as tutors, which provided four main themes.

This chapter begins with theme one, which suggests that there are mixed perceptions of online education within the organisation.

Theme two presents the challenges that perceptions have caused for tutors in this study. They identify that there is limited consideration for the infrastructure, as well as limited time allocated and resources provided for which to develop, teach and support online learning.

The third theme suggests that teaching and support is more effective when tutors are aware of the circumstances that online students may face. This theme also identifies the skills and knowledge that tutors in this study believe students should possess to enable the best possible chance of persistence in online education.

The fourth theme suggests that tutors provide most support to students in the online learning environment. Tutors may support students through teaching practices and course design. Tutors also monitor student progress and intervene when support is required. Although support services are available to all students of the organisation, this theme identifies that tutors take on a greater sense of responsibility in the online learning environment than they do in the face to face learning environment as students see them as the first point of contact.

Theme one – mixed perceptions of online education within the tertiary organisation

Interviews with tutors identified mixed perceptions of online education within the organisation. They reported that management staff who have no or limited involvement with online teaching perceive online education as easier than or similar to face to face education. However, these tutors suggest that the opposite is true – that online courses are not easier than or similar to the delivery of face to face courses. The following sections explore these perceptions that exist within the tertiary organisation.

Perceptions that online education is easier than or the similar to face to face education

All tutors agreed that from their perspective, there is a perception within the organisation that online education is easier than or similar to face to face education. Tutors in this study believe that management staff consider online education as an extension of face to face education as Tutor B expresses in his comments below:

> *It [online course] was just treated as "well, you already teach them face to face, just go and do this [deliver online] as well", but it's a whole set of different dynamics.*

Tutor E expresses similar views in her comment:

> *I've been told by someone a little high up on the totem pole than I am "oh, just take your face to face plan and put it online". Nothing can be further from the truth in terms of the development of an online course.*

The perception that online education is an extension to face to face education is particularly evident in courses where face to face options (50 percent) are also available with suggestions from management that online courses can be created by making resources from face to face courses available online:

I found out that a course was going to be delivered online starting the following Monday and there wasn't even a Moodle course created at the time […] but seeing as there was already a face to face version of it, they [programme manager] just decided "oh we'll start doing this as an online one, I think it will be probably quite good for that". (Tutor D)

However, tutors suggested that it takes more time and effort to design, teach and support online courses than face to face to courses:

Don't underestimate how much it takes to design, build and provide support for students in these [online] environments… Personally, it's easier for me to walk into a face to face class and teach than it is for the prep and the support involved for online students. (Tutor E)

Similar views are expressed by Tutor B:

I think the institution as a whole haven't valued online, it's just an extension, it's just like doing face to face. It's [online education] got its own demands and quirks and some people might say, more time is needed with online students, not less time.

Initially, tutors themselves held the view that online education was easier and that they underestimated the time involved, as demonstrated in the following comments:

I admit, in the beginning, 5 or 6 years ago, "oh, it's [online education] easy" and perhaps that's the attitude of the students, "oh it's online, it's easier" (Tutor E)

I might be busy and he's [the student] trying to call me, or I'm trying to call him or something like that so the timing of that is, managing the time in my job is an issue and its probably a bit bigger than I thought it would be. (Tutor F)

Such comments suggest that staff may initially underestimate the time and effort required to develop, teach and support online programmes. It is not until staff become involved in online education that they realise the amount

of time and effort required to develop, teach and support online programmes. Consequently, the perception that online education is easier than or similar to face to face education may be influenced by lack of awareness and experience with online education from a teaching perspective.

In summary, tutors suggested that there is a perception within the organisation that online education is similar to or easier than face to face education. However, as tutors have become more familiar with the time and effort required to develop, teach and support online learning, they suggest the opposite – that online education is not similar to or easier than face to face education and certainly not simply an extension of face to face education.

Theme two – challenges for the online tutor

As there is a perception that online education is an extension of face to face education, tutors in this study believe that this resulted in limited consideration for services and resources that may be required to teach and support online programmes. As a result, tutors experienced challenges in their roles. The following section identifies some of these challenges.

Limited consideration for the services and cost of supporting students

Technical support

Several tutors acknowledged that the organisation does have reasonably good hardware available for the delivery of online courses. In terms of software, all online courses are delivered through Moodle – a learning management system. Within Moodle, students access course content and complete course work. Moodle is also used to facilitate communication asynchronously through forums, chat and email. There are also options to communicate synchronously through Adobe Connect within Moodle which allows the tutor and students to attend virtual meetings where they can communicate in real time through video links.

Although the organisation offers a small number of face to face classes and synchronous tutorials during the evening, standard operating hours are from 8.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday. Provision of Moodle support is predominantly during these hours and is available to all students. Support enquiries are fielded through an email help function which is not manned during weekends. As a consequence, tutors in this study suggest that they take on more responsibility in the online environment to try and minimise technical difficulties with Moodle. This may include troubleshooting technical problems with students outside of standard operating hours. Technical difficulties do not occur often and are more apparent during synchronous tutorials.

As courses are delivered through Moodle, tutors believe that the functioning of Moodle is imperative to ensure students can complete their course work without technical disruptions. However, their views would suggest that there is limited consideration for support that may be required if technical difficulties do arise within Moodle outside of standard operating hours. Several tutors mentioned that a number of their students complete their course work during weekends and expressed concerns about Moodle support not being available during that time:

> *They [the organisation] might underestimate IT support, Moodle support, whatever they're running on that sort of thing because when you've got online students, it's not like you can wait till Monday. Those students might work all week and will need things in the weekend and if there's no one supporting Moodle on the weekend, it falls over, you know, effectively, you're reducing your student's chance of winning, or passing so it needs to be really, a pretty good IT strategy. (Tutor F)*

Further to his comments above, Tutor F was made aware of issues that students were experiencing where they could not access course content because of technical issues within Moodle. Such actions suggest that tutors may be perceived by students as the first point of contact if they experience technical issues with Moodle.

Tutor B expresses similar views and goes on further to suggest that support is not available during synchronous tutorials. Students are strongly encouraged to attend these tutorials, however, these are held outside of standard operating hours when limited Moodle support is available:

> *Many of my courses that I tutor online are after hours and I believe there's no technical support here for them and likewise as a tutor, I would like to think that if something is wrong at our end or something went wrong, there's someone I could call at the very least to remedy that. It's like being in a class, if the power went off or we had a physical malfunction in the room I'd like to think that somebody could address it*.

Although tutors did not comment specifically on the amount of times they have experienced technical difficulties, Tutor B commented on one occasion where a scheduled tutorial had to be cancelled due to technical difficulties:

> *10 minutes into the session [online synchronous tutorial] the system crashed somewhere along the line and I don't know why but that was it for the night. So the effect of that was that students are scattered around the country, they had organised children and planned their regular activities, like going to a class and it couldn't be helped and I described it at the time, it's like if I had a class booked here but couldn't access the room.*

In his comments, Tutor B reflects on the compromises that students have to make to attend these tutorials which may influence tutors increased sense of responsibility to ensure that technical issues are minimised. However, several tutors highlighted that their technical experience in Moodle is limited and they may not be in a position to assist students with technical enquiries:

> *What would be fabulous is a go-to person for say Moodle / Adobe queries, technological queries. A tutor's knowledge goes so far, by virtue of what they've learnt […] if there is a person to go to when we reach that point of not knowing anymore, that would be fabulous*

because sometimes, if the technology isn't working for one person in the tutorial, it distorts it for all of them. (Tutor E)

All tutors acknowledged that the organisation needs to consider the provision of support for online programmes particularly when virtual tutorials are offered outside of standard operating hours. Their feedback suggests that support does not necessarily have to be available 24/7 as there is never going to be a suitable time for every student. Rather, tutors suggested that Moodle support enquiries are responded to in a timely manner, within 24 hours as several tutors recommended. Furthermore, tutors recommended that students be given very clear guidelines about how to access support if there is no one available to help them with their enquiry at that time, as Tutor D emphasises below:

I've done a course actually myself online and it was frustrating when you couldn't get hold of someone. So I think the most important thing is that the people [tutors] that are running the programmes are available for the students as much as possible, not necessarily 24 hours a day but certainly the students are given very clear guidelines on when best the tutors are available at best times and that the tutors are available on those times and if the tutors aren't available on those times, who else can I talk to, who can I get help from, so there's always somewhere that the student can go to so they can move on.

In addition to further consideration of technical support that may be required for online students, tutors suggested that there needs to be further consideration into the cost of providing support. For example, as tutors themselves will often provide support to students outside of standard operating hours, this could be at their own cost:

I'm discussing some things with students at 9, 10 o'clock on a Friday night you know. In the weekends they're asking things, any time day or night, you need to be operating in your student's world which is generally outside of working hours where they're generally focused on work. So I guess staff with the right equipment to do that with a

decent smart phone or a laptop, iPad, tablet sort of thing so they can do that easily. (Tutor F)

Tutor D also highlighted the cost of phone calls in her comments:

So what happens if the tutor is wanting to provide support to a student after hours and the tutor isn't here on Campus? Who's going to pay for the phone call for them to phone and support a student? Those sorts of things. The actual literal cost of support and peoples time to do it.

Such comments demonstrate the lengths that tutors will go to in order to provide support to students. Tutors do this as they have a vested interest in seeing their students succeed in their courses. Tutors do however, believe that such practices could be unsustainable if they are providing this support at their own expense.

Other Support Services

Support services are available to all students regardless of the course delivery mode. The range of services include learning support services, library services and pastoral care services that may minimise barriers to learning such as counselling and healthcare.

Tutors in this study believe that online students should receive the same support services available to face to face students, however, several tutors were uncertain about how online students can access such services.

