

TE WHAKATŪ KŌRERO WORKING PAPERS

**Enhancing the Engagement and Success of
Distance Students Through Targeted Support
Programmes**

Ron Grant, Glenda Olivier, Caroline Rawlings
and Catherine Ross

Open Polytechnic
KURATINI TUWHERA



Open Polytechnic

Freephone 0508 650 200

Overseas phone +64 4 913 5300

www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz

Private Bag 31914 · Lower Hutt 5040 · New Zealand

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Abstract

Tertiary student engagement and success is of strategic importance (Ministry of Education, n.d.), and success in terms of course and qualification completion is a key requirement of the government's funding regime. Yet many students do not complete their courses and qualifications successfully. When students study at a distance and are physically separated from teaching and support staff and other learners, study can be challenging and success elusive. Distance students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging, and difficulty maintaining engagement in and motivation for learning. However, early and appropriate learning support can have a positive and lasting effect on student success outcomes.

This paper describes three learning support programmes, delivered by the Learning Centre at the Open Polytechnic, aimed at enhancing the engagement and success of distance students (the Learning Centre is responsible for providing learning support services to students). The first is facilitated, online study skills workshops, designed to help students build the requisite skills for self-directed, independent study so that they continue that study and complete their courses successfully. The second is a peer-mentoring and support programme, informed by learning-motivation theory and a strengths-based approach, and focused on establishing relationships with students, helping them to make a positive start to their studies and persist with them. The third is an e-mentoring programme for indigenous students, which uses an appropriate cultural model in the design and operation of its online space. Anecdotal evidence shows an increase in the success rates of students participating in these programmes, in addition to high levels of student satisfaction with the programmes.

Editorial note

A glossary of Māori terms used in the course of this paper is provided at the end of the paper. Glossary terms appear in **bold** text where they first appear. Māori terms that are defined in the body of the commentary are not repeated in the glossary.

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Introduction

Students bring to their study a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and expectations. Many have few or no formal qualifications and begin their tertiary education journey unprepared for the independent, self-directed learning that is required. Additionally, students can lack the academic skills necessary for successful study (Wingate, 2006; Kartika, 2007). When these factors come together in a distance learning environment, where students are physically separated from teaching and support staff and other learners, the isolation, coupled with a weak sense of connection to the learning community, means students can struggle to maintain their motivation and engagement in learning (Ross, 2009). Furthermore, studying is often just one of a variety of activities that students are involved in. Increasingly, students are in full-time or part-time employment, which means they have less time to devote to their studies. In 2010, 98 per cent of Open Polytechnic students were studying part time and 70 per cent were in the workforce (The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2010).

Tertiary student engagement and success is of strategic importance (Ministry of Education, n.d.). While an increased level of success in terms of course and qualification completion is a key requirement of the government's funding regime, many students, particularly part-time students, do not complete their qualifications (Scott, 2009). Significantly more first-year students drop out of study than do returning students, and so the first-year experience is critical to student success (Earle, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008). Early and appropriate learning support in the first year of study has a positive and lasting effect on student success outcomes (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008; Earle, 2007; Gibbs, Regan, & Simpson, 2007).

This paper describes three support programmes aimed at enhancing the engagement and success of first-year distance students at the Open Polytechnic.

The first is facilitated, online study skills workshops, designed to help students build the requisite skills for self-directed, independent study so that they continue that study and complete their courses successfully.

The second is a peer-mentoring and support programme, informed by learning motivation theory and a strengths-based approach, which focuses on establishing relationships with students, helping them to make a positive start to their studies and persist to successful course completion.

The third is an e-mentoring programme for indigenous students, which uses an appropriate cultural model in the design and operation of its online space. This programme aims to improve student engagement and success by providing support that meets not only students' learning needs, but their cultural needs as well.

