

Wide Open Listening: what is it really like to be a distance student?

Penelope Rush

The University of Tasmania

In 2013, Student Learning and Academic Development (SLAD) at The University of Tasmania (UTAS) surveyed distance students as part of the development of online learning support. One goal was to hear direct from UTAS distance students themselves, to discover *what it is like* to be a distance student: to uncover any commonalities, both negative and positive, in the experiences of distance and online students in general. Results suggest that a large portion of UTAS distance students feel isolated and see the primary benefits of this mode as serving a practical or necessary function, rather than being attractive in its own right. A comparably high number struggle with resources and feel unconsidered or overlooked. A reasonably high number struggle with balancing other life commitments and with the autonomy or self-reliance required to manage distance study. Thus this research provides evidence identifying key gaps between rhetoric and reality regarding distance education.

Keywords: distance education, experience, isolation, connection, flexibility

Introduction

In 2013, Student Learning and Academic Development (SLAD) at The University of Tasmania (UTAS) started researching the development of online learning support for online and distance students (henceforth jointly referred to by the term 'distance students'). A primary motivation was equity – distance students pay full student fees, but are often not aware of or underutilize the services they can access at UTAS. At times such access is comparatively difficult or limited (e.g. to phone and email). So SLAD investigated the utilisation of new modes of delivery of learning support and ways to reach these students to help facilitate equity here: to ensure students had genuine access to the services UTAS provides. A survey was designed in conjunction with this endeavour.

The goal of the survey was, in one sense, simple: to hear direct from UTAS distance students themselves. But the survey sought to achieve this in two contexts: one wide and one narrow. The wide context focused on the primary drawbacks and benefits of distance education in general and was deliberately as open as possible so that students themselves could play a central role in the identification of which key aspects of the needs and circumstances of this cohort need further research or action. The narrow context targeted UTAS concerns more directly, focusing on both existing and proposed UTAS support services online (e.g. questions designed to target student's awareness, capability and willingness to utilize these services). The focus of this paper is on research rather than action: i.e. responsive actions and the bulk of the narrow context are only briefly touched on; the primary focus is on results from the wide context responses, reporting on preliminary findings, key themes identified, and proposed follow up research.

A primary goal of the wide investigation was to discover *what it is like* to be a distance student: particularly to uncover any commonalities, both negative and positive, in the experiences of distance students. Similar research done in the past has been, by comparison, theory-driven (e.g. Muilenburga & Bergeb, 2005) and much has either focused on blended learning or has not discriminated between wholly online and blended learning (e.g. Sun, 2014). A possible exception is Andrews' 2014 project, the key objective of which was: "to develop a Student Experience Kit (SEK) for use by academics, learning designers and managers ... [drawing] upon 'student voices' (online learners)". Andrews and Tynan note that there is a "paucity of [such] information available about the distance learner in general". This, along with their observation that "the student voice can be used to inform how we can plan for successful learner experiences" (Andrews and Tynan, 2010), reinforces the relevance of the UTAS project. That is, the UTAS research addresses this same general area and for the same reasons. As Andrews points out, there is room for further work in this particular area. But it should also be noted that there are important differences between the UTAS project and Andrews': Andrews focuses particularly on students' experience of ICT, and aims to gather data challenging specific pre-existing notions about distance students, especially around diversity and globalisation (Andrews, 2010). The wide context component of the project described here, by contrast, focuses on elements of experience *per se*, i.e. the ultimate aim is to increase our understanding of key concepts emerging from the data, rather than to explore their role in other phenomena. Thus, the wide context questions were designed to identify key concepts in order to aid further examination (or re-examination) of their nature at a foundational level: i.e. to explore their definition or meaning (rather than,

say, their role in learner attitudes, learner characteristics, or contributing to a given phenomenon such as retention rates).

As such, the wide goal incorporates a number of research areas, and so goes beyond the boundaries of typical distance education research. In reporting on his Delphi Study into research areas in distance education, Olaf Zawacki-Richter outlines a number of characterisations of the foci in distance education research, but none of these completely capture the intended focus outlined above. Out of the range of other options available, the sorts of categories that he summarises which perhaps come closest to capturing that focus are variously dubbed: ‘learner characteristics’, ‘student psychology, motivation and characteristics’, and ‘distance students, their milieu, conditions, and study motivations’ (Zawacki-Richter, 2009, pp. 2-4). But *prima facie* at least, they do not incorporate the investigation of the experience of distance and online education *per se*, or for its own sake. Zawacki-Richter’s own study arrived at the more salient category: ‘Interaction and communication (in [distance and online] learning communities)’ (Zawacki-Richter, 2009, p. 15) to which it might be considered some of the emergent themes identified here belong. But insofar as the aim does not incorporate learners, their communities, or their circumstances, but focuses rather on further examination of the emergent concepts themselves, even this categorisation of the project may be slightly misleading. Possibly the intended focus sits more comfortably at the intersection of a number of other research fields as well, including conceptual, sociological, and philosophical. It is nonetheless worth noting that the most salient of Zawacki-Richter’s descriptors: ‘interaction and communication’, ranked highest on its level (Zawacki-Richter, 2009, p. 15) in the 1-10 scale Zawacki-Richter uses to measure expert opinion regarding the most important areas in distance education research (Zawacki-Richter, 2009).