Although tutors suggested that online students should receive the same level of support as face to face students, feedback from two tutors suggests that the uptake of support services by online students is minimal in comparison to that of face to face students. As students are not based on campus, online students do not have the same level of exposure to support services as Tutor D expresses in her comments below:

If a student is face to face and they're coming on campus and they're going past say downstairs and they see people in there and they sit in class with somebody else who says "I've just been down and

> *talked to so and so about such and such and god she was just so helpful" … then other students are more likely to go and avail themselves of the services that are available. Online because the student is in their own home or workplace or whatever there isn't those messages floating around as much so I think.*

Tutor D suggests that the uptake of support is more likely if students have visual exposure to the support services available. Such comments suggest that the organisation needs to consider how other support services are promoted to online students given the lack of shared location and exposure to these services.

Lack of resources and time to teach and support online courses

When asked what the biggest challenges were for supporting students online, all tutors felt that the amount of time and effort required to teach and support students online was not adequately reflected in their workloads. Tutors are allocated teaching hours per course and several tutors suggested that online courses are not allocated the same amount of hours as their face to face counterparts:

> *Our [face to face] students for instance have four hours a week to tutor. Our online students get one hour [of contact time]. Where's the equity? … I don't feel that in our workloads that the time needed to teach and support online students is anywhere catered for enough. Effectively, there's your four hours in class, that's a workload unit that you've compressed into one hour [through synchronous tutorials]. (Tutor B)*

It may be implied from the comments above that there is an expectation that online courses will be delivered in the same way as face to face courses through the use of synchronous tutorials. However, the logistics around synchronous tutorials can cause issues and compromise the quality of interaction between students and the tutor and between students themselves. These issues will be discussed later in this section.

Tutor beliefs would also suggest that communicating with students can be time consuming and further impacts their workload for online courses. Although Moodle facilitates asynchronous and synchronous communication through chat, email, forums and live virtual meetings, tutors did use various forms of communication technology outside of Moodle as well. This includes the use of text, email and phone. Three tutors mentioned how time consuming it is to communicate with students through asynchronous communication technology, such as through text and email, as Tutor C expresses in her comments below:

> *They [tutors] can get floods of things and they have to sift and sort and look through all these different emails and then find the one or two where there is a student actually asking or requesting some help and then how do they fit that into their day now because the student needs help now.*

As tutors felt the time allocated to online courses was minimal in comparison to face to face courses, they expressed concerns about teaching and learning quality. Tutors B and E facilitate synchronous tutorials through Adobe Connect; however, as their workloads only allow time for so many tutorials per week, they found that class sizes in tutorials were too large. As a result, these tutors felt that the purpose of tutorials, as a means to facilitate discussion about course topics, was compromised, as Tutor E expresses in her comments below:

> *Numbers is a big one, that's a challenge, numbers in the class who are there for online at one time in the tutorials, that's a huge one. You could ask six different people and they could give you a different number about what they think is a good number for an online tutorial, but you find the higher the numbers, for example, one tutor here and I, I'm pushing 20 on, 22 online and this tutor has got more than that, again you will find students will just sit back and listen because when you've got that many, its very difficult to be interactive and allow enough time for a person, a student to contribute if they wish to.*

Tutor B expressed similar views and also mentioned the technical issues that could arise with too many numbers in synchronous tutorials:

> *Another issue too that's ongoing is once you get so many students technically there is a lot of background noise you pick up and we've found the first 3 or 4 students is good as gold but once you get to about 8 or 9 and it gets really noisy. Any more than that and the students start, "to heck with this" and just sign off.*

To overcome the issues of having too many students in tutorials, Tutor B split his online class into smaller groups to allow for smaller tutorials. This has impacted his workload, however, students have benefited from the smaller class size, as expressed in his comments below:

> *So what I did on my own initiative, I cut that group of 30 odd into an afternoon and evening and I've got a regular afternoon session now, which impacts on my workload, but I do it and they've really thrived as 8 or 9 regularly turn up, we're like a class now, they talk and they know each other.*

Several tutors suggested that these synchronous tutorials allowed students to discuss learning with their peers and tutor in real time. Furthermore, they suggest that tutorials allow more interactivity, particularly if students are working with static materials as Tutor B expresses in his comment below:

> *Its [synchronous tutorials] our only real [visual] interaction with them other than the activities, you know may as well read a book.*

Although the quality of tutorials is compromised by large class numbers, there are students who value synchronous tutorials as a means to connect with their peers and tutor and to access timely support, as Tutor D expresses in her comments below:

> *For the most part throughout all of the programmes there's a pretty high take up with the tutorials and the reasons given are that they like the fact they can see their classmates and their tutor and just the opportunity to have that timeliness thing, you know, I can ask a*

question and get it answered just like that, and that's that personal touch as well.

In summary, tutors felt that the time, effort and resources required to teach and support students in online courses, as structured and operating in this situation, was not adequately reflected in their workload. As a result, tutors felt that the quality of teaching and learning can be compromised. It appears that tutors take on a greater sense of responsibility in the online environment by implementing measures to overcome issues of quality; however, these measures further impact their workloads.

Theme three – the online learner and the skills they need to enable persistence

Although tutors experienced workload and resource challenges in their roles, several tutors believe that teaching and support in online education is more effective when tutors are aware of the online student experience and the skills that students require to enable the best possible chance of success in online education. The following sections identify what these tutors said about the circumstances that online students face in the online environment and the skills and knowledge that tutors believe students need to succeed in online education.

The online learner

Four tutors reflected on their own experiences of being an online learner which they suggest helped them understand what their students could be experiencing. Tutor C recommends tutors experience being an online learner in order to understand this experience from the students view:

> *One of the best things you can do to be a good online tutor or developer or whatever is to have been that online learner yourself first and just having rocked up to a course and being told […]. You've got to have felt the fear yourself and then you kind of have a better idea of what it's like. Being on the other side of the fence.*

Several tutors also acknowledged that online learning can be an isolated way of learning for students. Tutor A, who completed online courses herself, expresses this in her comments:

> *Speaking from the student perspective, being at home on the computer, you're still physically isolated. When you're the online student it could just be you at home on your computer so yes you have a connection but I think there's the potential to feel isolated. You can assume that because they have access to their class forum, they're a big group, but really they're not. They really are isolated people.*

Tutor B suggested that a lot of his online students are studying online due to their remote geographic locations, including students from the far north and remote towns in the Bay of Plenty which he believes are often isolated communities:

> *Sometimes, not always, but sometimes it's the very communities that need the most support, you know the isolated poorer communities where the students come from […] and they want to better themselves and it defaults to an online learning environment.*

In addition to this belief that online learning is an isolated form of learning, tutors also suggested that their students lead busy lives, often managing demands of work, family and study. As a result, students would complete activities after business hours and during weekends, as Tutor E suggests in her comments below:

> *Tutors need to acknowledge that when the tutorials are set at night time, a lot of our students have already done an 8 or 9 hour day. What you find is people who are working, notifications of their completions of activities will pop through at the weekends, always at the weekends because they're working 40+ hours a week anyway.*

For four of the tutors, their beliefs about how online students should be supported appear to be influenced by their own experiences as online learners.

Skills that students require to enable persistence in online education

Tutors in this study identified four main skills that students require to succeed in online education – computing skills, time management skills, communication skills and the ability to be self-motivated independent learners.

Computing skills

All tutors suggested that students need basic computing skills for online learning such as word processing skills and the ability to navigate the internet. Being familiar with computing terminology was also identified as an important skill, for example, understanding what an Internet Browser is and the concept of clicking and dragging electronic files.

Two tutors suggested that the technical demands of their courses were not too onerous and that these skills can easily be learnt if students were fast learners. However, Tutor E also acknowledged that there are students who may not have studied for many years and therefore, would require more support to develop their computing skills. Tutor C referred to past students with limited computer experience but was unclear if such students should be supported to develop their computer skills:

> *Because the programme is online, they will need computer literacy. And again with a lot of the students we've had in the past, there have been students that have never used a computer. So should we get some of those students in the programme then that in itself is going to be a huge challenge for them. So obviously we're going to have to have some strategy in place on how we can get them up to speed quickly so they don't fall behind or get cheesed off with it. So that's really important that they are conversant with using a computer and they feel competent about using it.*

Although two tutors acknowledged that some students may require support to develop their computing skills, one Tutor had found that some of her younger students were quite fluent in the online environment which she attributed to the use of social networking sites.

Time management skills

Tutors in this study believe that the majority of their students are working full-time. Furthermore, two tutors mentioned that most of their students also have family responsibilities. To handle the demands of multiple commitments, all tutors acknowledged that students require time management skills to help them complete their study. Additionally, tutors believe that students may underestimate the time commitment required, as Tutor C comments:

> *The one I believe is most important is time management because our students are working – chances are they'll be working more than a 40 hour week. So they've put their hands up to do this programme and probably not knowing exactly what they've signed up for and the time involvement so for the students that come on board initially I think that's the main thing that we spend some time about arranging how to go about working out when they're actually going to do the online stuff. So time management is probably the first thing I'd say.*

Although tutors suggested that students need time management skills, their views would also suggest that students need to understand the amount of time that they will need to commit to their learning.

Communication skills

In addition to basic computing and time management skills, tutors suggested that students also require communication skills. They believe that students should have skills to communicate through asynchronous and synchronous technologies. Additionally, two tutors suggested that students need to be able to communicate their needs for help if required, as Tutor C expresses in her comments below:

> *The other strategy I think or skills that they'll need to have is communication skills because if they are having issues we need them to be aware that we've got to know that, they've got to tell us and ask for that help, which again, some of these students might not be so happy about doing*.

