

Student Attrition in Higher Education: 'What Was That You Said?'

Ambiguities Arising From Varied Contexts and Definitions in Distance and Open Learning

Introduction

Attrition rates in the higher education and distance/open learning modes have come under growing scrutiny over the last two decades. One of the drivers has been political, with the widespread adoption of New Managerialist policies in the public service throughout much of the Western world. The market focus of the competitive model brings a concentration on measurable outcomes and the use of benchmarking. The ensuing government linkage of funding to students' progress rates has focused attention on the issue (Woodley, de Lange & Tanewski, 2001, p. 114). In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education made its first move in relation to private training providers (PTEs), followed by clear signals to all tertiary providers that the same regime will apply.

Current Government policy on completions is made clear in a letter entitled *Managing for Growth Within the Tertiary Education Sector: Course Retention and Benchmarking of National Qualifications*, sent from the Tertiary Education Commission to tertiary institutions on October 15, 2003:

The course retention rate element of the project is based upon the guideline ... which requires that courses with reported course retention rates below 50% for two successive years will not be funded through EFTs-funding, unless there are compelling reasons to do so. (p. 1)

The attrition levels of distance learners have generally been acknowledged as being higher than those of 'conventional' face-to-face higher educational institutions (Brindley, 1998, p. 131). Brindley also draws attention to the fact that some distance education/open learning courses sometimes have higher rates of retention than contact courses.

However, attrition, its shape and its management, has long been considered a quality issue in higher education generally and in distance and open learning in particular. It is over 15 years since Brindley (1988, p. 131) observed that there

was an extensive body of writing on student attrition and persistence in higher education generally and particularly in distance/open learning. The body of work has only increased in the ensuing years.

Any discussion of results from the many qualitative and quantitative studies has to take place with shared understandings of the language used and of the contexts within which it is used. This paper is therefore structured in two parts. The first part describes the communities within which discussion of issues facing distance and open learning are constructed and variously defined. The second part explores the ways in which student attrition is investigated within those communities of interest.

The context

The complexity of the distance/open learning sector is not new. Over a decade ago, Paul (1990) pointed out that the task of defining such terms as *open learning*, *distance education* and *open learning institutions* may prove more elusive than first seemed (pp. 42–46).

This followed debate over Holmberg's assertion of distance education as a separate discipline rather than a branch of adult learning:

My definition of discipline is that of a clearly defined area of academic study that has caused both research and university teaching. In this sense, distance education is a discipline ... albeit a new and not very well-developed one (an emerging discipline?) ... Distance education research includes theory building and theory testing (Holmberg, 1989, p. 60).

During 1989 there also occurred, in the journal *Open Learning*, some lively debate over the exact meaning of the terms *distance education* and *open learning*.

Greville Rumble (1989) started a searing attack on the indiscriminate use of the term *open learning*, making a plea for greater clarity in the concepts. He saw (1989, p. 33) an attempt to 'hijack' the word *open*, thus defining a particular system in a way that was 'attractive politically' but essentially untruthful, particularly when applied to closed enrolment corporate education programmes. He described this as a 'monstrous misuse of language' (p. 35). His attack gave rise to spirited discussion beyond the pages of the journal in which it appeared.

Mugridge (1989 p. 85) concluded that a continuum existed, with context having a major role in determining the definition of open learning. He added, 'In my backyard, distance education means what I say it is!'. Tella (1998) later described the terminology as 'bewildering' (Summary).

Confusion over nomenclature has thus widened rather than narrowed since Rumble's words were written. Mugridge has had the last word. Ambiguity of nomenclature simply 'is'. Internationally, a plethora of providers has adopted the labels of *distance*, *open* or *flexible*, *distributed*, *flexi-mode*, *blended* or *mixed mode learning*, based on differing assumptions and pedagogical models.

Nipper (1989, p. 71) forecast that the advent of computer conferencing allowing communication and facilitation of learning as a social process would provide 'key elements' in the conceptual development of what he described as third-generation models of distance learning. This would, he postulated, overcome the problem of social distance between learners and teachers, not just the

geographical distance. The significance and challenges of this pedagogical movement are reiterated by Tait, in the Foreword to the *Proceedings of the 9th Cambridge International Conference on Open And Distance Learning*. There, he talks of the challenge of using technology in distance learning:

changing the overarching pedagogic assumptions to those that have constructivist ideas at their core — namely that students can rely less on prepared teaching materials and more on exploration of resources ... In particular, the advent of the new technologies, and their capacity to deliver interaction through e-conferencing, has fundamental implications for what we understand by 'distance' and 'near'. (2001, p. 6)