The narrow context investigation falls more easily into Zawacki-Richter’s classifications, importantly including ‘[distance] learner support services’; ‘quality assurance’ and ‘educational technology’ – the first two of which rated highly (Mdn 8 and Mdn 9) on the above scale. Separate research establishes the importance of support services for all students (e.g. Peach, 2005; Brindley, 2014).

The survey

The research tool was a SurveyMonkey questionnaire constructed by three members of SLAD: Penelope Rush (project leader), Gordon Campbell and Claire Saggars. A link to the survey was sent out to students identified as distance students at UTAS. The method of identification was a student systems generated report, designed to return all students enrolled as distance, provided they had been a distance enrolment in either Semester 1 2013, or a summer school distance student (2013). 5,911 students were on this initial list. A bulk email was sent to all students on the list asking them to fill out the survey by clicking on the SurveyMonkey.com link. This email also outlined the purpose of the research and included the ethics consent form.

Sample

1002 students responded ($\approx 17\%$ response rate): most individuals completed the survey during April and May 2013, and responses were received up until July 2013. A thank you email was sent out at the end of July 2013, and the survey was considered closed from August 2013. Of the respondents, 35.3% (N= 353) were enrolled in the Education Faculty at UTAS; 28.8% (N=288) in Health Science; 13.2% (N=132) in Arts; 10% (N=100) in Business; 4.5% (N=45) in the Australian Maritime Collage (AMC); 4.4% (N=44) in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET); 0.6% (N=4) in the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies; and 4% (N=40) selected ‘other’ and specified another area (among the areas specified were: Fine Arts; Medicine; Paramedicine; Nursing; and Foundation, Preparation and Pre-degree courses). Further, 42.59% (N=425) identified as ‘Postgraduate’; 39.28% (N=392) as ‘Undergraduate’; 15.63% (N=156) selected ‘I am in my first year as an Undergraduate’; 2.51% (N=25) as ‘other’ and specified another category (among categories specified here were: preparation programs; second degrees; Associate degrees; Diplomas; and Honours).

Analysis

Analysis of responses to open questions was done manually, initially through coding individual responses by meaning types. The software package QSR-Nvivo was utilized for this purpose along the lines described in Hutchison, Johnston and Breckon (2010). The approach taken was a primarily a grounded one, with a general inductive methodology (Thomas, 2006). Items were coded according to general meanings identified (e.g. if one response expressed two separate meanings, it was coded at two separate codes (also called nodes in Nvivo)). Meanings were mutually exclusive by stipulation: where meanings were closely related, nodes were double checked to ensure items were only coded at more than one node if they genuinely expressed more than one

(discrete) meaning. Following the inductive method (Thomas, 2006), the original number of nodes (this number ranged for each question ranged from 10-27) was later reduced to around 8 broad theme nodes by grouping the initial codes that were deemed to be relevantly connected.

Broad themes coded for open questions

Q3: What do you think is the best aspect of being a distance student?

Number of responses = 976 (97.4%), Number of respondents who skipped this question = 26 (2.6%)

Codes: Flexibility (N=493); Necessity (N=365); Location (N=168); Self-determination (N=145); Positive (N=57); None (N=27); Other (N=21).

Discussion:

Nvivo queries were run to return matrices identifying the number of students from each faculty coded at each node (henceforth called a 'faculty matrix'), and the number of students identified as a certain status (i.e. postgraduate, undergraduate, etc. – henceforth called a 'student status matrix'). Initial analysis on each open question also included cluster analysis by word similarity on all codes for responses to that question. Further exploration on correlations between themes included an investigation of shared coding between each broad theme code and the largest theme node. Finally, matrix queries were run to discover correlations between all codes on open questions and: Q6 (comfort with technology); and Q11 (whether services had been accessed in the past).

Q3 Faculty Matrix results: SET students were under represented at 'flexibility' and 'necessity', and over represented at 'location' and 'self-determination', suggesting that this cohort may generally be more concerned with the latter two than the former two. The largest deviation here was from 'flexibility', strongly suggesting that SET students may be motivated to study by distance for reasons other than those highly represented in the overall response count. Just why this is the case needs further study.