Facilitated online study skills workshops

Preparing students for learning can have a positive and lasting impact on their success. Study skills-development programmes are effective preparation (Kiernan, Lawrence, & Sankey, 2006) and help students to acquire the requisite academic skills (Groves, Bowd, & Smith, 2010), in addition to building confidence (Bailey, Derbyshire, Harding, Middleton, Rayson, & Syson, 2007). Study skills programmes delivered online offer distance students these same skill-development opportunities, in addition to providing a means to connect with other students and staff. Students respond well when technology fosters interaction and relationship building (Foster, 2011).

At the Open Polytechnic web-enhanced learning is considered part of mainstream education, and all programmes at Level 5 (equivalent to the first year of a degree) and above have an online component. Some students are comfortable with technology and online learning, but many find this environment challenging. These students report being anxious about their ability to cope with academic requirements, manage their time effectively and deal with the isolation of studying at a distance.

To help students prepare for online and distance study, the Learning Centre has developed two online study skills workshops: StudyWise and ExamWise. These workshops are aimed at increasing first-year student success by helping students to develop the requisite skills to succeed; promoting engagement with their studies, staff and fellow students; and enhancing their understanding of the Open Polytechnic's academic culture. The workshops are delivered each trimester and are free.

All online courses at the Open Polytechnic are accessed through the Online Campus, which uses Moodle course-management software. StudyWise and ExamWise workshops are also delivered on the Online Campus, which makes StudyWise the ideal vehicle to introduce students to online learning and ensure that they are familiar with their learning environment.

The workshops are advertised on the Online Campus and Learning Central (the Open Polytechnic's online study skills and support repository), and promoted by academic staff on their online course pages. Personal invitations are also sent to all first-year students and students identified as needing extra support. Key features of the workshops are that they are facilitated by learning advisers; they are asynchronous, flexible, and provide just-in-time learning; and they are available and accessible when needed, at times that suit students.

The StudyWise workshop aims to ease students' transition into distance tertiary education by providing them with an understanding of what is expected of them as online, distance students. StudyWise also presents a 'friendly face' to welcome students into what for some is a strange new environment.

The StudyWise online workshop starts 2 weeks before the commencement of each trimester and runs for 3 weeks. During this period students can access the workshop at any time and spend as much or as little time on it as they have available. Students typically spend between 4 and 8 hours working through the workshop resources and participating in the discussion forums. The workshop modules contain resources and activities covering all of the key academic skills areas. They are provided in a variety of formats, such as targeted readings, interactive exercises, audio and video clips, slideshows, hyperlinks to websites and facilitated group forums. StudyWise topics include:

- an introduction to the Polytechnic and Online Campus, the learning advisers who facilitate the workshop, and the workshop itself. Students are provided with information aimed at familiarising them with the Open Polytechnic. One behaviour associated with student success is making use of institutional resources, including support, so that they are also encouraged to seek timely assistance and view this as a strength, not a weakness
- organisation – students are encouraged to organise themselves, their study space and their files
- goal setting and motivation – the importance of goals and motivation is explained and students are encouraged to set personal goals
- time management – many students are time poor. It's essential that they learn to manage their time, plan their workload, and balance their work, life and study commitments
- learning preferences and study techniques – students explore their learning preferences and the different ways of learning, and study tips, techniques and strategies
- basic research – locating, evaluating and using information
- reading and writing for assessment, including writing online, netiquette, understanding and planning assignments, making notes, and editing and proof-reading

- APA referencing – why it’s necessary and how to reference correctly
- plagiarism – what it is and how to avoid it.

The online forums, facilitated by a team of learning advisers, provide a safe place for students to develop and practise their online skills before the trimester starts. This is particularly useful for students who are not yet comfortable with online forums and feel nervous about participating. The forums can also provide a sense of community and belonging, which serves to counteract feelings of isolation and loneliness. In addition, the workshops provide an opportunity for students to interact with the learning advisers and access early, personalised support.