Gorard, Selwyn and Williams (2000) cite Gell and Cochrane (1996, p. 252), who describe a 'meltdown' in education when discussing the phenomenon of a new 'training, learning and creativity sector' brought about by information and communication technology. The ubiquitous distance education/open learning cluster, with its growing dependence on technology, thus retains at least its share of post-modern levels of internal difference, ambiguity and uncertainty. Tella (1998) describes the changes wrought by the gradual disappearance of the concept of distance, both physically and psychologically:

Fundamentally, the chaos concerns the terms being used, not the concepts or the constructs themselves. The latter can clearly be circumscribed by a progressive increase in learner control and in widened access to resources, in emphasis on thinking skills as well as on metacognitive skills related to learning strategies. ... The latest human/machine interfaces make the use of new technology more user-friendly. (Summary)

The confusions extend beyond the description of models of education. Tinto's higher education predictive research model (1975) had already identified the lack of an accurate vocabulary to describe attrition and the need to distinguish between academic failure, voluntary withdrawal, transfer and delay. The current vocabulary of student attrition/persistence reveals immediate anomalies. Words used in the research include student *withdrawal*, *attrition*, *dropout*, *abandonment* or *discontinuation* as well as *persistence/completion* and *retention*. Powell and Woodley (1995) further refine some definitions into *non-starts* and *stop-outs* and refer to the use of such pejorative terms as *mortality* and *wastage* (p. 283).

Additionally, different researchers have used the same words to describe different states. For example, in distance education, *retention* or *persistence* is usually defined as retention/persistence throughout a *single course of study*. However, Kember (1989) writing in the Australian, Hong Kong, United Kingdom Open University and Papuan New Guinean contexts, Wetzel, O'Toole and Peterson (1999) in the United States, and Thompson (1990) in Australia use the term *persistence* differently. They mean student progress towards

completion of what would be defined at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand as a *programme*. In some literature, however, that is called a *course* or *course of study*. Retention means *re-enrolment* into the next module or 'course'; that is, the student is retained by the institution.

Such ambiguity of language, unrecognised, can cause providers, administrators and policy makers to talk past each other, to work in different educational contexts without realising it. Tinto (1975, p. 90) pointed out that 'seemingly contradictory findings' in research on drop out occur when such distinctions are not made. While he was referring primarily to the lack of distinction between academic failure and voluntary withdrawal; he points (p. 90) to the 'significant impact' such issues can have on policy decisions in higher education generally. Over a quarter of a century later, these issues of definition are just as pressing.

Given the number of models of distance/open learning, shared meaning seems a distant prospect. The European tradition has been one of independent learning and the one-to-one model, while North American models tend to use technology to emulate the face-to-face situation. Holmberg (1998) cites Bates in describing what this means for learners:

Put simply, the North American or dual mode assumption is that the traditional form of group, face-to-face instruction is the preferred and most effective form of higher education ... the closer distance education can directly imitate this, the more effective distance education will be.

The Europeans ... have designed and developed forms of distance education that place emphasis on the need for flexible learning opportunities that enable independence on the part of learners, and have tried to develop forms of teaching that are deliberately quite different from the traditional 'face-to-face' approach of classroom teaching. (Bates, as cited in Holmberg, 1998, p. 32)

The New Zealand context

Most New Zealand higher learning institutions have for some years been moving into what they describe as *distance education* or *open learning*, often using technology with small groups and with a mix of distance and face-to-face options.

These new providers tend not to belong to New Zealand's relatively tiny educational mass market. Instead, they reach students in discrete geographical or vocational areas. They may require students to have their own Internet-capable computer access for learning purposes, or may offer 'point-to-point' computer-mediated meetings, bringing groups in particular regions together for

learning and communication purposes, either in real or elapsed time. They may offer the negotiation of individual learning contracts to enable students to move at their own pace. Students may be on-site but choosing technology-mediated learning options, sometimes at pre-arranged times. The ratio of students to lecturers often models the ratio of the face-to-face classroom mode. The relative homogeneity of such niche audiences largely obviates the problems of equity and access faced by organisations that are trying to meet the needs of a mass market of students scattered nationwide, including the need for technological access and support.