Q3 Student Status Matrix results: There seems to be no significant difference between postgraduate and undergraduate representation in the codes, given 42.6% of respondents were postgraduate and 54.7% (N=548) were undergraduate or first year undergraduate (e.g. 50% of undergraduate and 48% of postgraduate responses were coded at 'flexibility'). Also note these figures may change slightly once 'other' status is taken into account (e.g. students undertaking honours or second degrees may be grouped with postgraduates). It is note-worthy that 'self-determination' rated highly for postgraduates (15%) compared with undergraduates (13%). This is perhaps partly explained by 30.5% undergraduate responses being coded at 'necessity', compared to 29.6% of postgraduates. One hypothesis here could be that the undergraduate distance students that responded to the survey were a (comparatively) mature age group. This is borne out by codes showing a high number of this group had family and work commitments (compared with the postgraduate group): i.e. a high number of undergraduates mentioned family (N=68: 12.4% undergraduates=51, first year=17) compared with postgraduates who mentioned family (N=38: 8.9%). An even higher number mentioned work (N=137: 25%: undergraduates=97, first year= 40). While this number was comparable with postgraduates who mentioned work (N=108: 25.4%), it seems reasonable to suppose that a significant proportion of the group of undergraduates represented here are at an age or life-stage comparable to postgraduate or mature age students (other studies also report this trend, e.g. Koch 2005). This suggests that the degree to which life commitments compel undergraduate and postgraduate students to study by distance (or the degree to which such comments make distance study an attractive, if not entirely necessary option) needs further study.

Word similarity:

Highest Pearson coefficient: 'self-determination' and 'flexibility' = .805

Lowest Pearson coefficient: 'other' and 'none' = .218

Main Shared Coding on primary theme (items coded at both...):

- 'flexibility' and 'positive'=15 (26.3% of 'positive')
- 'flexibility' and 'necessity' = 33 (9% of 'necessity')
- 'flexibility' and 'self-determination' = 42 (29% of 'self det')
- 'flexibility' and 'location' = 45 (26.8% of 'location')

This reflects the coding rule for 'flexibility' i.e. items were coded here if, where flexibility was mentioned, it was mentioned largely as a separate thing – i.e. not tied to necessity *per se*. Nonetheless, similar themes did run through the four most closely clustered nodes – suggesting possible common factors here. The high percentage

of cross coding (coding on both of the two codes) between ‘self-determination’ and ‘flexibility’ suggests common factors underlying these categories. The comparatively low shared coding between ‘flexibility’ and ‘positive’ suggests flexibility may be implicitly associated with necessity in a number of ways, primary among these being ‘location’. This in itself suggests a follow up analysis of the concept ‘flexibility’ for distance students. The follow up research suggested later in this paper takes this into account, and includes: an analysis of the theoretical meaning of the concept itself and an empirical examination of what distance students mean when they use this term. For example, the follow up research will examine whether and when flexibility is seen as a positive feature of student’s experience in its own right (a potential question may ask: ‘if on face-to-face education were more flexible/more able to fit your own schedule, would you prefer it to distance education?’); and whether and when it is seen as a positive feature because of, or in the light of, circumstances or commitments, including work, family, and location.

Other analysis: 65 references (18.2% of total coded at either) were coded at both ‘family’ and ‘work’ (total coded at either=358), indicating a significant portion of students had both work and family obligations.

Q4: What do you think is the worst aspect of being a distance student?

Number of responses = 980 (98%), Number of respondents who skipped this question = 22 (2%)

Codes: Isolation (N=666); Quality of resources (N=319); Feeling unconsidered (N=142); Responsibility (N=105); Balancing commitments (N=39); Nothing (N=22); Travel (N=11).

Discussion

Q4 Faculty matrix results: Across all faculties, the percentage represented of each coded at ‘isolation’ was significantly lower than the overall percentage of respondents coded at that node (on average 12.8% less). The exception here was Education, with 251 responses coded at isolation (representing 71.1% of respondents from that faculty: 3.1% more than the overall percent of respondents coded here).

Other things to note here: Business coded 6% more than the overall percentage at ‘balance’; Arts was the only faculty coding above overall percentage at ‘resources’; both Arts and AMC coded significantly lower at ‘responsibility’ than the overall percent; and Business coded significantly higher at ‘unconsidered’ than the overall percent count.

Q4 Student status matrix results: Slightly more postgraduates than undergraduates coded at ‘isolation’, ‘balance’, ‘resources’ and ‘unconsidered’ (2% more, .2% more, .8% more, .2% more, respectively), possibly suggesting that the major themes here affect postgraduates slightly more than undergraduates (who had (slightly) comparatively more ‘other’ or ‘no’ concerns).