Tutor F expresses similar views and goes on further to suggest that students need to be able to understand if they are achieving which could be a signal that they need help:

> *They need communication skills, they need to be able to understand when they're achieving or not.*

All tutors do monitor student achievement and initiate contact with students who may not be achieving their coursework. Two tutors believe that students need to be open to recommendations that may improve their work, as Tutor A expresses in her comments below:

> *The quality of her [student] work is not great, I can see the issues. And she's very resistant to understanding another way of doing things. Old dog, new tricks.*

Tutor E expresses similar views in her comments below:

> *We've had a couple of hurdles for students whom English is not their first language so that is something that we've needed to, invite them perhaps to get some learning support for, whether they take us up on that is the other issue.*

As demonstrated in Tutor E's comments, tutors may recommend that students seek support from other staff members, however, students may not follow through with these recommendations.

The ability to be self-motivated / independent learners

The ability to be self-motivated independent learners was highlighted in this study as a significant skill required for online learning. Due to the intensity of some courses, two tutors suggested that discipline and motivational skills are particularly important to ensure students keep up with learning activities that students were required to complete from week to week:

> *Yeah, self-discipline, self-motivation, most definitely. Very, very important. My course specifically is very intense so all it takes is a student either to get lazy, or give themselves a break, or legitimately*

might become ill and just can't do it. One week makes a massive difference to catch up.

Tutor F expresses similar views in his comments below:

They [students] need motivation, they need self-motivation.

In addition, one tutor suggested that students also require independent learning skills to try activities out for themselves:

A little bit of attitude is good as well, not being too timid. It's always good to have somebody who is willing to just have a look themselves and have a go themselves – that always bodes well for success as well.

As a previous online learner, Tutor C reflected on her own experiences and emphasised the importance of self-directed learning, as shown in her comment below:

I'm a fairly self-directed learner. If I hadn't been a self-directed learner I would have said "nah this is way too hard, I don't want to do it".

In summary, tutors reflected on their own experiences as online learners with such experiences influencing how they in turn teach and support online students. Tutors suggest that online learning can be an isolated way of learning. The skills that tutors believe students require include basic computing, time management skills and communication skills to enable the best possible chance of success in the online learning environment. The ability for students to be self-motivated, independent learners was also considered important for online learning.

Theme four – tutors support students in online education

The interviews identified that tutors play a key role in online education as these tutors appear to be the main point of contact for students in their courses. The findings in this section suggest that tutors have a key role in preparing students for online learning and can enable persistence through

teaching and course design practices. Furthermore, tutors in this study provide support that can be provided by others within the organisation, such as learning support services. The following sections identify how tutors prepare students for online learning and how they build relationships and student engagement in the online learning environment. This section also identifies how tutors monitor student progress and implement targeted support interventions.

Preparing students for online learning

Several tutors provided some form of orientation in their course and would spend the first two to three weeks focusing on building familiarity with the course in Moodle. Sessions to test connections for virtual tutorials were also offered to students to ensure that connections were working before live tutorials. These connection test sessions were highly regarded by the two tutors who used them as they minimised technical disruptions during live tutorials and also made students more familiar with the technology.

Although all courses had entry requirements that students had to meet, pre-entry interview sessions, some of which were held face to face, were helpful for tutors who used these (2). These sessions helped to gauge student skill levels and support that may be required throughout the course. Tutor D also suggested that during the pre-entry and or initial phases of the course, students need to be given clear information about the time commitment required for online learning to dispel the assumption that online learning is easier, as reflected in her comments below:

> *The whole idea of being able to study whenever and wherever you want is great but it's kind of really difficult. We're saying to students you can study whenever and wherever you like but if we want to have good retention and success statistics we have to say "actually no, we're not going to say you can study whenever you like, we're actually direct you quite a bit and we're going to make you have these sort of like little chunks" and be quite strategic about it. People seem to think if they're told they can study anywhere, anytime they like that*

magically it's actually going to happen, not that they actually still have to do any work.

Orientation activities that tutors in this study implement are focused on the requirements of the course. Although tutors provide information about services (library, learning support) available to students in their courses, tutors mention that support staff have no or limited involvement in orientation for online courses. In contrast, support staff have various levels of involvement in orientation for face to face courses through in-class promotional visits and study skills workshops.

Developing relationships and student engagement in the online learning environment

Tutors in this study believe that tutors of online courses need to be able to engage students which they suggest can enable persistence. In the context of this study, Chen, Gonyea and Kuh's (2008) definition of student engagement is used which refers to the degree to which learners are engaged with their educational activities. This definition is used as Chen, Gonyea and Kuh (2008) suggest that engagement is positively linked to student satisfaction and persistence.

Tutors suggest that tutors of online courses need to be able to develop and maintain engagement throughout the course, as Tutor F expresses in his comments below:

There needs to be the ability to keep the student engaged. Well before that, there needs to be a way to engage them, then it's got to remain throughout their study so they don't drop off and I guess for different types of programmes, its going to be different how you do that you know.

Tutor C expresses similar views and further suggests that tutors need to be entertaining in the online learning environment to engage students:

Having someone [as a tutor] who is passionate, who is energetic, it's like being in a classroom, you have to inspire them, you've got to be

a source of entertainment, you've got to be all these things because you want to capture these students, so that's a key thing, being that type of person.

While the comments above suggest that student engagement is necessary, these tutors found it difficult to build relationships with online students. Difficulties were due to the lack of visual cues, demeanour and body language that tutors might experience with face to face interactions, as Tutor C expresses in her comments below:

The other big challenge is getting a really good relationship going with your students because you're not seeing them face to face. There's so much that you pick up on when you meet someone […] the challenge will be building relationships with the students from an electronic source.

Tutor E expresses similar views in her comments below:

In a face to face class, I can see demeanour, I can see behaviour, I can see you and I can build up a picture. You know, I have no ability to do that with an online course.

Tutors in this study believe that developing relationships with students was easier to do through synchronous communication technologies such as virtual tutorials and phone calls as they were able to pick up on visual and audio cues, as Tutor A expresses in her comments below:

The phone call does make a difference. Not that I would ever wish it on a student, but if I ring a student who I see something's going wrong and she just bursts into tears because things are really going wrong […] I wouldn't have got that in an email.

Furthermore, Tutor D suggests that the use of synchronous technology can assist with resolving issues more efficiently, as expressed in her comments below:

Quite often I'll get an email from a tutor, and between them and the student it's been going on for ages and I just think for heaven's sake

just pick up the phone and call the person. And they go "oh well this is my problem" and I say "ok that's cool, are you in a position for us to have a look at that now?" "Oh yeah that will be good" and 5 minutes later it's done and sorted and they'll say "oh that was so easy". We're all people, we're meant to be talking to each other.

If students were based locally, the option for face to face help was also suggested by three tutors. Of the tutors, Tutor F had met with students who were based locally during the enrolment process which he believed helped him build and maintain relationships as expressed in his comments below:

So yeah it's a combination of still having person to person and predominantly text and email. That's my strategies of building and maintaining the relationships.

All tutors emphasised the need to be approachable, considerate and respectable when communicating with online students in order to build relationships. Furthermore, the importance of acknowledging student contributions was also emphasised, as shown in Tutor A's comments below:

We chat daily, so we're there, we're in all the learning forums and it's not like every student every day will get a response to what they've said, it's just we'll jump into a conversation, say this is really interesting what you guys have found out here, and have you considered something, have you related it to what you did three weeks ago. We have a presence.

As Tutor A suggests, regularly acknowledging student contributions helped her maintain an online presence which in turn, helped her to build relationships with students in the online environment.

Teaching practices that may enable persistence

When teaching online students, all tutors emphasised the importance of flexible teaching practices and also the importance of providing timely feedback to students. As tutors were aware of other commitments (work and family) that students held in addition to their studies, tutors were flexible

with their teaching and allowed extensions for assignment deadlines if needed. Tutors would also work with students to make subsequent catch-up plans as Tutor E expresses in her comments below:

> *If they [students] keep up week to week, they're going to hit the mark beautifully, but bearing in mind, whether we like it or not, there's illness, life other things that come along don't they and so if that happens, of course the invitation is there so we can make a plan for catch up.*

However, Tutor F suggested that extensions can also impact on tutor workload if initial assignment deadlines are not met which may compromise marking of assignments:

> *You know the pressure comes on, at times like this, I was talking to you before about the student who dropped off all of his assignments, you know, his rollover date is overdue and has dropped this all off at once so the potential is, the marking might drop off a little bit because of time pressure, but you need to be able to make sure you rise above that.*

Tutor F also reflected on how he had made assignments available in paper form for a student who did not engage well with online learning. While Tutor F acknowledged that this student was the exception and that small numbers in class (12) allowed him to do this, he did suggest that tutors need to adapt if required to make accommodations for students who may be struggling, as expressed in his comments below:

> *So this is an online programme but this student went through a whole lot of issues during the year like gear failure and actually his engagement with the online thing was really poor so it got to the stage where I gave him these, you know the practical stuff. He started off okay but after 2 or 3 months, he dropped off completely so I got to the stage where I had to do this [make assignments available in paper form] and has the exception but the fact is, you need to be able to adapt to that you know.*

Two tutors emphasised the need to draw on student experience to assist student learning, as Tutor C suggests in her comments below:

> *I guess part of our role is showing them how to apply the knowledge and skills that they already have and then just building on those knowledge and skills as well. Predominantly we do find with our students enrolling in part time programmes, they come in with a big base already [subject knowledge gained through industry experience].*

Tutor E reflected on how she had to adapt teaching when working with more dominant students:

> *One challenge that I came across not this semester but last semester was more dominant students who wouldn't allow others to speak, so you have to employ strategies that hopefully are, allow those quieter ones are more inclusive way of being included.*

To minimise the effects that dominant students may have on others, once Tutor E was aware of experience levels within her class, she would pair more experienced students with less experienced students to complete peer activities together. Tutor E found this pair activity useful to develop peer relationships and allow quieter students to participate more.