Smaller providers may achieve homogeneity on a disciplinary basis, for example in-service education or higher qualifications for teachers or doctors. Their students, often less geographically dispersed, may be able to meet at set times during the course. They may have access to technology in their homes or, in the case of teachers or corporate 'customers', in their workplaces. There may be a group element, perhaps with synchronous, point-to-point computer-mediated learning modes within relatively homogeneous cohorts. Additionally, or instead, there may be a regional cohort allowing for face-to-face encounters from time to time.

Until recently in New Zealand's distance learning sector, The Correspondence School, Massey University and The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand had been known as 'the big three'. These organisations delivered 'first generation' distance education, almost wholly correspondence-based and with closely prescribed interaction between student and tutor. Like other mass market providers worldwide, they were a source of the move towards what has been described as the *democratisation of education* (Paul, 1990, p. 41–42). Education has been made available, regardless of the constraints of time and place, to many adult learners who could not afford the time or expense of studying full-time, to many who have had to carry on working, and to many who could not travel to classes or who could not access technology or technological support services to support learning.

Adult learners have family relationships and community and workplace responsibilities that affect the time and energy available for study (Tinto, 1975, pp.98–99). Both persisters and non-completing students in tertiary education, however, report similar life events and problems. Managing the normal and not-so-normal exigencies of adult life is therefore important (Brindley, 1988, p. 134; Garland, 1993, p. 184; Morgan & Tam, 1999, p. 103). The work done by Tinto and those who have followed, for example Brindley (1988), Kember (1989), and Wetzel, O'Toole and Peterson (2000), suggests that the convenience factor for adult learners can, paradoxically, signal significant barriers to persistence: they are already in work; their part-time educational commitment

has low explicit and opportunity costs; and some may be second-chance learners without a record of academic success. (Wetzel, O'Toole & Petersen, 1999, p. 46). Given the high explicit and opportunity costs of contact learning, including full-time fees, travel and accommodation costs and time off work, the 'contact' student, with more time and money invested, has a lot more to lose by dropping out (p. 46). It is therefore difficult to measure how much organisational intervention can assist students' own levels of commitment.

A significant portion of the 'non-persisters' come from the most educationally disadvantaged: those with no prior qualification or work record. Garland (1993) quotes Sweet: 'Existing programmes serve best the educationally skilled; the educationally disadvantaged, if they do enrol, are more likely to become attrition statistics' (Sweet, as cited in Garland, 1993, p. 194).

Wetzel et al. (1999) also emphasise what seems self-evident to practitioners: 'Doing well, as measured by completed course work ... and ... doing well in that course work, leads to retention'. Thus, '... being academically successful appears to be the major key to retention' (p. 53).

Issues of equity and access for economically and socially disadvantaged students are raised by the technology of distance/open learning. While it enhances the learning experience for many, Gorard, Selwyn and Williams (2000, p. 507) identify an associated organisational challenge for mass market providers: In the short to medium term ... access to the Internet will continue to be delineated along the lines of socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity ... to a large extent reproducing patterns of unequal access to technology'.

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand has, however, a clearly defined mission to ensure equity and ease of access for the nationwide student audience that they serve:

Council requires the Chief Executive to monitor participation levels for the following groups and implement programmes where problems are identified:

- Māori
- Pacific Island groups and other ethnic minority groups
- People with disabilities and special needs
- Students requiring specific learning assistance
- Students suffering economic disadvantage
- Women. (The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2001, p. 24)

However, the challenge of using technology to support learning for these audiences is yet to be met. Much of The Open Polytechnic's teaching remains delivery-focused with much content and assessment paper-based but often supported by electronic forums, and email and telephone contact. This means a primarily postal mode for the distribution of assignments, with the addition of free phone access for all courses, some multi-media support, and compulsory use of technology for some students only. This design has, in the main, retained a focus on one-to-one interaction between the individual student and the lecturer, although technology is providing a fast-growing means of communication among students.

The challenges of change faced by both a mass market provider and a smaller, niche market provider can be considerable. It is evident that niche market providers can more easily provide facilities for academic and social integration, for assessing prior learning, and for catering to varying learning styles and individual needs. Access to technology can also be more easily managed.

Attrition: The problem

Tinto's (1975) work on factors affecting student persistence and withdrawal in higher education has led to a considerable body of later work in both the higher and distance learning fields. Tinto's thesis, necessarily simplistically described, postulated that once an individual's commitment to a programme of study has been made and the organisation chosen, successful integration into an organisation's social and academic systems is the major influence in the creation of new levels of student commitment. Individual decisions about the cost benefits of investment in this programme, or in alternative educational activities, are then made (pp. 94-95).