Word similarity:

Highest Pearson coefficient: ‘unconsidered’ and ‘resources’ = .778

Lowest Pearson coefficient: ‘travel’ and ‘nothing’ = .056

Main Shared Coding on primary theme (items coded at both...):

- ‘isolation’ and ‘balance’=11 (28.2% of ‘balance’)
- ‘isolation’ and ‘unconsidered’=35 (24.6% of ‘unconsidered’)
- ‘isolation’ and ‘responsibility’=36 (34.3% of ‘responsibility’)
- ‘isolation’ and ‘resources’=118 (37% of ‘resources’)
- ‘isolation’ and ‘travel’=1 (9% of ‘travel’)

The high correlations between ‘isolation’ and ‘responsibility’, and ‘isolation and ‘resources’ suggests students who struggle with the degree of autonomy (personal responsibility) required for distance studies also struggle with feeling disconnected or with feelings of isolation. Similarly, students who struggle with these feelings are also likely to struggle with resources (including accessing information, support and technical difficulties).

Other analysis: 37 responses were coded at both ‘unconsidered’ and ‘resources’ (8% of total coded at either; 25.7% of ‘unconsidered’), suggesting where students felt ‘unconsidered’, they were also likely to have problems with the resources provided. By comparison, only 6 responses were coded at both ‘unconsidered’ and ‘responsibility’ (2.4% of total coded at either), possibly suggesting that students who struggle with autonomy do not also feel unconsidered (but rather, isolated, as above). 27 (of 58) responses coded at ‘not enough support’ were also coded at ‘isolation’: i.e. 46.6% of those who felt they had ‘not enough support’ also felt isolated.

Q5: What would make distance learning better for you?

Number of responses = 887 (88.5%) Number of respondents who skipped this question 115 (11.5%)

Codes: Better resources (N=312); More contact (N=282); More communication (N=153); Improvement in personal circumstances or neutral comment (N=100); Positive (N=46); Negative (N=13); Other (N=20).

Discussion

Q5 Faculty matrix results: Only SET and AMC coded more highly at ‘communication’ more highly than the overall percent (respectively: 3.3%, 5%). The rest of the faculties had a lower percent representation here than the overall. Similarly, Education coded higher than the overall percent at ‘consideration’ as well as at ‘contact’, where the other faculties all coded lower here. Most of the ‘negative’ coding came from AMC and Arts students, and most of ‘positive’ from Education and Health science. 40.2% of responses from students from the Arts faculty were coded at ‘resources’ here (5% more than the overall percent coded here).

Q6 Student status matrix results: Results were relatively evenly split between post- and undergraduate students here. One exception was 11.9% of undergraduate responses were coded at ‘communication’, compared with 20% of postgraduate responses, i.e. more postgraduates than undergraduates offered effective communication as a key element in improving the experiences of distance students. But, undergraduates rated slightly higher than postgraduates at ‘contact’ (29% cf 27.1%), and it could be argued increased communication is implied in increased contact.

Word similarity:

Highest Pearson coefficient: ‘communication’ and ‘resources’ = .827

Lowest Pearson coefficient: ‘personal or neutral’ and ‘other’ = .226

Main Shared Coding on primary theme (items coded at both...):

- ‘contact’ and ‘consideration’=12 (11.4% of ‘consideration’)
- ‘contact’ and ‘communication’=18 (11.8% of ‘communication’)
- ‘contact’ and ‘resources’=33 (10.6% of ‘resources’)
- ‘contact’ and ‘positive’=1 (2.2% of ‘positive’)
- ‘contact’ and ‘personal or neutral’=3 (3% of ‘personal/neutral’)

Correlation between codes was not particularly high here – but the highest correlated with ‘contact’ were ‘communication and ‘consideration’, as we might expect. Again, this suggests common factors underpinning the concept of ‘contact’ and feeling considered, as well as feeling that lines of communication are open. In order to capture an apparent emphasis on webseminars, Skype and synchronous online interactions in general (observed during coding), a word frequency query was run on the node: ‘contact’. High frequency words of note here were ‘face’ with 71 occurrences (but, halved to account for ‘face to face’ mentions = 35.5). ‘Contact’ was the 7th most frequently occurring word with 24 occurrences (coming in after ‘face’ (71), ‘students’ (57), ‘online’ (40), ‘lectures’ (33), ‘study’ (29) and ‘tutorials’ (27)). It was noted during coding that the word ‘web’ was often used to indicate a live synchronous connection – this was borne out by similar word frequency between ‘web’ and ‘conferences’, both of which were high of the most frequent words listed above: ‘web’= 20, ‘conferences’/‘conference’=18+5=23. A manual exploration of the collected occurrences of ‘web’ (able to be done in Nvivo by opening the collection of responses in which that word appeared) confirmed that ‘web’ generally referred to a live online connection – i.e. besides ‘conference’, it was also mentioned with ‘chat’ and ‘meeting’. Combining these mentions (23) with word counts for ‘webinars’ (8) and ‘Skype’ (14), gives a combined word count = 45. The word ‘live’ also occurred frequently (16), as did the words ‘interaction’/‘interactive’ (8+6 = 14).