In addition to flexible teaching, tutors emphasised the importance of providing timely and relevant feedback. Tutor F emphasised the need to provide formative feedback in marked assignments so students may develop their skills further. Tutors would also provide feedback on course forums and Tutor A also reflected on how peer feedback is received in her course:

> *Some of them initially will come into the online forum and they'll think that every single thing they write will need to be received by the tutor and commented on or every piece of writing they'll get feedback on and then they gradually start to get the idea of, actually, the comments from students are equally useful.*

As well as giving feedback, tutors would encourage feedback and questions, particularly during synchronous tutorials. Tutor B would make himself available before and after tutorials to answer questions from students if need be.

Course design and teaching resources

All tutors suggested that learning could be made easier for online students by using course design principles that focused on ease of use and navigation. Tutor C expresses these views in her comments below:

> *We have to make it very clear, very easy this is what you need to do "now do this and now do this", "and if this happens, try this" so it's easy to navigate around. The initial set up of the programme so that it's really easy for the student to get around.*

Tutor D expresses similar views, particularly for students who may be located internationally:

> *Easy to access is one of the key features. When we're talking about online students as you know, we're not just talking about students who are local or even national, we're talking about students who are over in different time zones, so access for them so it's really obvious where they can go to get the support and ease of timing and things like that.*

As the tutor is not there to physically guide students, particularly in asynchronous learning environments, the ability for students to easily navigate through the online course was highly emphasised by tutors.

Several tutors commented on how they structure learning activities within the course to develop learning skills. Tutor F would structure learning activities with the aim of developing independent learning skills by providing less detailed instructions as students progressed through the course:

> *They need to learn or use researching techniques to find the material because purposely in the course, we start off with courses 1, 2 and 3, especially 1, have really detailed descriptions to get the material*

they need to get there. Course 2 and 3 are similar but starting to fade out a little bit. Courses 4, 5 and 6, basically a link on the side of the page which points them to which documents they'll need.

Tutor E reflected on how she would structure learning activities to facilitate peer interaction, as shown below:

Other suggestions that I've put in place in my teaching at the moment is also, even online, putting students into peers or groups which encourages them to strongly communicate with one another thereby hopefully, forming a collegiality and peer support and how you're getting on. Or asking them to produce two parts of a whole activity, and they put, the peer puts both names on the activity when it gets submitted.

Although the comments above suggest that strategies can be used to develop learning skills and peer-interaction, Tutor C expressed concerns about how course activities can be designed for kinaesthetic learners. As the face to face version of the course that Tutor C teaches requires no or very limited involvement with computers due to the practical nature of the course subject, she suggests that face to face workshops may need to be offered to students:

With our programme, we know 90% of our learners are kinaesthetic, so we've got to be able to develop something where we do have hands on activities for them to do, whether it's online or whether it's coming into a workshop doing a reading and then coming into the workshop and physically doing the activity, I don't know, we'll have to talk through some of those things when we get to them.

Tutor C did acknowledge that the provision of these workshops may counteract the purpose of going online which, as her feedback would suggest, is to provide flexible learning opportunities for students as they continue to work in industry. Furthermore, she realised that these workshops may be difficult to run if students are geographically widespread.

As identified in previous sections, tutors in this study believe that students require self-directed learning skills to enable persistence in the online learning environment. While tutors may influence self-directed learning behaviours through course design, tutors of courses that are of a more practical nature may find it difficult to design learning activities that will be delivered through an online forum. This is particularly apparent if these courses traditionally attract kinaesthetic learners.

Monitoring student progress and providing targeted support

All tutors had various monitoring strategies in place to identify students who may be at risk of failing or withdrawing. Such strategies included the use of Moodle reporting to gather site usage statistics and assignment submissions. Tutors in this study would initiate contact with students who were inactive on Moodle and would invite these students to make contact with them if they required support.

These tutors prefer to use asynchronous communication initially when contacting students who may require support. Email and text communication appears to be used in the first instance followed by phone calls. Tutor A expresses this view in her comments below:

> *My views of effective support, I guess are that when I pick up the phone and ring one of these guys, they know that the reason I'm ringing them is because we've crossed the line and they understand that I'm ringing to help, even if it's a kick up the backside, they kind of understand. If they get an email or a general posting, they're in the green zone, if it gets to a phone call they know that we're up to there, so they understand that very quickly.*

While tutors in this study generally showed a preference for asynchronous communication when contacting students who may require support, Tutor D suggested that this can sometimes be an inefficient way to communicate with students particularly when tutors are handling high volumes of email. In courses of a more practical nature, tutors (2) also suggested the option of face to face help if students are based locally. Additionally, Tutor C

suggested that face to face workshops could be offered in workplaces with groups of students to go over practical assignments. However, she did acknowledge that this may be difficult to do if students are not based locally.

Multiple levels of support

All tutors emphasised the importance of having a variety of support options available, such as self-help resources and guides, support though virtual meeting rooms and phone calls. Tutor D expresses this in her comments below:

> *It would be like you have your tool belt, an obvious thing would be a document would be one thing another would be an Adobe Connect meeting room another thing would be a phone call another thing would be can they actually come in and come face to face – they may be online but they may well be in Tauranga, so having all of those things on tap and ready to go – being efficient.*

In addition to providing different options for students to access support, tutors also emphasised providing timely support. However, their feedback would suggest this may not occur at the moment as support provision from an organisational perspective is focused predominantly towards students who are campus based. Through the provision of multiple support options, tutors believed that students may access more timely support even if staff members were not available, through self-help resources for example.

When asked who should provide support, tutors believe that there should be a combined approach. In the first instance, the tutor would provide support, particularly with content; however, specialised support should be given to students if and when needed whether that is through learning support staff, librarians and counsellors. As identified earlier in theme two of this chapter, tutors in this study appear to take on a great sense of responsibility in the online learning environment. It would appear that tutors are perceived as the main point of contact for online students and as such, tutors in this study provide support that might traditionally be provided by

other staff members of the organisation, as Tutor B expresses in his comments below:

> *You're not just the tutor but you're also the technical support person, you're the librarian, you're everybody.*

Tutors provide this level of support to students not only for completions, but also because they have a vested interest in seeing their students persist with their education, as Tutor F expresses in his comments below:

> *Supporting students has two distinct but interrelated drivers. One is for completions the other is for success of whom I see as "my students" in a field I am also involved. If I can help them to get to higher levels of success than they might not imagine at this stage –I had no vision of the future and success above what I was currently doing at that age – with any edge I can pass on, that makes me very happy.*

Tutor C expresses similar views in her comments below and suggests that students are family:

> *We want a good outcome for our students, both in retention and success, and for their own development and learning. In order to achieve this, we need to create an environment whereby they feel happy about asking for help, or just to give them confirmation that they are heading in the right direction. Our student become part of the 'family', this is why we support them.*

Such comments reinforce the view that tutors take on a greater sense of responsibility in the online learning environment and will do what is necessary to enable the best possible chance of persistence, as Tutor D expresses in her comments below:

> *I see support to students as part and parcel of helping to promote their readiness to learn. Removing barriers and enabling the process of engaging in the learning is part of good teaching practice.*

These tutors are committed to seeing their students persist in online education, however, this may require them to take on roles that they might not do in face to face courses.

Summary of chapter

In conclusion, tutors in this study believe that there is a perception within the organisation that online education is easier than or similar to face to face education. However, as tutors in this study are familiar with the time and effort required to design, teach and support online programmes, their views would suggest a reality that is not so straightforward – that online education is not easier than or similar to face to face education. This perception that online education is easier or similar to face to face education appears to be influenced by the organisation's response (or lack of) to online specific characteristics and it is seen as an extension of face to face education. Consequently, tutors believe that there is limited consideration for the time and effort required to teach and support online programmes. Although support is provided to all students of the organisation, it appears that tutors may provide support services that might otherwise be provided by support staff members, such as Moodle technical support and learning support. Tutors suggest that they do this as they have a vested interest in seeing their students persist and succeed in the online learning environment and students may perceive them as the main point of contact for all support enquiries. Tutors in this study show great levels of commitment to ensure that students receive a quality online learning experience with the time and resources that they have available. However, their views would suggest that current practices may be unsustainable and that a combined organisational approach may be necessary to support students in the online learning environment.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Overview of chapter

The previous chapter identified findings that indicate the pivotal role that tutors in this study have in teaching and supporting students in the online learning environment. These tutors are committed to seeing their students succeed and demonstrate this through their course design and teaching practices, however, this can negatively impact their workloads and may be unsustainable if the organisation increases their provision of online courses or if student numbers in these courses are to increase. As the main point of contact for students, tutors in this study take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment. However, as Bennett and Marsh (2002) suggest, are tutors in the online learning environment expected to run before they walk? With this focus in mind, this discussion is based on the role of the tutor and how their teaching practices can facilitate academic and social integration, which, according to literature, can enable student persistence in online education. This chapter also emphasises the importance of a collaborative, organisational approach to teaching and supporting students in the online learning environment to minimise challenges that tutors may experience and to ensure students are supported by the wider organisation.

This chapter is presented in three themes. It begins with theme one which describes how tutors teach and support students in the online learning environment. It also identifies the challenges they experience in doing this.

Theme two explores the reasons why tutors choose to provide this level of support despite the challenges they experience. These reasons include having empathy for their students and their belief that tutors themselves are the main or only point of contact for their students in the online learning environment.

Finally, theme three explores tutor views that support for students in the online learning environment should be implemented from a collaborative, organisational wide approach. This theme is particularly focused on how tutorial staff may collaborate with learning support services as these services have a significant influence on academic and social integration and in turn, student persistence in the online learning environment.