The ExamWise online workshop provides tips, strategies and techniques to help students prepare for and manage exams. The week-long workshop is offered each trimester, a month before exams start. It thus serves to motivate students and keep them on track for the final hurdle to successful course completion. ExamWise is also facilitated by learning advisers, and includes online forums. The forums are used mainly for motivation – students are encouraged to motivate one another – and for students to ask questions and obtain clarification of any issues regarding exams. ExamWise topics include:

- preparing for exams, including managing study time and planning for revision
- motivation – setting goals and the crucial role these can play in achieving study success
- concentrating and active learning – tips and strategies to help keep students on track
- revision strategies and memory techniques
- understanding and answering different types of questions
- managing and reducing stress
- what to do before, during and after exams.

The Learning Centre has been delivering online study skills workshops since 2007 and students have enrolled in increasing numbers since then. While around 20 per cent of first-year students participated in the ExamWise workshops in 2010, only 10 per cent participated in StudyWise. Increasing student participation in the latter workshop is a priority for the Learning Centre.

To date around 80 per cent of students who have participated in workshops have gone on to successfully complete the course that followed the workshop (participation is defined as logging in to the workshop at least once). This rate is higher than the overall successful course completion rate for first-year students, which was 60 per cent in 2010. However, the successful course completion figure for workshop participants must be interpreted with caution. It could be argued that it is the more organised and academically able students who take advantage of skill-development programmes, and that therefore the positive impact of such programmes on success is marginal.

Students who participate in the workshops report high levels of satisfaction with the workshops, as illustrated by the following feedback:

It covers study skills for distance learning with what to expect time management wise and how to set up your study area and also how to motivate yourself to study because the onus is on you to do it. I am new to online learning and I found moving systematically through the workshop eye-opening. I made sure I opened a wide variety of different links and windows, just to experience the new mode of learning. I am so glad to have become familiar with online learning through StudyWise.

And:

Sets everything out clearly and gives you confidence about exams. It is easy to use and very helpful. It makes me feel confident that I'm not alone in feeling anxious at exam time.

Student mentoring programme

As well as preparatory programmes and academic support, peer-mentoring schemes can contribute to increased levels of student success. Peer mentoring, where experienced students provide guidance and support to less-experienced students, is well established as an effective support strategy in tertiary education (Tahau-Hodges, 2010; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Not only do mentoring programmes for first-year students contribute to increased self-esteem and academic confidence (Dewart, Drees, Hixenbaugh, & Thorn, 2006), but also students who participate in such programmes report increased feelings of belonging and a successful transition to university (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2005). Mentoring programmes have also been proven to have a positive impact on the engagement and success of distance learners (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010).

The Learning Centre developed its student peer-mentoring programme in 2005 and has further developed and refined it subsequently. In 2010 more than 4000 students participated in this programme. The programme's development has been informed by work carried out by Ormond Simpson at the United Kingdom's Open University and it is his model of proactive motivational student support (Simpson, 2008), in particular, that has informed the most recent delivery of the mentoring programme.

Simpson (2008) found that a combination of phone calls and a strength-based approach, using positive psychology, had a significant positive effect on the successful course completion rates of distance students. He argued that the traditional method of concentrating on weakness was not an effective way of improving student performance, and that research suggested people do best when they focus on their strengths. Louis (2009) concurs, and asserts that students who use their strengths more report increased engagement in and intrinsic motivation for learning. Furthermore, helping students become aware of their personal strengths boosts their self confidence and contributes to their development as autonomous learners (Macaskill & Denovan, 2011). With this in mind, Simpson suggests that peer mentors should concentrate on emphasising the positive during their contact with students. In other words, they should focus on students' existing competencies or strengths, draw out their past successes, and validate effort rather than achievement.

The student peer-mentoring programme has the following objectives:

- to welcome students to the Open Polytechnic learning community and help them make a positive start to their study
- to help students plan their study and manage assessment tasks
- to help students build confidence, work with their strengths and feel competent in their study
- to encourage students to contact their teacher or support staff with any concerns they have.