Q14: Please provide any further comments relating to any aspect of the student support you have experienced or would like to experience as a distance student.

Number of responses = 318 (31.7%), Number of respondents who skipped this question = 684 (68.3%)

Codes: Negative (N=160); Appeal (N=149); Positive (N=105); In-person contact (explicit mention) (N=12); Live online connection (explicit mention) (N=18); Neutral (N=9); Specific or isolated incident (N=4).

Other question data:

Q6: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “I am comfortable using the computer technology that was required for my course units”.

Number of responses = 997 (99.5%), Number of respondents who skipped this question = 5 (.5%)

Table 1: responses to Question 6 on how comfortable students were with technology

<i>strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neutral</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
430	427	87	43	10

Q11 Have you attempted to access student advice/services as a distance student?

yes 32.3% (N= 320); no 67.7% (N=672)

Q12 Which advice/service(s) did you access or attempt to access?

Number of responses = 313 (31.2%), Number of respondents who skipped this question = 689 (68.8%)

Table 2: Services accessed

MyLO (LMS) help	N=37
tech help inc webmail	N=45
admin help eg enrolments or fees or estudent centre or admissions	N=51
library help	N=32
other service eg disability or counselling or housing or careers or scholarship	N=36
course advice	N=28
general query unspecified	N=10
student learning or academic or course work advice	N=35
other	N=17
help from lecturer or tutor	N=32
student adviser	N=35
student services or student centre	N=30
faculty or faculty based student adviser	N=35

Table 3: Matrix – comfort with technology crossed with service accessed

	neutral	disagree	strongly agree	agree	strongly disagree
admin help eg enrolments or fees or estudent centre or admissions	2	2	21	26	0
course advice	0	1	11	16	0
faculty or faculty based student adviser	1	2	20	12	0
general query unspecified	0	0	3	7	0
help from lecturer or tutor	1	2	8	20	0
library help	2	2	12	16	0
MyLO help	10	2	9	15	1
Other	3	1	6	7	0
other service eg disability or counselling or housing or careers or scholarship	3	3	17	13	0
student adviser	5	3	11	16	0
student learning or academic or course work advice	4	3	10	17	1
student services or student centre	5	2	10	13	0
tech help inc webmail	7	6	11	20	1

Discussion:

Q12 Comfort with technology matrix results:

It is worth noting that the above matrix suggests that not many students who reported a high level of discomfort with technology also tried to access services.

Q13 Please describe your experience

Number of responses = 313 (31%), Number of respondents who skipped this question = 689 (69%)

Table 4: Descriptions of service experience

useful or helpful	N=111 (35%)
prompt	N=51 (16%)
good great terrific excellent etc	N=90 (29%)
friendly professional or otherwise positive comment re staff	N=48 (15%)
not helpful or not useful	N=20 (6.4%)
disappointing or less helpful than had hoped	N=29 (9%)
not prompt or direct enough or delayed	N=23 (7.3%)
bad frustrating or unsatisfactory ill-advised or damaging	N=37 (11.8%)
absent - no help provided at all	N=15 (4.8%)
ok or satisfactory	N=23 (7.3%)
neutral or average	N=2 (.64%)
mixed - some positive some negative	N=20 (6.4%)
other	N=19 (6%)

Discussion: The first four codes here could be collated under a general theme node of ‘positive’, and the following five under ‘negative’. This gives: ‘Positive’ (N= 300) and ‘Negative’ (N= 124), an encouraging result!

Further exploratory analysis

Some further analysis was conducted using the Nvivo software in order to arrive at a “grounded theory from which hypothesis can be generated” (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010, p. 284).

Further analysis on Q11: Have you attempted to access student advice/services as a distance student?