Kember's (1989) reformulation of Tinto's model for the distance learning context postulates the existence of an important recycling loop. There is, he says, a more constant weighing-up process — the learners involving themselves in what he calls '... an ongoing cost-benefit analysis ...', continually assessing the actual and social costs of continuing or discontinuing learning (p. 197).

This conceptual model has, however, been challenged. Kember's redefinition of social integration to allow a significant weighting for the distance learner's own social support network is seen by Brindley, (1999, pp. 21–22) as unintentionally ruling out the possibility of institutional integration for the distance learner. She acknowledges the external influences affecting student attrition but says, in arguing for the development of social support intervention for learners, 'It does not necessarily follow that little can be done to encourage a sense of affiliation or integration into the institution's social support system (eg instructional, counselling, library and administrative support)' (1999, p. 1).

Wetzel, O'Toole and Peterson (1999) used Tinto's model in the United States distance education context to measure student persistence at the urban Virginia University, which has a large number of 'non-traditional' students, including those belonging to minority ethnic groups. The university has both full- and part-time students, including some attending evening classes. (The authors defined the part-time and evening students as 'distance' students.) They found that such demographic factors as being single raised the level of social integration with the educational organisation, improving the likelihood of academic success. Ethnic background was also significantly related to persistence rates (p. 54). While the project demonstrated that the financial constraints variable had some relationship to persistence rates for distance students, it proved less significant than either academic progress or an 'at-risk' demographic classification.

Thompson (1999, p. 78) suggests that it would be useful for a university to be able to predict which students were likely to withdraw so that appropriate counselling and other strategies might be put in place. Current criteria amongst tertiary education providers specify that success is measured in terms of high completions. Unfortunately, there is a low rate of entry and persistence among the socio-economically disadvantaged in tertiary education generally. It is therefore possible that pressure to improve completion rates could further restrict access to tertiary education to the point of excluding this educationally needy group.

Barriers to completion

Barriers to completion include geographical isolation and a consequent lack of communication with other students, lack of access to word processors or Internet-capable computers, and lack of the technical/educational support required to sustain access and to sustain it reliably. Some students have difficulty in accessing a tape deck or telephone. A problem for individual students can be the unavailability of necessary resources for particular courses. Lack of reading or study skills can also hamper students' study, and where there is no direct personal contact with tutors, such barriers may become critical factors in their decision whether to continue or withdraw (Kember, 1989, p. 204).

In Garland's study (1993, p. 184) almost all withdrawing students cited time constraints, though further examination revealed higher order reasons. Morgan and Tam (1999, p. 1) describe the same phenomenon, having sought to move beyond the superficiality of the 'not enough time' response. Shin and Kim (1999) also identify the amount of study time learners spend as the most influential of the three variables of persistence found in their study into learner progress and dropout at the Korean National Open University (p. 88). The other two variables cited are social integration and face-to-face activities. The researchers conclude that the independent learning skill of time management is 'one of the most important strategies for learner success (p. 91). Supporting the development of such a crucial behaviour is obviously an organisational imperative in order to develop students' independent learning skills and reduce attrition.

Extrinsic factors

While variables found within student demographics and psychological factors are significant predictors of completion/retention, so are variables outside the students themselves. The course itself is one significant variable. In addition, the type of course influences the role the tutor will play.

Cheung (1998), in analysing distance learning lecturer effectiveness, says, 'Teaching effectiveness is course-dependent' (1998, p. 32). Similarly, Bernard and Amunsden compare persistence and withdrawal rates among courses with different characteristics: accountancy, communication and business administration, finding '... dramatically different results among courses' (1989, p. 43).

Metcalf and Halstead (1994) refer to Woodley's 1987 study at The Open University. It showed that lack of preparedness for courses is an important contributing factor to dropout. They describe course design efforts to assist students with preparatory materials, citing Mason's 1989 report on the dropout problem particularly found in the faculties of science and mathematics (1994, p. 261). Garland (1993) discusses problems of preparedness, particularly in specific subject areas: 'Prerequisite knowledge in high-structure fields can be assumed ...' (p. 194). She points out, 'Course content itself cannot be ignored in any theoretical or practical consideration of distance education attrition' (p. 181).

An analysis of barriers to completion

Morgan and Tam (1999, p. 104) aggregate from a number of research reports the following table of barriers to completion as reported by students. These are clustered into four well-recognised categories:

- situational
- institutional
- dispositional
- epistemological.