The programme offers support to all first-year students via telephone during weekday evenings, when students are most likely to be available to discuss their study. It is a programme of proactive contact with students, rather than one that relies on student self-referral. Contact occurs at times that have been identified as key points in students' progress through their courses, and is aimed at providing timely and appropriate support to enhance learning and encourage persistence.

The peer mentors contact students within the first 2 to 4 weeks of their course start date. The conversation focuses on getting started, confirming students' goals for study, and identifying strengths and how these can be applied to learning. Where appropriate, a discussion on preparing for and tackling the first assessment task might be included. Subsequent contact is made to see how students are progressing and, if necessary, give reassurance and encouragement to help keep them 'on track'. Mentors emphasise student effort where necessary and reinforce the notion that increased effort will increase their ability to learn.

In order for relationships and conversations with students to be authentic and meaningful and achieve positive results, careful selection and thorough training of the peer mentors is essential (Henry, Bruland, & Sano-Franchini, 2011). In our experience an effective peer mentor has a successful tertiary background, self-confidence, enthusiasm, cultural awareness, a lot of patience, and an ability to work in both a one-to-one situation and as part of a team. Terrion and Leonard (2007) concur, and list the characteristics of successful peer mentors as university experience, communication skills, supportiveness, trustworthiness, empathy, enthusiasm and flexibility.

Peer mentors are specifically recruited and are paid for the work that they do. They must be current students or recent graduates, but do not need to be studying in the same discipline as the students they support. They are chosen for their ability to empathise with diverse students, as well as a mature attitude

to cultural differences. Mentors receive training in the strengths-based approach and work from a script that provides a guide for conversation rather than a prescription for it.

Student responses to the mentoring programme have been very positive. Students tell us, both during conversations with peer mentors and through solicited feedback, that contact with the mentors is encouraging and motivational, and helps increase their self-confidence. A typical comment is:

I needed someone to look over my shoulder and the phone calls from the mentor helped me through a time when I didn't want to do any work. She also helped me work out some really good techniques to help me with my study.

Students also report that, among other things, the phone calls help them to develop a sense of belonging to the institution and a learning community, and they say this is important for their learning. As one student stated:

I felt really good after the mentor talked with me. Studying all by myself is very lonely so getting phone calls from her made me feel like I belonged to a group. It helped me keep going with my study.

These outcomes are supported in the literature. Glaser, Hall, and Halperin (2005) report on a project involving 1200 first-year students at the University of New South Wales that found that peer mentoring had a positive impact on students' successful transition to university and them feeling part of the university community. Similarly, a United Kingdom Staff and Educational Development Association report on student-to student support (Potter & Hampton, 2009) reveals that such support has a positive influence on students' academic achievement and self-confidence.

The peer-mentoring programme has had a positive impact on successful course completion rates too. During 2007, this programme, which involved approximately 2000 students, delivered a 6 per cent average increase in successful course completion rates. This outcome aligns quite neatly with results from similar programmes at the United Kingdom's Open University and Korea Open National University. An increase in retention of 22 per cent at the Open University is reported by Simpson (Boyle et al., 2010), but this was with just a small group of first-year students. Korea Open National University provides a bigger data set. It recorded a retention increase of between 5 per cent and 14 per cent for the 1900 enrolled and new students who took part in the mentoring programme, as opposed to those who did not (Boyle et al., 2010).

Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging: Culturally relevant peer mentoring

The positive outcomes delivered by the peer-mentoring programme at the Open Polytechnic have generated the design and development of an online mentoring programme for first-year **Māori** students. Māori students who participate in formal mentoring programmes are more likely to complete their courses successfully than those who don't (Tahau-Hodges, 2010). Furthermore, matching experienced students with first-year students in e-mentoring schemes has proven to be successful in helping students to engage with learning and persist with it (Dewart et al., 2006).