Table 5: Correlation between all codes and Q11

*(showing those codes where ‘no’ was larger than ‘yes’: highest 5 shown):
(n.b. recall that 67.7% of all responses to Q11 were ‘no’)*

	yes	no	‘no’ as % of whole node
Q4 responsibility	23	82	78.1%
Q5 personal	29	71	71%
Q5 consideration	33	71	67.6%
Q5 communication	53	99	64.7%
Q5 resources	104	198	63.5%

Table 6: Correlation between all codes and Q11

(showing those codes where ‘yes’ was larger than ‘no’: highest 3 shown)

	yes	no	‘yes’ as % of whole node
Q14 physical	9	3	75%
Q14 positive	48	38	45.7%
Q14 appeal	60	55	40.3%

Note that ‘physical’ at Q14 was a relatively small code (N= 12), nonetheless, it is worth noting that most respondents coded there (i.e. whose suggestions for improvement included explicit mention of physical or ‘in-person’ contact), had also attempted to access a student service in the past. This may suggest a positive correlation between engagement and physical connection, although this would run counter to a host of research suggesting otherwise (e.g. Herman & Banister, 2007; Ellis, 2011). A more significant finding here may be correlations between general calls for interaction and greater responsiveness and attempts to access services. A query run on the correlation between accessing services and sub codes capturing these elements (in Q 14) reinforces the idea that there is a correlation between respondents naming connection and responsiveness as key factors for improvement, and the level of engagement of those students (as reflected by their accessing of services):

Table 7: Correlation between selected codes and Q11

	yes	no
faster response times	5	2
more interaction, contact etc	23	7
lack of or inadequate connection or interaction	6	11
slow response times	9	4

Further analysis on all codes and Q6 (comfort with technology):

A query was run to find comparatively high correlations between ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ with ‘I am comfortable using the computer technology that was required for my course’, across all open question codes (except services and experience) i.e. finding responses that were coded at a given code and at ‘either ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’’. These were: ‘negative’ (in answer to Q5 ‘better for you’) = 23.1%; ‘resources’ (in answer to Q4 ‘worst aspect’) = 8.8% (i.e. 8.8% of respondents whose answers to ‘worst aspect’ were coded at ‘resources’, also answered ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ to the question: ‘I am comfortable using the computer technology that was required for my course units’); ‘consideration’ (in answer to Q5 ‘better for you’) = 7.6%; ‘negative’ (in answer to Q14 ‘other comments’) = 7.5%. Although the first of these (‘negative’ in Q5) is a relatively small code (N=13), it is interesting to note that a large percent of respondents coded there (responses here were general negative comments or responses saying despairing of anything at all that could make distance learning better), were also uncomfortable with the technology required for their learning.

Coding queries were also run to find patterns or commonalities in responses across questions: for example, an Nvivo report was run to find all respondents with responses to Q3 that were coded at ‘flexibility’ (N=493), which also had their responses to Q4 coded at ‘isolation’ (N=666). The number of individual codes returned by this report = 646, i.e. 323 responses were coded at both these nodes in Q3 and Q4. Thus over half of respondents who felt that the best aspect of being a distance student was ‘flexibility’, also felt that the worst aspect of being a distance student was the lack of contact: i.e. the rate of correspondence between nodes ‘flexibility’ and ‘isolation’ was 65.5%. The percentage of respondents the other way (i.e. the percentage of ‘lack of contact’ that corresponded with ‘convenience’) was a little lower: 48.5% of the responses coded at ‘isolation’ also coded at ‘flexibility’. Overall, the percentage of the total (the two codes added together) coded at both codes = 27.9%. So there is a high correlation between the two largest theme nodes for questions 3 and 4. A similar report found that responses coded at ‘necessity’ in answer to Q3 and at ‘isolation’ in answer to Q4=388: i.e. 194 at both. The total number coded at necessity was 365, so 53.2% of responses coded at necessity were also coded at lack of ‘isolation’, (29.2% the other way around). So again, there is a comparatively high correlation between these codes, suggesting possible common factors between feelings of isolation and lack of choice or feeling compelled to undertake study in this mode. Some further evidence here is the correlation between ‘unconsidered’ and ‘necessity’. This came to 66 (i.e. 33: 23.2% of ‘unconsidered’; 9% of ‘necessity’) – where a respondent is feeling unconsidered, they are also likely to have listed some sort of ‘necessity’ as the ‘best aspect’ of distance education. This indicates that the extent to which responses coded at ‘flexibility’ implied a degree of necessity (i.e. to what extent respondents who gave ‘flexible’ as the best aspect of distance education are undertaking education in this mode for expediency or necessity rather than as an active choice) needs further research; supporting the above observations regarding the further research needed around the concept ‘flexibility’.