Crucially, Morgan and Tam identify those barriers that were identified

- (a) only by persisters,
- (b) only by non-persisters
- (c) by both groups.

Table 1

Key

Reported only by non-persisters

* Reported only by persisters

• Reported by both persisters and non-persisters.

<p>Situational</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem with study environment • Lack of free time • Change in circumstances • Took more time than expected • Study not related to job <p><input type="checkbox"/> Poor family support</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Money problems</p>	<p>Institutional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems with course schedule and pacing • Learning materials arrived late • Insufficient feedback on assignments • Insufficient/unsatisfactory communication with academics • Course focus and expectations not clear • Missed contact with other students • Inflexible course structure • Course content was duplicated • Course context was wrong/outdated • Difficulty with residential schools • Problems with additional resources • Unit design and quality issues * Bureaucratic bungling * Confusing changes to course * Problems getting academic to call back
<p>Dispositional</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Personal study problems</p> <p>* Unclear goals</p> <p>* Time management problems</p>	<p>Epistemological</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult content/discipline mismatch • Course not hands-on enough • Course focus lacked personal relevance or interest <p><input type="checkbox"/> Mismatch in assessment requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Course too management oriented</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Units offered were not those desired</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Lacked prerequisite knowledge</p>

Morgan & Tam, 1999, p. 104.

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Despite the growing use of technology as a delivery and support tool, it is interesting that problems with software, hardware, student interfaces and technological links and support were not specifically identified as factors affecting student persistence in this pre-1999 study. These factors obviously add another dimension to the discussion.

Cultural issues

Owing to Internet development, education has become globalised. As a result, there is a growing clash of cultural perspectives, which can undermine effective learning. Belawati (1998) reports on the failure of a research project incorporating five levels of institutional intervention to increase student persistence. He discusses the need to identify such factors as the culture and tradition within which attrition occurs. In his study at the Indonesian Open Learning University, he describes the crucial underlying factor as a 'problematic imported model of distance education' (pp. 105–6).

Multi-causal problem

Preparation of good learning materials, the infrastructure to deliver them and support for learners once enrolled are all threads in the tapestry, supporting Woodley's observation on attrition as cited by Morgan and Tam (1999, p. 106): 'This is a multi-causal problem, which requires multiple partial solutions, including the removal of organisational barriers'.

The many interacting variables and the many variations of meaning in the words *successful completion*, *attrition* and *open* and *distance learning* mean that selecting successful organisational strategies to support student persistence is problematic. Powell and Woodley call this 'an often-made observation' (1995, p. 286). Solutions can only ever be partial here. Some studies show meagre results for much organisational input. Addressing the multiplicity of issues involved in assisting the student in readiness for study and in ongoing support during study is fraught with difficulty. However, failure to do so will put at risk the reputations of organisations and open and distance learning.

Lecturer performance and student success

In this complex mix of variables, how important is the lecturer? Many resources are put into the preparation and development of distance courses for the mass market, particularly where technological applications are integrated. The employment of highly qualified academics as lecturers is expensive as well. Cost benefits must be analysed and probing questions asked: Can ever-developing interactive technological expertise to support learning and expert instructional design and assessment render the lecturer less and less relevant to learning? What effect can the individual lecturer have on successful student outcomes?

Freeman (1997) identifies lecturer performance as having ‘considerable impact on learner progress (in distance education)’ (p. 111). He also notes that the quick return of assignments and the need for well-chosen comments, ‘both encouraging and in sufficient quantity’, are crucial (p. 111).

United Kingdom Open University researchers Cole, Coats and Lentell (1986), from discussion with students and other lecturers (some of the latter Open University graduates themselves), created a list of 16 items identified by students as key components of lecturer performance in the distance mode. The list covers areas of generic support and feedback common to most mainstream distance programmes, without raising ambiguity over issues of contact teaching, technological mediation or course ownership. The factors identified include

- grading fairly and objectively
- explaining the significance of a grade
- clearly indicating how they can improve, both in terms of the specific question and more generally
- honesty aligned with encouragement and reassurance
- constructive comments rather than vague generalisations
- full comments, in particular on the script itself
- clear and legible comment
- a sympathetic, friendly and supportive approach

- the opportunity and invitation to respond to lecturers through tutorials or telephone
- quick turnaround of scripts (1986, p. 16).