The e-mentoring programme, Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging, uses technology to best advantage to reach students and provide support that not only meets their learning needs, but their cultural needs as well. A strong sense of cultural identity is linked to academic success for Māori students (Addis, Hall, Higgins, & Higgins, 2011). The e-mentoring programme is about **whakawhanaungatanga** in cyberspace, and is aimed at building an online learning community and fostering students' connection with and belonging to that community. Evidence from previous studies at the Open Polytechnic reveals that Māori students consider 'a sense of belonging' and 'a place of belonging' to be critical factors for their academic success (Ross, 2009).

Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that to be fully engaged and successful students must feel accepted and affirmed, and that they belong. However, many students with cultural backgrounds that label them 'non-traditional' do not have that sense of belonging, and they often feel uncomfortable in traditional institutions (Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007). Consequently, they do not feel engaged; nor do they feel supported. Feeling unsupported can be stressful to students. When Māori students experience stress and discomfort, they are likely to experience a lowered sense of well-being, reduced motivation and less enjoyment of their learning (Gavala & Flett, 2005).

Rather than leaving it to students to seek a sense of connection and belonging, institutions need to adapt their cultures and environments to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Johnson et al., 2007). Mentoring programmes have proven helpful in creating more culturally responsive environments (Goh, Seet, & Rawhiti, 2011). The Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging programme, with its purpose-built online space, signals the Open Polytechnic's commitment to supporting its Māori students in culturally relevant ways.

Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging is a mentoring programme that takes place in an online space that has been specially designed, both visually and structurally, to reflect Māori practice. The space has been named the iWhare, which reflects twenty-first century e-learning, incorporating **kaupapa Māori** pedagogy for a distance learning environment. It is a place for Māori students to connect and establish relationships with other Māori students during their first trimester of study. The programme aims to foster a 'sense of belonging' (whanaungatanga) and a 'place of belonging' (turangawaewae) among the students.

The concept of tuakana-teina is not new, and within a kaupapa Māori context it literally means 'older sibling looking after younger sibling'. In the learning context, however, it has taken on the meaning of a more-experienced student (tūakana/mentor) looking after and guiding a newer student (tēina/mentee) in a holistic manner. Peer mentoring within kaupapa Māori is based upon Māori values and principles, which set the framework for the Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging programme. Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging is also informed by a number of theoretical frameworks, including Māori pedagogy, positive psychology and a strengths-based approach.

Using a Moodle platform, the online mentoring space has been designed to reflect a dual purpose: to encourage academic learning; and to replicate the values, principles and customs of a **marae** complex. To this end the online site comprises three separate spaces, so that the key Māori concepts of **whānau**, **aroha**, **manaakitanga**, **rangatiratanga**, **kotahitanga** and **kaitiakitanga** are visible and active. The three spaces are Whānau, Iwi and Wahi Akoranga, and they serve different purposes.

Whānau

Whānau comprises individual spaces for each small whānau group of tūakana and their tēina. Each space is visible and accessible only to those who belong to it. The Whānau space has been purposefully set up to replicate the notion of whānau, whereby students and their mentors can talk about their **whakapapa**, their learning and other cultural issues in a private space.

Iwi

Iwi is a single space that is accessible to all whānau groups. It replicates the notion of iwi on a marae, whereby discussions, conversations and debates are held in the **wharenuī** and everyone is involved. The protocol for meetings held in a wharenuī is very different from those held elsewhere, and participants have to learn the required etiquette for speaking. This requirement is replicated in the Iwi space, and tūakana and tēina are given guidelines on etiquette.

Wahi Akoranga

Wahi Akoranga (training space) is accessible only to the tūakana. In kaupapa Māori there are some elements of learning that are dedicated to the learner and others that are dedicated to the teacher. This is where the notion of tohunga (learned expert) has its place in Māoridom.