Other interesting correlations across question responses suggesting common factors include: 56 coded at both Q4 (worst aspect) at ‘unconsidered’ and Q14 (other comments) at ‘negative’ (total number coded at either=304, so 18.4% coded at both (35% of ‘negative’ and 39.4% of ‘unconsidered’.) 44.5 responses were coded at both ‘unconsidered’ (in answer to Q4), and ‘consideration’ (in answer to Q5 ‘what would make it better’), which is 31.3% of ‘unconsidered’, and 42.4% of ‘consideration’). This highlights consistency across answers as well as underscores the importance of showing due consideration and finding new ways to communicate that consideration to distance students.

Conclusions and further study

Some very general conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the data so far available. Firstly, we can conclude that a large portion of UTAS distance students feel isolated and also that a large number of these students may see the primary benefit of this mode as its serving a practical or necessary function (interpreting ‘flexible’ this way), rather than its being attractive in its own right. A comparably high number (comparable to those coded at ‘flexible or necessity’) struggle with resources and feel unconsidered. A reasonably high number

struggle with balancing other life commitments and with the autonomy or self-reliance required to manage distance study.

In response to the data, SLAD launched workshops and consultations utilising Blackboard Collaborate webrooms (responding to, e.g. 'more contact'). These sessions have steadily increased in popularity since they were introduced (mid 2013). An effort has been made to increase awareness of online services through a dedicated LMS site (called Uni Essentials), and an ongoing project to construct a searchable webpage and FAQ including links to all SLAD resources (responding to the codes regarding 'information' and 'resources'). The sample of students who responded to this survey was very large, and the responses quite complex, so there is a lot more work to be done assimilating and drawing meaningful conclusions from all the data. Initially this further work will focus on foundational analysis of the large theme concepts emerging from the open questions: particularly on 'isolation' and 'contact or connection' (the largest theme codes in Q4 and 5, if we add the node 'more contact' to the node 'more communication' in Q5), and on 'flexibility' (the largest theme node in Q3). As indicated above, this work will involve both theoretical analysis (e.g. a re-examination of initial definitions) and an empirical exploration of the possible factors constituting the meaning and experience of these concepts for distance students: both in a distance educational context and in an 'in person' context.

That the elements emerging here (or akin elements) *are* elements of distance student's experience is well-established in the literature (e.g. Ganawardena, 1995; Walter & Burgoon, 1992), and concepts associated with such elements (e.g. 'community' and 'interaction') have been extensively studied. Indeed, in line with its perceived importance, Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014) report that the category 'interaction and communication' was the most represented in a follow up literature review. But rather than focus on the implications of such elements in other phenomena, such as student success or engendering a sense of community, the follow up research proposed here aims to take advantage of the high number of respondents in the original study in order to re-examine the fundamental definitions and theories on which such studies typically build. Thus, in broad terms, the data collected will be utilised to contribute to the theoretical branch of this research category: i.e. to what Conrad calls 'theories to frame by' (Conrad, 2014, p. 385). That is, a follow up survey will study the meaning and experience of the emergent concepts for distance students: examining what student's mean when they use such concepts, as well as components of their experience of them. But follow up research will also include a thorough foundational study: constructing various possible theoretical definitions of such concepts (in a distance educational context) and studying different existing theoretical frameworks through which they may be understood and explored.

To this end, the next stage of this project will include the above mentioned survey, designed for factor analysis on important features (pro and con) of distance study. This survey will feature Likert scale questions capturing core meanings of actual responses from the initial survey and grouped according to degree of correlation with other codes – e.g. where there is strong correlation, a cross section of responses from those correlated codes will be looked at to inspire these questions. For example, one section of the follow up survey will explore the nature or *meaning* of the concept 'isolation' for distance students with the question: '*what does isolation mean to you?*' Suggestive responses for the Likert-type exploration of this concept include:

- "I feel like I'm the only one studying the subject"
- "feeling 'out of the loop'"
- "Feeling like you are not connected or have been forgotten"
- "A sense of working in a void, with minimal feedback or engagement"
- "I don't feel like I am affiliated or a member of the university"
- "At times it feels like we are just typing into cyberspace."

Similarly, another section will explore elements contributing to the *experience* of isolation ('what makes you feel isolated?'). The same sorts of questions will be asked regarding other fundamental concepts frequently utilised in the 2013 survey, notably 'connection' and 'flexibility'. The empirical results from this follow up survey will be examined in the context of other relevant empirical research: e.g. it is anticipated (due to the number of responses calling for more on campus study schools) that the results may ratify Caughlin and Sharabi's (2013), showing that the extent to which distance students feel a personal connection may involve elements that extend beyond "technologically mediated communication" (p. 877).