Roberts later used this work as a basis for interviews with 22 students in one United Kingdom Open University geology course. The findings replicated well-documented needs: for swift turnaround time and for detailed comment on scripts. As well, students stressed the need to have their work treated with respect, to be graded fairly and objectively and to know the significance of a grade (1996, p. 99). Roberts concluded that any improvement in lecturer performance at the United Kingdom Open University would be contingent on the extra provision of one resource: time.

Resourcing improved lecturer performance

Robert's premise has some basis in the truism that particular quality challenges in the sector are, as in business, born of resource constraints. Time is a crucial resource. Particular challenges include the development of professional competence where there are conflicting needs, including meeting student expectations while recruiting credible academic 'experts'. Pedagogical expertise may not always be a criterion for selection of staff, particularly where it is assumed that well-designed courses are the most important factor for learners, or that higher education experience on entry is sufficient training for lecturers.

Paul, (1990) identifies unique demands that may go unrecognised by lecturers and managers from a conventional academic background:

A lot of subsequent grief will be avoided if the newcomer is fully aware of ... the absence of students on campus, the course team approach to course development, additional administrative and supervisory loads and different rhythms of the academic year. (p. 63)

He advocates careful recruitment of staff and a 'sensitive' orientation programme run by credible academic colleagues. These should, he says, be backed up by a staff development programme including research seminars on open learning and time management seminars (he considers time management a key professional skill); the resourcing of professional development in open learning; funds for travel and research; and institutional presentations/ seminars. Modra, writing on lecturer development needs (Evans & King, 1991, p. 95), reflects an academic orientation in expounding the need for critical reflection rather than training for practitioners.

Professional organisations have an obvious role in improving lecturer performance. Prebble (1990), discussing the imperative of ensuring training for managers (not just lecturers) in all aspects of distance learning, refers to the important role played by such organisations as the Distance Education Association of New Zealand (DEANZ). Seminars and the organisation's journal are strong encouragement for critical reflection on practice. He also suggests strategies such as manuals, in-house seminars, workshops and professional attachments to other institutions (p. 21). However, in times of economic conservatism, organisational support for such voluntary activity may not be seen as a core business strategy.

Conclusion

The emphasis on outcomes associated with the New Managerialist paradigm of the 1990s has focused attention upon student rates of attrition and persistence. To the managerialist, completion rates seem obvious — and theoretically easily defined — ‘outcomes’ and measures of efficiency. Defining what the terms *persistence* and *attrition* mean is difficult, however. In this environment, extensive use of quality management systems, including using and measuring ‘customer’ (student) feedback, is a challenge for all educationalists. A complex interplay of multiple variables independent of lecturer intervention affects attrition and is a particular challenge in open and distance learning.

The multiple variables and complex contexts of delivery mean that programmes to improve student persistence rates in the open and distance learning sector often have limited success. Yet the credibility of the modes is measured by intense economic, social and political imperatives. Organisational and sector initiatives, supported by quantitative, qualitative and comparative research, are crucial to ensure the best opportunity for student success. Where to start? Garland (1993) states, ‘Persistence can be enhanced by distance educators’ awareness of numerous complex variables that differentially act and interact. There is a need to create a uniquely optimal environment’ (p. 195).

The distance educator could be excused a plaintive cry of ‘Yes, but *how?*’.

A nationally orchestrated research project into contextually appropriate strategies to support student persistence in the distance open learning environment is needed in New Zealand. There is an associated need to build and maintain the credibility of the sector, which is now emerging from a complex variety of state-owned and private models and organisations. Not all organisations, or practitioners, are aware of the different discourse communities that now exist. Nor are the nuances of difference necessarily understood at government level.

To first identify, then reduce, the factors associated with attrition, the sector faces significant and often costly challenges in the fields of pedagogy, technology and communication, as well as of organisational structure and systems. For niche market providers, measuring successful strategies for groups of continuing learners is relatively easy. For large-scale, mass market, part-time organisations, and the lecturers who work within them, the task is more difficult. In this country, they must research, counsel and negotiate, then recognise, record and meet individual student needs for 40,000 or more part-

time students. Those students are scattered nationwide and internationally and are enrolled in a bewildering array of courses, creating a massive organisational dilemma regarding the allocation of resources.

Despite the diversity of the distance/open learning sector, it is imperative that traditional mass-market providers and niche market providers learn from each other. In the non-competitive model now being fostered as New Zealand government educational policy, how can lessons be transferred across organisations and modes? What role should government play? Could any single voluntary organisation co-ordinate providers successfully? Is a single forum for shared discourse still possible? Without a nationally mediated research project, individual providers are likely to struggle to find answers in this complex field.

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