The Whānau, Iwi and Wahi Akoranga spaces provide a suitable online environment within which tūakana can mentor and support tēina effectively. For cultural values and knowledge to be expressed within a kaupapa Māori context, the selection of 'learned experts' is paramount. Tūakana are experienced and successful students, who are not necessarily studying the same subjects as the students they mentor. They are selected on the basis of their academic record and knowledge of kaupapa Māori. Tūakana must be willing to support a small group of first-year students for the duration of a trimester and be available to their group for approximately 5 hours a week. They are not paid for the mentoring, but they do receive a koha (donation). One student who agreed to participate in the programme as a tūakana said:

I am keen to help support and guide other students through their learning and I can't wait to see where this journey takes me.

Tūakana participate in an online training programme before they begin mentoring tēina. The training programme has been carefully planned so that tūakana engage fully with it. The following requirements were incorporated into its design:

- creation of a sense of kanohi-ki te-kanohi (face-to-face) interaction
- implementation of Māori pedagogy
- facilitation of online **kōrero** using kaupapa Māori concepts.

The training programme comprises six modules. These reflect the above requirements, while at the same time using kaupapa Māori and e-learning practices to ensure that the training is successful. Each training module is staircased to maximise both learning and training, and the modules are interlinked, motivating, engaging and fun. To date, all of the tūakana who have completed the training programme have reported that they feel fully prepared and ready to mentor their tēina online.

The Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging programme is in its first year of operation, so no conclusions about the extent of its success can yet be made. Nor can the question 'Is it possible to create a virtual sense of belonging?' (Huijser, Kimmins, & Evans, 2008, p. 54) be answered. However, preliminary evidence and feedback from tēina indicate that involvement in the programme is helping tēina feel connected and supported, both culturally and academically, as they manage the demands of their first year of distance study. Typical comments are:

It's been great to meet with other Māori learners and from the kōrero we are all doing really well. What I like about this kōrero – it's different because we talk about whānau, our whakapapa, our tūpuna. But at the same time we are helping each other with our study.

And:

A real bonus for me is being able to kōrero with others and listen to the success stories.

This preliminary evidence suggests that the Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging programme may help dissolve some of the challenges first-year Māori distance students face by weaving together Māori culture, pedagogy and the online environment to support and enhance their learning.

Conclusion

This paper has described three different learning support programmes for first-year distance students and considered the impact of those programmes on student engagement and success outcomes. While the majority of students participating in the online study skills workshops report high levels of satisfaction with their workshop experiences and go on to complete their first course successfully, a more in-depth examination of the impact of the workshops on student learning is required. For example, what impact does workshop participation have on the qualification completion rates of students? Furthermore, is the development of the skills students need for effective study best delivered within a generic framework? This 'bolt-on' approach to study skills development has been criticised (Wingate, 2006), and it is suggested that such development is effective only when it is embedded in discipline-specific content (Groves et al., 2010). We agree, and therefore more work needs to be done towards this end.

The results achieved by the two mentoring programmes suggest that peer mentoring is valued by students and contributes to successful outcomes for them. By harnessing both 'low-tech' (telephone) and 'high-tech' (online) tools, and underpinning their use with appropriate pedagogy, peer mentoring has the potential to enhance the learning experience of diverse students in their first year of distance study in significant ways.

Overall, the results of the three approaches in terms of supporting first-year students studying at a distance suggest the programmes are working well. However, more work can be done to ensure that we continue to develop and deliver the most effective learning support programmes to meet diverse students' needs and promote study success.

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Glossary of Māori terms

Note: Many of the descriptions used in this glossary are specific interpretations for the purposes of the Tūakana-tēina e-Belonging programme and do not denote the fullness of meaning normally associated with the word or term.

Aroha	To care; affection
Kaitiakitanga	Guardianship; trustee
Kaupapa Māori	Things Māori
Kōrero	Discussion
Kotahitanga	Collaboration, standing together as one
Manaakitanga	Caring for others, being generous, empowering, respecting others
Māori	New Zealand's indigenous people
Marae	Meeting place
Rangatiratanga	Self-awareness, self-esteem, confidence
Whakapapa	Connection, identity
Whakawhanaungatanga	Building relationships
Whānau	Family
Wharenui	A meeting place; meeting house