It is important to explore not only how these states are understood and experienced by distance and online students, but also to enrich our fundamental theoretical understanding of what the concepts actually mean. As indicated above, such theoretical work may include: a re-examination of theoretical frameworks explicating the core concepts (e.g. social constructivism; Moore's (2013) theories of social presence and transactional distance);

sociological perspectives such as Turkle's (2011) and fundamental philosophical definitions; an examination of the relationship between the core concepts themselves (e.g. an exploration of the nature of the conceptual juxtaposition of isolation and connection); and an examination of the relationship between the core emergent concepts and other concepts (e.g. the relationship the concept of 'flexibility' has with those of 'structure', 'dialogue' and 'autonomy' (Moore, 2013, pp. 70-73)).

In sum, the gaps between the promises and the reality of distance education need careful and continued monitoring. This research is starting point of an ongoing endeavour to identify ways to genuinely address key concerns and common experiences of distance students. The focus of the next stage is directly informed by the concerns and experiences of students voiced in their responses to this initial survey. The themes isolation, connection and flexibility in particular indicate the need to further explore these concepts. The data collected thus far, though, also strongly suggests a need to increase the degree of connection, interaction and responsiveness between distance students and their Universities. The research presented here gives a critical perspective on distance education and by focusing on actual student experience, offers a comparison between the state-of-the-art and the state-of-the-actual educational technology and practice utilised for distance learning.

References

- Andrews, T. & du Toit, L. (2014). *Exploring the student voice in online education: Final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-exploring-student-voice-online-education>
- Andrews, T., & Tynan, B. (2010). Why the student voice? The case for investigating the distance learners' experience of ICT in distance education. In C. H. Steel, M. J. Keppell, P. Gerbic, & S. Housego (Eds.), *Curriculum, technology & transformation for an unknown future. Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2010* (pp. 60-64). Retrieved from <http://http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney10/procs/Andrews-concise.pdf>
- Brindley, J. E. (2014). Learner support in online distance education: Essential and evolving. In O. Zawacki-Richter, & T. Anderson (Eds.), *Online distance education: towards a research agenda* (pp. 287-310). Athabasca: Athabasca University Press.
- Caughlin, J. P., & Sharabi, L. L. (2013). A communicative interdependence perspective of close relationships: The connections between mediated and unmediated interactions matter. *Journal of Communication*, 63(5), 873-893.
- Conrad, D. (2014). Interaction and communication in online learning communities: Toward an engaged and flexible future. In O. Zawacki-Richter, & T. Anderson (Eds.), *Online distance education: towards a research agenda* (pp. 381-402). Athabasca: Athabasca University Press.
- Ellis, M. J. (2011). Peer feedback on writing: Is on-line actually better than on-paper? *Journal of Academic Language & Learning*, 5(1), 88-99.
- Gunawardena, C. N. (1995). Social presence and implications for interaction and collaborative learning in computer conferences. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1(2/3), 147-166.
- Hutchison, A. J., Johnston, L. H., & Breckon, J. D. (2010). Using QSR-Nvivo to facilitate the development of a grounded theory project: an account of a worked example. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13(4), 283-302.
- Herman, T., & Banister, S. (2007). Face-to-face versus online coursework: A comparison of costs and learning outcomes. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 7(4). Retrieved from <http://www.citejournal.org/vol7/iss4/currentpractice/article1.cfm>
- Koch, J. (2005). Does distance learning work? A large sample control group study of student success in distance learning. *e-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology*, 8(1). Retrieved from http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/e-jist/docs/vol8_no1/fullpapers/distancelearning.htm
- Moore, M. G. (2013). The theory of transactional distance. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of Distance Education* (3rd ed.) (pp. 66-85). New York: Routledge.
- Muilenburga, L. Y., & Bergeb, Z. L. (2005). Student barriers to online learning: A factor analytic study. *Distance Education*, 26(1), 29-48.
- Peach, D. (2005). Ensuring student success – The role of support services in improving the quality of the student learning experience. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*, 2(3), 1-15.
- Sun, S. (2014). Learner perspectives on fully online language learning. *Distance Education*, 35(1), 18-42.
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246.
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.
- Walther, J. B., & Burgoon, J. K. (1992). Relational communication in computer-mediated interaction. *Human Communication Research*, 19(1), 50-88.

Zawacki-Richter, O. (2009). Research areas in distance education: A Delphi study. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(3). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/674/1260>

Zawacki-Richter, O. & Anderson, T. (2014). *Online distance education: towards a research agenda*. Athabasca: Athabasca University Press.

Contact author: Penelope Rush, penelope.rush@utas.edu.au

Please cite as: Rush, P. (2014). Wide Open Listening: what is it really like to be a distance student? In B. Hegarty, J. McDonald, & S.-K. Loke (Eds.), *Rhetoric and Reality: Critical perspectives on educational technology. Proceedings ascilite Dunedin 2014* (pp. 348-358).

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.



The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution 3.0 licence enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.