How tutors support students and enable persistence in online education

Models of retention emphasise that persistence in tertiary education is likely to occur when students experience a sense of connection with the tertiary organisation (Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 2006-2007). This sense of connection occurs through academic and social integration and tutors of online programmes can facilitate integration through their teaching and course design practices. Academic integration occurs when students assimilate into the intellectual life of the tertiary organisation and social integration occurs when students develop interpersonal relationships with faculty, peers and staff (Rovai, 2003). Literature suggests that academic and social integration has a significant influence on student persistence in online education. The following section identifies how tutors in this study facilitate integration and the challenges they experience in doing this.

Developing relationships with the online student

Tutors in this study believe that teaching and supporting students in the online learning environment requires them to develop and maintain student engagement. Gonyea and Kuh (2008) define student engagement as the degree to which learners are engaged with their educational activities which they suggest is positively linked to student satisfaction and persistence. As face to face interaction is limited in online learning environments, tutors in this study believe that it is difficult to build relationships with students in the online learning environment as tutors are not exposed to visual cues, body language and demeanour that they would otherwise experience in face to face interactions. Consequently, to develop relationships with their

students, tutors prefer to use synchronous forms of communication which allows them to see students and hear students through online tutorials and in some circumstances, through face to face meetings.

Tutors in this study acknowledge that face to face meetings may counteract the purpose of online education, which in this study is defined as courses delivered completely online. However, two tutors in particular reflected on how face to face interactions may be necessary given students of their programmes are predominantly kinaesthetic learners. Alternatively, such learners may need to consider different learning formats. These two tutors believe that programmes of a more practical nature that traditionally attract kinaesthetic learners may need to be taught through blended delivery formats although this could limit potential students to those who are based locally. Nevertheless, one tutor who met with students face to face before the course started believed that these meetings helped him build relationships with his students and the small class size (12) at the time of the interview allowed him to do this. He did however mention that this practice may need to be reviewed if class numbers were to increase. Although these two tutors suggested that face to face interactions may be necessary for kinaesthetic learners, remaining tutors in this study also recommended face to face meetings as an option for students to access further support if they wish. Face to face orientations in online programmes have contributed to student retention as they helped to build relationships with students and in turn made it easier for staff to support students throughout the course (Hunte, 2012; Nichols, 2010). Although face to face orientation sessions can contribute to retention and thus persistence, they should only be an option as students may be geographically widespread and such sessions may limit the convenience and flexibility that attracts students to online programmes (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003; Simmering & Posey, 2009). Such options might also be inequitable for students as it would be easier for those who are based locally to attend these, not so much for students who are geographically widespread.

Several tutors in this study used synchronous online tutorials in their courses as a way to develop relationships with their students. These

tutorials allowed tutors and students to have video discussions in real time through virtual classroom software, Adobe Connect. Tutors, along with their students, valued the ability to see members of their class and to also receive feedback in real time. These tutors also believed that online tutorials helped to develop online learning communities. As online learning can be an isolated form of learning, the use of online learning communities is recommended in literature to minimise feelings of isolation, enhance social interaction and in turn, enable persistence (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007; Rovai & Downey, 2010). However, the use of online tutorials may be counterproductive to building online communities if class sizes are too large and if technical disruptions occur (Ng, 2007).

Ng (2007) suggests that online tutorials are beneficial to facilitate real time discussion; however, they can be ineffective if run with large groups of students as they become more of a one way lecture from tutor to students. Consistent with Ng's (2007) findings, one tutor in particular mentioned how tutorials were ineffective when tutorial groups were too large (over 20 participants) so he split tutorials into smaller groups (8-10 participants) which impacted on his workload. He mentioned that students prefer tutorials with smaller numbers as it allows them, and the tutor himself, to interact with each other.

Tutors in this study also experienced technical difficulties when class numbers were too large. One tutor mentioned that background noise would occur when tutorial groups were larger than 8-9 participants. Furthermore, when tutors have had to troubleshoot technical difficulties with students, this can impact on the tutorial by causing delays in tutorial start times. Consistent with Ng's (2007) study on the use of virtual tutorials, tutors in this study felt that it was time consuming to prepare for and support online tutorials. When using technologies in online learning, it is highly recommended that tutors are competent in using these technologies (Croxton, 2014; Martin & Parker, 2014; Ng, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007).

Although tutors in this study were familiar with basic operations of Adobe Connect, they suggest that further support is required to ensure that support is available if technical difficulties arise that extend beyond their technical knowledge. However, organisational practices are not currently set up to support online tutorials that may run outside of the organisation's standard operating hours (8.30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday). Online tutorials are held outside of these hours to accommodate students who work during the day. As support is limited during this time, tutors in this study take on the responsibilities of technical support staff which may reinforce the view that tutors are the main or only point of contact for students in the online learning environment.

Despite the challenges that tutors in this study experience when they use synchronous online tutorials, they appear to value these as a way to develop relationships with their students even if this impacts on their workload. Their preference for online tutorials, or the use of synchronous technology, may be explained by the need to develop social presence in the online learning environment. Social presence is the degree to which a person is perceived as 'real'" in mediated communication (Richardson & Swann, 2003). Studies have shown that perceived social presence is positively related to student satisfaction and persistence in online education (Croxton, 2014; Richardson & Swann, 2003) and can be achieved by acknowledging student contributions and providing timely feedback. However, this does not necessarily have to occur through synchronous communication alone (Barnard et al., 2008; Chen & Jang, 2010; Naughton et al., 2010; Shroff & Vogel, 2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Shimoni et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2008). Tutors in this study do use asynchronous chat forums within Moodle and one tutor in particular believed that her contributions to these forums helped her create presence in the online learning environment. Furthermore, literature suggests that asynchronous forms of communication may be more suitable with online learning communities to allow more flexibility for students to participate at a time that is convenient for them (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007).

Students who do participate in online tutorials value these and tutors in this study are committed to making them work for these students even though it impacts their workload. Such actions demonstrate the commitment that tutors have to supporting their students. However, such actions may also indicate intentions to replicate the face to face learning environment in their online courses. As this study identified, tutors in this study believe that there are mixed perceptions of online education within the organisation. Tutors believe that management staff consider online education as an extension of face to face education. This study did not explore the reasons why online tutorials are used beyond their ability to support students, however, this area could be researched further to identify whether online tutorials are used to replicate the face to face learning environment, particularly if online courses are considered an extension of face to face courses. Nevertheless, the use of online tutorials does have its benefits. Online tutorials should only be considered an option, which they were in this study, particularly if services that are required to support these such as technical support are not available at times that these are delivered. Furthermore, workload allocations should reflect the time required to deliver these, particularly if tutorials are to be run with smaller groups.

Supporting the online student

Preparing students for online learning

Several studies recommend the use of orientation sessions to prepare students for online learning as these have been shown to positively influence student satisfaction and motivation (Hunte, 2012; Kuboni, 2009; Lee, 2010; Nichols, 2010). Orientation sessions can also facilitate academic and social integration as students become familiar with academic requirements of the course. They can also provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty and their peers (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; 2007; Rovai, 2003). Tutors in this study provided some form of orientation in their courses and would focus the first two to three weeks on building familiarity within the Moodle course. There was no standard orientation package, rather, tutors in this study would focus orientation on their specific courses. In courses where online tutorials were offered, students were also given the

opportunity to test their connections to Adobe Connect to ensure that this functioned properly.

As online education is a convenient option for students who cannot or choose not to attend campus based courses, tutors in this study believed that students need to be given clear expectations of the time and commitment required for online learning at the beginning of the course to dispel perceptions that online learning is easier. Underestimating the time and commitment required for online learning are cited as reasons for withdrawing from online course as Lee and Choi (2011) identified in their review of empirical studies that investigated reasons for student withdrawal from online courses.

Orientation and induction strategies that tutors in this study use are focused predominantly on the requirements of the course. Although this can facilitate academic integration, there is scope for learning support staff to be involved in orientation to promote the services that are available to students. Tutors do provide links to information about the services available to students, however, several studies have shown that interaction with students early on in the programme, such as orientation, can assist learning support staff to provide ongoing support to students throughout the course (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morrison & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010). These studies suggest that through early interactions, students find it easier to approach learning support staff if they require assistance. Furthermore, orientation sessions can also be a platform for staff to initiate communication with students who may require additional support throughout the course. As there is no standardised form of orientation, there may be scope for the organisation to develop orientation packages that specifies information that students need to know, such as where and how to access help if needed and at the same time, allow for some tailoring by tutors to align with their course requirements.

It may be necessary to include learning support staff in orientation and induction sessions as two tutors in this study believed that the uptake of support may not be as high for online students as they are not physically

exposed to the support services that are available. However, this is not to suggest that support is not required by these students. As Simpson (2004) identified in his synthesis of student support research in the United Kingdom, students who seek out learning support are often those who will most likely complete without intervention from learning support staff. Shimoni et al. (2013) also found that students were too shy or embarrassed to approach staff for help. Collaborating with learning support staff in orientation and induction can help to ensure support is targeted towards students who might need it most. Collaborative support approaches such as these will be discussed later in this chapter.

Supporting students through course design and teaching practices

In order for students to persist with, and successfully complete their online education, tutors in this study believed that students require self-directed learning skills. These skills are highly recommended in online education literature as students have increased control over when and how they learn, particularly in asynchronous learning environments (Naidu, 2006; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001). It is well documented that course design and teaching practices can either facilitate or forestall self-directed learning skills (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008).

Tutors in this study used course design principles that focused on ease of use and navigation in the online learning environment. They would do this by providing clear instructions on where to find information and would structure their courses to make these easy to navigate. Such course design principles are highly recommended in online education literature to ensure students can navigate their course with minimal effort (Galy, Downey, & Johnson, 2011; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Naughton et al., 2010). Students report feelings of frustration if courses are difficult to navigate which can in turn affect their ability to engage with the course and learning materials.

To develop self-directed skills further, learning tasks should develop students' skills and knowledge (Barnard et al., 2008; Geddes, 2009; Naughton et al., 2010; Shroff & Vogel, 2009). One tutor in particular would

provide increased guidance to students in learning activities at the beginning of the course and would taper this off as students progressed through the course to develop their research skills. This tutor believed that this helped to develop self-directed learning skills and that these skills would also prepare students for the workplace.

In addition to course design principles described above, tutors in this study emphasised the importance of providing timely feedback to students. Providing feedback through marked assignments was considered important as students can use this to guage their progress and in turn, allow them to self-direct their learning. Although learning is predominantly self-directed in online education, timely feedback is highly recommended in literature as students will require guidance from the tutor to ensure they progress with their learning (McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Salmon, 2005; Salmon, 2012). There is no recommended timeframe in which to provide feedback, however, tutors in this study believe that students should be given clear information about when they might expect a response. Such views are supported in the literature (McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Salmon, 2005; Salmon, 2012).

Feedback from peers can be equally as useful and can minimise reliance on the tutor (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). One tutor in particular mentioned that students will often provide feedback to each other in asynchronous chat forums, such as comments that may encourage students to consider different viewpoints to help them with their assessments. This tutor believed that peer feedback was also helpful for students as they learn from each other. Furthermore, discussions between students can also develop online learning communities which can minimise feelings of isolation and in turn, enable persistence in the online learning environment (Drouin, 2008; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). This study did not identify whether peer interactions are encouraged and practiced by all tutors, however, creating opportunities for students to provide feedback may be a recommended practice for other online courses to encourage online learning communities and minimise reliance on the tutor. Furthermore, the use of other mediums to faciliate peer interaction can be considered. Social

networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook for example, are well recognised for their ability to facilitate collaborative learning opportunities and communities of practice amongst students (Bosch, 2009; Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison, & Walsh, 2011; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009). Educators can drive the use of SNS by incorporating SNS based activities into their courses. However, students appear to be driving the use of more popular sites, such as Facebook by creating their own informal learning networks (Lampe et al., 2011; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009; Selwyn, 2009). Bosch (2009) analysed the use of Facebook by students at a South African University and found that Facebook was predominantly used as a tool to help students settle into the university lifestyle. Likewise, Ophus and Abbitt (2009) found that Facebook allowed students to form informal relationships with their peers. Investigating the use of SNS is beyond the scope of this study, however, given SNS are widely used, such sites may be another avenue to facilitate peer interaction in the online learning environment.

Providing targeted support

As described earlier in this chapter, students who seek out learning support are often those that are likely to successfully complete their course without learning support intervention (Simpson, 2004). Furthermore, students may be too shy or embarrassed to approach staff for help (Shimoni et al., 2013). To minimise feelings of embarrassment that may be associated with asking staff for help, learning support services may need to be more apparent in the online learning environment so students see these services as a standard service. This will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

To ensure that support is made available to those who might need it most, the use of targeted support strategies is highly recommended (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010). Tutors in this study used various monitoring strategies to identify students who might require additional support. They would do this by monitoring the quality of assignments and monitoring contributions to class forums. Usage statistics were also analysed to identify student activity within the Moodle course. Such strategies are consistent with literature

findings. As academic and social integration is positively linked to persistence in online education, measures of academic integration can include assignment and test grades and social integration can be measured by interactions with peers and faculty (Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 2006-2007). Tutors in this study appear to use these measures to identify students who may require additional support.

Additionally, two tutors in particular based potential student support requirements on the characteristics of students who they attract in face to face versions of their programmes. Students of these programmes tend to be kinaesthetic, mature learners who may have had limited experience with computers. These tutors did suggest that students in online versions of these programmes may require additional support to bring them up to speed with the technical requirements of the course. As identified earlier in this chapter, these tutors also suggested face to face workshops given their students are traditionally kinaesthetic learners. Although student characteristics can help tutors identify students who may require support, it is important that practices used for students studying in face to face programmes are not simply replicated for students studying online. As described earlier in this chapter, students predominantly self-direct their learning in online education and teaching and course design principles should encourage self-directed learning (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008).

Once students who may require additional support were identified, tutors in this study would initiate contact with them to offer support if needed. One tutor in particular mentioned that she would suggest to students that they access learning support services, however, she was unsure whether they would follow through with her suggestions. Although tutors in this study prefer to use synchronous communication to develop relationships with their students, they would prefer to use asynchronous communication through email when they initially contact students who require support and would follow this up with phone calls if students were non-responsive. However, tutors do suggest that issues can be resolved in a timelier manner when synchronous communication, such as phone calls, is used. The initial use

of asynchronous communication appears to be less intrusive, which may appeal to students who find it difficult to ask for help. Tutors in this study believe that having multiple communication options was necessary and which medium to use would depend on the particular situation. Although tutors monitor student activity and progress to identify those who might need support, they believe that students also require communication skills to ask for support if needed.

In summary, tutors in this study play a key role in facilitating academic and social integration and in turn, they can enable student persistence in the online learning environment. To facilitate integration, tutors in this study believe that relationships need to be developed first; yet, this can be difficult for them to achieve in the online learning environment due to the lack of visual cues available in face to face interactions. Additionally, tutors in this study may have limited knowledge and understanding of ways to build relationships online. Consequently, they appear to have a preference for synchronous communication to develop relationships with their students. However, the use of synchronous technologies can cause challenges for tutors. As tutors in this study believe there are perceptions within the organisation that online courses are an extension of face to face courses, further research could identify whether this perception is influencing the use of synchronous communication as a means to replicate the face to face environment online. Despite the challenges they experience, tutors in this study are committed to seeing their students succeed and demonstrate this through their teaching and support practices. They incorporate teaching practices that can encourage self-directed learning and also provide opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with the course. Tutors in this study also use various monitoring strategies to provide targeted support to students. However, to encourage students to make use of services that are available to support them with their learning, there is scope for learning support staff to increase their visibility and presence in the online learning environment. Nevertheless, tutors in this study are highly committed to supporting their students and do this in spite of the challenges that they experience. To understand why they provide this level of support,

the following section explores factors that may influence their decisions to support students despite the challenges that they face in their roles as online tutors.

What drives tutors to provide support?

As the previous section identified, tutors in this study provide high levels of support to their students even though this can be challenging. Given the challenges they experience, why do they provide this level of support? The following section explores some of the reasons why they may do this. These include having empathy for their students who have many responsibilities in addition to their studies and that tutors consider themselves to be the main point of contact for their students.

Empathy for the online learner

Online courses are a convenient option for students who cannot attend campus based courses such as working professionals and students with family responsibilities (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; -2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Although there is no 'typical' online student, tutors in this study describe their students as working professionals, some of whom are working full time. They also refer to family commitments that some of their students have in addition to their studies. This awareness of their students' circumstances appears to influence the way tutors support their students. They show empathy towards their students and reflect this in their teaching practices. From the tutor's perspective, support should be provided to students in 'their' time, which could mean during weekends or outside of standard operating hours. This is recommended in some literature; however, this is not to suggest that support should be available 24/7. The use of self-help resources is highly recommended which allows students to access help independently (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Simpson, 2004). It is also recommended that students are given clear information about when they can expect a response in order to minimise expectations that their enquiry will be responded to immediately (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003).

As identified earlier in this chapter, tutors in this study do encourage self-help in their courses through the provision of clear information and resources, however, they are in contact with students during evenings and weekends which can impact their workload and life outside of work. Such actions demonstrate the commitment they have to supporting their students. Several tutors mention that some of their students are mature students who may not have followed a linear pathway into higher education. Consistent with literature, online programmes tend to attract non-traditional students who are described as mature, second-chance learners (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Lee & Choi, 2011). The notion of providing students with a second chance at learning could also influence the level of support that tutors in this study provide to their students. They are committed to making this second chance work, particularly if students have had negative educational experiences in the past. Further to this, tutors in this study are also familiar with the support that is available to students who are based on campus. Their views on support for online students suggest that all students should receive the same level of support regardless of the course delivery mode. The organisation does promote equality for all students, however, there is room for development in the area of support for online students as the ICT strategy for the organisation is still in draft form and the provision of learning support services to online students is limited. It is the intention of this study to contribute to development in the area of support for online students.

The services available to campus based students appear to be a reference point for tutors in this study and this may drive them to replicate some of these services in the online learning environment. Campus based students are likely to receive support the moment they request it because they are physically exposed to the services available to them, however, there will be delays in the online learning environment, particularly in asynchronous environments. Tutors in this study may try to compensate for these delays and emphasise the need for immediate support in the online learning environment. This further reinforces their views that students need to be

supported in 'their'" time. Tutors do provide support to students in their time even though it can be challenging for them.

Tutors are the main point of contact

As students predominantly self-direct their learning in online education, the role of the tutor has evolved into a facilitating role. Tutors of online programmes may take on many responsibilities that they might not otherwise take on in face to face programmes and as such, they are perceived as the main point of contact for their students (McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Salmon, 2005; Salmon, 2012). Consistent with literature, tutors in this study take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment; however, as described earlier in this chapter, this does impact their workload and causes challenges for them. Tutors believe that the time and commitment required to teach and support students in the online learning environment is underestimated.

Tutors in this study fulfil many of the responsibilities proposed by Goodyear et al. (2001), as described below:

- The Process Facilitator – facilitates activities to promote learning
- The Adviser-Counsellor – provides advice to students on an individual basis
- The Assessor – grades and provides feedback on completed activities
- The Researcher – encourages students to produce new knowledge in the course content area
- The Content Facilitator – facilitates understanding of course content
- The Technologist – makes technological choices that improve the online learning environment and assists students with developing their skills to use chosen technologies
- The Designer – designs online learning tasks that promote learning. Tasks with this role occur before the course is delivered
- The Manager-Administrator – oversees administrative requirements of the course such as record keeping for course content

Tutors may fulfil these roles in the face to face learning environment as well, however, they believe that students in face to face courses might make use of campus based services that can provide advice in particular areas (learning support advice, counselling, and technology support). Two tutors suggested that the uptake of support by online students may not be as high as that of face to face students as they are not physically exposed to the services that available to them. As such, tutors in this study were perceived as the main point of contact for their students.

To adequately fulfil roles that tutors may have to take on in the online learning environment, development of tutor capability and skills is imperative (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Galy et al., 2011). Although tutors in this study are competent educators who are committed to seeing their students succeed, they acknowledge that their technological skills are limited, particularly when it comes to troubleshooting unexpected problems within Moodle. Tutors in this study did reflect on a number of occasions when they experienced technical difficulties which affected online tutorials. They also reflected on technical difficulties that students had experienced when studying in the weekends or after hours. Although they did not specify the frequency of technical disruptions, tutors in this study believe they can only provide limited technical support to students and that technical support should be available if needed which could mean providing support to students in 'their' time. It is difficult to identify when technical issues will occur, therefore, having dedicated technical support staff available 24/7 is not feasible. However, if students are required to attend online tutorials, support should be made available during these tutorials. The provision of technological support is predominantly during the organisation's standard operating hours (Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm) and therefore, tutors in this study field technical enquiries outside of these hours though their technical experience may be limited.

Tutors in this study believed the provision of technical support was particularly important. Their technical skills are limited and their views suggest that they would like to be able to escalate enquiries if need be. As

described earlier in this chapter, the empathy tutors in this study have for their students may compel them to try and resolve issues immediately and therefore, tutors might expect other organisational support services to do the same. As the main point of contact for their students, tutors may also be concerned if students view technical issues as a reflection of their teaching and course design practices. The latter is particularly important given teaching and course design practices have a significant influence on student persistence in online education. Although technical support may not be available at times when students are completing their course work, as described earlier in this chapter, providing students with response timeframes may alleviate frustrations that students (and tutors themselves) might experience when technical issues arise.

In summary, tutors in this study are committed to teaching and supporting students who they describe as having multiple responsibilities in addition to their studies. Some of these students may have also had negative educational experiences in the past and have returned to study later in life. As a result, tutors strive to create a quality educational experience with the time and resources they have. Tutors appear to use the services available to face to face students as a reference point and suggest that services should be available to all students regardless of the delivery mode. As students of face to face courses are likely to access services in 'their' time, tutors in this study believe that this should also extend to students who are studying online. To ensure that services are provided as timely as possible, tutors themselves take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment. This includes fielding technical enquiries although they acknowledge that their skills are limited in this area. Given the challenges that tutors in this study experience in the online learning environment, it is necessary that support for online students is considered from an organisational wide perspective to alleviate some of these challenges. The following section identifies how this may occur in the tertiary organisation that this study focuses on.

Support from a collaborative, organisational approach

As this study identified, tutors in this study believe that there are mixed perceptions about online education. Tutors believe that online education is considered an extension of face to face courses and as a result, they suggest that there is limited consideration for the time and effort required to teach and support students who are studying online. To minimise challenges that tutors experience in their roles, a planned and coordinated organisational approach to online education is necessary. The following section identifies how such approaches may be achieved in the tertiary organisation that this study focuses on.

Clarification of online learning

Before a collaborative approach to online learning can occur, mixed perceptions of online education need to be addressed. Tutors in this study believe that management or staff who make decisions about online course offerings underestimate the time and effort required to teach and support these. Before their experience with online education, tutors initially shared these views. Tutors reflected on occasions where online courses were expected to be developed by making face to face course materials available online. As a result, they believe that the time and effort required to teach and support students in the online learning environment is not adequately reflected in their workload. As tutors in online education provide limited direction and guidance in comparison to face to face courses, online course design and teaching practices need to be carefully considered to allow students to self-direct their learning (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Palloff & Pratt,). Tutors in this study do the best they can with the time and resources they have, however, they would like to do more for their students.

Tutors in this study received some form of e-learning training before delivering courses online, however, if online courses are treated simply as an extension of face to face courses, tutors may be working retrospectively to adapt face to face courses for the online learning environment. Tutors need to recognise and be recognised as operating in the online learning

environment. As such, tutors may draw upon intentions of some face to face strategies but not implement these verbatim in the online learning environment.

Based on tutor beliefs about support for online students, it would appear that the time and effort required to develop, teach and support online programmes needs to be clarified and communicated to staff. This would ensure that those who make decisions about online courses, and those who develop, teach and support online courses, have a shared understanding about the time and effort required for online programmes.

Combined approach to supporting students

Although tutors take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment, it is not their responsibility alone to support these students. Tutors in this study believe that students should be supported from a combined, organisational approach. Discussion of all support services and their role in online education is beyond the scope of this study. However, as learning support services have a significant influence on academic and social integration and in turn, student persistence, the following sections focus predominantly on these services.

Palloff and Pratt (2001) highly recommend a strategic and planned approach to online education. Such approaches require involvement from staff who are responsible for the development, delivery and support of these programmes (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Simpson 2004). Palloff and Pratt (2001) suggest that policies and plans are delivered by teams or committees to ensure that services required to support students are provided in a seamless manner. How programmes are developed is beyond the scope of the study, however, as the organisation's ICT strategy is still in draft form, this could indicate that the development of online courses is not considered from a wider, organisational perspective. Furthermore, as identified in my learning support role, the provision of learning support to students studying online is limited. This is not to suggest that learning support is not required, rather, the way in which support is delivered needs to be considered and clarified. This extends to other

services that may be required to support students in the online learning environment and this can only occur through a strategic and planned approach to online education.

As described earlier in this chapter, tutors in this study emphasise the need for support to be available to students in 'their' time. Although tutors are in contact with students during evenings and weekends, this is not to suggest that support staff, or tutors themselves, need to be available 24/7, particularly if this has a negative impact on workload. Students can be supported through self-help resources and if support services are not available at the time of enquiry, communicating response times to students gives them an idea of when they can expect a response (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Shimoni et al., 2013; Simpson, 2004). Tutors in this study do practice elements of this, however, this study did not identify how, or if other organisational support services communicate response times to students who make support enquiries. Self-help resources are made available to all students through Moodle by the learning support department; however, it is unclear how these resources are promoted to students and how many students who are studying online access these. Further investigation into these areas is beyond the scope of this study; however, as the provision of self-help resources is one way to support students in the online learning environment, further research into these areas may be necessary.

Tutors in this study believe that a combined approach to teaching and supporting students online is necessary. They believe that tutors are required for content knowledge and that support staff are needed to provide services such as learning support as required. Several tutors mentioned that they had referred students to seek assistance from learning support staff; however, they were unsure whether students followed through with this. As described earlier in this chapter, Simpson (2004) suggests that those who seek out learning support in online education are likely to successfully complete their course without learning support intervention. As teaching and support has a significant influence on academic and social integration and therefore persistence in the online learning environment, (Rovai, 2003; Tinto 2006-2007), it may be necessary for tutors to work

closely with learning support staff. Literature suggests that learning support services can better prepare students to meet learning demands of their course (Lee & Choi, 2011; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Simpson, 2004). Given this, several researchers suggest that learning support should be considered as an integral part of the overall design and delivery of online courses (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002).

The success of targeted support strategies that involve learning support staff are well-documented (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010; Tung, 2012). Early interaction between learning support staff and students can help to build relationships and can also be a platform for ongoing communication throughout the course. This is particularly useful when learning support staff are aware of students who may require additional support based on pre-course and pre-entry analysis as students are more likely to be receptive of support if they are familiar with staff (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008-2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2008-2009; Nichols, 2010; Shimoni et al., 2013; Simpson, 2004). Tutors of online courses are in a prime position to monitor student progress and identify those who may require additional support (Lee & Choi, 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; 2003; Simpson, 2004). Tutors can play a key role in bridging the gap between students who require support and learning support staff in the online environment.

To ensure the success of some of the strategies described above, clarification of learning support staff and tutor roles in the online learning environment is necessary. Although tutors may refer students on to learning support staff, this could be difficult to do if the services learning support staff provide are not made clear and communicated to tutorial staff. As the organisation's ICT strategy is still in draft form, this may indicate that the roles and responsibilities of other staff in online education are yet to be clarified. This is further supported by my experience in learning support. Although learning support services are available to all students, these services are predominantly focused towards those who are studying through campus based courses. It is the intention of this study to contribute to the development in the area of support for online students.

In summary, mixed perceptions of online education have caused challenges for tutors in this study in the online learning environment. When online courses are considered an extension of face to face courses, the time and effort required to develop, teach and support online programmes is underestimated. Tutors do the best they can with the time and resources they have as they adapt their programmes for the online learning environment. However, because of the challenges they experience, further consideration needs to be given to online education from a strategic, organisational wide perspective. Given the organisation's ICT strategy is still in draft form and as there is limited involvement from learning support services, this may indicate that there is a need for a collaborative and planned approach to online education with the organisation. Through this approach, the services and resources required to develop, teach and support programmes in the online learning environment are adequately considered.

Summary of chapter

This chapter discussed the key role that tutors of online programmes have in facilitating academic and social integration which, in turn, can enable student persistence in the online learning environment. Tutors demonstrate this through their teaching and course design practices, however, this can be challenging for them. The time and effort that they put into teaching and supporting their students can negatively impact their workload. They do the best they can with the time and resources they have, however, current practices may be unsustainable going forward particularly if the provision of online courses, or student numbers, are to increase.

Tutors in this study describe their students as having multiple commitments in addition to their studies and also as second-chance learners who may have had negative experiences with education in the past. Having an awareness of these circumstances influences the way in which tutors support their students. Tutors emphasise a need for support to be provided to students in a timely manner, which may include supporting students after

hours or during weekends particularly when technical issues arise. This is not to suggest that support staff need to be available 24/7. The use of self-help resources and communication around response timeframes can help to minimise expectations of immediate support. To ensure that services are provided as timely as possible, tutors themselves take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment, however, this further impacts their workload.

To minimise the challenges that tutors in this study experience, they believe that a combined, organisational approach to teaching and supporting students in the online learning environment is necessary. Before this can occur, the time and effort required to develop, teach and support online programmes needs to be clarified. Tutors in this study believe that online courses are considered an extension of face to face courses by those who have limited experience with online education and therefore, they believe that the time and effort required to teach and support online programmes is underestimated. A planned and coordinated approach to online education ensures that the services required to teach and support students who are studying online are provided in a seamless manner.

As tutors in this study believe that there is ambiguity in online formats, is there a distinct need for something or someone else to bridge these features to ensure that tutors and students feel connected and that tutors are not supporting students all the time in an isolated way? Furthermore, is there a balancing act to fulfil when it comes to supporting students of online courses? The aim is to promote that presence and relationship building is important for teaching online and is also important for tutors to undertake and exchange with students. However, learning support services can take a position to enable that without denying any role of the tutor. They can provide specific and explicit support services to students with clarity and demarcated positions from tutor roles.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has identified that there are many variables that influence student persistence in the online learning environment. Services provided by learning support staff may explicitly support students in their studies and in turn, enable persistence, however, teaching and course design practices also have a significant influence on student persistence in the online learning environment.

Literature surrounding the topic of online support suggests that learning support interventions are more successful when implemented in a proactive and timely manner. Preparing students for online learning through orientations and providing ongoing, targeted support throughout the course has a positive influence on student persistence. Such interventions are not intended to interfere with the important role that tutors have in the online learning environment; rather, they can ensure that the task of supporting students is not for tutors to bear alone. As tutors of online programmes are viewed as the main point of contact by their students, they may take on many responsibilities in the online learning environment, which was evident in this study.

This study has raised issues that tertiary organisations can learn from. Online education is not merely an extension to or an equivalent of face to face courses, as tutors in this study can attest to. This study has identified that there is a need for a combined, organisational approach to teaching and support students in the online learning environment. As a result, staff who are involved with the development, delivery and support of online programmes have a shared understanding about the time and effort required to teach and support online students. Although tutors in this study are committed to seeing their students succeed, the time and effort they put into teaching and supporting students has a negative impact on their workloads. To minimise workload issues, there is scope for tutorial and learning support staff to work together to support students in the online

learning environment. A combined, organisational approach to online learning and teaching can ensure that students are supported by other organisational staff, not tutors alone.

Recommendations

As identified in the introduction of this thesis, the organisation will continue to move into blended and online delivery modes, therefore, it is important that students of these courses are supported throughout their studies. To contribute to the development in the area of support for online students, the following recommendations to the tertiary organisation are made:

1. That the organisation works toward establishing a shared vision of online education. Through this, staff who are involved with the development, teaching and support of online programmes have a shared understanding about the time, effort and resources required for online programmes.

2. That roles and responsibilities of staff who are involved in the development, teaching and support of online programmes are defined and communicated to ensure all staff are aware of their responsibilities and those of other staff. As this study was focused on learning support services , it is important that the following is considered:
   - What learning support services will be made available to students who are studying online?
   - How will students access this support?

   As this study identified, there is scope for learning support services to be provided in a proactive and timely manner in the online learning environment. However, before this can occur, it is important that the role of learning support services is clarified. Once the roles of all staff who are involved with teaching and supporting online students are clarified, these should be communicated to students to make them aware of whom to approach if they have support enquiries. Students should also be informed about response timeframes.

3. That the development of self-help resources is explored further to create best-practices around teaching and support in the online learning environment. Tutors in this study practice elements of this and some also encourage peer-support. Such practices may minimise reliance on tutors and allow students to access support independently.

Limitations of the study

My own experience as an online learner contributed to my interest in this area of research. As I am now in a position where I may provide learning support to online students and have seen the growth of online learning in the organisation that was part of this study, I wanted to find out how this could be done within my current role. I considered my experience as an online learner to be an asset in identifying how online students of the tertiary organisation may be supported in the future. However, over the course of the study, it became clear that my own experience as an online learner was also a constraint. I had in mind a particular kind of student – me (mother, full-time employee, independent learner) and a particular type of online learning – the form I experienced. To minimise researcher bias, tutors in this study approved their transcripts before data analysis to ensure that these reflected their views and not my own.

A second limitation of this study is that the student voice is not captured. While students themselves may be able to provide insight into how they might be supported, it may be difficult for students to identify what services are required when the provision of services from the learning support department is limited. However, to identify support services that may be required in the online environment, literature on the area of online support was reviewed. To complement findings from the literature, tutors, as the main point of contact for students in online education, were approached in the first instance to identify current thinking and practices around support for online students. Further research could focus on support for online students from the students' perspective.

Finally, as this research focuses on a particular tertiary organisation with its own unique characteristics, it may be suggested that results from this study are relevant only to this organisation. Although this research may be able to assist other tertiary organisations around how they might be able to support online students, individual organisations will need to consider their own learning support needs based on their own characteristics and population of students. Nonetheless, findings from this research can contribute to the overall topic of teaching and learning in the online environment.

Areas for further research

As identified, tutors in this study believe there are perceptions that online courses are an extension of face to face courses. Tutors in this study do show a preference for communication modes that allow for face to face interaction (either face to face or through synchronous communication technologies). Although the use of these technologies does have its benefits, such as the ability to provide instant feedback, they can also cause challenges. Tutors report technical issues when online tutorials are too large and they implement measures to overcome these which are not factored into their workloads. Further research could explore whether the use of these technologies are driven by the view that online courses are an extension of face to face courses.

Similar research could be undertaken from the students' perspective. Although this study may contribute to the development of support for online students, this could be enhanced further as students themselves may provide insight into how they can be supported by the tertiary organisation in the online learning environment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Email to Participants

Dear

I am conducting a study to investigate the current thinking and practices around support for online students. Information from this study will contribute to a Masters in Education thesis with The University of Waikato. Information may also be used to inform any developments in student support services for the [organisation's] online courses.

As a staff member who is involved with the delivery of an online programme, I would like to invite you to be interviewed to discuss support for online students. This interview will be an opportunity for you to discuss how online students might be best supported throughout their studies. The interview will be used for research purposes only and will be kept strictly confidential. Identifying information will not be included in any documentation or reports at any time. Attached to this email is an information sheet which explains the interview process further.

If you have any questions about this study, please email me or phone me on the number below.

Sincerely

Narissa Lewis

Learner Facilitator

Phone: XXX

Email: XXX

Appendix 2 – Information Sheet

Title of Project: Rethinking support for the digital age: support for online learners from a teaching staff perspective.

Researcher: Narissa Lewis
Learner Facilitator, [organisation]
Phone: XXX
Email: XXX

I am conducting a study to investigate the current thinking and practices around support for online students and to identify how online students may best be supported. Information from this study will contribute towards a Masters of Education thesis with the University of Waikato. Information will also be used to make recommendations to the [organisation] about how they might support students who are studying online.

As the student's main point of contact, tutors of online courses are invited to attend an interview with myself to discuss support for online students. These interviews will be an opportunity for tutors to discuss how online students might best be supported throughout their studies. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed and will last no longer than 30 minutes. Interviews will take place in Tauranga at a prearranged location and time that is convenient for participants. The discussions will be used for research purposes only and will be kept strictly confidential, with access to the audio recordings for principal researcher reference only.

Identifying information will not be included in any documentation or reports at any time. Demographic information such as age, gender, culture or tenure with the organisation will not be collected. Participants will be given the opportunity to review and approve interview transcripts before this information is used in the study. [organisation] may use this information for future developments in the area of online support however; no identifying information of participants will be included in this process. On completion of this study, an electronic copy of the thesis will be made publically available through the University of Waikato's digital repository. A link to this repository will be sent to participants should they wish to view this.

If you agree to participate, you may withdraw at any time and may withdraw your data from the study up until the point that you have approved your interview transcript. If you wish to withdraw, you may inform me by email. Alternatively, you may email the Research Supervisor, Kerry Earl on kearl@waikato.ac.nz.

If you are willing to participate in an interview for this research, please sign and return the attached consent form. Can you please provide me with contact details on the consent form so that I may contact you to arrange an interview. If you have any further questions about this study, please contact me directly via phone or e-mail.

Thank you for your consideration to my request.

Appendix 3 – Guided Interview Questions

1. What are your views and or expectations of effective online support for learners?

2. What skills / knowledge / help do you believe students need to successfully complete their studies online?

3. How do you as a tutor currently support students who are studying online?

4. What might be some challenges for tutors for supporting students who are studying online?

5. What might be some challenges for faculties for supporting students who are studying online?

6. What might be some challenges for institutions for supporting students who are studying online?

7. What key principles do you think should be considered when supporting students who are studying online?

8. Who should support students who are studying online?

9. Is there anything else that you would like to add to this topic / our discussion?

Appendix 4 – Interview Consent Form

Title of Project: Rethinking support for the digital age: support for online learners from a teaching staff perspective.

Name of Researcher: Narissa Lewis

Note: This consent form will be held in secure storage for a period of 5 years, after which it will be securely destroyed.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the purpose of the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am able to withdraw at any time and may withdraw my data up until the point that I approve my interview transcript. I may withdraw without giving any reason.

3. I understand that I will not be identified and my real name will be not be used in this project. The data will only be available as part of a Masters thesis and possible developments in the area of student support for the [organisation's] online programmes

4. I consent to an audio tape being made of the interview of which I am a participant with the researcher, to be used for reference by the principal researcher only

5. I agree to take part in the above study

Date: _____

Name: _____

Signed: _____

Phone number/s: _____

Email: _____